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Parents as Essential Partners for Fostering Students' Learning Outcomes

AMY L. RESCHLY AND SANDRA L. CHRISTENSON

> The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life … When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.
>
> (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7)

Years of research, and hundreds of studies, indicate the major role of families in promoting academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes among youth (Barton & Coley, 2007; Hess & Holloway, 1984; Wahlberg, 1984; White, 1982). The desire to tap family involvement for the educative purposes of schools is not surprising, particularly in this era of accountability and the ubiquitous press for improved achievement among students in our schools. The national precedence given to family involvement in education is evidenced in legislation—No Child Left Behind (NCLB; cited in Epstein, 2005); the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA); initiatives such as the National Education Goals (Goals 1 and 8; National Education Goals Panel, 1999); countless policy and position statements put forth by such organizations as the National PTA (1998, 2000), National Association of School Psychologists (2005), and even accrediting bodies such as National Council for Accreditation on Teacher Education (NCATE, 2002, cited in Epstein & Sanders, 2006); and, although to a somewhat lesser extent, state educator licensing guidelines (Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan, 1994). Very interesting are the findings of a recent study, "The Family: America's Smallest School," by the Educational Testing Service (ETS; Barton & Coley, 2007). These ETS researchers identified four variables that are out of the direct control of schools (single parent household, attendance, amount of daily reading at home, and amount of TV watching) that predicted student success on state reading standardized tests with impressive accuracy. When interviewed for the *New York Times* article (Winerip, 2007), Coley stated:

> Kids start school from platforms of different heights and teachers don't have a magic wand they can wave to get kids on the same platform. If we're really interested in raising overall levels of achievement and in closing the achievement gap, we need to pay as much attention to the starting line as we do the finish line.

This statement aligns with the preventive nature of and need for family-school partnerships across grade levels; yet, they remain an unmet national educational priority (Barton & Coley, 2007; Carlson & Christenson, 2005). Students' adaptation to schooling depends in part on the degree of support, opportunity to learn, and resources available to the student; these come from home and school and must fit the specific developmental period.

The desire to utilize family involvement in order to improve student outcomes has outpaced educator pre-service and in-service training necessary to accomplish this aim. Pre-service training that addresses working or partnering with families has generally been limited to the areas of early childhood and special education (Chavkin & Williams, 1988), rather than all K-16 students and their families. Although there has been some progress in family involvement and/or partnerships in other pre-service coursework, educators are largely unprepared to carry out this expected and vital portion of their jobs (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). This lack of preparedness continues into practice. As such, there is a national need for in-service training in this area for educators and administrators (Jordan, Orzco, & Averett, 2001).

Similarly, national initiatives and the inclination to utilize family involvement have outstripped knowledge of effective implementation processes (Jordan et al., 2001) and evidence-based programs and practices (Carlson & Christenson, 2005). Much of the research and publications to date have been correlational, descriptive, and/or policy focused. Currently, however, the field has begun to delineate effective programs and practices (e.g., Carlson & Christenson). Furthermore, articles and literature reviews published in the recent years have detailed the methodological issues in research, delineated areas of promise and greatest need, and outlined necessary research agendas to move the field forward (e.g., Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Jordan et al., 2001; Sheridan, 2005).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the literature related to partnering with families to promote child competence. First, the theoretical foundation of this work-systems ecological theory-is described, along with implications of systems theory for work in education. The next section describes how this theoretical framework has influenced several recent changes in the field, including definitions of families, involvement, and partnerships and the role of the meso-systemic relationship for promoting competence. The focus of current inquiry in family-school relationships to promote positive outcomes is on questions of *how* and *what works*. These questions are addressed in the last sections of the chapter, followed by future directions for research.

An Evolving Field

Theoretical Foundation

A number of studies and policies related to involving or working with families were developed in the absence of a theoretical framework, a step necessary to advance research and guide practice in the field (Jordan et al., 2001). Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992) provides the theoretical foundation for working across families and schools to promote student success. Bronfenbrenner stressed understanding child development in context, noting the importance of immediate or proximal settings (family, school, community) and those more distal in nature, such as parents' workplace, legislation, cultural norms, and so forth. In this view, children are embedded within contexts. There are reciprocal interactions or relationships among these contexts over time, rather than a unidirectional influence of a setting, such as family or school, on student outcomes.

There are several implications of this theory for work in education. First, child competence cannot be understood as a function of home or school inputs (for reviews of the literature regarding home, school, and teaching influences related to student outcomes, see Christenson & Buerkle, 1999, Bickel, 1999, and Brophy & Good, 1986, respectively) but rather must be considered part of the entire system, e.g., child, family, school, community, and peer contexts. Furthermore, of chief

importance for promoting competence are relationships, particularly the relationship between the two primary socializing contexts, home and school (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). As such, child competence is best understood as a result of co-action, or as the dynamic influence of relationships among systems.

This theoretical framework also affects how risk is conceptualized. Risk is not located within the student, home or school systems, but rather is distributed across systems and represented in the interactions among these systems. Thus, high-risk circumstances are those in which there is a lack of congruence in messages and poor relationships between home and school. Low-risk conditions are those in which family and school systems are well-functioning and there is a positive relationship between these two major socializing influences, promoting congruence and shared responsibility (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). In other words, relationships among these contexts (e.g., home-school) and subsystems (e.g., teacher-student, parent-child) represent a social system that enhances or thwarts students' learning across school levels (Christenson & Anderson, 2002).

Manifestation of Theory: Current Thinking about Families and Schools

Current thinking about families, research, and future directions is reflective of this system's ecological theoretical framework. Although not exhaustive, some of the more substantive changes and status of the field are described briefly in the paragraphs that follow. These changes include changing definitions of families, acknowledgement of the role of context and purpose of involvement initiatives, a reduced focus on school-determined activity-based involvement, and recognition of the importance of the family-school relationship.

One of the signature developments in recent years is the changing conceptualization and purpose of involvement. *Parent Involvement* has given way to a broader view of families and *Family Involvement*, recognizing the many configurations of families and diversity of roles in which relatives and close friends may have in raising children and adolescents. Furthermore, there is no single definition of family involvement; rather, families take part in a wide-range of participatory and support behaviors across settings (school, home, community; Jordan et al., 2001). Hence, the predominant emphasis on school-defined involvement, which is reflective of the school's priorities, is insufficient to capture how families support learning, may inhibit involvement of some families, and preclude the development of constructive relationships with others. There is variation in both the definition and purpose of family involvement initiatives, which may include (a) a focus on increasing or improving family involvement in schooling (e.g., Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostleris, 1997); (b) enhancing the interactions between home and school with a goal of improving student learning; or (c) establishing partnerships between families and schools to create the most favorable conditions possible for enhancing student learning and competence (Christenson, 2004). Our preference is a focus on the creation of partnerships between families and schools with the goal of facilitating optimal student learning across academic, social, behavioral, and emotional domains of competence.

Furthermore, partnerships imply engaged relationships, one wherein teachers are engaged with students, parents are engaged with their children's learning and lives, and parents, educators, and students are actively engaged with each other toward the shared goal of promoting students' success and schooling experiences. An effective parent-school engagement process is based in problem-solving approaches (e.g., sharing of information, data, suggestions; listening, co-construction of concerns, intervention plans, and so forth) that provide parents, educators, and students *access* (right to inclusion), *voice* (feeling that they were heard and listened to throughout the process), and *ownership* (agree with and are committed to any plan concerning them) during shared decision making to address referral concerns (Osher, 1997).

Another shift that has occurred in this field is a reduced focus on activities. Much of the initial work in both academic and practitioner venues related to family involvement at school was activity focused, providing ideas or lists of activities for family involvement. These lists, while useful to some extent, have yielded to the greater appreciation of context inherent in a systems ecological theoretical framework for family-school relationships. Any number of activities may accomplish a specific goal or outcome, such as communication (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006), but it is not the activity per se that matters (although these must occur), but rather the activity must match the desired goal or outcome within a given context. Effective practices for engaging and partnering with families vary across sites, depending on the unique needs of families, students, and schools and the resources available to families, schools, and communities. Furthermore, particular programs or strategies may have different effects at different ages (Jordan et al., 2001). For example, a family literacy program that is effective for improving the reading performance kindergarten and first grade students may not be appropriate for high school students in a language arts class. Similarly, the content of the partnership effort may be coordinated home learning activities for elementary students, but shift to more motivational home support for learning such as discussion about student interests, parental expectations, and planning for postsecondary enrollment options for adolescents (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In short, *context matters*.

Focus on the Mesosystem

According to Bronfenbrenner's seminal theory (1979, 1992), the mesosystem refers to interactions among the contexts in which the child directly participates, typically home, school, and community. The relationship between home and school, the primary socializing agents for children and adolescents, is part of the mesosystem. There has been a gradual deconstruction of the notion that families and schools have separate responsibilities for student learning. Rather, the learning environment for students is comprised of home, school, and home-school relationship components (Ysseldyke & Christenson, 2002). The meso-systemic home-school relationship is increasingly recognized as being imperative to student success (Barton & Coley, 2007; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007). Recognition of the importance of the home-school relationship for promoting students' academic, behavioral, social, and emotional competence orients educators and researchers to the *quality of the home-school relationship*, importance of *congruence* and consideration of the power of *out of school time*.

Relationship Quality

Previous research and applied work in the field of family involvement in schooling was dominated by the aforementioned focus on activities and typologies of family involvement. The most influential of these typologies is Epstein's six types: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Enhancing Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaborating with the Community. These types of involvement were the basis for the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (National PTA, 1998) and provide a structure for school action teams who desired to implement family-involvement programs (Epstein, 1995; Epstein et al., 2002). However, as definitions of families and the ways in which families support learning have expanded, paired with an increased focus on the meso-systemic relationship between home and school, so too has attention to other types and dimensions of involvement and relationships. For example, it has been recognized that in addition to quantity, the *quality* of contact between home and school must be examined (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001); it may also be important to distinguish between school and parent-initiated contact (Jordan et al., 2001; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000). Kohl and colleagues (2000) have

offered an expanded typology that reflects both behavioral and affective/relational components of family involvement in education: parent involvement at school, parent involvement at home, parent-teacher contact, quality of the parent-teacher relationship, teacher perception of the parent, and parent endorsement of school.

Congruence in Messages

The meso-systemic home-school relationship promotes positive outcomes for students when there is congruence in terms of expectations, interactions, and so forth, and a positive relationship among these socializing agents. For example, Hansen (1986) found greater achievement gains for third- and fifth-graders who experienced congruence in rules and interaction styles across home and school. In addition, interventions have been found to be more effective when both home and school components are utilized (e.g., Heller & Fantuzzo, 1993; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Elliott, 1990) and when joint problem-solving sessions between parents/guardians and educators are conducted (Galloway & Sheridan, 1994). Establishing congruence is also a key component in the delivery of efficacious mental health interventions (Dishion & Stromshak, 2006).

The significance of home-school relationships and congruence between these systems is buttressed by empirical work that suggests analogous home and school predictors of achievement and learning. As noted by Chall (2000), "The processes and characteristics that enhance academic achievement are essentially the same—whether found in the home or in the school" (p. 159). Home predictors of school learning—work habits of the home, academic guidance and support, stimulation to explore and discuss ideas and events, language environment, and academic aspirations and expectations—are comparable to school factors that enhance achievement (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993).

Similarly, a comprehensive review of more than 200 studies on home, school, and community influences related to student learning revealed a common set of factors that promote learning across contexts: *Standards and Expectations* (the level of expected performance held by key adults for youth); *Structure* (overall routine and monitoring provided by key adults); *Opportunity to Learn* (variety of learning options and resources available to youth in the home, school, and community); *Support* (guidance provided by, communication between, and interest shown by adults to facilitate student progress in school); *Climate and Relationships* (amount of warmth, friendliness; praise and recognition; and degree to which adult-youth relationships are positive and respectful); and *Modeling* (how adults demonstrate desired behaviors and commitment/value toward learning and working hard). These factors highlight the complementary nature of family, school, and community influences for student success (Christenson & Peterson, 2006). Data gathered directly from students supported the validity of these factors for student learning and success. Students characterized by their teachers as *consistent learners* rated the importance of each factor to their learning more highly than those who were described as *inconsistent learners*. The home and school influences related to student success were more frequent and systematically present for consistent learners, which suggested a cumulative effect of home and school systems on achievement (Christenson & Anderson, 2002). These components, for families or schools, may be characterized as the extent to which the environment is a learning environment; the curriculum of the home or the school (Walberg, 1984). Other family-school interventions are focused on interventions that connect families to the curriculum at school.

Out of School Time

Consideration of the effects that home, school, and the home-school relationship have on student achievement necessitates consideration of the places in which learning may occur, which are not

limited to schools. Indeed, Walberg (1984) estimated that from birth to the age of 18, students spend more than 90% of their time outside of schools. Efforts to improve student achievement, and close the achievement gap among various groups of students (e.g., those in poverty, racial/ethnic groups, English learners), must take into account the power of out-of-school time (Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

How students spend time outside of school is related to academic, as well as social and behavioral outcomes (see Barber, Abbott, Blomfield, & Eccles, chapter 21, this book). For example, constructive use of time and participation in structured (supervised) activities are associated with positive outcomes, across domains, for students (e.g., Benson, 1997; Doll & Lyon, 1998). Furthermore, out of school time may be one factor related to educational disparities for students in our schools. A study by Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2001) found that during the academic year, students of different socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds made similar academic gains; however, during the summer, higher-SES students continued to grow while low-SES children did not, creating an ever-increasing gap in performance across years. Recent meta-analyses of the literature on the effects of summer-school and after-school programs implemented with at-risk students found positive academic effects (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000; Lauer et al., 2006). Finally, families play a primary role in socializing students as learners by making school work a priority among competing activities, helping students learn from their mistakes, and recognizing that ongoing persistence on academic tasks is necessary to reach goals (Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1999).

Defining Partnerships: Congruence and Shared Responsibility

> Partnerships that do not define a common mission are rarely able to sustain the long-term collaborative relationship and sharing of resources necessary to accomplishing substantive goals. (Jordan et al., 2001, p. 14)

The influence of systems ecological theory—and focus on congruence, out of school time, and quality of relationships as part of the mesosystem—is reflected broadly in definitions and descriptions of partnerships. For example, Jordan, Averett, Elder, Orozco, and Rudo define family-school collaboration in terms of joint goals and priorities and shared responsibility for success (cited in Jordan et al., 2001). A similar definition is offered by Fantuzzo and colleagues in which partnerships are comprised of shared goals, shared contributions, and shared accountability (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). Okagaki's (2001) model of minority student achievement, which is comprised of perceived function and form of the school, cultural norms and beliefs of families about education and intellectual development, and child characteristics, also underscores the importance of systems theory for understanding educational outcomes and the mutual influence of home and school. She aptly showed that a focus on only one aspect narrows the ability of educators to assess and design interventions to enhance the school performance of students, especially those from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Christenson and Sheridan's (2001) description of school-family partnerships also highlights congruence and shared responsibility, as well as problem-solving. According to Christenson and Sheridan (2001), the following are characteristics of school-family partnerships:

1. A *student-focused philosophy* wherein educators and families cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance learning opportunities, educational progress, and school success for students in academic, social, emotional, and behavioral domains.
2. A belief in shared responsibility for educating and socializing children—both families and educators are essential and provide resources for student's learning and progress in school.

3. An emphasis on the quality of the interface and ongoing connection between families and schools. Creating a constructive relationship (how families and educators work together in meaningful ways) to execute their respective roles in promoting the academic and social development of children and youth is most important.
4. A preventive, solution-oriented focus, one where families and educators strive to create conditions that facilitate student learning, engagement, and development.

Their work also highlights the changing purpose of involvement and school-family partnerships. These partnerships are not established to involve families in school activities; rather, partnerships are founded to enhance student learning as well as social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for youth (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

In summary, there is great impetus toward school-family collaboration and partnerships to facilitate student learning and development. Several changes in the field, such as the expanded definitions of families, recognition of the many ways in which families are involved in supporting students' education, appreciation of the importance of context in guiding partnerships and activities, and emphasis on the meso-systemic home-school relationship were guided by systems theory. Other changes in this field are indicative of a shift in focus away from "why" educators should work with families. The influence of and rationale for family involvement in education are well-established; rather, of chief importance in current work are questions of how and what works. The next section addresses these questions, providing a description of current recommendations regarding process (the "how"), evidence-based practices ("what works") and the role of school-family partnerships in school reform as well as universal and targeted interventions.

Engaging All Families

Process Variables: Relationships and Conditions

It has been recognized that at the core of successful partnerships is relationships (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Jordan et al., 2001). In the words of Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004), "… the central problem in the development of partnerships is failure to establish collaborative, trusting, empowering relationships between families and educators that support effective service delivery" (p. 169). Process and relationship variables are areas that require additional research to provide firm guidelines for practice; however, the literature is informative for formulating initial considerations in these areas. These considerations are described in terms of relationship dimensions and behaviors; and establishing the conditions, or groundwork, for successful collaborations and partnerships to develop.

Relationships

The literature is clear that close relationships between youth and competent, caring adults promotes resiliency (Masten & Reed, 2002); so too, however, do constructive, positive relationships among primary socializing influences in students' lives—home, school, and community. The descriptions of risk—high- and low-risk circumstances—drawn from theoretical work in school-family partnerships support the notion that relationships may be protective and facilitate student development and learning. Alternately, when these relationships are poor (e.g., contentious, lack congruence), they hinder student learning and development, placing students at higher risk for poor school outcomes (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Unfortunately, recognizing the importance of relationships for promoting student outcomes does not translate easily into knowledge of how to develop positive relationships. Indeed, authors have likened studying relationships to the story of blind mice exploring an elephant (e.g., Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

A study by Blue-Banning and colleagues (2004) provides some guidance in terms of school-family relationship dimensions and behaviors that are facilitative of fostering partnerships. Blue-Banning et al. (2004) conducted focus groups with service professionals and diverse groups of families: those who had children with disabilities, those whose children did not have disabilities, and those who were non-English speaking. These focus groups led to the identification of six dimensions and behaviors facilitative of partnerships: communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect. These dimensions, or *partnership components* as the authors describe them, and indicators may be viewed as essential elements for establishing collaborative partnerships. Furthermore, these dimensions are similar to the underlying characteristics of family-centered services developed by early interventionists and espoused in early childhood as best practice: family orientation, positiveness, sensitivity, responsiveness, friendliness, and child and family community skills (McWilliam, Tocci, & Harbin, 1998). These six dimensions of family-centered services underscore the importance of sharing information and resources that are perceived by the family as relevant and necessary. Addressing the need for information and resources has been the cornerstone of effective programs that empower parents to address learning gaps (Rodriquez-Brown, 2004).

Essential Conditions

Relationships are at the nucleus of school-family partnerships; climate, behavior, and attitudes create the conditions for relationships and partnerships to develop. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) provided a useful heuristic, the 4 A's, for conceptualizing conditions and actions related to establishing these partnerships. This heuristic has been adopted by the Futures Task Force on School Family Partnerships. The 4 A's refer to Approach, Attitudes, Atmosphere, and Actions. *Approach* is the framework for interactions between families and educators. It is reflected in the expectations for family involvement and recognition that families may be involved in a variety of ways, development and learning occur both inside *and* outside of school, and positive relationships and congruent messages between home and school facilitate student success. *Attitudes* reveal the values and perceptions held about family-school relationships (e.g., family involvement is essential rather than desirable; shared perspective-taking and mutual respect; non-blaming, problem-solving interactions). *Atmosphere* is the school climate for interaction between families and educators. Finally, *Actions* are the strategies or behaviors that facilitate and support family-school relationships, such as increasing problem-solving across home and school, identifying and managing conflict, garnering administrative support, acting as a systems advocate, implementing family-school teams, supporting families to be engaged, and helping teachers communicate and build relationships with families. Actions link the socializing systems for students to develop an identity as learners who work hard in the face of challenges and strive to improve their learning outcomes. These conditions—*Approach, Attitudes, Atmosphere*—set the stage or become the host environments for partnerships and must be attended to prior to initiating broad actions and the various supportive activities such as workshops, newsletters, conferences, and so on (see Figure 20.1).

Diversity and All Families

Inherent in a true partnership, one in which the relationship and process (Approach, Attitudes, Atmosphere) elements are present and actions are tailored to context, are trusting, non-blaming, and respectful interactions among schools and families. However, it should be emphasized that these are essential partnership elements for *all* families and schools. It is not uncommon that educators want to "fix" students and families, placing the blame for student behavior or performance squarely in one realm or system; a situation that appears to occur more often with families who are
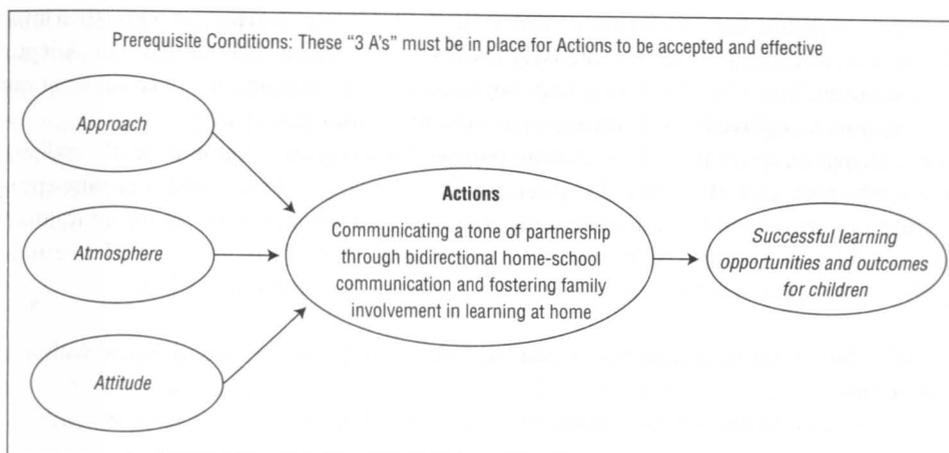
Figure 20.1 Developing pathways to partnerships: Prerequisite conditions. Sheridan and Kratochwill: *Conjoint behavioral consultation,* 2nd edition (2007), page 13. Reprinted with permission of Springer Science + Business Media.

non-White or from other than middle-class backgrounds. This deficit model lens (Boethel, 2003; Montemayor & Romero, 2000 cited in Jordan et al., 2001), or one in which the not good families are fixed to be like the good ones, may reinforce racial, ethnic, and social class biases. Furthermore, this view of families is antithetical to establishing partnerships that promote student learning and desirable outcomes.

The distinction between *status* (e.g., race, SES, single-parent) and *process* variables (i.e., what families do) is important to consider for the design and implementation of partnership programs to improve student achievement outcomes. Family process variables account for a much greater portion of the variance in achievement (60%) than those related to status (25%; Kellaghan et al., 1993). A recent qualitative study of high-achieving students from low-SES families provides additional support for the notion that process is more important than status or structure. Milne and Plourd (2006) found that *educational resources and influences* were prevalent among low-SES families who had high-achieving students. This theme referred to having materials available, a regular time set aside to do academic work and limiting the amount of television children were allowed to watch. Other themes included, *Relationships,* which referred to spending time with and talking with their child, and *Causes of Success.* When asked about their role in promoting student success, the parents spoke about providing support and guidance, as well as boundaries and expectations for their children, and the consistent message that education is important. These findings corroborate those of Clark (1983); however, some families appear uninvolved or apathetic because they are unclear about the role they should play or lack knowledge about how to be engaged to address a school or parent based concern (Abdul-Adil & Farmer Jr., 2006). Note also the similarity of these factors to those that emerged from the extensive review of the correlational literature on school, home, and community influences related to positive student outcomes: Standards and Expectations, Structure, Opportunity to Learn, Support, Climate and Relationships, and Modeling (Christenson & Peterson, 2006).

Masten (2001) once noted that resiliency is not a rare quality inherent in some children, but rather it is a product of the ordinary processes or "everyday magic" and is embedded within systems of development—children, families, schools, and communities. Similarly, family factors that promote positive outcomes among youth do so for all youth, regardless of socioeconomic background or race. An interesting finding from the research synthesis completed by Boethel (2003) is that low

income and non-White families are more involved in their children's learning at home than involved at school; however, they may be less intensely involved than White or Asian families. Adopting a health promotion focus by connecting with families early and systematically about what can be done to support a positive home learning environment is promising strategy.

One challenge in current work is creating partnership programs that engage *all* families, not just those who were already involved (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Partnerships require engaged, active communication and congruence among educators and families. Schools and educators have been successful in engaging families from a variety of backgrounds. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), key practices for engaging families of diverse backgrounds include:

1. establishing trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families and within communities;
2. being aware and respectful of racial/ethnic and social differences and address family needs; and
3. creating a partnership philosophy focused on shared power and responsibility.

School-Family Partnerships, School Reform, and Interventions

One of the goals of this chapter is to highlight the necessity of adopting a systemic-ecological orientation for educating all students. This moves beyond the three big traditional roles for parents—homework helper, volunteer, and fund raiser—to focus on meaningful roles for parents at home, namely bi-directional communication and fostering academic and motivational home support for learning. Many studies, dating back almost two decades (e.g., Lindle, 1989) have reported that parents want suggestions for how to help their children in school, provide information they view as important for educators, and to be informed early about any learning concerns. As such, this chapter is grounded in the meso-systemic partnership between home and school, which includes variables such as congruence, quality of the home-school relationship, and value of meso-systemic interventions for promoting child competence. We have not elected to review all evidence-based interventions; for this information, readers are referred to Carlson and Christenson (2005) and Henderson and Mapp (2002). In general, however, effective family-school interventions are those that emphasize two-way communication, joint monitoring of school performance, and consultation; therefore, we contend a shared or joint problem solving approach may provide the best avenue for promoting child competence. In this section, the role of family-school involvement and partnerships in school reform is described with particular attention to the promise of school-family partnerships in the Response to Intervention reform initiative.

A recent trend in education is to conceptualize and depict numbers of students, resources, and the intensity of interventions as tiers of intervention or in the graphic form of a pyramid (e.g., Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ysseldyke et al., 2006). Tier 1, or universal level, applies to all students; Tier 2, or targeted level, refers to a smaller group of students who are in need of more intensive support for academic or behavioral concerns. Tier 3, intensive level, applies to an even smaller group of students, representing the most rigorous level of services. The percentages of students expected to succeed at each level are 80%–90%, 5%–15%, and 1%–7% across Tiers 1 through 3, respectively.

Family-school partnerships and interventions fit well into a conceptualization of tiered service delivery. It should be emphasized, however, that communication and quality relationships between families and schools must be initiated and established prior to signs of student difficulty, at the first tier of services. The conditions for partnerships—approach, atmosphere, attitudes—should be in place for the families of all students. Consider the "co-roles" for families and educators delineated

by the U.S. Department of Education (Moles, 1993): Co-communicators, co-supporters, co-learners, co-teachers, and co-decision makers. Each subsequent role requires greater participation and commitment on the part of families and educators. Conceptually, these roles fit well with tiers of intervention. Each respective tier represents a greater intensity of intervention and more frequent data collection; these should also represent greater communication, problem-solving and intensity of partnerships with schools and families. The promotion of student competence is the focus of school-family partnerships within and across tiers of intervention.

Intervention Programs

A movement toward scientifically supported or evidence based practices is evident in recent legislation (e.g., NCLB, IDEA) and within applied fields, such as psychology and education (Kratochwill & Shernoff, 2004). The same may be said of family-school involvement and partnership programs. This field is currently focused on delineating what works, for whom, and under what conditions (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Sheridan, 2005). Many of the family-school intervention programs and strategies fit into the tiers or levels of intervention; there are programs aimed at all students (universal) and those that are targeted to smaller groups of students and families.

Family involvement and partnerships are an integral part of school reform programs (e.g., Comer, 2005). However, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of family involvement components from other aspects of reform (e.g., reading curricula, staff development, intensive behavioral and/ or academic interventions; Christenson & Carlson, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Two widely known examples of programs that include school-family partnerships at the universal level are the Comer School Development Program (Haynes, 1998) and Epstein's Action Plan for School, Family and community partnerships (Epstein et al., 2002). Interestingly, both of these programs are grounded in problem-solving, through a school-family team or group that works meet the needs of all students who attend the school.

In addition to universal interventions—those aimed at entire schools or classrooms—there are numerous examples of strategies and programs designed for smaller, more targeted groups of students and families, such as Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Bergan, 1996) or Dishion and Stromshak's EcoFit Model (2006) for child and family interventions.

Small group and individualized interventions for students and families require frequent communication, congruence, and structured problem-solving. Recently, the Parent and Family Intervention domain of the Task Force on Evidence Based Interventions in School Psychology undertook a comprehensive review and analysis of the effectiveness of parent and family interventions for addressing behavior and learning difficulties of children at school (Carlson & Christenson, 2005). The Task Force reviewed and coded intervention studies in the areas of parent training and therapy, consultation, involvement, and family-focused early childhood interventions. The number of intervention studies was small in comparison to the number of studies that were descriptive in nature. However, results indicated the most effective interventions were those with a systems orientation, including collaborative interventions that stress two-way communication, monitoring, and dialogue; parent education programs focused on specific behavioral and/or learning outcomes; parent involvement programs emphasizing the role of parents as tutors in specific subjects; and parent consultation (Christenson & Carlson, 2005).

A recent meta-analysis of the effects of parent involvement programs on academic performance of elementary students found overall positive, statistically significant effects (Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2007). The most frequently assessed outcome was the area of reading, with a stable (across studies) moderate effect size. Mathematics outcomes were also significant and moderate in size but more variable across intervention studies. Moderator analyses revealed the large effect for intervention

programs in which parents provided some reward or incentive for student performance, followed by those with parent education/training components.

Family-School Partnerships and Special Education Reform

One current, large-scale reform movement, Response to Intervention (RtI), is tied in part to the passage and reauthorization of NCLB and IDEA, respectively, as well as research reports and policy statements complied by national panels and commissions (e.g., Learning Disabilities Summit, Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002; Reschly, 2008; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The recent popularity of tiers of intervention and the pyramid conceptualization is due at least in part to changes in the reauthorization of IDEA, which allowed for an RtI approach to eligibility determination for learning disabilities, the largest special education category.

Rather than limiting its use to special education, some argue that RtI is promising as a means improving educational outcomes for all students in general, remedial, and special education (e.g., Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007). It is a service-delivery model oriented toward prevention and early intervention with academic and behavioral difficulties, evidence-based instruction and interventions, and frequent data collection. RtI is often represented with a pyramid divided into three levels or tiers. Decisions regarding students, who is in need of intensive interventions and determining the effectiveness of programs, are driven by their own response to instruction and interventions at each level.

RtI represents significant reorganization and reform of educational service delivery. One complaint driving RtI reform is the delay in the initiation of intervention services, often referred to as a "wait to fail" model, and corresponding severity academic or behavioral difficulties must reach prior to initiating interventions, which in many cases is placement in special education programs. At its worst, family involvement was not invited because it was not required until the point of special education eligibility determination, which is often represented by consent; many families are passive through the remainder of that process (Harry, 1992). As one school psychologist noted, "Parent attendance does not equal parent participation" (Barbour, personal communication December 15, 2007). In this view, placement was the intervention, rather than an intensive level of intervention on a continuum of services provided to students based on need and responsiveness to other high-quality interventions. Harry's (1992) contention that a change in parent-educator discourse occurs by changing parental roles to achieve equal power and an equalitarian relationship—something she refers to as a posture of cultural reciprocity—offers promise for designing coordinated home-school interventions to address students' learning needs. She operationalizes the meaningful roles for parents as: parents as assessors, presenters of reports, policy makers, and advocates and peer supports.

The cornerstone of RtI is structured problem-solving (Marston, Reschly, Lau, Canter, & Muyskens, 2007). Problem-solving is a logical, data-driven process. It provides an occasion to invite and engage families around students' education at the first sign of difficulty. Problem-solving from a school-family partnership perspective involves shared responsibility in the creation of problem definitions, data collection, intervention design, and decision-making processes within and across levels of intervention. Families are viewed as essential from the first step, Problem Identification, to the last, Problem Solution (see Bergan, 1977; Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990; and Deno, 1989, for further information regarding problem solving). Further, involving families as essential partners in the problem-solving process capitalizes on evidence based practices in working across families and schools. The Task Force review of this literature concluded that the most effective school-family interventions were those that had specific intervention targets; emphasized the roles of parents as

teachers, school-family dialogue, and shared communication/monitoring of student progress; and parent consultation (Carlson & Christenson, 2005).

Research and Practice

The field has recently begun the process of identifying effective programs and practices and has delineated a course of action for future research; part of this future research agenda includes information regarding process—the *how* of creating partnerships rather than the *why* (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Jordan et al., 2001). There are also numerous future directions, including clearer links from theory to research (Jordan et al., 2001) and research to practice (Sheridan, 2005), measurement and methodological issues to be addressed, and a need for greater rigor and new methodology in research and intervention work (Christenson & Carlson, 2005; Jordan et al., 2001; Sheridan, 2005).

In terms of clarifying research and intervention outcomes, it is necessary to more precisely define what is meant by family involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan et al., 2001; Nye et al., 2007). This is important given that different conceptualizations of involvement assuredly lead to different outcomes (Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). These outcomes also require greater differentiation. Hence, there is a need for greater measurement precision for the definition and outcomes of involvement (Jordan et al., 2001). As noted by Jordan and colleagues (2001) in their summary of needed research, attention should be paid to differentiating outcomes for students and schools, as well as examining indirect effects and mediating variables (e.g., parenting styles) of parent involvement initiatives and intervention programs. In particular, which family and community involvement activities affect specific outcomes (e.g., academic, attitudinal) for which school levels and groups of students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006)?

There is also a great need for additional research on students and families from diverse backgrounds (Sheridan, 2005), including involvement in nontraditional families, and a closer examination of family involvement or school-family partnerships during times of transition (e.g., elementary to middle school) and in students' post-secondary plans (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Epstein and Sheldon (2006) described the need for longitudinal data to answer the question, "How do school practices to involve families affect parents' behaviors and the change or continuity of student achievements and behaviors?" Finally, an important direction for researchers and stakeholders is the inclusion of family-school initiatives and partnerships in comprehensive school reform models, including RtI, and interventions that aim to improve student achievement, behavior, and wellness.

Conclusion

There is a desire and strong justification to involve or engage families in education to improve students' academic, social, behavioral, and emotional learning outcomes. Ecological systems theory provides the theoretical foundation for working across families and schools to positively affect student outcomes. Major themes for the home-school relationship and meso-systemic interventions include congruence, shared responsibility, and high-quality relationships between home and school (e.g., respect, communication, friendliness, competence). The field has moved beyond the rationale and established need for family involvement to the implementation and delineation of effective programs and practices. Implementation must be based on components of effective interventions; however, implementation also requires attention to (a) the context—there is no efficacious one-size-fits-all program or strategy—and (b) conditions necessary to establish productive relationships and partner with families to promote student achievement and well-being.

The conditions of Atmosphere, Attitudes, and Approach are essential to the success of specific actions (and interventions). The critical consideration, then, is the question of which actions bring together the primary socializing agents—home and school—to address student difficulties and promote well-being. Although there is currently no precise prescription for how to proceed, there are guidelines regarding process variables and implementation of school-family partnership programs and a compelling theoretical foundation and a consistent literature base that point to the rationale, need, and promise of establishing school-family partnerships for the purpose of promoting student competence.

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