

Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Family Engagement in a Title I Elementary School

Dissertation Manuscript

Submitted to National University

School of Education

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by

TAMERA RUCKER CARTER

San Diego, California

August 2025

Abstract

Family engagement is associated with improved student outcomes; however, sustaining meaningful engagement remains challenging in high-poverty Title I elementary schools in historically underserved rural communities. The problem addressed in this study was the difficulty schools face in maintaining consistent family engagement despite its benefits for students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how educators and a school administrator at a high-poverty Title I elementary school described family engagement practices, contextual barriers to participation, and student outcomes when families were consistently connected to the school. Ecological systems theory and the theory of overlapping spheres of influence guided the study. This single instrumental qualitative case study employed semi-structured interviews with educators and a school administrator, as well as a document analysis of school-based artifacts related to family engagement. Data were analyzed through a systematic coding process to identify patterns across participant perspectives and documents. Findings indicated that engagement was strengthened through relational trust, accessible two-way communication, culturally responsive practices, and shared leadership, all of which were supported by community partnerships. Participants described barriers such as work schedules, transportation limitations, and financial constraints as structural rather than motivational. Participants also described connections between consistent engagement and improved student motivation, attendance, behavior, and academic effort. The conclusions suggest that meaningful family engagement in high-poverty Title I elementary schools is achievable when schools prioritize trust, reduce access barriers, and implement responsive, context-aligned practices.

Keywords: family engagement, Title I, rural schools, ecological systems theory, school–family partnerships

Acknowledgments

First, I give all honor and glory to God for carrying me through this process. I could not have made it without Him. He has proven to me that the promise of Jeremiah 29:11 applies to my life, and I believe He has plans to prosper me and to give me hope and a future. This journey confirmed that my beginning did not determine my ending. I will forever honor and praise Him for His faithfulness. This doctoral journey was challenging, filled with trials, tribulations, and painful days, weeks, months, and years that made me question whether I could accomplish this goal as a first-generation doctoral student. Still, God proved that I could do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.

I want to thank my loving and hardworking husband, John Carter Sr., for supporting me and allowing me to devote so many days and late nights to this work, even when it interrupted our family time and plans. John, thank you for loving me and believing in me when I felt unsure of myself and didn't think I would make it. We endured difficult moments during this process, and I want you to know that I love you and appreciate you with all my heart.

To my amazing children, Al'taviion, Eriyelle, and John Jr., thank you for loving me, being patient with me, and understanding that I was working toward a goal that will sow seeds for your futures and for generations to come. I love you, and I thank God for each of you.

I want to honor my grandmother, Mary E. Ghee, who is in heaven. Thank you for always pushing me and seeing the best in me when I could not see it in myself. You raised me and sacrificed what little you had to ensure I had an education, a strong foundation, and most importantly, a relationship with the Lord. I hope you are proud and know that your tears, prayers, and hard talks were not in vain. Rest in heaven. I will always honor and love you, Ma.

To my baby sister, Nurse Melanie, thank you for being in my corner. You have always expected the best from me, not only as your big sister but also as a woman of purpose, and I will forever honor that. I love you, my nephew Oosie, and my nephew Frog, in heaven with all my heart.

To my godmother, Dr. Tonya Chestnut, thank you for encouraging me to go back to school and pursue my final degree. I am grateful to share this accomplishment with you. To my faithful prayer sister, Dr. Mashika Culliver, thank you for praying, pushing me, and always speaking life when I could not see it for myself. To my devoted prayer sister, Ms. Kimberly Grimes, thank you for covering me in prayer, speaking success into my life, and standing with me during the most challenging seasons. I will always love and appreciate you.

I am sincerely grateful to my dissertation committee for their guidance and support. To my Chair, Dr. Mary Kropiewnicki, thank you for your steady leadership and encouragement. To my Subject Matter Expert, Dr. Tarae Terry, thank you for your expertise and thoughtful feedback that strengthened this study. To my Academic Reader, Dr. Carrie Lloyd, thank you for your careful review and commitment to academic excellence throughout this process.

Finally, I want to thank my school family for being a true family away from home and for believing in me throughout this process. I am grateful to everyone who supported me in any capacity and sowed seeds into my life along the way. To God be the glory for the things He has done. I am proof that it matters not how you start, but how you end with God.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study	4
Introduction to Framework	5
Introduction to Research Methodology and Design	6
Research Questions.....	6
Significance of the Study	7
Definitions of Key Terms	7
Summary.....	9
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	10
Framework	11
Family Engagement Policies and Context	18
Teacher Efficacy and Retention.....	22
Barriers to Family Engagement	24
Summary.....	32
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	35
Research Methodology and Design	35
Population and Sample	39
Materials and Instrumentation	41
Study Procedures	43
Data Analysis	45
Assumptions.....	48
Limitations	49
Delimitations.....	50
Ethical Assurances	51
Summary.....	53
Chapter 4: Findings.....	55
Trustworthiness of the Data	57
Results.....	59
Comparison of Results to the Literature Review	77
Summary.....	81
Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary.....	83
Discussion.....	85
Recommendations for Practice	90
Recommendations for Future Research	93
Study Summary.....	96

References.....	98
Appendix A: Interview Protocol.....	111
Appendix B: Alignment Chart for Interview Questions.....	113
Appendix C: Document Analysis Form.....	114
Appendix D: Recruitment Email.....	116
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form.....	118
Appendix F: Codebook for Reflexive Thematic Analysis.....	121
Appendix G: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval.....	123

List of Tables

Table 1 Participant Demographics	60
Table 2 Themes Identified for Research Question 1	61
Table 3 Theme Identified for Research Question 2	72
Table 4 Theme Identified for Research Question 3	75

Chapter 1: Introduction

Family engagement in education has been widely recognized as a critical factor in improving student achievement and overall school success (Epstein, 1995, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). Decades of research have demonstrated that when families were meaningfully engaged, students experienced academic growth, positive social-emotional development, and sustained school success (Bettencourt et al., 2023; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024). Despite this evidence, achieving equitable and sustained family engagement remained a persistent challenge in historically underserved school settings, particularly in Title I elementary schools serving low-income communities (Gross et al., 2022; Perrigo et al., 2022).

Schools designated as Title I under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act received federal funding to address inequities by supporting students from low-income households (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Although these resources were intended to strengthen family–school partnerships, research indicated that persistent barriers such as socioeconomic disparities, cultural differences, and systemic inequities continued to hinder collaboration between schools and families (Baxter & Nolan, 2022; Beard & Thomson, 2021). These barriers often weakened trust, limited consistent communication, and reduced opportunities for authentic family–school partnerships, particularly in high-poverty contexts (Brodsky et al., 2025; Sisson et al., 2022).

The broader context of this problem was evident in historically underserved regions of the United States, where schools frequently encountered intersecting challenges related to poverty, limited access to educational resources, and longstanding inequities (Iruka et al., 2020; West et al., 2022). In these settings, schools faced additional demands related to staffing instability, limited infrastructure, and community stressors that influenced engagement practices.

Within such contexts, effective family engagement required schools to adopt culturally responsive strategies that acknowledged families' strengths while addressing contextual constraints (Hong et al., 2025; Kea et al., 2025).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasized the interconnectedness of students' development across family, school, and community systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). Similarly, Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence highlighted shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities in supporting student success (Epstein, 1995, 2018; Epstein et al., 2002). Together, these frameworks provided an organizing structure for examining educators' and administrators' perspectives on family engagement practices within a Title I elementary school context (Gregg et al., 2024; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Within this broader context, the study was framed to examine the challenges associated with fostering authentic and equitable family engagement in historically underserved Title I elementary schools. This framing supported clear articulation of the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the guiding research questions. It also emphasized the importance of examining family engagement through the perspectives of educators and school leaders who implemented and sustained engagement practices.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent challenge of sustaining meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools despite its documented benefits for student achievement and school improvement (Gross et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2024). Although family engagement was associated with improved academic outcomes, student behavior, and social-emotional well-being, schools serving economically disadvantaged communities faced

systemic barriers such as poverty, limited access to resources, and differing cultural perceptions regarding parental roles in education (Baxter & Nolan, 2022; da Rosa et al., 2024; Iruka et al., 2020). These barriers contributed to inconsistent participation and weakened family–school relationships.

Students in Title I schools were impacted when family engagement was inconsistent, as disengagement hindered academic success and social-emotional development (West et al., 2022). Educators and administrators also experienced challenges building collaborative school cultures when meaningful family participation was limited or absent (Smith et al., 2021). Although the Every Student Succeeds Act allowed schools to implement family engagement initiatives through Title I funding, implementation varied widely across contexts, and many schools lacked sustainable, schoolwide engagement models that were responsive to their community needs (Troppe et al., 2020).

Existing engagement frameworks often relied on standardized approaches that failed to reflect the lived realities of families in high-poverty communities (Lynch & Prins, 2023). Traditional measures of engagement also overlooked culturally grounded forms of participation and undervalued families’ strengths (Gross et al., 2022). Additionally, unexamined assumptions held by school staff limited participation unless addressed through culturally responsive reflection and practice (Baxter & Nolan, 2022).

What remained insufficiently understood was how educators and administrators experienced and interpreted family engagement strategies within the daily realities of a high-poverty Title I elementary school. Without this understanding, schools in similar contexts continued to experience low levels of family participation and misalignment between home and

school. These conditions limited equitable academic and developmental outcomes for students (Iruka et al., 2020; Marschall & Shah, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this single instrumental qualitative case study was to explore practical strategies for enhancing family engagement in a Title I elementary school serving Grades K–6 in a historically underserved southern region. This study responded to the challenges identified in the problem statement and sought to support the development and sustainability of family–school partnerships in high-poverty contexts. The overarching goal was to identify barriers to engagement and to highlight best practices for building meaningful and sustainable family involvement.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 9 educators, including classroom teachers and 1 administrator, who had direct experience implementing family engagement initiatives (Patton, 2015). The final sample size was guided by qualitative saturation principles to ensure sufficient depth and variation in participants’ perspectives (Guest et al., 2006). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of school policies and practices.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2023) reflexive thematic analysis approach, which emphasized the researcher’s active engagement with the data. Triangulation across interviews and documents was employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructs of interest included family engagement, barriers to involvement, and effective partnership practices. The findings provided school leaders, policymakers, and educators with evidence-based strategies to improve and sustain family–school partnerships in Title I elementary schools.

Introduction to Framework

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explained human development as the result of dynamic interactions between individuals and multiple layers of their surrounding environment. These layers were organized into five interrelated systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This theoretical lens supported examination of how contextual conditions shaped family engagement opportunities within the study setting.

Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence complemented this ecological perspective by defining family, school, and community as interconnected institutions that jointly influenced student success. Epstein et al. (2002) identified six types of involvement that supported this collaboration, including parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. These involvement types provided a practical structure for describing the engagement strategies discussed by participants and for interpreting how school-based practices aligned with family and community partnerships.

Integrating these two frameworks provided a comprehensive lens for examining family engagement in Title I schools. Bronfenbrenner's framework emphasized systemic and contextual influences, whereas Epstein's model focused on relational practices at the school level. This integrated perspective informed the development of the problem statement, supported the study design, and guided the formulation of the research questions by framing the inquiry into strategies, barriers, and outcomes associated with engagement efforts. Using these combined frameworks, the study was grounded in theory and practice and supported a holistic examination of sustained and equitable family-school partnerships in high-poverty educational settings.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design

This study employed a single instrumental qualitative case study design to examine family engagement strategies in a Title I elementary school setting. A qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring participants' perceptions and practices related to family–school partnerships (Stake, 1995). The case study design facilitated an in-depth examination of family engagement within its real-life context. It supported the use of multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2017). This design also enabled the study to capture how engagement practices were implemented within the constraints and conditions of the local setting.

The research setting was a Title I elementary school located in a historically underserved region of the United States. Participants included educators and administrators who were actively involved in family engagement initiatives and had direct knowledge of engagement practices at the site. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, including family engagement policies, communication logs, and school artifacts. These data sources supported triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings (Yin, 2017).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

RQ1

How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the strategies used to foster meaningful family engagement?

RQ2

What do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school perceive as barriers to effective family engagement?

RQ3

How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the outcomes of family engagement on student achievement?

Significance of the Study

This study was significant because it addressed the persistent challenge of fostering sustained, meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools. Prior research demonstrated that effective family engagement improved student achievement, increased attendance, and contributed to a supportive school culture. However, these benefits were often undermined by structural and socioeconomic barriers in high-poverty communities (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Gross et al., 2022).

This single instrumental qualitative case study contributed to the field of education by identifying practical strategies to promote family engagement, examining perceived barriers, and documenting the outcomes of engagement efforts. The study also advanced theoretical understanding by applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence within a Title I school context.

Definitions of Key Terms***Academic achievement***

Academic achievement refers to students' educational outcomes as indicated by grades, standardized tests, and classroom assessments (Iruka et al., 2020).

Barriers

Barriers are obstacles such as economic hardship, cultural perceptions of parental roles, work-related scheduling conflicts, or resource shortages that limit effective family engagement in education (da Rosa et al., 2024).

Collaboration

Collaboration involves educators, administrators, and families working cooperatively to achieve shared educational objectives and support student success (Peltier et al., 2024).

Culturally responsive practices

Culturally responsive practices are educational approaches that recognize and adapt to cultural differences, fostering inclusive environments for diverse student populations (Beard & Thomson, 2021).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 is a federal legislation that focuses on equal educational opportunities, emphasizing accountability, state autonomy, and evidence-based interventions (Troppe et al., 2020).

Family engagement

Family engagement entails active participation by families in educational activities and decision-making processes that support student development and learning (Iruka et al., 2020)

Family-school partnerships

Family-school partnerships are collaborative relationships between families and schools that support students' educational and developmental goals (Peltier et al., 2024).

Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is a composite measure of an individual's or family's economic and social position, based on income, education, and occupation, and it impacts educational outcomes and opportunities (Iruka et al., 2020).

Title I schools

Title I schools are educational institutions that receive federal funding to support students from economically disadvantaged families in achieving academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

Summary

This study focused on enhancing family engagement in Title I elementary schools, particularly in high-poverty communities. The study highlighted the importance of family–school partnerships for strengthening student outcomes and supporting a positive school climate. The problem addressed was educators’ ongoing difficulty implementing sustainable, culturally responsive family engagement strategies in historically underserved contexts. The purpose of this single instrumental qualitative case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was to explore practical, sustainable, and culturally responsive approaches to strengthening family engagement in a Title I elementary school serving grades K–6 in a historically underserved southern region.

The study was significant for educators, administrators, and policymakers because it offered evidence-based implications for strengthening family partnerships in high-poverty school communities. Two guiding theoretical frameworks, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein’s (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, provided a foundation for examining how family, school, and community systems influenced student development and engagement practices. The research design, research questions, and definitions of key terms supported the study’s focus and clarified the methodological approach. Chapter 2 presented a comprehensive review of the literature on family engagement, barriers to involvement, culturally responsive practices, and school-based strategies that supported effective family–school partnerships.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent challenge of sustaining meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools despite its documented benefits for student achievement and school improvement (Gross et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2024). The purpose of this single instrumental qualitative case study was to explore how educators and administrators described the strategies and practices that strengthened family engagement in a high-poverty Title I elementary school. This literature review supported the study's problem and purpose by synthesizing current research on family engagement practices in high-poverty educational settings.

This chapter provided a review of the historical and policy background shaping family engagement in Title I schools and examined the theoretical frameworks that guided the study. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence were used to frame how systemic conditions and relationships among schools, families, and communities influenced engagement. The chapter synthesized research across five areas: (a) theoretical frameworks, (b) benefits of family engagement, (c) barriers to family engagement, (d) culturally responsive engagement practices, and (e) strategies for effective family-school partnerships.

A systematic search of peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025 was conducted using academic databases accessible through the National University Library, including ERIC, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. Targeted keywords and Boolean operators included family engagement AND Title I, parental involvement AND low-income, culturally responsive education, school partnerships, qualitative case study methodology, and ecological systems theory. Foundational and seminal references were identified through backward citation tracing

and were included to provide theoretical and historical context. Sources were included if they examined family engagement within K–12 settings, particularly in Title I or high-poverty schools, and were excluded if they lacked empirical grounding, fell outside the publication window, or were not relevant to culturally responsive strategies. Priority was given to equity-centered studies and research that provided insight into collaboration between educators and families.

Framework

This study was grounded in two guiding frameworks: Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein’s (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Ecological systems theory conceptualized human development as occurring within a nested structure of environmental systems that interact with and influence individual behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). These systems included the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Within this study, ecological systems theory provided a lens for understanding how systemic, school-based, and community factors shaped family engagement in a Title I school.

Epstein’s (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence emphasized shared responsibilities among families, schools, and communities in promoting student success. The model encompassed six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration (Epstein et al., 2018). These domains provided a practical structure for examining engagement strategies that aligned with families’ social and cultural realities.

Together, these frameworks complemented one another by acknowledging dynamic and reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environments. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979)

theory explained the contextual layers that shaped engagement, while Epstein's (1995) model offered actionable domains for partnership. The assumptions underlying these frameworks held that all families, regardless of socioeconomic status or background, could support their children's education when equitable structures and respectful relationships were established. The selection of these frameworks was endorsed by their prior application in family engagement research conducted in high-poverty contexts.

Previous studies demonstrated the relevance of ecological and relational frameworks for examining barriers and facilitators of school–family partnerships (Brodsky et al., 2025; Gregg et al., 2024). Although alternative models, such as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) parental involvement process model, were available, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the overlapping spheres of influence model (Epstein, 1995) were selected for their comprehensive, context-sensitive, and practice-oriented relevance. These guiding frameworks informed the study's problem statement, purpose, and research questions by emphasizing relational trust, systemic context, and shared responsibility (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Lynch & Prins, 2023). Collectively, the frameworks provided a strong foundation for examining how family engagement efforts were developed and sustained within a high-poverty school setting.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory provided a foundational lens for understanding how multiple layers of environmental influence, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, interact to affect child development. Ecological systems theory positioned the family within the microsystem, with the school as another immediate environment that contributed to the child's learning and growth

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem, which encompassed connections between home and school, was particularly relevant to this study's focus on family engagement.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) emphasized the need for stronger, reciprocal relationships between families and institutions such as schools and argued that such collaborations were essential for developmental success. In high-poverty areas, these connections were often strained by systemic inequities, cultural disconnects, and limited resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Gross et al., 2022; Lara et al., 2025; Lynch & Prins, 2023).

In this study, the ecological systems framework served as a lens for examining how educators acted as agents of connection across systems by intentionally cultivating trust, respect, and mutual accountability with families. Recent studies affirmed the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory in family engagement research. For example, Lara et al. (2025) conducted a qualitative study of family-school partnerships and found that positive mesosystem connections helped mitigate the effects of economic stress on student outcomes. Interviews with teachers and parents indicated that consistent, respectful outreach from educators played a critical role in building long-term engagement and resilience among families in high-poverty settings.

Similarly, Iruka et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of microsystem and mesosystem interactions in early childhood education and reported that strong family-school connections supported student development despite contextual poverty. In addition, Chen et al. (2025) found that culturally responsive engagement practices grounded in Bronfenbrenner's framework helped reduce the negative impacts of socioeconomic adversity by strengthening relational trust. Together, these studies reinforced the value of Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective for

understanding how family–school partnerships functioned in high-poverty, under-resourced environments (Chen et al., 2025; Iruka et al., 2020; Lara et al., 2025).

Epstein’s Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

Epstein’s (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence complemented Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) ecological systems model by providing a targeted explanation of the shared responsibilities among schools, families, and communities. Epstein (1995) explained that these three domains overlapped, both formally and informally, to influence student learning and development. The overlapping spheres of influence framework identified six key types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. These types provided schools with structured pathways for building inclusive engagement practices (Epstein, 1995; Epstein et al., 2002). This model also informed teacher preparation and professional practice by embedding family engagement as a core component of effective education (Epstein, 2018). Epstein’s (1995) model was valuable for this study because it provided a clear framework for examining school-level strategies that facilitated engagement across cultural and socioeconomic boundaries. In Title I schools, where families often experienced marginalization or mistrust of institutional systems, two-way communication and shared decision-making were vital for building authentic partnerships (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Epstein et al., 2002).

Multiple qualitative studies have used Epstein’s (1995) framework to examine how family engagement programs were implemented and experienced by families and educators. For example, Yotyodying et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative case study of a culturally responsive engagement initiative at a Title I elementary school. Their findings indicated that families reported greater confidence in supporting their children’s education when schools structured

activities to align with Epstein's six types of involvement, particularly communication and collaborative decision-making. Similarly, Baxter and Nolan (2022) demonstrated that reframing engagement as cultural work, when aligned with Epstein's (1995) typology, empowered teachers to bridge relational gaps and build trust with families from non-dominant communities. In settings affected by poverty, applying Epstein's (1995) framework often required intentional adaptations to address limited resources and related challenges.

Gross et al. (2022) developed an equity-centered model based on Epstein's (1995) theory and modified its application to capture informal engagement practices standard in low-income communities. Their qualitative findings revealed that traditional engagement metrics often overlook families' culturally embedded and meaningful contributions outside formal school settings. These insights underscore the importance of broadening the definition of engagement to include relational and culturally responsive practices (Baxter & Nolan, 2022; Gross et al., 2022; Yotyodying et al., 2024).

Integrating the Frameworks

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence provided a dual lens for examining the central phenomenon of this study: educators' fostering of sustained, culturally responsive family engagement.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) conceptualized child development as shaped by interactions across multiple nested environmental systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Within this model, the family and school are situated in the microsystem, while the mesosystem encompasses the relationships and interactions between these settings. These interactions were influenced by broader exosystemic and macrosystemic conditions, such as economic opportunities, policies, and sociocultural norms (Bronfenbrenner,

1986; Chen et al., 2025). The ecological framework was particularly relevant in under-resourced settings, where systemic barriers and community dynamics significantly influenced school-family partnerships (Iruka et al., 2020; Lara et al., 2025; Lynch & Prins, 2023).

Within this context, Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence provided a practical framework for examining how schools, families, and communities collaborated to support student success. Epstein (1995) identified six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. These involvement types have been widely implemented as core components of family engagement strategies across diverse educational settings (Epstein et al., 2002). The overlapping spheres of influence framework emphasizes that when institutional boundaries between families, schools, and communities intentionally intersect, students are more likely to experience academic and social success (Epstein, 2018). Epstein (2018) further argued that embedding family engagement within teacher preparation and ongoing professional development was essential for sustaining collaborative relationships and improving student outcomes.

The integration of these two theories enabled an examination of both macro- and micro-level influences on family engagement. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory has been utilized in multiple studies to explore how poverty, cultural dissonance, and institutional inequities influence engagement practices (Gross et al., 2022; Lara et al., 2025). For example, Iruka et al. (2020) found that family-school partnerships were more effective when educators acknowledged local cultural values and adapted outreach efforts to the lived experiences of under-resourced communities. Similarly, Chen et al. (2025) reported that relational trust, supported by responsive practices, helped mitigate the adverse effects of socioeconomic

instability on engagement. These studies supported the importance of analyzing environmental and structural factors that influenced school-family partnerships.

At the same time, Epstein's (1995) overlapping spheres of influence model served as the foundation for empirical studies examining how school-based initiatives promoted engagement. Yotyodying et al. (2024) found that schools implementing Epstein-aligned strategies experienced stronger family participation and improved educator-family relationships. Baxter and Nolan (2022) contended that when teachers adopted an engagement approach as cultural work, they were more successful in reaching historically marginalized families. Gross et al. (2022) expanded this work by developing an equity-centered model based on Epstein's typology and by modifying its application to include informal and culturally grounded practices often excluded from traditional engagement assessments. Together, these frameworks offered a balanced theoretical foundation for this study.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory supported the examination of broader conditions that impact family engagement, including poverty, limited access to services, and cultural disconnects. Epstein's (1995) overlapping spheres of influence theory guided the analysis of school-led practices that encourage family involvement, such as shared leadership, inclusive communication, and community collaboration (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Epstein et al., 2002; Gross et al., 2022; Yotyodying et al., 2024). This dual-theoretical approach informed the development of the research questions, interview protocol, and coding procedures. The ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) guided the interpretation of external factors related to school engagement, while the overlapping spheres of influence framework (Epstein, 1995) supported the identification and categorization of intentional school-level strategies.

These frameworks aligned with the study's goal of identifying sustainable engagement practices that were culturally relevant and appropriate for high-poverty school communities (Lynch & Prins, 2023; Smith et al., 2022). By integrating Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, this study examined how family engagement unfolded across systems and relationships. The combined lens supported a comprehensive understanding of how school personnel built, sustained, and adapted partnerships that responded to the complex realities of families in Title I school environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Epstein et al., 2002; Gross et al., 2022; Lara et al., 2025; Yotyodying et al., 2024).

Family Engagement Policies and Context

Family engagement policies in the United States continued to shape the structures and practices of schools, particularly those serving students from low-income families, such as Title I schools. Federal legislation, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), required schools to implement meaningful family engagement initiatives as a condition for receiving Title I funding. These requirements emphasized collaboration between schools and families to improve student achievement and accountability outcomes. State-level mandates reinforced federal requirements and were often tailored to the demographics and needs of individual school communities.

At the local level, schools in historically underserved regions adapted these policies within contexts shaped by poverty, limited resources, and systemic inequities. Research indicated that implementation varied across schools and was influenced by factors such as administrative leadership, educator perceptions, and family readiness to engage (Gross et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2024). Although some schools effectively translated policy into practice, others continued to

experience persistent challenges due to limited capacity and insufficient culturally responsive approaches (Baxter & Nolan, 2022; Iruka et al., 2020).

A critical strength of existing policy was its recognition of families as essential partners in the educational process. However, a notable limitation was that mandates often lacked specificity regarding how engagement should be implemented in contexts of concentrated poverty. This lack of clarity left substantial discretion to school leaders and teachers, contributing to inequities in how families were engaged across districts and communities (Banks et al., 2025; Gross et al., 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Peltier et al., 2024). Research emphasized the need for policies to move beyond compliance and prioritize authentic, culturally responsive engagement strategies that honored the voices and perspectives of diverse families (Banks et al., 2025; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

Benefits of Family Engagement

Decades of empirical research consistently affirm that family engagement is a powerful lever for improving student outcomes and enhancing school effectiveness, particularly in Title I schools serving economically disadvantaged communities (Epstein, 1995; Henderson et al., 2021). When families and schools partnered intentionally, benefits extended beyond academic gains to include improvements in students' emotional regulation, social development, and sense of belonging (Iruka et al., 2020; Lara et al., 2025; Skinner et al., 2022). Engagement also contributed to a more inclusive and affirming school climate, supported teacher well-being, and increased retention, particularly in high-poverty environments where staff turnover and burnout were persistent challenges (Haight et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024).

Across diverse methodologies and school contexts, studies demonstrated that equitable, culturally responsive family–school partnerships fostered resilience, academic persistence, and

educator satisfaction. These partnerships strengthened student outcomes and the conditions that supported effective teaching and learning, particularly in historically underserved communities. When engagement was grounded in mutual respect, shared responsibility, and responsiveness to family context, it became a sustainable driver of equity-centered school improvement. This section explored benefits across five interrelated domains: academic and social-emotional gains, strengthening school climate, supporting teacher efficacy and retention, promoting educator well-being, and mitigating the effects of socioeconomic adversity (Haight et al., 2024; Hong et al., 2025).

Academic and Social-Emotional Gains

Numerous studies highlighted the academic and emotional benefits of active partnerships between families and schools. Such partnerships were associated with higher educational achievement, improved emotional regulation, and increased classroom engagement, particularly in high-poverty settings where students often required additional support (Iruka et al., 2020; Lara et al., 2025; Skinner et al., 2022). Iruka et al. (2020) emphasized that respectful communication between educators and families enhanced student engagement and reading fluency. Similarly, Skinner et al. (2022) found that strong family partnerships supported students' executive functioning and goal-setting behaviors.

Lara et al. (2025) further demonstrated that culturally affirming engagement strategies fostered emotional resilience and promoted students' social development. Their findings indicated that when schools honored families' cultural identities, communication styles, and community knowledge, students experienced stronger belonging and improved relational outcomes. These findings suggested that culturally responsive engagement was not an add-on practice but a meaningful lever for supporting whole-child development in historically

underserved contexts. Although the studies varied in focus and methodology, they collectively underscored the multifaceted benefits of family–school partnerships in advancing academic performance and socioemotional well-being.

Iruka et al. (2020) employed a qualitative design grounded in ecological systems theory and conducted interviews with families and educators to examine how family–school partnerships influenced student learning. Their findings revealed that students whose families received consistent, respectful communication from educators demonstrated improved reading fluency, increased task persistence, and greater classroom engagement. The study also emphasized that culturally responsive practices strengthened trust and participation among families of color, highlighting the importance of inclusive outreach that reflected families' lived experiences.

Similarly, Skinner et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal case study in a high-poverty urban school district. They reported that family engagement initiatives led to measurable improvements in students' executive functioning, including self-regulation and goal-setting behaviors. These gains were attributed to increased family support at home and consistent collaboration between educators and caregivers. Teachers noted that students from actively engaged families arrived at school more emotionally regulated, better prepared for academic tasks, and more motivated to learn.

Lara et al. (2025) examined the influence of school, family, and peer networks on children's behavioral and emotional development within a high-poverty school context. Through interviews and focus groups with educators and community stakeholders, the researchers found that students whose families participated in structured, culturally affirming activities demonstrated greater emotional resilience and social adjustment. Lara et al. concluded that

consistent, culturally responsive engagement practices were essential for supporting academic achievement and holistic student development.

Teacher Efficacy and Retention

Family engagement also benefited educators, particularly in contexts where teacher burnout and turnover remained persistent challenges. Zhang et al. (2024) emphasized that inclusive family engagement practices, particularly those centered on student voice, fostered stronger relational trust among educators, students, and families. Smith et al. (2022) similarly found that sustained family–school partnerships improved teacher morale and strengthened school climate, especially in high-poverty schools.

Haight et al. (2024) identified essential conditions for successful school–community partnerships, emphasizing that collaborative wraparound support systems fostered supportive environments for both students and educators. Yotyodying et al. (2024) further demonstrated that teacher engagement in family–school partnerships through empathetic communication and educational collaboration was positively associated with increased job satisfaction and professional self-esteem. Collectively, these findings indicate that meaningful family engagement supports student success while also contributing to educators' efficacy, morale, and retention.

Equity and Teacher Well-Being Through Family Partnerships

As schools in high-poverty environments increasingly struggle with teacher retention and burnout, research has demonstrated the value of family–school partnerships not only for improving student outcomes but also for sustaining favorable professional environments (Haight et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Yotyodying et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Specifically, studies have shown that relationship-centered engagement practices can strengthen educators' sense of

purpose, increase job satisfaction, and reduce occupational stress in under-resourced settings. In this way, family engagement serves as both a student-support strategy and a workforce-stabilizing approach, contributing to a healthier school climate and long-term institutional resilience.

Zhang et al. (2024) outlined student-centered models of family engagement, emphasizing the role of student voice in fostering meaningful partnerships. Their findings indicated that when engagement efforts were aligned with students' authentic needs, educators experienced increased motivation, a more profound sense of purpose, and greater investment in school improvement. These inclusive partnership models contributed to improved staff morale and reinforced a collective commitment to education.

In a related quantitative study, Yotyodying et al. (2024) examined the impact of prosocial family engagement strategies on educator well-being. Teachers who regularly implemented empathy-based communication, collaborative decision-making, and relationship-centered practices reported significantly higher job satisfaction and lower occupational stress. The researchers concluded that these prosocial approaches not only benefited students but also functioned as protective factors for educators working in under-resourced schools.

Similarly, Smith et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis evaluating the effects of family engagement interventions on parent-teacher relationships across diverse educational settings. Their findings revealed that initiatives fostering interpersonal connection and effective communication enhanced teachers' perceptions of school climate and strengthened their sense of professional efficacy. These positive outcomes were especially evident in high-poverty communities, where increased family involvement mitigates feelings of isolation, reduces behavioral disruptions, and helps prevent institutional fatigue.

Further reinforcing these findings, Haight et al. (2024) explored family–school collaboration in under-resourced schools and reported that structured, consistent engagement practices foster supportive professional communities. Haight et al. (2024) found that intentional family involvement increased teacher retention, strengthened professional identity, and reduced teacher burnout. The authors emphasized that engagement efforts grounded in mutual respect and continuity created emotional support systems for educators, which were particularly beneficial in schools experiencing high staff turnover and limited institutional resources.

Collectively, these studies reported that family engagement improved student experiences and served as a protective factor for teachers by enhancing emotional stability, job satisfaction, and professional connection (Haight et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Yotyodying et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). The findings confirmed that robust, equity-centered partnerships are crucial for cultivating resilient educators, fostering favorable school climates, and promoting institutional well-being in high-stress and underserved educational environments.

Barriers to Family Engagement

Family engagement remains a cornerstone of student success; however, meaningful school-family partnerships are hindered by persistent, multidimensional barriers, particularly in high-poverty and Title I schools. Although research consistently affirms the academic and social benefits of engagement, families in under-resourced communities often face challenges rooted in systemic inequities, cultural disconnects, and limited access to communication tools, transportation, and leadership opportunities (Banks et al., 2025; Brodsky et al., 2025; Gonzalez-Gomez et al., 2025; Gregg et al., 2024; Gross et al., 2022; Lynch & Prins, 2023). In historically underserved school contexts, these issues are further intensified by historical disinvestment,

geographic isolation, educator turnover, and a lack of culturally responsive infrastructure (Mullins & Panlilio, 2023).

A critical barrier to engagement is the mismatch between institutional expectations and families' lived realities. Gross et al. (2022) found that traditional definitions of involvement often exclude culturally embedded and informal practices common in low-income communities. Gonzalez-Gomez et al. (2025) extended this finding by studying co-produced activity packs and identified barriers related to time constraints, resource scarcity, and parental confidence. They emphasized that engagement is more sustainable when designed around families' strengths and routines. When schools narrowly define engagement as event attendance or volunteerism, they risk overlooking valuable forms of support that occur at home or in the community.

Language and communication practices also contribute to inequities in engagement. In their multi-site case studies, Lynch and Prins (2023) and Yotyodying et al. (2024) reported that many schools relied on one-way, standardized messaging systems that did not reflect the cultural communication styles or multilingual needs of families. Even when language was not a direct barrier, overly formal or impersonal communication discouraged sustained participation, particularly for caregivers who had previously experienced negative interactions with the school system. Brodsky et al. (2025) similarly noted that systemic misalignment between families and schoolwide engagement models creates disconnects, particularly when family input was not integrated into social-emotional learning (SEL) and multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) practices.

Historical mistrust also affects family-school relationships. Kea et al. (2025) found that culturally dismissive school practices often triggered withdrawal from families, particularly those who had experienced exclusion, racism, or punitive discipline systems. This mistrust is

compounded when families do not see their voices represented in school decision-making structures. Beard and Thomson (2021) emphasized that unless schools actively acknowledge and include diverse expressions of family engagement, they may unintentionally reinforce exclusionary norms.

Structural factors such as transportation, work schedules, and childcare remain persistent barriers to family engagement. In historically underserved settings, geographic distance and limited public infrastructure can exacerbate these obstacles, reducing families' access to school events and services. Mullins and Panlilio (2023) reported that schools with constrained funding frequently lack the capacity to offer flexible engagement opportunities, thereby shifting the responsibility for coordination onto families and school staff who were already overextended. As a result, engagement efforts may be inconsistently implemented and less accessible to families facing the most significant logistical constraints.

Despite these barriers, research has documented the impact of trust-based, relational engagement strategies. Jeynes (2024), in a meta-analysis of 76 quantitative studies, demonstrated that relational forms of involvement were more strongly linked to academic and behavioral outcomes than traditional forms, such as volunteering. Brodsky et al. (2025) reinforced this by demonstrating that integrated SEL and behavioral frameworks foster stronger school climates when families are included in systems-level planning. These findings are especially relevant in high-poverty contexts, where warmth, consistency, and trust can serve as protective factors that support both student and family well-being (Chen et al., 2025; Gonzalez-Gomez et al., 2025).

The findings of Brodsky et al. (2025), Gonzalez-Gomez et al. (2025), Jeynes (2024), and Kea et al. (2025) emphasized the need for engagement frameworks grounded in cultural humility, shared leadership, and relational trust. Rather than viewing family engagement as a

compliance-based obligation, effective strategies prioritize co-created experiences that validate families' cultural and social capital, promoting sustained school-family collaboration.

Structural and Logistical Barriers

Families in under-resourced communities often face structural barriers that hinder their meaningful involvement in schools. These barriers include inflexible work schedules, unreliable transportation, limited access to childcare, housing instability, and inconsistent internet access. Lara et al. (2025) found that parents in Title I schools often struggled to attend meetings or participate in school activities due to low-wage employment that offered little scheduling flexibility. These work constraints were exacerbated by limited transportation infrastructure, especially in geographically isolated areas. Zhang et al. (2024) supported these findings. They emphasized that logistical and communication breakdowns between families and schools frequently result from unequal access to resources and missed opportunities for inclusive practices that center on the needs of students and their families.

In addition to employment and transportation challenges, childcare responsibilities, and housing insecurity, these factors compound difficulties in school engagement. Iruka et al. (2020) noted that schools often assume families have autonomy over their schedules and resources, overlooking circumstances such as multigenerational caregiving, temporary housing, and employment across multiple part-time jobs. This disconnect between school expectations and families' lived realities can contribute to ongoing disengagement. Bettencourt et al. (2023) expanded on these structural concerns by emphasizing that digital engagement platforms, while well-intentioned, often assume consistent internet access and digital fluency. These assumptions disproportionately affect low-income families who may lack access to broadband internet, up-to-date devices, or consistent technological support in the home.

Structural barriers are further magnified by systemic conditions within schools themselves. In many economically distressed communities, limited staffing and high educator turnover reduce schools' capacity to implement family-centered practices. Mullins and Panlilio (2023) found that teachers in under-resourced schools were frequently overburdened with instructional demands, limiting their ability to initiate or maintain consistent outreach to families.

As a result, the responsibility for engagement has unintentionally shifted onto families, who are already navigating a web of socioeconomic and logistical stressors. These findings suggest that structural barriers to engagement are multifaceted and deeply embedded in socioeconomic and institutional contexts. Effective family engagement strategies must address individual family needs and broader systemic inequities that constrain participation (Zhang et al., 2024).

Cultural Disconnect and Educator Bias

A recurring theme in the literature was the disconnect between school culture and the values, communication styles, and traditions of the families being served. Beard and Thomson (2021) found that many educators misinterpreted low parental visibility as disinterest, overlooking culturally embedded forms of involvement outside the school context. This deficit-based perspective reinforced harmful stereotypes and discouraged families from forming authentic relationships with schools. Similarly, Lynch and Prins (2023) emphasized that many educators lacked preparation in family-centered and culturally sustaining practices. Baxter (2024) further highlighted that teachers often experience stress and uncertainty when adapting their instructional practices to engage families effectively, underscoring the importance of supportive environments that encourage experimentation without fear of failure.

As a result, many educators may continue to struggle to connect with families whose languages, traditions, or norms differ from those prioritized within mainstream school environments. Thornton (2025) extended this discussion by examining school leadership practices across four detracking teams and found that inclusive, culturally responsive leadership helped dismantle institutionalized barriers and foster trust among diverse families. These findings affirmed the need for leadership development that prioritizes equity, affirms student identity, and strengthens community-based engagement.

Educator bias, whether implicit or overt, has been shown to influence family-school dynamics in high-poverty contexts. Banks et al. (2025) reported that teachers often internalized deficit-based assumptions about families' knowledge and capacity to engage in their children's education. These assumptions led to surface-level activities that excluded families from leadership roles and decision-making processes. Gregg et al. (2024) further demonstrated that educators frequently missed opportunities to support culturally responsive engagement practices when they lack professional development in equity and inclusion. Beaulieu et al. (2024) supported these findings through a pilot study using culturally responsive and trauma-informed checklists and goal-setting tools to guide equitable practices. The work of Beaulieu et al. (2024) illustrated how practical tools embedded in professional learning can reshape educator mindsets and improve inclusive collaboration with families from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Several studies have demonstrated how unexamined assumptions contribute to structural exclusion. Beard and Thomson (2021) noted that schools that fail to recognize informal or culturally specific engagement practices often marginalize families whose contributions are not visible during conventional school events. Slade et al. (2023) added that dominant engagement frameworks typically reflect middle-class norms and unintentionally exclude families navigating

poverty, racialized experiences, or linguistic barriers. Lynch and Prins (2023) reinforced this conclusion by asserting that school-family partnerships must be designed around families' lived realities rather than institutional preferences.

In response to these challenges, researchers have emphasized the importance of reflective, community-centered approaches to engagement. Haight et al. (2024) and Lynch and Prins (2023) recommended that schools establish partnerships with families that are grounded in mutual respect, shared leadership, and cultural responsiveness. These partnerships included wraparound supports aligned with families' strengths and needs while creating space for families to contribute meaningfully to school improvement efforts. When schools recognize families as collaborators rather than passive participants, they foster trust and lay the foundation for sustainable engagement. These findings collectively emphasized the need to move beyond school-centered definitions of family involvement. Creating equitable partnerships requires schools to dismantle relational and structural barriers actively, affirm diverse forms of engagement, and include family voices in shaping educational practices.

Measurement and Representation Bias

An additional barrier lies in how schools measure and define engagement. Gross et al. (2022) argued that traditional engagement metrics disproportionately affect families from non-dominant cultural backgrounds by failing to capture informal, culturally embedded practices. These practices, such as neighborhood-based mentoring or family storytelling, are often overlooked by formal rubrics that privilege event attendance or volunteer hours. When schools rely exclusively on these narrow indicators, they risk rendering entire communities invisible and reinforcing underrepresentation in school decision-making. Compounding this issue is the widespread use of engagement tools designed for urban or middle-class norms.

Yotyodying et al. (2024) found that such tools were poorly suited to reflect the lived realities of multicultural families, leading educators to disregard culturally valued practices such as elder involvement or multilingual home activities. These measurement blind spots contribute to an incomplete picture of how families support their children's learning and well-being.

Willemse et al. (2024) added empirical support to this concern through a study on implementing school-wide positive behavioral interventions in Dutch elementary schools. Willemse et al. reported that educators often lacked culturally sensitive indicators and mechanisms for family input, thereby limiting their ability to evaluate engagement holistically. Research has also shown that many teachers require structured support and professional development to confidently implement flexible, culturally relevant engagement strategies (Baxter, 2024). These strategies frequently emphasize compliance and documentation over trust-building and contextual responsiveness, creating friction between school expectations and family contributions.

Similarly, Kuo and Stanley (2023) emphasized the need to reframe family engagement through equity-centered, system-level partnerships. Grounded in the dual capacity-building framework, their work advocated for expanded engagement models that integrate families, schools, communities, and universities. Kuo and Stanley noted that when institutional metrics narrowly define engagement, they often fail to capture relational and community-based forms of participation that are essential in under-resourced contexts. As a result, traditional measurement tools may reflect and perpetuate structural inequities.

Extending these findings, Gregg et al. (2024) observed that many engagement assessments reflect dominant cultural norms and may overlook practices that promote emotional safety, resilience, and community trust outside formal school structures. When narrowly defined engagement assessments guide engagement policy, authentic participation may be constrained,

and perceptions of family interest and investment may be distorted. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for inclusive, flexible engagement frameworks that recognize and validate the diverse ways families contribute to student success. Advancing equity also requires new strategies and a reexamination of how schools define, assess, and respond to family engagement in marginalized communities.

Summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature on family engagement in Title I schools, with a particular focus on high-poverty settings. The discussion was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. These frameworks illuminated the systemic, interpersonal, and contextual dynamics that shape how schools and families collaborate to support student learning and well-being.

The literature affirms that family engagement yields academic, social-emotional, and institutional benefits. Studies have demonstrated that meaningful partnerships promote student achievement, improve emotional regulation, and strengthen behavioral outcomes (Iruka et al., 2020; Lara et al., 2025; Skinner et al., 2022). Research has also shown that consistent engagement fosters relational trust between teachers and families, enhances school climate, and supports teacher morale and retention, particularly in under-resourced settings where educator burnout is prevalent (Haight et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024).

Despite these benefits, engagement remains uneven and often inequitable. Scholars have noted that many approaches are grounded in compliance-based or urban-centered frameworks that do not fully account for cultural diversity or the lived experiences of marginalized families (Bettencourt et al., 2023; Lynch & Prins, 2023). Furthermore, measurement tools often exclude

informal and culturally embedded practices, such as storytelling, elder mentorship, or spiritual guidance, thereby limiting recognition of families' authentic contributions (Fisher et al., 2022; Gross et al., 2022; Yotyodying et al., 2024). These exclusionary metrics contribute to underrepresentation and misalignment between institutional expectations and community norms.

Systemic barriers, such as inflexible work schedules, geographic isolation, and historical mistrust, further constrain family engagement, particularly in Title I schools. These barriers are often rooted in broader economic and social conditions that limit families' time, transportation, and access to school-based opportunities. Research suggests that equitable engagement must address structural challenges while fostering relational trust through consistent, respectful partnerships. Studies further emphasize that schools should involve families in designing practices and policies that reflect families' cultural strengths and daily realities (Gonzalez-Gomez et al., 2025; Kuo & Stanley, 2023; Willemse et al., 2024).

To respond to these limitations, researchers have proposed equity-centered, culturally responsive frameworks that prioritize shared leadership, asset-based communication, and co-designed strategies tailored to specific community contexts (Chen et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2025; Peltier et al., 2024). These models advocate for family engagement as an inclusive, reciprocal, and contextually grounded process. Empirical evidence further confirmed that when families are positioned as collaborators and their cultural assets are valued, school communities become more inclusive, adaptive, and resilient (Kea et al., 2025; Slade et al., 2023; Thornton, 2025). This growing body of literature highlights the need for Title I schools to shift their focus from transactional approaches to sustainable, trust-based partnerships.

This single-instrumental, qualitative case study explored how educators and school leaders in a high-poverty elementary school, situated in a historically underserved context,

implemented and sustained family engagement strategies responsive to the strengths, needs, and cultural values of the communities they serve. The intersecting patterns of engagement, challenge, and resilience discussed throughout this review underscore the need for a research design that captures participants' perceptions and the broader ecological contexts shaping family–school partnerships in marginalized educational environments. Chapter 3 presented the research methodology, including the single instrumental qualitative case study design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and thematic analysis that guided the examination of culturally responsive and inclusive engagement practices in this distinctive school setting.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent challenge of sustaining meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools, despite its benefits for student achievement and school improvement (Gross et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2024). The purpose of this single instrumental, qualitative case study was to explore practical strategies for enhancing family engagement in a Title I elementary school serving grades K-6 in a southern, historically underserved region marked by systemic inequities in education and opportunity. This chapter presented the research methodology and design, population and sample, instrumentation, study procedures, data analysis strategies, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances.

Research Methodology and Design

The research methodology employed in this study was qualitative, utilizing a single instrumental qualitative case study design. A qualitative methodology was appropriate because it facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and contextual practices related to family-school partnerships. Denzin et al. (2023) asserted that qualitative research is a situated, interpretive process rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed, complex, and best understood through the exploration of meaning in context.

Qualitative research involves material and interpretive practices that seek to understand phenomena in their contexts, often producing layered, nuanced insights into participants' perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). These practices reflected the moral and political nature of inquiry, requiring researchers to function as instruments in observing and interpreting meaning within participants' realities. Brinkmann (2022) explained that qualitative research is not merely a set of technical procedures but a morally and epistemically engaged activity that requires the

researcher to act reflexively, ethically, and contextually. The researcher must navigate issues of representation, positionality, and relational dynamics inherent in meaning-making while remaining attentive to the co-construction of knowledge with participants. This methodological orientation was particularly well-suited for the current study, which seeks to explore how family-school partnerships are experienced and enacted within a high-poverty school context.

The single instrumental, qualitative case study approach aligned with the study's intent to examine a complex social phenomenon in its real-life context, using multiple forms of data. Yin (2017) stated that qualitative case study research is particularly appropriate for answering "how" and "why" questions, especially when the researcher has limited control over events and when the phenomenon of interest is deeply embedded in its context. This study adopted a single instrumental qualitative case study design, as defined by Stake (1978), in which the selected case, a Title I elementary school in a historically underserved school context, was used to gain insight into a broader issue: the enhancement of family engagement in high-poverty school settings.

This single instrumental, qualitative case study design supported the use of multiple data sources to achieve triangulation, which enhanced the credibility, depth, and completeness of the findings by enabling the convergence of evidence from various sources (P. Baxter & Jack, 2008; Ravitch & Carl, 2020). In qualitative research, triangulation involves intentionally designing and sequencing methods to ensure alignment with the research questions and enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to capture rich, descriptive accounts of participants' perspectives (Patton, 2015). Interview questions were

open-ended and purposefully aligned with the theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Document analysis included reviewing relevant materials, including family engagement policies, communication logs, event sign-in sheets, newsletters, and meeting agendas. These documents provided contextual information about the school's family engagement practices and served as an additional data source to triangulate with interview findings (Bowen, 2009). These data sources supported the development of a thick description and identified emergent themes grounded in participants' perspectives.

Alternative methodologies, including quantitative and mixed methods, were considered but deemed less appropriate for the aims of this qualitative inquiry. Quantitative research, which emphasizes statistical measurement and generalizability, would not have adequately captured the contextualized, practice-based perspectives of educators and administrators within a bounded Title I elementary school setting (Pregoner, 2024). The purpose of the study was not to test hypotheses, estimate effect sizes, or determine the strength of relationships among variables. Instead, the study required close attention to how family engagement was interpreted, enacted, and sustained within the everyday realities of a high-poverty school community. Quantitative designs would have required standardized instruments and predetermined variables that could have constrained participants' meaning-making and limited attention to contextual influences such as trust, relational history, communication norms, and school-community dynamics.

Mixed methods designs were also considered because they can integrate numerical trends with an in-depth qualitative understanding. However, a mixed methods approach would have required the design, administration, and analysis of a quantitative component in addition to interviews and document analysis. This added component would have increased the scope of the

study, introduced additional demands related to measurement decisions and data integration, and shifted the study away from its central goal of producing thick description and practice-focused insight within one bounded case (Denzin et al., 2023). Because the research questions were addressed through educator and administrator perspectives and school-based documents, the inclusion of a quantitative strand was not necessary for coherence or alignment.

Other qualitative designs were also explored to ensure methodological alignment with the research questions, the study's context, and its practical conditions. Phenomenological research was not selected because phenomenology aims to describe the essence of a shared lived experience across individuals. In contrast, this study examined strategies, barriers, and perceived outcomes associated with family engagement as they were implemented within a specific institutional setting. Participants held different roles and responsibilities, and variation in perspective was expected and analytically meaningful rather than something to reduce to a single essential experience (Brinkmann, 2022; Rovamo & Mabrouk, 2025).

Ethnographic design was considered but was not selected because ethnography typically requires prolonged immersion and sustained participant observation to interpret cultural patterns over time. While culture and community context were relevant to engagement practices, the study's data collection plan relied on semi-structured interviews and document analysis rather than extended fieldwork. The study's timeline and access conditions supported targeted data collection, and the purpose did not require producing a comprehensive cultural portrait of the school community (Alam, 2021).

Grounded theory was also ruled out because grounded theory is designed to generate a new theory through iterative cycles of data collection, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling. The purpose of this study was practical understanding rather than theory generation.

The study was guided by established theoretical frameworks, and the research questions were designed to explore strategies, perceived barriers, and perceived outcomes within a single bounded case rather than to construct a new explanatory model (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2017). Given the contextual nature of the research questions and the need to examine family engagement within its real-life setting, the single instrumental qualitative case study approach was deemed the most suitable design for this study.

Population and Sample

The total eligible population at the study site consisted of approximately 18 certified school personnel, including two administrators, two instructional coaches, and 14 classroom and support teachers. These individuals were directly involved in instructional planning, direct instruction, and family engagement activities. They met the inclusion criteria of having completed at least one full academic year at the school. The study site was a Title I elementary school in a historically underserved region, serving approximately 300 students in grades K-6, most of whom came from low-income families.

The inclusion criteria included participants who (a) were employed at the study site as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, or administrator; (b) had completed at least one full academic year at the school; and (c) were directly involved in instructional planning, teaching, or family engagement efforts. Individuals were excluded from the study if they had been employed for less than one academic year or if their roles did not include instructional or family engagement responsibilities (e.g., custodial, cafeteria, or clerical staff). The selected school population closely mirrors the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of many Title I elementary schools within historically underserved school contexts, thereby enhancing the study's relevance and the potential transferability of its insights to similar contexts.

Participation in this single instrumental qualitative case study was voluntary; therefore, it could not be assumed that all eligible individuals would provide consent to participate. If one or both school administrators were unable to participate, insights from other leadership personnel, such as instructional coaches, would be included to ensure representation of school-level leadership perspectives. The anticipated sample size ranged from nine to 14 participants, aligning with qualitative guidelines emphasizing depth over breadth in interview-based research.

Brinkmann (2022) underscored the importance of prioritizing “fewer interviews that are thoroughly analyzed” (p. 48) rather than conducting numerous superficial interviews. Brinkmann further noted that a sample of approximately 15 participants is often practical and sufficient to achieve data richness and support analytical rigor in qualitative inquiry. The final sample size was determined by data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2020). This approach ensured depth and breadth of understanding while maintaining methodological rigor. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants, as this approach intentionally selects individuals with knowledge most relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015).

Participants were recruited through direct email invitations sent to eligible individuals. These emails included an IRB-approved recruitment script outlining the study’s purpose, its voluntary nature, the participation criteria, and the confidentiality protections in place. Interested individuals were invited to contact me directly if they wished to participate. Informed consent was obtained privately from each participant before data collection to ensure voluntary participation and maintain confidentiality.

Materials and Instrumentation

Data collection for this single instrumental qualitative case study involved two primary sources: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These complementary methods were selected to support a comprehensive understanding of educators' and administrators' perspectives on family engagement practices in a Title I elementary school. Semi-structured, researcher-designed interviews served as the primary data source (see Appendix A). This flexible, participant-centered approach facilitated in-depth exploration of individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and social interactions. This method was particularly well-suited for qualitative case study research because it yielded rich, contextualized data that standardized instruments may overlook (Brinkmann, 2022; Rovamo & Mabrouk, 2025).

The interview protocol was developed for use with all participants, regardless of their role at the study site, to obtain detailed accounts of educators' and administrators' strategies and perceptions related to family engagement. Questions were grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) and Epstein (1995) to examine how ecological systems and overlapping spheres of influence shape school–family partnerships. The protocol was informed by a comprehensive review of the literature on family engagement and aligned with the study's purpose and research questions (see Appendix B).

In semi-structured interviews, researchers used a protocol to guide the conversation while remaining open to emerging insights. This structure enabled tailored probing questions, co-construction of meaning, and conversational depth that was uniquely responsive to participants' perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). This consistency supported comparability across participant roles and was appropriate because individuals in different positions at the study site contributed to and implemented family engagement practices. While the same core questions were asked of

all participants, the protocol included flexible prompts that enabled tailored probing based on each participant's responsibilities and context. This strategy promoted consistency in data collection while allowing for meaningful cross-role comparisons (Seidman, 2019).

To ensure clarity, neutrality, and relevance, I reviewed and refined the interview protocol internally, applying best practices in qualitative interview design. Following the internal review, a field test was conducted with two expert reviewers who were not study participants. The reviewers included an experienced elementary school administrator with extensive expertise in family engagement initiatives and a classroom teacher with more than 10 years of instructional experience in Title I schools. The reviewers evaluated the interview protocol for content validity, clarity of language, alignment with the research questions, and potential bias. The reviewer's feedback indicated that the questions were clear and appropriately focused; however, minor revisions were suggested to enhance specificity and encourage open-ended responses. For example, one question was rephrased to be more exploratory, and additional clarifying probes were incorporated to facilitate participants' elaboration on their perceptions. These modifications enhanced the protocol's ability to generate detailed, trustworthy narrative data that aligned with the study's objectives.

Document analysis served as a secondary data source and included family engagement policies, communication logs, event sign-in sheets, newsletters, and meeting agendas. These materials were obtained with permission from school leadership and reviewed to supplement and triangulate the interview data. A structured document analysis protocol, adapted from Bowen (2009), guided the process and included criteria for selecting relevant documents, organizing content aligned with family engagement themes, and recording analytic memos regarding emphasis and alignment with interview findings. Document analysis contributed to the

credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation by providing additional insight into organizational and contextual factors influencing family engagement within the bounded case.

Study Procedures

Data collection for this single instrumental qualitative case study followed a structured, step-by-step process consistent with National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Formal written site authorization was obtained from the school district and the building-level administrator. This permission authorized the recruitment of participants, the conduct of interviews, and access to school-related artifacts relevant to family engagement practices. The signed permission letter was submitted with the IRB application, as required by the university's research approval process.

Following site approval, a formal application was submitted to the university's IRB. The application included all required documentation, including the site permission letter, the study's purpose and research questions, the informed consent form, participant recruitment materials, a detailed description of data collection procedures, the interview protocol, and the data protection plan. No recruitment or data collection activities occurred until formal IRB approval was received (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After IRB approval, participants were recruited using email invitations with confirmation from the site administrator. The recruitment email outlined the study's purpose, participant responsibilities, estimated time commitment, and confidentiality protections. Individuals who volunteered to participate received an informed consent form describing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty (National Commission for the Protection of Human

Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). All participants signed the informed consent form before data collection.

Data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase involved individual, semi-structured interviews with nine participants, including educators and administrators. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was scheduled at a time convenient for each participant. To maintain confidentiality and reduce the risk of perceived coercion, interviews were conducted off-site at neutral, private locations, such as reserved study rooms at public libraries, or via Zoom at the participant's preference. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to support accurate analysis (Patton, 2015).

The second phase involved document analysis. Relevant materials were collected following the interviews and included Title I family engagement plans, school-family communication logs, newsletters, parent-teacher event records, and staff-parent meeting notes. These records provided contextual information regarding family engagement practices and served as an additional data source for triangulation with interview findings (Bowen, 2009). Formal permission to access these materials was obtained in writing from the site administrator following IRB approval.

Member checking occurred after interview transcription. Participants received their interview transcript via email and were invited to review it to confirm accuracy and clarify or elaborate on any statements as needed. Participants were given up to 2 weeks to return corrections or comments (Birt et al., 2016). This process strengthened the credibility of the interview data and supported an accurate representation of participant perspectives. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms using alphanumeric identifiers to protect their identities in transcripts, field notes, and reports.

Audio recordings, transcripts, and collected documents were stored in secure, password-protected formats, and any printed materials were secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's private office. Data will be retained for three years following completion of the study and then permanently deleted or destroyed in accordance with IRB requirements and the informed consent form.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023), guided the exploration of how educators and families in a Title I elementary school perceived and engaged in family–school partnerships. This approach aligned well with qualitative case study research because it emphasized the researcher's active and interpretive role in deriving meaning from the data. Rather than prioritizing objectivity or replicability, reflexive thematic analysis emphasized transparency, reflexivity, and depth, which were essential for examining complex, context-dependent educational phenomena. Brinkmann (2022) further asserted that reflexive practice involved continuously and critically examining the researcher's assumptions, values, and influence across all stages of the inquiry process.

Braun and Clarke's (2023) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis guided the exploration of meaning within the interview data. During the familiarization phase, I read and reread interview transcripts and study artifacts, took notes, and wrote early reflections to build familiarity with the dataset. During the second phase, initial codes were generated, and NVivo software was used to support inductive coding. According to Braun and Clarke (2023), inductive coding involves the organic development of codes from the data rather than the application of pre-existing theoretical categories.

This approach enabled themes to remain connected to participants' narratives and contextual realities, which supported an authentic, data-driven understanding of the phenomenon under study. Inductive coding was particularly appropriate for exploratory qualitative case studies because it fostered openness to unanticipated patterns and meanings while allowing flexibility in theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Although reflexive thematic analysis recognized that complete inductiveness was impossible, the process prioritized coding as an active, interpretive practice shaped by the researcher's theoretical and experiential perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

As Braun and Clarke (2023) described, codes were collated into broader categories that represented repeated and meaningful patterns across the data during theme construction. Attention was given to how participants constructed meaning within their educational and social contexts. In the reviewing themes phase, preliminary themes were evaluated for coherence, conceptual clarity, and alignment with the research questions. Themes lacking strong support or clear distinction were revised or removed.

In the defining and naming themes phase, each theme was refined to articulate its scope, significance, and core organizing concept. During the final phase, producing the report, I developed a compelling narrative using illustrative quotes, theory-informed interpretation, and alignment with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Each code and emergent theme were aligned with the research questions to maintain analytical focus (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This alignment supported coherence between the analytic decisions and the study's guiding aims.

Document analysis complemented the interview data through qualitative content analysis to systematically examine patterns across school artifacts (Bowen, 2009). A structured document

analysis protocol guided this process by outlining criteria for selecting materials, procedures for appraising authenticity and relevance, and steps for extracting and coding data. The process involved iterative phases of skimming, detailed reading, and interpretation to identify meaningful excerpts and develop themes aligned with the research questions. This approach allowed for examining the frequency, emphasis, and alignment of documentary evidence with interview findings, thereby supporting methodological triangulation and enhancing the credibility of the results (Bowen, 2009).

To ensure analytic rigor and trustworthiness, the study was guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, integration of multiple data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was supported by providing detailed contextual descriptions of the school setting, participant backgrounds, and data collection procedures, which enabled readers to evaluate applicability across contexts (Nowell et al., 2017). These strategies supported a trustworthy interpretation of participant perspectives.

Dependability was established by maintaining an audit trail that documented research procedures, coding frameworks, theme development, and interpretive decisions. The audit trail provided transparency and allowed the analytic process to be traced in detail (Bowen, 2009; Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was strengthened through the use of a reflexive journal, which facilitated critical examination of personal assumptions, reactions, and evolving interpretations. The journal served as an internal accountability tool separate from the audit trail and supported ongoing self-monitoring and positionality (Ortlipp, 2008).

This study also followed the guidance of Sun et al. (2025), who emphasized integrating reflexive thematic analysis with theory-informed, systematic theme development. Their work enhanced analytical depth by encouraging researchers to explore configurational patterns across cases and to maintain transparency about how meaning was constructed and synthesized. Consistent with this guidance, the study employed Braun and Clarke's (2023) reflexive thematic analysis while integrating trustworthiness strategies outlined by Bowen (2009), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Nowell et al. (2017), Ortlipp (2008), and Sun et al. (2025). Together, these approaches supported credibility and generated contextually rich insights into educators' perspectives on family engagement practices within a high-poverty Title I elementary school.

Assumptions

Qualitative research is an interpretive approach used to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences within a particular social and institutional context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In qualitative case study research, the phenomenon is examined within a bounded setting, and findings are shaped through sustained engagement with participant perspectives and contextual evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because qualitative inquiry acknowledges the inevitability of subjectivity and the researcher's interpretive role, reflexivity is essential for making analytic decisions transparent and for strengthening the credibility of interpretations (Brinkmann, 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the analytic focus emphasized transparency, reflexive engagement, and depth of interpretation rather than claims of objective neutrality or exact replicability (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Assumptions are conditions accepted as accurate or taken for granted without direct evidence, but they are necessary for a study to proceed (Alam, 2021). In qualitative research,

assumptions often reflect beliefs about the nature of reality, the role of participants, and the processes of data collection and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, it was assumed that participants provided honest and authentic responses during interviews and that their perspectives reflected their views and interpretations of family engagement within a Title I school context. It was also assumed that documents collected for analysis were authentic, accurate, and representative of the school's family engagement practices and policies during the study period (Bowen, 2009). Given the single instrumental case study design, it was further assumed that the bounded setting provided sufficient depth to generate contextually grounded insights relevant to schools serving similar Title I populations and operating within comparable historically underserved contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Initially, it was assumed that family engagement would be limited and difficult to sustain in this context based on prior professional experience in similar Title I settings. Because this assumption had the potential to shape interpretation, reflexive practices were used to document assumptions, monitor subjectivity, and support analytic decision-making throughout coding and theme development (Brinkmann, 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). These assumptions were necessary because a qualitative single instrumental case study relied on the trustworthiness of participant accounts, the authenticity and accuracy of documents, and a transparent interpretive process to construct meaning from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Limitations

In qualitative research, limitations refer to inherent constraints in a study's design, methodology, or contextual scope that may influence how findings are interpreted or applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One limitation of this study was its single-site design, which hindered

generalizability beyond the immediate setting. In qualitative inquiry, transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other similar contexts rather than generalized across populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the study sought to generate deep, contextually rich insights into family engagement within a Title I elementary school in a historically underserved area, differences in school culture, community structure, and resource availability may limit its applicability to other settings.

The findings included thick description to support transferability by providing detailed accounts of the school context, participants' roles, and family engagement practices described by participants and documented in school artifacts. Presenting rich contextual detail allowed readers to understand how engagement strategies were shaped by the setting and the conditions influencing participation. This approach enabled readers to determine the relevance of the findings to their own contexts and to make informed judgments about applicability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A further limitation was the potential for researcher bias. This limitation was addressed through a reflexive journal, peer debriefing, and the systematic documentation of analytic decisions via an audit trail. These strategies strengthened credibility, dependability, and confirmability and helped minimize the influence of subjective interpretation (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

Delimitations

This study was delimited to one Title I elementary school in a historically underserved context. Delimitations are the researcher's intentional boundaries that narrow the scope of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study included only educators and administrators with at least one year of experience at the study site who were actively involved in instructional planning, teaching, or family engagement initiatives. These parameters excluded direct

perspectives from families and students. This delimitation enabled a rich, in-depth exploration of school-based strategies and educators' insights on family engagement.

Focusing on educator and administrator perspectives aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) framework of overlapping spheres of influence, which emphasize the role of school personnel within a broader engagement system. The decision to center educators' voices was also supported by the literature, which indicates that educators often serve as key facilitators of meaningful and sustained family partnerships (Gross et al., 2022; Willemse et al., 2024). Within this bounded context, educator perspectives provided insight into how engagement was interpreted, encouraged, and operationalized through school-based practices.

To enhance trustworthiness within this delimited context, multiple strategies were employed to promote transparency and analytic rigor. These strategies included thick description, triangulation across data sources, peer debriefing, an audit trail, and a reflexive journal documenting analytic decisions and the researcher's positioning throughout the study. Collectively, these procedures supported credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability within the boundaries established by the research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Ethical Assurances

Approval from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before any data collection procedures were initiated. Permission from the research site was also secured to conduct the study and access relevant documents. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and included the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation,

confidentiality protections, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence or penalty.

The study was guided by the three core ethical principles outlined in The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979): respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons was upheld by ensuring that participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving adequate information through the informed consent process. Beneficence was maintained by minimizing potential risks and ensuring that participants were not harmed. The study involved minimal risk because it focused on professional perspectives within an educational setting. Justice was upheld by selecting participants equitably based on their roles and relevance to the research questions, thereby ensuring that no group was disproportionately burdened or excluded.

To protect participant confidentiality, alphanumeric identifiers were assigned to participants and were used in all records and reports. All digital data, including interview recordings, transcripts, and field notes, was stored in password-protected files on a secure, encrypted device. Hard copy materials were stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. Data were retained securely for 3 years following the conclusion of the study, consistent with the approved IRB protocol.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to acknowledge and mitigate potential bias. Strategies used to support trustworthiness and minimize bias included memo writing during data collection and analysis, maintaining a reflexive journal, and engaging in peer debriefing with experienced qualitative researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). These

strategies supported transparency, strengthened analytic rigor, and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the research design and methodology for this single instrumental, qualitative case study, which explored strategies to enhance family engagement in a Title I elementary school within a historically underserved context. The chapter provided the rationale for selecting a single instrumental qualitative case study approach, highlighting its appropriateness for examining participants' perspectives within a specific sociocultural and educational setting. A detailed justification was provided for selecting the single instrumental qualitative case study design over alternative methodologies, including phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, quantitative methods, and mixed methods.

The chapter presented the target population and sample, supported by a purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity of roles and relevant experience. The development of the semi-structured interview protocol was grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Epstein et al. (2002), with expert validation incorporated to enhance the protocol's credibility. The data collection process was structured and aligned with ethical research practices, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and adhering to the procedures outlined in the IRB approval. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2023) reflexive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to support transcript organization, coding management, excerpt retrieval, and analytic memoing, consistent with its use as a supportive tool in qualitative case study research (Alam, 2021). A reflexive journal was used to ensure transparency and rigor in the process. Limitations and delimitations were acknowledged, and

strategies such as thick description, peer debriefing, and content validation were used to enhance credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. These strategies were applied throughout data collection and analysis through documented analytic decisions, repeated checks of codes and themes against full transcripts, and triangulation of interview and document data. The chapter concluded with ethical assurances. Chapter 4 presented findings from the interviews and document analysis, organized by themes that addressed the research questions.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent challenge of sustaining meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools despite its documented benefits for student achievement and school improvement. The purpose of this single instrumental qualitative case study was to explore practical strategies for enhancing family engagement in a Title I elementary school serving grades K–6 in a historically underserved southern region. This chapter presented the study’s findings, which were organized around the three research questions that guided the study. The chapter began with a description of the procedures used to establish trustworthiness, followed by an overview of the research setting, participants, and analytic approach. Findings were then presented in direct alignment with each research question. The chapter concluded with a comparison of the findings to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and a summary that transitioned to Chapter 5.

Trustworthiness was established using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across nine semi-structured interviews, institutional artifacts, and archival documents, consistent with Yin’s (2017) assertion that convergence across multiple data sources enhances case study validity. Member checking supported accuracy and authenticity, as participants reviewed and verified their interview transcripts in alignment with Birt et al. (2016).

Reflexive memoing and analytic journaling, as recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2020), enhanced transparency and supported ongoing reflection on the researcher’s positionality and decision-making. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the school context and participant characteristics. Dependability was reinforced through a detailed audit trail that documented methodological decisions and coding procedures. Confirmability was

strengthened by grounding all interpretations in participant interview excerpts and triangulating them with documentary evidence.

Document analysis provided additional contextual insight and supported the credibility of the findings. This process involved iterative cycles of skimming, close reading, and interpretation to identify meaningful excerpts aligned with the research questions. This analytical approach supported methodological rigor and triangulation, aligning with Bowen's (2009) recommendations for document analysis. In accordance with Baxter and Jack (2008) and Stake (1978), the use of multiple forms of evidence strengthened the validity of the case study. Braun and Clarke's (2023) reflexive thematic analysis guided the coding and theme development procedures, as well as the researcher's active role in interpreting participants' meaning and constructing themes aligned with the research questions.

The study's results included information about the participants, their perspectives, and the seven themes that emerged through the reflexive thematic analysis. These themes described how educators experienced and interpreted family engagement practices within a high-poverty Title I setting. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence informed the interpretation of educators' perspectives, particularly across microsystem and mesosystem interactions.

The seven themes that emerged were relationship-building and trust, two-way communication practices, culturally responsive engagement, empowerment and shared voice, community collaboration, socioeconomic and contextual barriers, and student impact and school climate. The themes were aligned with the corresponding research question. Each theme incorporated descriptive summaries, participant excerpts, and documentary evidence to illustrate

educators' perspectives on engagement practices, barriers to participation, and strategies that supported partnerships in the Title I setting.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research ensured that the analysis accurately reflected participants' perspectives and that the findings were credible, dependable, transferable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this single instrumental qualitative case study, trustworthiness was strengthened through multiple strategies aligned with the approved methodology in Chapter 3, including triangulation, member checking, an audit trail, reflexive journaling, and detailed documentation of study procedures. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' perspectives. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation across nine semi-structured interviews and multiple institutional documents, including family engagement plans, school improvement plans, policy documents, and communication artifacts (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2017). Member checking was conducted by providing participants with a summary of their interview responses for review to confirm accuracy and intent, consistent with the approved IRB protocol. In addition, interview transcripts were reviewed against audio recordings and reflexive notes to ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' voices rather than the researcher's assumptions (Patton, 2015).

Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual descriptions that allowed readers to determine whether the study's findings could apply to similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the school context, participants' roles, the community's demographic characteristics, and the engagement practices observed in a high-poverty Title I elementary school. These contextual descriptions enabled

readers to determine whether the findings might apply to other Title I schools with similar populations or community conditions.

Dependability was strengthened through consistent and transparent procedures across data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was supported by a clearly documented methodological process, as outlined in Chapter 3. This process included the consistent use of a semi-structured interview protocol, standardized transcription procedures, and systematic coding phases following Braun and Clarke's (2023) reflexive thematic analysis approach. An audit trail was maintained to document coding decisions, theme development, and procedural steps, demonstrating that the study was conducted logically and consistently (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability was demonstrated by ensuring that findings reflected participants' accounts rather than researcher bias (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2015). Triangulation, reflexive journaling, and verbatim participant quotations reinforced confirmability by grounding interpretations in participants' voices. Reflexive memos documented assumptions and analytic decision points, and thematic interpretations were repeatedly checked against the complete data set to ensure alignment with participants' accounts. The triangulation of multiple data sources, including interviews and documents, further reduced reliance on any single perspective and enhanced confirmability (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2017).

Collectively, these strategies strengthened the study's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Each approach aligned with the qualitative case study design and supported a rigorous and transparent research process. Together, these efforts strengthened the overall trustworthiness of the results presented in this chapter. Because qualitative findings are shaped by context and the researcher's positioning, steps were taken to minimize potential

response bias during the interviews. Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, responses were confidential, and there were no penalties for nonparticipation. The researcher also employed reflexive journaling to monitor assumptions and document analytic decision points, thereby reducing unintended influence on interpretation.

Results

This single instrumental qualitative case study explored how educators and an administrator at a Title I elementary school described the strategies used to foster meaningful family engagement, the barriers to participation, and the perceived outcomes of engagement for students. Data were collected from nine semi-structured interviews and a review of institutional documents related to family engagement. The findings were organized around the three research questions and presented descriptively, without added interpretation or speculation.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix G), data collection proceeded according to the procedures outlined in Chapter 3. Recruitment took place at the participating Title I elementary school, where educators were invited to participate via email in accordance with the IRB-approved procedures. A total of nine educators, comprising eight teachers and one administrator, agreed to participate, which aligned with the projected sample size described in the research design. All data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted off campus, either in person or via a secure video-conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and followed the approved interview protocol grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) overlapping spheres of influence.

All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim, resulting in approximately 120 pages of transcript data. Interview transcripts were returned to

participants for member checking to verify accuracy, and each participant was allowed to clarify or amend any of their responses. All participants indicated that the transcripts accurately represented their responses and did not request any changes. In addition to interviews, institutional documents related to family engagement and school improvement were collected to support triangulation. These documents included the Family Engagement Plan, the Title I Parent Compact, the family engagement components of the Alabama Continuous Improvement Plan (ACIP), Family Literacy Day artifacts, communication logs, newsletters, parent meeting minutes, and archival records such as the 2023–2024 Title I Annual Evaluation and the 2023–2024 ACIP Report. These documents provided contextual information about family engagement practices and supported verification of recurring patterns observed in the interview data.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Role	Years of Experience	Education Level
ET1	Teacher	Less than 5 years	Bachelor's
ET2	Teacher	Less than 5 years	Bachelor's
ET3	Teacher	Less than 5 years	Bachelor's
ET4	Teacher	Less than 5 years	Master's
ET5	Teacher	5-10 years	Bachelor's
ET6	Teacher	16-18 years	Bachelor's
ET7	Teacher	16-18 years	Bachelor's
ET8	Teacher	16-19 years	Master's
EP	Principal	11-15 years	Master's

Nine educators participated in the study, including eight classroom teachers and one administrator. Participants represented a range of professional backgrounds, with teaching and leadership experience spanning from less than 5 years to more than 18 years. Educational preparation included bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education, special education,

literacy, and instructional leadership. To protect confidentiality in accordance with IRB requirements, participants were assigned alphanumeric identifiers (ET1 to ET8 for teachers and EP for the administrator). Demographic information was reported in generalized categories to reduce the risk of identifying individual participants.

Table 2

Themes Identified for Research Question 1

Themes	Description	Participants
Relationship-Building and Trust	Daily greetings, visibility, empathy, and consistent follow-up strengthened trust between families and staff.	ET1-ET8, EP
Two-Way Communication	Multiple communication methods improved accessibility and responsiveness.	ET1-ET8, EP
Culturally Responsive Engagement	Plain-language communication, flexible scheduling, and inclusive events increased family participation.	ET1, ET3, ET4, ET6, ET7, ET8
Shared Decision-Making	Families were engaged through shared input in Title I planning, ACIP development, and school governance.	ET2, ET4, ET6, ET7, ET8, EP
Community Collaboration	Partnerships with churches, civic groups, and local businesses expanded opportunities for engagement.	ET3, ET6, ET8, EP

Note. ET = experienced teacher, EP = experienced principal. Participant codes reflect those who contributed evidence aligned to each theme.

Research Question 1

How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the strategies used to foster meaningful family engagement?

Data for this research question were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023). Analysis began with repeated readings of all interview transcripts to build familiarity with participants' perspectives. Line-by-line coding was used to identify initial codes related to family engagement strategies. These codes were clustered into categories based on conceptual similarity and refined through iterative comparison across the full data set. Themes were generated by comparing codes across participants and identifying recurring points of emphasis. Themes were verified through cross-checks with transcripts, analytic memos, and institutional documents to ensure credibility and alignment with participants' perspectives.

Theme 1: Relationship-Building and Trust. Participants consistently emphasized that strong family–school relationships formed the foundation for meaningful engagement at the Title I school. Daily gestures, such as greeting parents upon arrival and dismissal, using their names, and checking in on family needs, were described as essential to building trust over time. Educators characterized these practices as intentional and relational rather than transactional, noting that families were more likely to participate when they felt known and cared for by school staff. As one participant summarized, families responded positively when staff “take time to greet them and show we care,” and trust increased when the school consistently followed up.

ET1, ET3, and ET4 described how simple acts of kindness and consistency shaped parents' willingness to engage. ET1 explained that “parents respond when we show kindness and consistency every day,” highlighting that families noticed when teachers remained steady and respectful in their interactions. ET3 shared, “When I talk to my parents and build relationships, they start trusting me. They text and call,” describing how proactive outreach and ongoing contact encouraged families to share both concerns and positive updates with the school. ET4

noted that being “authentic and transparent” with families and focusing on “solving the parents’ and students’ problems” helped parents feel that staff were on their side rather than judgmental. ET2 echoed this emphasis on reliability, explaining that parents became more open and communicative when she followed up after difficult conversations and checked in to see whether supports were working at home.

Visibility and accessibility were also key factors in educators' descriptions of trust. ET5 stated that “being visible in the morning and afternoon helps parents trust us and feel comfortable coming into the school,” emphasizing the importance of being physically present during key transition times. Another teacher explained that having regular conversations at car dismissal and on the sidewalk allowed them to “keep in contact” and “promote support from home to school,” which deepened relationships with families over time. ET6 added that taking time to understand each family’s situation, including single-parent and grandparent-led households, helped her “fill in the gaps” and tailor support so that parents felt respected and understood. ET7 highlighted that maintaining a calm, nonjudgmental tone during challenging interactions helped families feel safe sharing concerns about behavior, attendance, or academic struggles. ET8 similarly described that slowing down, listening carefully, and acknowledging families’ efforts communicated respect and strengthened relationships even when there were disagreements about student discipline or expectations.

EP underscored the importance of ongoing, relational contact as a core leadership practice. EP described standing outside daily to greet students and families, explaining that these routines were intentional efforts to make families feel welcome and to signal that the school was approachable. EP highlighted the cumulative effect of consistent relational practices, noting that trust developed “when families see that the school follows up, checks on students, and

communicates respectfully” and emphasizing that “it is not one big event that builds trust but the small things we do every single day.” These cumulative practices led families to view the school as a partner and to reach out more frequently with questions, updates, and concerns.

Document analysis further supported this theme by showing that relationship-building was embedded in the school’s formal commitments and routines. The family engagement plans, school improvement plans, and communication artifacts such as newsletters and school-wide messages consistently highlighted a welcoming, relationship-centered climate, including an open-door philosophy, regular invitations for families to visit classrooms, and frequent expressions of appreciation for parent involvement. These documents aligned with participants’ descriptions of daily greetings, visibility, and follow-up, reinforcing the intentional priority of trust and relational care rather than incidental practices.

Theme 2: Two-Way Communication. All nine participants described ongoing, two-way communication as central to fostering meaningful family engagement. Participants emphasized that communication occurred across multiple platforms, enabling families to both receive information and respond in ways that best suited their needs. One participant explained that Remind and text updates kept parents informed and “gave them a way to talk back to us,” highlighting that accessibility and responsiveness were key features of effective communication. Participants described a wide range of tools used regularly to communicate with families. ET1 explained, “We send out flyers and daily and weekly updates; I have given my personal number for parents to contact me by email and Remind app. We have an open-door policy and set up conferences as well,” showing how written updates, digital tools, and in-person meetings worked together to keep parents informed. ET2 similarly noted that “Remind, newsletters, Facebook” were used and that “our communication is very transparent through face-to-face conferences, and

walking to the cars,” emphasizing that messages were shared through both digital and face-to-face channels. Hence, parents had multiple ways to stay updated. ET3 noted, “We make sure when we have different events, we send out flyers, use the Remind platform, send a calendar for the entire year, make sure we greet them and keep them updated, and make sure we are communicating,” underscoring that families received information well in advance and were reminded multiple times. ET4 reported that the school used “Remind, Dojo, newsletters, Facebook, phone calls, and hard copies” to engage parents, indicating that communication strategies were intentionally varied to accommodate varying levels of technology access. ET5 explained that communication extended into daily routines, noting that “phone calls, newsletter, flyers, Remind, and car ride visits at dismissal” helped keep parents informed and provided opportunities to ask questions during pickup. ET6 added that the school used “Remind, a school newsletter, email, and sometimes we talk to them at the car,” which further illustrated how scheduled messages and informal conversations worked together to sustain ongoing communication with families.

Participants also stressed that communication practices were intentionally structured to be two-way rather than one-sided. ET7 described that “communication at their school is ongoing and responsive. We use phone calls, Remind messages, classroom updates, email, and school media to communicate with families. We also talk with parents in person during dismissal and at events. Families know they can contact teachers or the principal anytime,” emphasizing that parents were encouraged to reach out rather than only receive information. ET8 echoed this focus on dialogue, explaining that the school used “phone calls, sending home flyers, Remind, so parents can know exactly what is going on in our school, and face to face sidewalk reminders,” and that these strategies helped families stay informed about events, PBIS activities, and field

trips. Together, participants described two-way communication as a routine part of their work, enabling families to ask questions, share concerns, and receive real-time clarification.

EP reinforced two-way communication as a schoolwide expectation and leadership priority. EP explained that communication at the school was not “a one-way message” but “a dialogue,” maintained through Remind, school newsletters, personal phone calls, and daily conversations at school arrival and dismissal. EP also noted that teachers were expected to support weekly communication with families and document outreach to ensure that contact with parents remained consistent, respectful, timely, and purposeful. These expectations positioned communication as an ongoing partnership between home and school rather than a series of isolated announcements.

Document analysis further supported this theme by demonstrating that two-way communication was embedded in the school’s formal systems and routines. Communication artifacts such as school newsletters, Remind messages, printed flyers, yearly calendars, and social media posts documented frequent updates about academic expectations, school events, and family engagement opportunities. Many of these documents included invitations for parents to contact the school with questions, attend conferences, or provide feedback through surveys and open-ended comment sections. Title I and ACIP parent input forms, parent–teacher organization notices, and event flyers regularly listed multiple ways to respond, including returning forms, calling the school, or replying through Remind. Together, the interview data and communication artifacts indicated that maintaining two-way communication across multiple platforms enhanced accessibility and accountability between families and educators, serving as a core mechanism for sustaining family–school partnerships.

Theme 3: Culturally Responsive Engagement. Culturally responsive engagement emerged as a key strategy among six participants, who emphasized that family participation increased when school practices respected families' cultural and contextual experiences. ET1 noted that "keeping things simple and short works best," explaining that families were more likely to respond when messages were "factual and straight to the point" rather than written in complex language. ET4 similarly described that "many parents participate more when information is simple, clear, and not overwhelming," emphasizing the importance of plain-language communication that families could quickly understand and act on. ET3 reaffirmed this focus on accessibility, explaining that most families shared similar backgrounds and that "we have to keep it simple, so everyone understands what is expected."

Participants also highlighted flexible scheduling and inclusive event design as culturally responsive practices that acknowledged families' work demands and community realities. ET6 explained that many caregivers "work late or work multiple jobs," which required the school to plan flexible times and make sure resources are available for all parents, even if they did not finish high school." ET8 described how adapting events to family needs increased participation: "When we host events at different times and make them relevant, more parents attend because it fits their needs." ET 8 summarized the combined effect of these practices by stating, "When we simplify information and host events at different times, more families show up."

Document analysis supported these perspectives, as the Title I family engagement plan and school improvement documents emphasized plain-language communication, multiple scheduling options for family events, and targeted outreach to families with limited transportation or varying work schedules. Event flyers, calendars, and sign-in sheets consistently reflected these commitments by using precise wording, offering sessions at different times of

day, and documenting increased participation at events that were scheduled flexibly and designed to be welcoming to all families.

Theme 4: Shared Decision-Making. Six participants identified shared decision-making as an essential dimension of family engagement and described multiple structures through which families could influence school plans and priorities. These participants emphasized that families were not only invited to attend events but were also encouraged to contribute ideas, provide feedback, and participate in planning processes. Across their responses, shared voice was described as both a formal requirement through Title I and school improvement processes and a relational practice that communicated respect for families' perspectives.

The participants consistently pointed to parent organizations and planning meetings as key spaces for shared decision-making. ET4 described having "a PTO committee" that was "involved in the Title I ACIP processes" and that "voted and put input on what they would like to see, what the scholars should have to be successful." ET4 added that families "make suggestions regularly" and that these suggestions were used to "make sure everything comes together as well as addressing concerns," indicating that parent input functioned as more than symbolic participation. ET2 similarly described that families were invited to participate through "PTO meetings" and "one-on-one time at open house that are held monthly," noting that these opportunities allowed parents to receive updated information and ask questions about expectations and plans. ET6 emphasized that there was "a platform where the parents can come out and say what they want for the students," concluding that "they have a voice," underscoring that families were encouraged to express their priorities rather than just listen.

Participants also highlighted the specific types of decisions and ideas families contributed. ET7 shared that "parents are giving ideas about things they want to see take place,

field trips, conferences, one-on-one parent data meetings,” and added that families were “asking what they can do at home to help with their child,” illustrating that parent input extended to both school-based activities and home-support strategies. ET 4 echoed this emphasis on shared voice, explaining that “families participate in decision-making through PTO, Title I parent input meetings, and ACIP planning sessions” and that “parents help plan events, suggest resources, and provide feedback that shapes school goals.” ET6 also noted that parents were asked what support they needed at home and that “their voice is valued and used in school planning,” reinforcing the idea that family input was incorporated into decisions rather than merely collected.

EP described shared decision-making as a deliberate feature of school governance. EP explained that families served on the Title I parent advisory committee, the ACIP school improvement team, and PTO, and that they participated in “budget planning, school event planning, and review of engagement policies annually.” EP further noted that families helped determine “which resources are purchased with Title I funds, including take-home learning kits and literacy tools,” and that their “voices influence academic priorities and engagement activities.” These examples showed that families were involved not only in event planning but also in decisions about how resources were allocated to support students and caregivers.

Document analysis supported this theme by showing that shared decision-making was embedded in written plans and communication artifacts. Title I family engagement materials and the ACIP narrative referenced parent advisory roles, parent input meetings, and opportunities for families to review and comment on proposed uses of Title I funds and family engagement activities. Notices and flyers for PTO and parent advisory meetings invited families to attend sessions where budgets, resources, and school goals would be discussed and explicitly requested

their feedback. Sign-in sheets and parent input forms documented family participation, recording comments and suggestions on funding priorities, needed resources, and preferred workshop types. Together, these documents aligned with participants' descriptions by demonstrating that families were formally invited to participate in decision-making and that their ideas were used to shape school plans and resource allocations.

Theme 5: Community Collaboration. Four participants described community collaboration as a key mechanism for supporting family engagement. They explained that partnerships with local churches, civic groups, and businesses increased resources for families, enriched school events, and signaled to parents that the broader community was invested in their children. Across their responses, community collaboration was framed as extending the school's capacity, responding to families' needs, and strengthening trust among home, school, and community.

Participants highlighted how community partners contributed tangible resources and helped create meaningful experiences for families. ET6 explained that community partners "helped bring in resources and activities that families appreciated," noting that outside organizations donated items and supported events that the school could not provide on its own. ET3 described family-focused events, such as "Muffins with Moms" and "Doughnuts with Dads." It noted that these activities made students excited to see their parents at school and encouraged parents to be more willing to participate in family engagement events. ET3 emphasized that when students saw their families welcomed and celebrated through these events, they viewed the school as a place where both families and community members were valued. Participants also noted that community collaboration increased turnout and strengthened family-school partnerships. ET8 noted that partnerships with outside groups made events more

meaningful and visible, stating, “When the community shows up, parents show up too.” ET8 explained that community representatives often attend family events, volunteer, and support activities, which helps families feel more comfortable participating. ET8 further indicated that having familiar community faces at school events communicated that “we are all working together” on behalf of students, which encouraged families who might otherwise be hesitant to attend.

EP described community collaboration as a deliberate component of the school’s engagement strategy. EP explained that the school has maintained community partnerships, including STEM career days and family resource workshops. EP noted that these opportunities enabled local organizations to provide direct services, information, and mentorship to families. EP also described collaborations with churches and civic groups that supported families by donating uniforms, school supplies, and food baskets, and by providing transportation to key events. According to EP, these partnerships “extended support beyond the school walls” and reinforced a culture in which families saw that the broader community was committed to their children’s success.

Document analysis supported this theme by showing that community collaboration was embedded in the school’s planning and communication artifacts. The family engagement calendar and school improvement documents listed events such as STEM career days, Numeracy Nights, family resource workshops, and family celebrations, all hosted in collaboration with community organizations. Title I and ACIP materials referenced community partnerships as part of the strategy for meeting student and family needs, including references to local churches, civic groups, and businesses that provided services and sponsorships. Newsletters, flyers, and social media announcements frequently acknowledged community partners by name, invited families

to attend events sponsored or supported by these groups, and highlighted available resources such as school supplies, food distributions, and informational booths at family events. Together, the interview data and documents indicated that community collaboration functioned as a key mechanism for broadening support for families, enhancing the quality of engagement activities, and signaling that students are surrounded by a network of school and community advocates.

Table 3

Theme Identified for Research Question 2

Theme	Description	Participants
Socioeconomic and contextual barriers	Work schedules, transportation limitations, childcare needs, and financial constraints reduced families' ability to participate consistently.	ET1-ET8, EP

Note. ET = experienced teacher, EP = experienced principal. Participant codes reflect those who contributed evidence aligned to each theme.

Research Question 2

What do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school perceive as barriers to effective family engagement? Data were analyzed using the same reflexive thematic analysis process following Braun and Clarke's (2023) framework. Transcripts were read multiple times, followed by line-by-line coding to identify all statements related to challenges that hindered family participation. Codes that reflected similar ideas, such as work demands, limited transportation, childcare concerns, and financial constraints, were grouped into broader categories. Categories were refined through iterative comparison until one overarching theme emerged that represented the predominant barriers described by all participants. The theme was reviewed against transcripts, researcher memos, and institutional documents to ensure accuracy

and confirm its validity. Thick descriptions were developed to represent the depth of participant perspectives.

Theme 6: Socioeconomic and Contextual Barriers. All nine participants identified socioeconomic and contextual conditions as the primary barriers to consistent family engagement. They described how work schedules, transportation issues, financial strain, and childcare responsibilities limited families' ability to attend school events or respond to invitations. Collectively, their accounts portrayed families as caring and committed but constrained by circumstances beyond their control rather than by a lack of interest.

Participants frequently emphasized that many parents worked long or nontraditional hours, which limited their availability for school-based activities. ET2 explained that "a lot of parents are working late or working more than one job, so the times we offer meetings do not always work for them." ET5 similarly noted that "some parents want to come, but they cannot leave work in the middle of the day," illustrating how hourly schedules and inflexible employment conditions interfered with participation. ET1 further explained that many families could "get necessities, but not extra," and that "transportation and jobs are a big factor in whether they can come," highlighting how work demands and limited resources intersect to shape engagement. Transportation emerged as another common barrier across participant accounts. ET3 stated that "some families do not have a car, and if they do not have a ride, they just cannot get here," underscoring the challenges faced by caregivers who relied on others or lived farther from the school. ET6 added that "even when we plan events, getting to the school is hard for families who live farther away or rely on others for transportation." ET8 noted that "some are not able to come because of the situation they are in from working or transportation, but they do call

and follow up,” emphasizing that families often seek alternative ways to stay connected even when they cannot attend in person.

Childcare responsibilities and financial pressures were also described as limiting factors for family engagement. ET7 shared that “parents sometimes have younger children at home and no one to watch them, so they stay home even if they want to be involved,” indicating that caregivers often had to choose between meeting caregiving responsibilities and attending school events. ET4 explained that “families are trying to manage bills, food, and everything else, and it can be overwhelming to add school meetings on top of that.” Participants noted that these financial and caregiving demands could make school involvement feel like an added burden, even for families who strongly value education.

EP confirmed these observations by noting that “families are balancing many responsibilities, and it is not that they do not care. Life circumstances make it hard for them to be here every time we ask.” In response to these barriers, participants noted that offering virtual meeting options has increased participation in parent PTO sessions and grade-specific meetings by providing more flexible ways for families to join. Institutional documents, including components of the Alabama Continuous Improvement Plan and family engagement reports, referenced transportation, scheduling conflicts, and competing responsibilities as ongoing challenges for caregivers and described efforts to adjust meeting times and offer alternative engagement options. Taken together, participant accounts and documentary evidence provided a coherent description of the socioeconomic and contextual barriers that affected family engagement at the school.

Table 4***Theme Identified for Research Question 3***

Theme	Description	Participants
Student Impact and School Climate	Participants described improvements in attendance, motivation, behavior, and academic performance alongside consistent family engagement.	ET1–ET8, EP

Note. ET = experienced teacher, EP = experienced principal. Participant codes reflect those who contributed evidence aligned to each theme.

Research Question 3

How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the outcomes of family engagement on student achievement? Data were analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Transcripts were read multiple times, followed by line-by-line coding to identify all statements related to student outcomes, including academic performance, attendance, motivation, behavior, and school climate. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into categories, which were refined through iterative comparison across the nine participants. This process led to the development of one overarching theme that captured how educators and the administrator described the outcomes of family engagement. The theme was reviewed against transcripts, researcher analytic memos, and institutional documents to ensure consistency and confirmability. Thick descriptions were developed to represent the depth of participants' perspectives.

Theme 7: Student Impact and School Climate. Participants described family engagement as positively related to student outcomes. They described observable changes in

student effort, behavior, and attendance when families were consistently involved in school activities and communication. Participants emphasized that students appeared more motivated when they knew their caregivers were actively connected to the school. ET3 emphasized that “students try harder when they know their parents are checking in with us and asking about their progress.” ET6 shared that “when families attend events or respond to messages, students seem more focused and willing to complete their work.” ET1 noted that “students take their assignments more seriously when they see that teachers and parents are working together.” ET2 described a similar observation, stating, “When parents check in or come to events, students behave better and take more pride in their work.”

Participants also described improvements in attendance linked to family engagement. ET5 stated that “students come to school more regularly when parents feel welcomed and involved.” ET7 emphasized that “families who stay in contact are more likely to make sure students are present, even when there are challenges at home.” Across participants, descriptions emphasized that stronger home–school connections often coincided with more consistent attendance.

Behavioral outcomes were mentioned frequently. ET8 explained that “behavior issues decrease when parents respond to our calls and messages and follow up with their child.” ET4 described that “when families participate in meetings or school events, students tend to make better choices in the classroom.” EP described a similar observation at the school level, noting that “students behave differently when they know their families and the school are on the same page.” Institutional documents, including school attendance reports and behavior logs, were consistent with participants’ descriptions by reflecting changes in attendance and behavior over time within the school records. Across interviews and documents, participants described stronger

attendance, fewer behavioral concerns, and a more positive school climate when families maintained consistent engagement.

Comparison of Results to the Literature Review

Research Question 1. How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the strategies used to foster meaningful family engagement? The findings for this question were consistent with the existing literature and the theoretical frameworks used in this study. The emphasis on relationship-building aligned with Epstein's (1995, 2018) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which highlights the importance of trust and shared responsibility between families and schools. Participants' descriptions of daily relational practices also aligned with research indicating that relational trust and positive school climates contribute to stronger family engagement in high-poverty schools (Gross et al., 2022; Iruka et al., 2020).

The results further reflected Epstein's (1995, 2018) involvement in various forms of communication, home learning, decision-making, and community collaboration. Educators' use of multiple communication platforms, intentional outreach, and ongoing follow-up with families was consistent with research showing that clear, frequent, and two-way communication strengthens partnerships and supports student outcomes in Title I schools (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Gross et al., 2022; Uzzell et al., 2024). Participants' descriptions of flexible communication methods and the use of tools such as newsletters, digital messaging, and phone calls were also consistent with studies demonstrating that maintaining reciprocal communication through multiple channels helps reduce communication barriers and sustain family-school engagement in high-poverty contexts (Gross et al., 2022; Iruka et al., 2020).

The culturally responsive engagement strategies identified in this study also align with prior research. Participants reported using plain language, offering flexible event times, and designing inclusive activities that reflected the needs and realities of families in the school community. These practices were consistent with the literature, which emphasized affirming families' cultural identities while recognizing the constraints of poverty (Baxter & Nolan, 2022; Lynch & Prins, 2023). These results were consistent with research indicating that when schools adopt responsive practices and create spaces for families to participate meaningfully, engagement can be more sustainable in historically underserved communities (Iruka et al., 2020; Peltier et al., 2024).

Shared decision-making and community collaboration also reflected the frameworks and research supporting this study. Participants indicated that families contributed to Title I planning, Alabama Continuous Improvement Plan activities, and school-based committees, which aligned with Epstein's (2018) emphasis on decision-making and community collaboration as key forms of engagement. These practices were consistent with studies indicating that when parents were invited to participate in planning and governance, they reported stronger connections to the school and a greater sense of ownership in school improvement efforts (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Uzzell et al., 2024). Overall, the results for RQ 1 supported the theoretical and empirical foundations that highlighted relationship-building, communication, cultural responsiveness, shared voice, and community partnerships as core components of effective family engagement in Title I settings.

Research Question 2. What do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school perceive as barriers to effective family engagement? The findings for this question showed that educators and administrator perceived structural and socioeconomic conditions as

the primary barriers to consistent family engagement. Participants explained that work schedules, transportation limitations, childcare responsibilities, and financial strain were frequent obstacles that prevented families from attending school events or responding to all engagement opportunities. These results align with research that documents families in high-poverty communities often face multiple external stressors, which limit their access to school-based engagement activities (Baxter & Nolan, 2022; da Rosa et al., 2024; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory, the barriers identified in this study reflect influences from the exosystem and macrosystem.

Iruka et al. (2020), using a bioecological lens in rural low-wealth districts, found that community-level conditions such as limited time for families due to low-wage and nonstandard employment, distance between home and school, restricted access to childcare and pre-K, and scarce transportation and social services constrained families' opportunities to engage with early learning settings and schools. These findings aligned with participants' descriptions of barriers shaped by broader structural inequities, including caregivers working multiple jobs, lacking reliable transportation, and managing significant caregiving demands under economic hardship, rather than individual family disinterest (Marschall & Shah, 2020; West et al., 2022).

The findings also supported the literature that distinguishes between a lack of access and a lack of interest. As noted in prior studies, families in Title I schools often valued education and sought to support their children; however, structural constraints hindered their participation (Gross et al., 2022; Lynch & Prins, 2023). Participants in this study consistently described families as caring and invested, even when they were unable to attend events or respond to every invitation. This finding was consistent with scholarship indicating that contextual constraints, rather than disinterest, can limit family engagement in high-poverty settings.

Research Question 3. How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the outcomes of family engagement on student achievement? The results for this research question indicated that participants perceived family engagement as positively associated with student behavior, attendance, motivation, and academic performance. Participants described students as more focused and responsible when families maintained open communication with the school or participated in school events. They also noted that students were more likely to attend school regularly when their caregivers felt a sense of connection to the school community. These findings align with research demonstrating that strong family–school partnerships are linked to improved academic outcomes, better behavior, and enhanced social–emotional development, particularly in Title I schools (Gross et al., 2022; Iruka et al., 2020; West et al., 2022).

From an ecological perspective, the results were consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) assertion that coordinated support across home and school environments fosters positive developmental trajectories. In this study, greater alignment between families and educators, as reflected in shared expectations, regular communication, and collaborative problem-solving, appeared to support stronger student outcomes. This alignment was consistent with literature highlighting the influence of supportive mesosystem relationships on students in high-poverty communities (Iruka et al., 2020; Marschall & Shah, 2020).

The findings also reflected Epstein’s (2018) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, particularly the benefits of meaningful engagement across various involvement types, including communication, learning at home, and community collaboration. Participants’ descriptions of improved attendance, reduced behavior incidents, and more substantial academic effort were consistent with studies showing that when families are engaged in multiple ways, students

experience a more supportive and coherent learning environment (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Peltier et al., 2024; Uzzell et al., 2024). Overall, the results for RQ 3 supported the literature's evidence base by reinforcing the positive relationship between family engagement and student outcomes in a Title I elementary school context.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the single instrumental qualitative case study on family engagement in a Title I elementary school. The chapter began by restating the problem and purpose of the study, and then described the procedures used to establish trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The results were organized by research question and supported by thick descriptions, participant quotations, and institutional documents.

For RQ1, the findings showed that educators and the administrator described meaningful family engagement as grounded in relationship-building, two-way communication, culturally responsive practices, shared decision-making, and collaboration with community partners. For RQ2, the results indicated that structural and socioeconomic conditions, such as work schedules, transportation limitations, childcare responsibilities, and financial strain, were the primary barriers to families' consistent engagement with the school. For RQ3, participants reported that when families were engaged, students demonstrated stronger attendance, improved behavior, increased motivation, and greater academic effort, which contributed to a more positive school climate.

The chapter concluded by comparing the findings to the theoretical frameworks and empirical literature presented in Chapters 1 and 2. Overall, the results were consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of

overlapping spheres of influence, as well as prior research on family engagement in high-poverty, Title I schools. Chapter 5 contains the interpretation of the findings, the implications for practice and policy, and recommendations for future research and action.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

The problem addressed in this study was the persistent challenge of sustaining meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools despite its benefits for student achievement and school improvement (Gross et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2024). The purpose of this single instrumental qualitative case study was to explore practical strategies for enhancing family engagement in a Title I elementary school serving grades K-6 in a historically underserved southern region. This investigation was designed in direct response to the challenges identified in the problem statement, with a focus on how educators and administrators foster and sustain family-school partnerships in high-poverty contexts. The overarching goal was to identify barriers to engagement and highlight practices that support meaningful and sustainable parental involvement.

A single instrumental qualitative case study design was employed to explore the perceptions of educators and administrators who played key roles in family engagement at the selected Title I elementary school (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of school-level materials, including family engagement artifacts, attendance records, and behavior reports. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to code the transcripts line by line, develop categories, and generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2023) that aligned with the research questions and guiding theoretical frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Epstein, 1995). This led to the development of a detailed, contextualized understanding of how participants described strategies, challenges, and outcomes related to family engagement.

The results indicated that participants consistently viewed family engagement as essential for student success and school improvement. The major findings indicated that relationship

building and trust, two-way communication, culturally responsive and inclusive practices, shared decision-making, community collaboration, socioeconomic and contextual barriers, and student impact and school climate were central to family engagement at the site. The findings emphasized the importance of intentional relationship building, culturally responsive outreach, and consistent communication as foundational elements of effective practice. Participants also described structural challenges, including limited time, staffing constraints, and socioeconomic stressors, which influenced families' ability to participate regularly. Findings from the document analysis were consistent with the interview data and reflected improvements in attendance and behavior for students whose families demonstrated consistent engagement.

Limitations of the study included its single-site setting, which limited the scope of perspectives to a single school community. The sample focused on educators and administrators, excluding parents, which limited the findings to school-based perspectives. Additionally, the use of self-reported data may have been influenced by participants' perceptions of their roles or their desire to present school practices in a positive light. These limitations were identified and considered during analysis to maintain credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this chapter, the findings are interpreted in relation to the research problem, purpose, theoretical frameworks, and existing literature. The chapter also includes recommendations for practice, suggestions for future research, and a summary of the study's contributions to the field. The chapter concludes by highlighting the significance of the findings for educators, school leaders, and stakeholders committed to strengthening family engagement in high-poverty, Title I school settings.

Discussion

This single instrumental qualitative case study clarified how meaningful family engagement was sustained in a high-poverty, Title I elementary school context and identified the constraints on participation. The study problem focused on the persistent challenge of sustaining meaningful engagement in Title I elementary schools despite the documented benefits for student outcomes and school improvement (Gross et al., 2022). The purpose of the study was to identify practices that support engagement and to understand the barriers that limit participation. This discussion is organized around the research's major findings and presents conclusions supported by the study's interview evidence and document analysis. Findings are interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (2018) theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

Major Findings of the Study. One major finding indicated that engagement was sustained when families experienced the school as relationally consistent over time. Participants described respectful communication, empathy, and follow-through as conditions that strengthened trust and increased families' willingness to participate and communicate openly. Engagement was less dependent on isolated events and more dependent on sustained relational reliability. This major finding was consistent with prior research that identified trust-based relationships as foundational to family engagement in high-poverty contexts (Gross et al., 2022). This major finding supported a practice implication that schools should operationalize relational trust through intentional routines for positive contact and consistent follow-through.

Another major finding of the study indicated that engagement increased when communication practices reduced barriers and supported two-way exchange. Participants described greater responsiveness when communication was timely, direct, personal, and

accessible across multiple formats. Communication operated as an access mechanism that shaped whether families could realistically engage with the school. This major finding was consistent with research indicating that accessible, two-way communication strengthens home–school partnership and supports sustained engagement (Lynch & Prins, 2023). This major finding endorsed a recommendation to standardize two-way communication expectations by establishing consistent opportunities for family response and follow-up.

In addition, another major finding of the study indicated that engagement improved when flexibility and culturally responsive practices were treated as core engagement structures rather than optional events. Participants described that plain-language messaging, inclusive opportunities, and flexible scheduling increased participation among families facing socioeconomic constraints. This major finding indicated that participation barriers were primarily structural and contextual rather than motivational. This major finding was consistent with research emphasizing that engagement in high-poverty contexts is often constrained by contextual factors rather than lack of interest (Chang, 2023). This major finding has practical implications for districts and schools, suggesting that they should provide flexible engagement options, including virtual, asynchronous, and community-based opportunities, to reduce access barriers.

The findings further indicated that engagement deepened when caregivers had meaningful opportunities to influence school improvement efforts and when collaboration expanded shared responsibility. Participants reported increased investment when caregivers engaged in planning and decision-making. Engagement strengthened when families were positioned as partners whose input was consequential. This major finding aligned with Epstein's (2018) seminal research, which emphasized authentic family voice and shared decision-making

as mechanisms for strengthening engagement and shared responsibility. This major finding supported a recommendation that schools create multiple and accessible avenues for caregiver input, including options that accommodate varied schedules and caregiving responsibilities.

The last major finding indicated that, among structural conditions, stronger home-constrained engagement–school connections were associated with improved student outcomes and a more positive school climate. Participants emphasized that time, transportation, work schedules, and caregiving responsibilities limited their participation, and that inconsistent attendance at events did not necessarily reflect a lack of interest. At the same time, participants associated engagement with improvements in attendance, behavior, and learning persistence, and document analysis supported these perceptions through school records. This major finding was consistent with research linking family engagement to academic and social outcomes, including in high-poverty contexts (Jeynes, 2024). This major finding supported the implication that schools and districts should pair engagement expectations with supports that reduce structural barriers and strengthen family access.

Factors Influencing Interpretation. Several factors may have influenced the interpretation of the results. The study was conducted at a single site. It relied primarily on educator and administrator perspectives, limiting interpretation to school-based viewpoints and excluding caregiver and student voices. Self-reported interview responses may have reflected social desirability or differences in how participants conceptualized effective engagement. Document analysis strengthened credibility through triangulation and reduced the likelihood of overinterpretation (Bowen, 2009).

Consistency With Prior Research and Theory. Overall, the findings were consistent with the guiding theoretical frameworks and the research base presented in Chapter 2. No

unexpected or divergent results were identified. Variation in engagement appeared most strongly related to caregiver availability and structural constraints, providing a plausible explanation for why participation differed across families, even when caregivers valued education. This pattern supported the conclusion that engagement should be understood within families' realities rather than as a proxy for motivation.

Implications and Societal Outcomes. The impact of this study was significant for educators, school leaders, policymakers, and community partners seeking to strengthen family engagement in high-poverty Title I schools. Consistent with ecological and partnership frameworks, the findings suggested that sustainable engagement is most likely when schools strengthen the relational and structural conditions that shape caregiver participation across home, school, and community systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Epstein, 2018).

The findings suggested several key implications for strengthening family engagement in high-poverty contexts. A primary implication is that engagement may be more sustainable when schools prioritize relational trust as an ongoing practice rather than a single initiative. This interpretation aligns with evidence that relational parental involvement and strong parent-teacher relationships are associated with meaningful outcomes for students and families (Jeynes, 2024; Smith et al., 2022). Participants emphasized that engagement improved when caregivers experienced respect, consistency, and responsiveness from school personnel, indicating that trust-building routines can support sustained partnerships.

Another implication is that engagement may be strengthened when communication is reciprocal, accessible, and responsive across multiple formats. This interpretation aligns with scholarship that frames family engagement as a two-way process and emphasizes reciprocal strategies as central to sustaining partnerships, particularly when structural barriers limit in-

person participation (Huber et al., 2024; Sisson et al., 2022). In practice, this implication supports communication systems that create feedback loops rather than one-way messaging.

Additionally, the findings suggested that engagement may be strengthened when culturally responsive engagement structures are institutionalized through schoolwide routines and shared expectations rather than treated as optional or event-based. This implication aligns with literature emphasizing culturally sustaining approaches and schoolwide practices that support meaningful connections with diverse families (Banks et al., 2025; Hong et al., 2025). A related implication is that engagement may deepen when caregiver voice is consequential in planning and decision-making, consistent with research emphasizing inclusive strategies that elevate and validate family contributions (Peltier et al., 2024).

Further, school-community collaboration may strengthen engagement when it expands wraparound supports and shared problem solving. This interpretation aligns with evidence identifying conditions for effective partnership collaboration within school-community models, especially when families face barriers that schools cannot address alone (Beard & Thomson, 2021; Haight et al., 2024). These implications may be especially salient in rural Title I contexts, where ecological constraints and access issues can intensify engagement challenges (Iruka et al., 2020; West et al., 2022).

Collectively, these implications suggested societal outcomes that extend beyond attendance at events. When relational trust, reciprocal communication, culturally responsive structures, caregiver voice, and school-community collaboration are institutionalized, schools may strengthen school-family relationships that support student engagement and enhance school

climate, with potential benefits for social-emotional development (Jeynes, 2024; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024).

Less likely implications include large-scale systemic change without corresponding structural supports. While this study identified actionable school-level conditions, sustained improvement at scale typically requires coordinated policy alignment, resources, and implementation infrastructure beyond individual schools' efforts (Troppe et al., 2020; Uzzell et al., 2024). These interpretations should be considered in light of the single-site design and the study's emphasis on educator perspectives rather than caregiver or student voices.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study provide practical recommendations for educators, school leaders, and district personnel seeking to enhance family engagement in high-poverty Title I elementary schools. Each recommendation is derived directly from the study's major findings and is framed to reflect actions feasible within typical school constraints, without overstating transferability. The recommendations are also interpreted through the theoretical lenses used in this study, emphasizing shared responsibility across home, school, and community systems (Epstein, 2018). Consistent with the research base presented in Chapter 2, these recommendations prioritize relationship-centered engagement structures, accessible two-way communication, and barrier-responsive practices that support sustained participation (Gross et al., 2022).

Prioritize Relationship Building as a Foundational Practice. Relationship building emerged as central to meaningful engagement; therefore, schools should intentionally incorporate routines that help families feel welcomed, respected, and valued. Practical examples include greeting caregivers during arrival and dismissal, using caregivers' names, and

conducting brief, strength-based check-ins that invite families to share needs or concerns. This recommendation reflects the study's findings and is consistent with research emphasizing trust as a foundation for effective family–school partnerships in Title I contexts (Gross et al., 2022). Strengthening relational interactions also supports the home–school microsystem and mesosystem connections described in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory.

Strengthen Two-Way Communication Systems That Are Accessible and Consistent.

Participants explained that families responded more consistently when communication was timely, personal, and accessible. Schools should implement communication approaches that support two-way exchange, including text messaging, personal phone calls when needed, simplified newsletters, and flexible conference scheduling. This recommendation is grounded in the study's findings and aligns with Epstein's identification of communication as a core component of family involvement and partnership (Epstein, 2018, 1995; Epstein et al., 2002). Providing communication in accessible formats helps ensure that families receive and can respond to information in ways that meet their needs, thereby reducing barriers to sustained engagement (Lynch & Prins, 2023).

Implement Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Engagement Practices. The findings indicated that culturally responsive practices increased participation among families experiencing socioeconomic barriers. Schools should simplify written communication using plain language, offer flexible event times, and design inclusive family activities that acknowledge caregivers' varied schedules, transportation needs, and caregiving responsibilities. This recommendation aligns with the study's findings and with the literature, which indicate that families in high-poverty communities often face structural barriers that constrain participation rather than a lack of motivation to engage (Chang, 2023). Designing culturally responsive

engagement structures supports equitable access to school involvement by reducing practical barriers and strengthening the home–school connection (Epstein, 2018).

Expand Opportunities for Families to Participate in Shared Decision-Making.

Participants noted that involvement in Title I planning and continuous improvement processes increased caregiver investment in school initiatives. Schools should expand opportunities for families to provide input by offering virtual meeting options, brief surveys, and varied meeting times. This recommendation is grounded in the study’s findings and aligns with Epstein’s emphasis on shared responsibility and meaningful partnership through decision-making and collaboration (Epstein, 2018). Providing multiple pathways for participation can help address caregivers’ time constraints and increase representation by reducing access barriers (Chang, 2023).

Strengthen Community Partnerships to Support Engagement. Because community partnerships were found to be beneficial for meeting family needs and reducing barriers to participation, schools should continue to develop and sustain relationships with churches, civic groups, local agencies, and businesses. These partnerships can expand support for families by increasing access to resources, strengthening communication networks, and creating additional entry points for engagement in school activities. Strengthening school–community collaboration aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory by reinforcing mesosystem connections among families, schools, and community settings.

Address Structural Barriers by Providing Flexible and Accessible Engagement

Options. Participants emphasized that work schedules, transportation challenges, and caregiving responsibilities influenced family participation. Schools should consider offering flexible event times, virtual engagement options, and off-site meeting locations when feasible. This

recommendation is grounded in the study's results and aligns with the literature, which indicates that family participation in high-poverty contexts is shaped by contextual and socioeconomic barriers (Gross et al., 2022). Addressing these constraints can create more equitable opportunities for meaningful school engagement.

Use Family Engagement Strategies to Support Student Outcomes. Participants perceived that increased family engagement had a positive influence on student behavior, attendance, motivation, and academic effort. Schools should use engagement strategies that connect caregivers to instructional expectations, attendance monitoring, and behavior supports through clear communication routines, shared goal-setting, and follow-up. This recommendation is based on the study's findings. It is consistent with evidence that family involvement is associated with academic and social-emotional gains for students in high-poverty school contexts (Iruka et al., 2020). Strengthening the connection between home and school can support improved student outcomes by reinforcing consistent expectations and support across settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can build upon the findings and implications of this study by examining additional perspectives, contexts, and methodological approaches that deepen understanding of family engagement in high-poverty Title I schools. These recommendations are grounded in the study's findings and limitations and are conceptually aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological systems theory and Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. Future studies should extend this work by broadening participant perspectives and settings, and by using designs that capture engagement processes over time and across outcomes.

Include Caregiver Perspectives to Complement Educator Insights. Because this study primarily focused on educators' and administrators' perspectives, future studies should include

caregiver voices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of home–school relationships. Caregiver perspectives may clarify how families interpret school communication, relational efforts, and engagement structures, and would directly address the limitation of relying on school-based viewpoints. Including caregiver voices would also strengthen understanding of mesosystem interactions between home and school within an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

Conduct Multi-Site Studies to Explore Engagement Across Diverse Contexts. This study took place in a Title I elementary school located in a historically underserved region. Future research should include multiple schools or districts to examine the extent to which the findings are consistent across different geographic and demographic contexts, thereby strengthening their transferability and generalizability. Multi-site designs are significant for understanding engagement patterns in rural and high-poverty settings and for identifying how context shapes barriers and supports (Iruka et al., 2020).

Utilize Mixed Methods to Investigate the Relationships Between Engagement and Student Outcomes. Future researchers should consider mixed methods designs that integrate qualitative perspectives with quantitative indicators such as attendance, academic performance, and behavioral data. This approach would allow researchers to examine whether specific strategies identified in this study, including two-way communication and flexible engagement structures, are associated with measurable improvements in student outcomes. Mixed methods research may strengthen claims about outcomes while preserving contextual understanding of engagement processes (Peltier et al., 2024).

Examine Student Perspectives on Family Engagement. Participants perceived that family engagement influenced student motivation, behavior, attendance, and academic effort.

Future studies should examine these outcomes from students' perspectives to better understand how students experience home–school connection and how engagement shapes their daily learning experiences. Including student perspectives would broaden the ecological lens and strengthen understanding of microsystem factors related to student functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

Investigate Community Partnerships as a Central Focus of Inquiry. Findings indicated that community organizations supported family engagement by helping reduce structural barriers and expanding participation opportunities. Future research should examine community partnerships as a primary focus to understand how local agencies, churches, civic groups, and businesses contribute to sustained engagement and how these supports interact with school efforts. This line of inquiry would extend understanding of mesosystem and exosystem influences on engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986).

Explore Approaches That Reduce Structural Barriers to Engagement. Participants identified work schedules, transportation challenges, childcare needs, and limited resources as significant constraints on participation. Future studies should evaluate which interventions most effectively reduce these barriers, such as virtual meeting options, flexible scheduling, and off-site engagement opportunities. This research would support the development of engagement structures that are equitable and responsive to contextual constraints in high-poverty communities. Yin (2017) supports the use of designs that examine complex, real-world engagement systems across contexts, and Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) and Epstein (2018) provide theoretical grounding for examining how family, school, and community systems shape access to engagement.

Next Logical Step in This Line of Research. A logical next step is a qualitative, embedded, multiple-case, multi-site study examining family engagement across multiple Title I elementary school contexts. Within each school case, researchers could include embedded units of analysis by integrating caregiver, educator, and student perspectives to develop a deeper understanding of how engagement systems function across settings. This design facilitates the investigation of complex, real-world phenomena within and across bounded contexts, thereby strengthening transferability through cross-case comparison (Yin, 2017). This approach would extend the current single-site instrumental case study by examining how ecological systems and overlapping spheres of influence operate across diverse school environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Epstein, 2018).

Study Summary

This study explored how educators and one administrator at a high-poverty Title I elementary school in a historically underserved rural region in the southern United States described family engagement, the contextual barriers that shaped engagement, and the outcomes participants perceived for students when families remained consistently connected to the school. The study addressed the problem that meaningful and sustainable family engagement remains challenging to achieve in historically underserved communities, where socioeconomic constraints, limited access to resources, and competing responsibilities often hinder participation in school-based activities. Using a single instrumental qualitative case study design informed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 and 1986 and Epstein in 1995, the study generated an in-depth understanding of how engagement was enacted within a Title I elementary school context.

The findings indicated that relationship building, two-way communication, cultural responsiveness, shared decision making, and community collaboration were central to

strengthening home–school partnerships. Participants described barriers such as work schedules, transportation limitations, childcare needs, and financial constraints as structural rather than motivational. Participants also perceived that consistent family engagement was associated with improvements in student motivation, attendance, behavior, and academic effort. These findings underscore the importance of schoolwide practices that reduce access barriers and foster relational trust.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the literature on family engagement in high-poverty school settings and its focus on a rural region that remains underrepresented in existing research. The overarching conclusion from this study was that meaningful family engagement in high-poverty Title I schools is achievable when schools prioritize relational approaches, accessible two-way communication, culturally responsive practices, shared responsibility in school improvement, and community-based support. For school districts, state education agencies, and professional organizations, family engagement should be resourced and implemented as a sustained system of partnership rather than a series of events, with routines designed to reduce structural barriers and strengthen ongoing home–school connection to support equitable student success.

References

- Alam, M. K. (2021). A systematic qualitative case study: Questions, data collection, NVivo analysis and saturation. *Qualitative Research in Organizations & Management*, 16(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-09-2019-1825>
- Banks, J., Kea, C., & Coleman, M. R. (2025). Making meaningful connections: Facilitating schoolwide family engagement with culturally diverse families. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 57(3), 186–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599231182048>
- Barradell, S., & Peseta, T. (2025). What can physiotherapy learn by looking more closely at “how” research insights come about? The role of reflexivity and representation. *Physiotherapy Theory & Practice*, 41(4), 890–900. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09593985.2024.2368604>
- Baxter, G. (2024). Taking risks without the stress: How can schools support teachers to make practice adaptations to strengthen families’ engagement in their children’s literacy learning? *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 32(3), 57–60. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.T2024100900017291605976424>
- Baxter, G., & Nolan, A. (2022). (Re)framing teachers’ family engagement practice as cultural work. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 32(3), 721–740. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2087725>
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544–559. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573>

- Beard, K. S., & Thomson, S. I. (2021). Breaking barriers: District and school administrators engaging family and community as a key determinant of student success. *Urban Education, 56*(7), 1067–1105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920987284>
- Beaulieu, L., Kwak, D., Jimenez, G. C., & Morgan, G. (2024). Implementing culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices with checklists and goal setting. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 57*(4), 821–839. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaba.1095>
- Bettencourt, A. F., Gross, D., Bower, K., Francis, L., Taylor, K., Singleton, D. L., & Han, H. R. (2023). Identifying meaningful parent engagement indicators in early learning for low-income, urban families. *Urban Education, 58*(10), 2308–2345. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920968619>
- Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1802–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, M. N. Coutanche, L. M. McMullen, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. (2nd ed., Vol. 2. pp. 65–81). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000319-004>
- Brinkmann, S. (2022). *Qualitative inquiry and method: Theory, methodology, and practice*. Oxford University Press.

- Brodsky, L., Iun, A., Ervin, A., Cook, A. L., & Pearrow, M. (2025). Exploring systems-level family engagement practices across elementary and PK-8 schools. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 35(1), 1–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2023.2269389>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology*, 22(6), 723–742.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.22.6.723>
- Chang, H. (2023). Chronic absence: A call for deeper student and family engagement. *State Education Standard*, 23(3), 18–24.
- Chen, M., Liu, S., Wijaya, T. T., & Cao, Y. (2025). Influence of family socioeconomic status on academic buoyancy and adaptability: Mediating effect of parental involvement. *Acta Psychologica*, 253, Article 104753. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104753>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Curry, K., Harris, E., Olsen, J., Kim, Y., & Egre, D. (2023). TeleNGAGE: Enhancing collaboration between families and schools. *Current Issues in Education*, 24(1).
<https://doi.org/10.14507/cie.vol24iss1.2089>
- David, S. R., Wen, D. J., & Goh, E. C. L. (2024). Identifying the relationship between strength of school social support and level of hope in children from low-income families. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 53(4), 871–891. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-023-09777-2>

- Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., Giardina, M. D., & Cannella, G. S. (Eds.). (2023). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701–712. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20405436>
- Epstein, J. L. (2018). School, family, and community partnerships in teachers' professional work. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 44(3), 397–406.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2018.1465669>
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2002). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (2nd ed.). Corwin.
- Fisher, Y., FitzGerald, A. M., & Olson, A. (2022). What do teacher-education college students know about parental involvement: A comparative study between the U.S. and Israel. *Education and Urban Society*, 54(6), 714–730.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245211026685>
- Fute, A., Oubibi, M., & Kangwa, D. (2025). Exploring the influence of family socio-cultural factors on students' learning engagement at school through a mediation model. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 35(3), 391–406.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2024.2302518>
- Gonzalez-Gomez, N., Luthra, N., Hewitt, E., Castro, I. A., & Hendry, A. (2025). Breaking barriers: Promoting parent–child engagement with co-produced activity packs for 1-to-3-year-olds. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 34, 1151–1162.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-025-03038-7>

- Gregg, K., Rickert, N. P., & Leckie, A. (2024). Following the family: Applying bioecological theory to strategies learned from a family-school-community partnership. *School Community Journal, 34*(2), 33–51.
- Gross, D., Bettencourt, A. F., Finch, W. H., Plesko, C., Paulson, R., & Singleton, D. L. (2022). Developing an equitable measure of parent engagement in early childhood education for urban schools. *Children and Youth Services Review, 141*, 106613.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362244126>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLoS ONE, 15*(5), 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research, 67*(1), 3–42.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543067001003>
- Haight, J., Daniels, J., Gokiert, R., Quintanilha, M., Edwards, K., Mellon, P., Skoye, M., & Malin, A. (2024). Essential conditions for partnership collaboration within a school-community model of wraparound support. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 33*(9), 2962–2977. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-024-02903-1>
- Hong, S., Baloch, M. H., Conklin, K. H., & Warren, H. W. (2025). Teacher-family solidarity as culturally sustaining pedagogy and practice. *Urban Education, 60*(1), 90–122.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221131809>

- Huber, R., Menon, M., Klatka, K., Balasubramanian, H., Callahan, K., & Zaslow, M. (2024). Reciprocal family engagement strategies in U.S. early childhood systems: A qualitative study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01763-0>
- Ihmeideh, F., AlFlasi, M., Al-Maadadi, F., Coughlin, C., & Al-Thani, T. (2020). Perspectives of family–school relationships in Qatar based on Epstein’s model of six types of parent involvement. *Early Years: Journal of International Research & Development*, 40(2), 188–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2018.1438374>
- Iruka, I. U., DeKraai, M., Walther, J., Sheridan, S. M., & Abdel-Monem, T. (2020). Examining how rural ecological contexts influence children's early learning opportunities. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 52, 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.09.005>
- Jeynes, W. H. (2024). A meta-analysis: The association between relational parental involvement and student and parent outcome variables. *Education & Urban Society*, 56(5), 564–600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245231179674>
- Katz-Buonincontro, J. (2022). *Qualitative research essentials*. In *How to interview and conduct focus groups* (pp. 7–21). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000299-002>
- Kea, C. D., Young, F., & Sirgany, L. (2025). Using community and home supports to increase student achievement and family engagement among families of color. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 57(3), 218–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599241242097>
- Keizer, R., van Steensel, R., Jongerling, J., Stam, T., Godor, B. P., & Lucassen, N. (2024). Collaborative learning intervention associated with small increases in home-based school involvement for lower SES families in deprived neighbourhoods. *Educational Studies*, 50(6), 1163–1183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2022.2058320>

- Kelty, N. E., & Wakabayashi, T. (2020). Family engagement in schools: Parent, educator, and community perspectives. *SAGE Open*, *10*(4), 1–13.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020973024>
- Kuo, N.-C., & Stanley, K. (2023). Building effective quadruple partnerships across families, schools, communities, and universities. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, *27*(3), 143–156.
- Lara, L., Miranda-Zapata, E., Saracostti, M., & de-Toro, X. (2025). The predictive influence of family, teachers, and peers on affective, cognitive, and behavioral school engagement in primary and secondary school students. *Revista de Psicodidáctica (English Ed.)*, *30*(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psicoe.2024.500159>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.
- Lynch, J., & Prins, E. (2023). Knowledge to support early educators and elementary school teachers' engagement in family literacy and family literacy programs. *The Reading Teacher*, *76*(5), 518–625. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2187>
- Marschall, M. J., & Shah, P. R. (2020). Linking the process and outcomes of parent involvement policy to the parent involvement gap. *Urban Education*, *55*(5), 699–729.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916661386>
- Martinez-Yarza, N., Solabarrieta-Eizaguirre, J., & Santibáñez-Gruber, R. (2024). The impact of family involvement on students' social-emotional development: The mediational role of school engagement. *European Journal of Psychology of Education: A Journal of Education and Development*, *39*(4), 4297–4327. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-024-00862-1>

- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Michael, S. L., Pitt Barnes, S., & Wilkins, N. J. (2023). Scoping review of family and community engagement strategies used in school-based interventions to promote healthy behaviors. *Journal of School Health, 93*(9), 828–841. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13367>
- Mullins, C., & Panlilio, C. C. (2023). Adversity, engagement, and later achievement: The role of emotion regulation and parent-child relationship quality. *Children and Youth Services Review, 148*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.106862>
- National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. (1979). *The Belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Ogg, J., & Anthony, C. J. (2020). Process and context: Longitudinal effects of the interactions between parental involvement, parental warmth, and SES on academic achievement. *Journal of School Psychology, 78*, 96–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.11.004>
- Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(4), 695–705. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1579>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE.

- Paulson, R. E., Plesko, C. M., Gross, D., & Bettencourt, A. F. (2023). Associations between social determinants of health, chronic absence from school, and teacher ratings of parents' engagement in early education. *The Journal of School Nursing, 39*(6), 431–443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10598405211032958>
- Peltier, M. R., Edwards, P. A., & Sweeney, J. (2024). Reframing family engagement: Inclusive strategies that elevate and validate. *School Community Journal, 34*(2), 9–13. <http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org/SCJ.aspx>
- Perrigo, J. L., Hurlburt, M., Harris, T., Grest, C. V., Borja, J., & Samek, A. (2022). Qualitative methods approach to reimagine education-related parental involvement among low-socioeconomic status families. *Children & Schools, 44*(4), 224–235. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdac020>
- Pregoner, J. D. (2024). Research approaches in education: A comparison of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. *IMCC Journal of Science, 4*(2), 12–17.
- Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2020). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Rosa, T. da, Magalhães, C. R., & Silveira, L. M. de O. B. (2024). The family-school engagement and its implications on student performance in basic education. *Psicologia Escolar E Educacional, 28*. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2175-35392024-262230-t>
- Rovamo, H., & Mabrouk, M. (2025). Qualitative interviewing: Strengths and challenges of interviewing lay populists. In I. Sakki (Ed.), *Qualitative approaches to the social psychology of populism: Unmasking populist appeal* (pp. 25–40). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003492276-2>

- Seidman, I. (2019). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Sisson, J. H., Shin, A., & Whittington, V. (2022). Re-imagining family engagement as a two-way street. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *49*(1), 211-228.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00422-8>
- Skinner, E. A., Rickert, N. P., Vollet, J. W., & Kindermann, T. A. (2022). The complex social ecology of academic development: a bioecological framework and illustration examining the collective effects of parents, teachers, and peers on student engagement. *Educational Psychologist*, *57*(2), 87–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2022.2038603>
- Slade, E. P., Bettencourt, A. F., & Gross, D. A. (2023). Cost-effectiveness of a parenting skills program implemented in public PreK schools in disadvantaged urban communities. *Administration & Policy in Mental Health & Mental Health Services Research*, *50*(6), 888–900. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-023-01287-6>
- Smith, T. E., Holmes, S. R., Romero, M. E., & Sheridan, S. M. (2022). Evaluating the effects of family-school engagement interventions on parent-teacher relationships: A meta-analysis. *School Mental Health*, *14*(2), 278–293. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-022-09510-9>
- Smith, T. E., Reinke, W. M., Herman, K. C., & Sebastian, J. (2021). Exploring the link between principal leadership and family engagement across elementary and middle school. *Journal of School Psychology*, *84*(84), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.12.006>
- Stake, R. E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, *7*(2), 5–8.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X007002005>

- Sun, Y., Hsieh, J., & Gao, X. (2025). Integrating qualitative comparative analysis with reflexive thematic analysis in theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251318749>
- Thornton, M. (2025). “The kids can handle it”: A culturally responsive case study of four detracking school leadership teams. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 61(1), 71–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X241289111>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Troppe, P., Isenberg, E., Milanowski, A., Garrison-Mogren, R., Rizzo, L., Gill, B. P., Ross, C., Dillon, E., & Li, A. (2020). *The transition to ESSA: State and district approaches to implementing Title I and Title II-A in 2017–18* (NCEE 2021-002). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2021002/>
- Turhan Şengönül. (2022). A review of the relationship between parental involvement and children's academic achievement and the role of family socioeconomic status in this relationship. *Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction*, 12(2), 32-57. <https://doi.org/10.47750/pegegog.12.02.04>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2025, January 28). *Improving basic programs operated by local educational agencies (ESEA Title I, Part A)*. <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/school-improvement/improving-basic-programs-operated-by-local-educational-agencies-esea-title-i-part-a>

- Uzzell, E. M., Ayscue, J. B., Fusarelli, L. D., & Jackson, M. M. (2024). Fighting an uphill battle: The pursuit of equity through the Every Student Succeeds Act in North Carolina. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *60*(2), 230–256.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x241281372>
- VanValkenburgh, J., Putnam, J., & Porter, M. (2021). Middle school parent involvement: Perceptions of teachers and parents. *Middle School Journal*, *52*(4), 33–42.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2021.1948299>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- West, E. M., Zolkoski, S. M., Lockhart, J. R., Holm, J. M., & Tremont, J. (2022). “Everybody knows everybody”: Adolescents’ perceptions of what helps them succeed in a rural Title I school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *37*(5), Article 074355842110438.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584211043880>
- Willemse, T. M., Nelen, M. J. M., & Blonk, A. (2024). Including families in the implementation of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and support: Dutch administrators and SWPBIS-leadership team experiences. *Psychology in the Schools*, *61*(10), 3942–3960.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.23266>
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE.
- Yotyodying, S., Dettmers, S., & Jonkmann, K. (2024). Teachers’ prosociality and well-being at work: The mediating role of teacher engagement in family-school partnerships. *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal*, *27*(4), 1413–1430.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09873-0>

Zhang, J., Boone, B. J., & Anderman, E. M. (2024). Students at the center: Student voice in parental involvement and school-family partnerships. *School Community Journal*, 34(1), 109–126.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/3052813380?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Family Engagement in a Title I Elementary School

Theoretical Frameworks: Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) Ecological Systems Theory and Epstein's (1995) Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence

Introduction to Interview

Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Tamera Carter, and I am a doctoral candidate at National University. I am conducting a research study to explore how educators and administrators foster and sustain meaningful family engagement in Title I elementary schools. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential. The purpose of this interview is to better understand your perceptions, and practices regarding family engagement in a high-poverty school context. The interview will last 45-60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. At the end of the interview, I may ask to follow up with you to clarify any responses and/or conduct member checking to confirm the accuracy of the data. You may choose to withdraw at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

Q 1: Can you describe the strategies your school uses to promote family engagement?

Probe: What practices have been most successful in encouraging family participation?

Q 2: How do you engage families from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds?

Probe: What culturally responsive practices have you found effective?

Q 3: What are the biggest challenges you face in engaging families at your school?

Probe: How do these challenges vary across different family populations?

Q 4: What role do socioeconomic factors play in family engagement at your school?

Q 5: How does family engagement influence student learning and overall school culture?

Probe: Can you share specific examples of changes you have observed in students or the school community?

Q 6: How are families involved in school decision-making and planning?

Q 7: How does your school ensure two-way communication with families?

Q 8: Can you describe any school-wide initiatives or events aimed at fostering family-school partnerships?

Probe: How are these initiatives evaluated for effectiveness?

Closure to Interview

Thank you for sharing your insights and perceptions. Your responses will contribute to a deeper understanding of family engagement in Title I school settings and may help other educators and leaders implement strategies that are inclusive and effective. If you are open to it, I may reach out in the coming weeks to follow up for clarification. You will receive an emailed transcript of your interview within two weeks for your review and verification of its accuracy. At that time, you may add or revise any of your responses as needed. Do you have any final thoughts or questions before we conclude?

Appendix B: Alignment Chart for Interview Questions

Interview Questions	RQ 1	RQ 2	RQ 3	Bronfenbrenner	Epstein
Can you describe the strategies your school uses to promote family engagement?	X			X	X
Probe: What practices have been most successful in encouraging family participation?				X	X
How do you engage families from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds?	X			X	X
Probe: What culturally responsive practices have you found effective?				X	X
What are the biggest challenges you face in engaging families at your school?		X		X	
Probe: How do these challenges vary across different family populations?		X		X	
What role do socioeconomic factors play in family engagement at your school?		X		X	
How does family engagement influence student learning and overall school culture?			X	X	X
Probe: Can you share specific examples of changes you have observed in students or the school community?			X	X	X
How are families involved in school decision-making and planning?	X			X	X
How does your school ensure two-way communication with families?	X				X
Can you describe any school-wide initiatives or events aimed at fostering family-school partnerships?	X			X	X
Probe: How are these initiatives evaluated for effectiveness?			X	X	X

Appendix C: Document Analysis Form

Document Section	Criteria/Code	Evidence
Overview of Policy	Family Engagement Expectations	The document outlines the school's commitment to involving families in student learning and school decision-making, consistent with ESSA mandates and Title I program goals.
Communication Practices	Two-Way Communication; Inclusive Practices	Includes multiple forms of communication, including newsletters, digital apps, meetings, and home visits. Emphasizes creating accessible formats and opportunities for reciprocal dialogue with families.
Participation Opportunities	Collaborative Practices: Shared Decision-Making	Invites families to serve on school planning teams and participate in engagement events. Opportunities appear limited in frequency and do not explicitly describe roles for co-leadership or culturally responsive input.
Addressing Barriers	Socioeconomic Constraints; Equity Considerations	Acknowledges transportation and scheduling challenges. Offers limited detail about how these are addressed beyond providing flexible meeting times. No reference to childcare, multilingual support, or informal engagement pathways.
ESSA Alignment	Policy Compliance and Capacity Building	References Title I, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Mentions joint development and annual review but does not provide data-based evaluation of engagement effectiveness or community voice integration.

Researcher's Reflections:

This document will be a foundational data source for examining how the study site institutionally defines and structures family engagement under Title I mandates. It will provide insight into how responsibilities are communicated, how families engage in school processes, and how the policy aligns with the federal requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The content is

anticipated to reflect how current practices align with Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence, particularly in terms of two-way communication, parenting support, and collaborative decision-making.

Additionally, the policy will be reviewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, with particular attention to interactions within the microsystem, such as family-school relationships, and the mesosystem, including connections between home and school. The document is anticipated to provide contextual understanding of how engagement is institutionally framed and may inform how educators describe or interpret these expectations during interviews. Furthermore, this document will support methodological triangulation by offering a formal perspective to compare with emergent themes in participant narratives during data collection and analysis.

Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on Family Engagement in Title I Elementary Schools

Dear [Participant Name],

My name is Tamera Carter, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to explore how educators perceive family engagement practices in a Title I elementary school.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all the following criteria:

1. You are age 18 or older.
2. You are a current or former educator or staff member.
3. You have experience with family engagement in a Title I elementary school.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete the following activities:

1. Participate in a 45-60-minute interview, either in-person or via a secure video conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom).
2. Review a summary of your interview responses (member checking) to confirm accuracy, which will take 10-15 minutes and will be sent via email.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your perceptions of family engagement practices.
- Any barriers or challenges to family engagement that you have observed.
- Institutional supports or strategies that promote family-school partnerships.
- General demographic information, including your role and years of experience.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you have any questions, please contact me at:

Tamera Carter

Email: T.Carter2043@o365.ncu.edu

Phone: (205) 928-1096

Thank you for considering participation in this study. Your insights will be valuable in helping to improve engagement between schools and families in Title I settings.

Warm regards,

Tamera Carter

Doctoral Candidate, National University

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

My name is Tamera Carter, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I also serve as principal at a Title I elementary school in the study region.

I am asking you to participate in a research study about educators' perceptions of family engagement in a Title I elementary school. The name of this research is "Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Family Engagement in a Title I Elementary School."

You may participate in this research if you meet all the following criteria:

1. You are age 18 or older.
2. You are a current or former educator or staff member.
3. You have experience with family engagement in a Title I elementary school.

I plan to include 6 to 10 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1:1 interview (in-person or via Zoom) for 45-60 minutes.
2. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes to confirm accuracy (member checking).

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your perspectives on family engagement.
- Barriers and supports for school-family partnerships.
- Institutional policies and practices that shape engagement.
- Demographic questions, such as your current role and years of experience.

Risks:

There are minimal foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research. You can skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participating anytime.

Benefits:

If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase knowledge of family engagement in Title I schools.

Recording:

I would like to audio record your responses with Zoom during the interview. You can turn off the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Mandated Reporting:

My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Confidentiality:

I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in transcripts and reports. Data will be stored in a secure, password-protected location and deleted three years after the conclusion of the study.

Taking part is voluntary:

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, contact me at

T.Carter2043@o365.ncu.edu or (205) 928-1096.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

To indicate your consent, please reply to this email with the words **“I Consent.”**

Appendix F: Codebook for Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RQ 1 Focus: How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the strategies used to foster meaningful family engagement?				
Code	Category	Participants	Representative Excerpt	Theme
Daily greetings; empathy; visibility; personal acknowledgment; consistent follow-up	Relationship-Building & Trust	ET1, ET2, ET 3, ET 4, ET 5, ET 6, ET 7, ET 8, EP	“Families respond when we take time to greet them and show we care. They trust us more when we follow up.”	Theme 1: Educators described that family–school partnerships were strengthened as they intentionally built relationships characterized by trust, consistency, and personal connection.
Remind messages, phone calls, newsletters, Class Dojo, two-way communication	Communication Practices	ET1, ET2, ET 3, ET 4, ET 5, ET 6, ET 7, ET 8, EP	“Remind and text updates keep parents informed and give them a way to talk back to us.”	Theme 2: Educators explained that maintaining two-way communication across multiple platforms improved accessibility and accountability between families and educators.
Plain-language communication; flexible scheduling; inclusive events	Cultural Responsiveness	ET1, ET3, ET4, ET6, ET8,	“When we simplify information and host events at different times, more families show up.”	Theme 3: Educators noted that family engagement increased when they used culturally responsive practices that affirmed parents’ identities and respected their lived experiences.
Title I, ACIP, PTO participation; shared decision-making	Empowerment & Shared Voice	ET2, ET4, ET6, ET7, ET8, EP	“Parents like having a say in our school plans; they feel respected when their ideas are used.”	Theme 4: Educators reported that families felt empowered when given meaningful opportunities to share input and participate in school decision-making.

Partnerships with churches, businesses, civic organizations	Community Collaboration	ET3, ET6, ET8, EP	“Local partners help us provide more resources for our families and students.”	Theme 5: Educators reported that partnerships with community organizations expanded the resources available to families and strengthened the overall support network for students
RQ 2 Focus: What do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school perceive as barriers to effective family engagement?				
Code	Category	Participants	Representative Excerpt	Theme
Work schedules; transportation; multiple jobs; childcare; financial limitations	Socioeconomic/ Contextual Barriers	ET1, ET2, ET 3, ET 4, ET 5, ET 6, ET 7, ET 8, EP	“Some parents can’t attend meetings because they work two jobs or don’t have transportation.”	Theme 6: Educators described that family participation was often limited by work schedules, transportation issues, and financial hardship, yet many parents remained deeply committed to their children’s education.
RQ 3 Focus: How do educators and administrators at a Title I elementary school describe the outcomes of family engagement on student achievement?				
Code	Category	Participants	Representative Excerpt	Theme
Attendance; motivation; behavior; academic progress	Student Impact & School Climate	ET1, ET2, ET 3, ET 4, ET 5, ET 6, ET 7, ET 8, EP	“When parents check in or come to events, students behave better and take more pride in their work.”	Theme 7: Educators reported that consistent and active family engagement led to noticeable improvements in student behavior, attendance, and academic performance.

Appendix G: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval



9388 Lightwave Ave.
San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

Notice of Exemption
September 26, 2025

To: Tamera Carter

Project Title: Beyond Barriers: Strengthening Family Engagement in a Title I Elementary School
NU IRB Number: IRB-FY25-26-193
Modification Determination: Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101

Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of September 26, 2025

Dear Tamera Carter:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined the proposed modification to your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.101, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at irb@nu.edu.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Joseph M. Marron in black ink.

Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair

Handwritten signature of Brianne Mongeon in black ink.

Dr. Brianne Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB

Handwritten signature of Jenessa Eberhardt in black ink.

Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB