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Commentary

Family engagement in education and intervention: Implementation and evaluation to maximize family, school, and student outcomes

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1. Introduction

The articles included in this special issue are consistent in their focus on families in the home setting and school personnel in the school setting as the primary individuals and settings to align interventions for children and adolescents. Years of research support the influence families and school personnel have on children and adolescents (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Domina, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001; Ginsburg-Block, Manz, & McWayne, 2010; Henderson, 1981; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patterson, 1974; Pomerantz, Kim, & Cheung, 2011). Articles in this issue provide sophisticated descriptions of home and school risk and protective factors for children and adolescents (e.g., peer affiliations at school, parent and teacher beliefs and expectations) and leverage systems-level, family, classroom, parent, and child strengths to improve home, school, and child outcomes. This strengths-based approach to service delivery is a hallmark of family engagement (Dunst, 2002).

In addition to focusing primarily on the home and school settings, articles in this issue also discuss and address other settings and systems. Considering an array of settings and nested systems when planning interventions to support children and families, cross-disciplinary research findings suggest that an ecological approach is useful to understand the interactions among individuals and these systems (Bowen, Thompson, & Powers, 2012; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In an ecological approach, a child's behavior, academic performance, and overall development is conceptualized as a multitrajectory and ever changing status resulting from various influences, stressors, supports, and exchanges within and across systems and over time (Gutkin, 2012; Von Bertalanffy, 1973). Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) organizes child development in a set of nested structures, from immediate microsystems, such as the home and school, to more remote systems, such as school policies, neighborhoods, laws, and social structures. The macrosystem is differentiated from the other systems in ecological systems theory. The macrosystem includes archetypes, some explicit (e.g., laws) and others implicit. Ecological systems theory holds that these archetypes are concretely manifested in microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Thus, the priority for engaged partnerships between families and schools in the macrosystem is manifested every day in interactions, learning, and development. An important feature of ecological systems theory is its emphasis on the interactions between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological systems theory provides a sophisticated organization for child development in addition to a useful heuristic to guide intervention (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007). Articles in this

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issue reflect important ecologies of child development and demonstrate the importance of intervening within home and school as well as targeting the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) by connecting and establishing congruence across microsystems (Crosnoe, 2015) that promote positive family and child outcomes.

In the sections that follow, we address several issues in family engagement research. We begin by describing and defining key terms. Next, we outline the current state of family engagement research and identify priorities. We then introduce a conceptual model that displays conditions, variables, mechanisms, and outcomes central to family engagement intervention research. We follow the conceptual and empirical overview with a brief summary of each article included in the special issue. We conclude by describing future directions for family engagement research.

2. Family engagement terms and definitions

Decades of research on the influence of the home setting and home-school connections to support children have yielded many terms and definitions. Articles in this special issue are united in their focus on families and the school setting but appropriately use different terms to describe their work, so the core features under investigation are clear. Here we provide an overview of key terms. Although there is some variation, common terms include *family involvement*, *family-centered services*, *family-school partnerships*, and *family engagement*. Family-centered services or family-centeredness focuses on the clinical application of family services, such as demonstrating empathy, focusing on strengths, treating families with dignity, collaborating with families, and tailoring practices to meet family needs (Dunst, 2002; Dunst, Trivette, & Hamby, 2007). Family involvement has traditionally referred to family member support of their child's education (e.g., attending school events, helping with homework, communicating with teachers; Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Family-school partnerships emphasize elements of family-centeredness as well as the connection across home and school. In family-school partnerships, families and school staff are co-equal partners, they engage in shared work and joint planning, and focus on promoting positive child outcomes through a strengths-based approach (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008).

Family engagement suggests that families should be engaged. In a school context, this means the onus is on school personnel to engage families. At its surface, the term family engagement may suggest that families are not active participants in their child's development, are not empowered advocates and key stakeholders, or undermine elements of family centeredness. However, we believe a close examination of key issues suggest family engagement can be a helpful term. Evidence points to the importance of extending families invitations to participate in school events or meetings (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005) and the fact that families often wait for school personnel to initiate contacts (Davies, 1991). Thus, a focus on seeking out families is appropriate (Christenson & Reschly, 2010). Consonant with others (Mapp & Hong, 2010), we believe school outreach to families should focus on equitable strategies that all families can access and reflect the myriad ways families with diverse values, expectations, and beliefs are supporting their children. Thus, family engagement is a broad term that reflects active, interactive, and dynamic processes and practices (Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011) that family members use with other key stakeholders as they engage as equal partners to support adaptive child development.

3. Current state of family engagement research and priorities

Family engagement in education and social-behavior interventions for youth has long been championed as a solution to many social ills. For decades, educators, researchers, and policy-makers have been calling for greater efforts to engage parents in their children's education under the assumption that greater parent participation would improve child academic and social outcomes. Hundreds of studies on the topic have also supported this very intuitive assumption. Recently, however, the book, *A Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with Children's Education*, garnered national press coverage for its startling conclusion that parent involvement in education does not matter. The authors of the book indicated, "Most forms of parental involvement ... do not improve student achievement. In some cases, they may actually hinder it" (Robinson & Harris, 2012, para. 1).

Although the book and the study methods that were used to draw these conclusions have since been widely criticized, the provocative discussion raised the question about what exactly is the state-of-the-science regarding family engagement. The answer, it turns out, is more complex than implied by the orthodoxy surrounding the importance of parent involvement. The answer varies by whether the focus is on engagement in education or engagement in social behavioral interventions, so we briefly review the literature separately for these two areas.

To begin, scores of studies conducted since the 1970s (some of which were identified earlier in this report) support the importance of family engagement in education. These studies have been coalesced in several meta-analyses and comprehensive literature reviews, mostly leading to the conclusion that parent involvement in education matters a great deal. Specifically, these reviews have consistently concluded that parent involvement in education is associated with a wide range of benefits (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). Students whose parents participate in their education are more likely to have better grades, spend more time on homework, persist and complete high school, and enroll in college (Barnard, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005). Lower levels of parent involvement are associated with problem behaviors at school, lower social functioning, and lower academic achievement (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010).

Despite the optimism suggested by this long line of research, examining the literature more closely reveals several deficits. Among these shortcomings, the most striking is that the vast majority of research on the topic is cross-sectional and correlational, and thus the knowledge produced is at the lowest levels of the intervention science research cycle (Fraser, Richman, Galinsky, & Day, 2009). Indeed, there is a great need for more rigorous, experimental methods to establish implied causal links (Jeynes, 2007).

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