Preparing Educators to Involve Families: From Theory to Practice

Introduction: Preparing Educators in Family Involvement

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Summary

There are many ways families can be involved in their children's education. In this introductory chapter to their edited volume on preparing educators to involve families in their practice, the authors explain that "family involvement" entails any activities families engage in that support their children's learning at home, school, or the community. Additionally, the authors point out that this involvement has multiple dimensions, including parents' dreams and aspirations for their children, parenting behaviors, and relationships with schools. It is the intersection of these dimensions that shapes how parents and teachers work with one another to support student learning. Take the example of an immigrant parent who does not feel comfortable with his own English skills but advocates that his son be placed in English-only classroom, to prevent this same insecurity from happening to his child. When the parent realizes he cannot help his son with homework, what does this parent's involvement look like? What are the dynamics that need to be present in the school and what does the relationship with his son's teacher need to look like in order to support the child's learning? Many parents may find themselves in situations such as this one — they want to be involved in their child's learning but find it difficult because they lack the confidence, information, or practical skills to do so.

Likewise, teachers want parents to be involved in their students' learning and want to support them in this process, but they often lack the skills and support from schools to begin developing meaningful relationships with them. With the extensive job demands teachers face in and outside

their classrooms, it is often difficult to engage with their students' parents. Additionally, when there are cultural, socioeconomic, language, and value differences between them and their students' families, there can be misunderstandings and miscommunication between both parties. As the demographics of the nation are constantly changing, and teachers are serving an increasingly diverse student population, it becomes important for teachers to get to know their students' families and consider how they can proactively connect with them.

Research has found that teachers who proactively reach out to parents of low-performing students and invite them to be involved in their children's education do improve the students' performance over time (Westat & Policy Study Associates, 2001). By connecting with parents and discussing ways to develop home supports, activities, and routines that align with school expectations and classroom curriculum, teachers can employ families' "funds of knowledge", or the knowledge, resources, and skills families posses, in their classrooms. This, the authors claim, links the home and school for students, further supporting their learning and development in both spaces.

While the notion of partnering and engaging with families is an appealing concept, many teachers do not feel prepared to do this. In order to change this, the authors explain that educators need to have pre-service and in-service training and professional development specifically on family involvement. They explain that teachers should be able to:
- Build relationships with parents by relating to them and increasing trust among both parties
- Share with parents expectations for all students
- Ask parents what how they envision parental involvement — do not just depend on what school expect
- Connect and engage in relationships with families who may come from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In order to explore how educators can reach the above points and improve their family involvement practices, the authors present a series of cases as a teaching tool. Additionally, they adopt the *Ecological Systems Theory* as a framework to understand and analyze the complexities of parental involvement.

Ecological Systems Theory

When considering the development of children and their learning, the Ecological Systems Theory postulates that context must be considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982). Context is "understood in terms of various systems that influence child's development either directly (e.g., through daily routines and interactions that occur in the child's immediate context) or indirectly (i.e., through more distal factors that impact those routines and

interactions) (p. xiii)." As such, a major principle of the Ecological Systems Theory is that every level of the ecological system is interconnected with one another, and therefore influences the others; these interactions between levels are reciprocal. For example, what happens in a child's home influences how she will act in the classroom, and vice-versa. Additionally, the Ecological Systems Theory explains how social and economic policies, often considered unrelated to children's academic performances, influence them in the classroom. The framework explains the complexities of the different interrelated mechanisms that impact parental involvement.

The Ecological Systems Theory is best understood visually as set of concentric circles, with the child in the center.
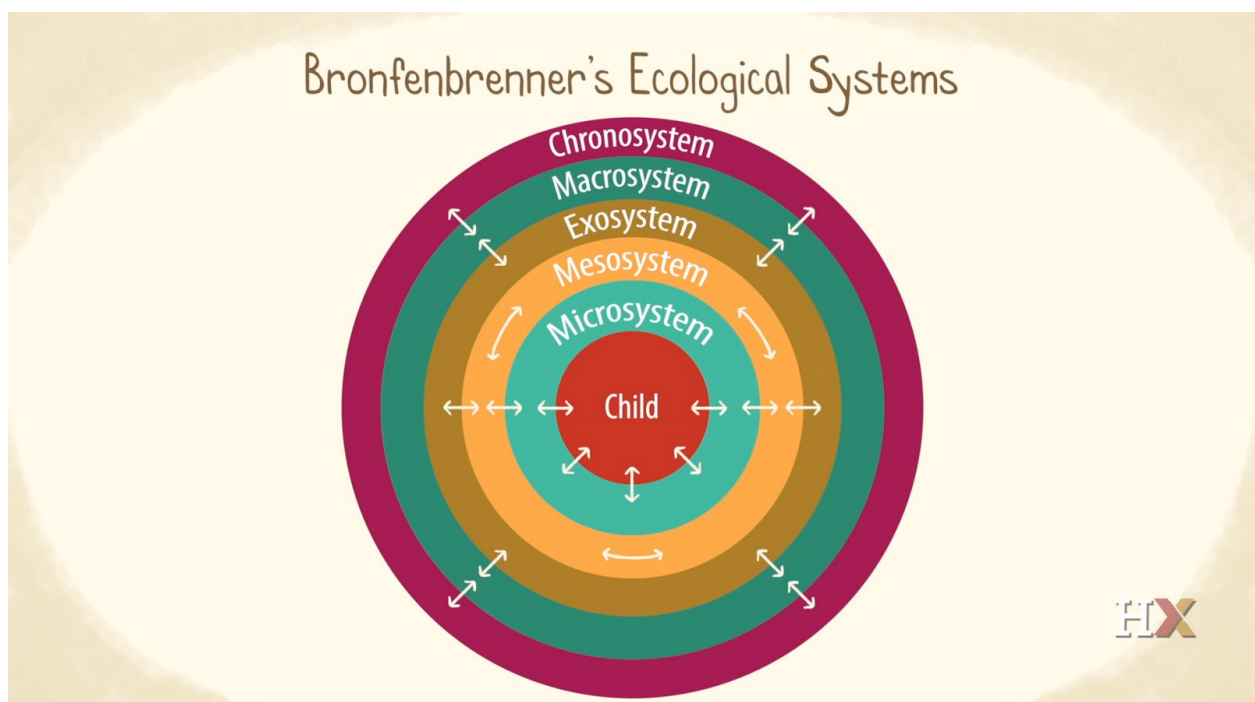
- Microsystem: the immediate contexts that interact with the child directly. Examples of these include parents and siblings, friends, teachers, school settings, and after-school programs.
- Mesosystem: the interactions and relationships between the different individuals and settings found in the microsystem; these do not directly include the child. Examples of these interactions are relationships between parents and teachers and the relationship between an afterschool program/service provider and a school. The mesosystem represents the connections and continuity that can exist across a child's microsystems.
- Exosystem: these are the contexts that influence the child directly, it includes the child by impacting the individuals in her/his microsystems. An example of this is when a parent's workplace establishes a new work schedule and prevents her or him from reading to a

children at night, affecting the child's literacy skills. In this case, the workplace is part of the exosystem.
- Macrosystem: this level consists of the political systems, social policy, culture, economic trends, and other factors that have a broad influence in the society the child lives in and whose impact can eventually trickle down and affect the child; cultural practices and beliefs systems are also a part of this level. Examples of the macrosystem are welfare reform, immigration policy, and American cultural values.
- Chronosystem: represents time both in the individual sense (infancy, childhood, adolescence, etc.) and historical context.

Again, the cases presented in this book use the Ecological Systems Theory to explore and address some of the difficulties educators face when attempting to develop relationships with their students' families, especially low-income families, who may be racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically different from school staff. Some of the issues the cases address include:
- When teachers and parents have different perceptions of what the roles of families and schools should be in supporting children's development
- What parental involvement looks like in resource-poor schools and communities
- How race, culture, and class divisions impact family-school relationships and perceptions.

Citation

Weiss, Heather B., M. Elena Lopez, Holly Kreider, and Celina Chatman-Nelson. *Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework.* 2002.

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