

Conceptualizing and Defining Family Involvement for Research: Setting New Directions

Joyce L. Epstein, Ph.D.

Johns Hopkins University

Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Meeting Theme 1

Gaining clarity on the definition and concepts of school, family, and community involvement.

For more information:

jepstein@csos.jhu.edu

www.partnershipschoools.org



Short History

School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University

1981 -1986 Basic research and theory development

1987 -1995 **Field studies** in Baltimore and other MD districts
in elementary, middle, and high schools
Field studies on district leadership in MD & UT
Field studies on state leadership in UT & WI
**Tests of theory and trial “translations” of
research ↔ practice**

**1996 –
present** **Research, development, and dissemination**
National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS)
(now: 1200+ schools, 150+ districts, 50+ organizations,
& 22 states for leadership and program
development)
**Ongoing studies, applications, and evaluations of
theory, research ↔ practice ↔ research...**

Early Work: Theory Development

Two main ways to develop theory:

- “Out of the blue sky” process
- “What was that, again?” process

Theory of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence*

- Need to alter sociological theory of effective organizations to focus on student learning and success.
- Need to alter Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory of child development to depict the dynamics of changing relationships of individuals across contexts for student learning.
- Different from Hoover-Dempsey’s model that helps explain parents’ beliefs and decisions about involvement. Need to depict schools’ outreach to family and community partners to improve student learning.

Theory of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence*

Contrasting theoretical perspectives:

- Separate
- Sequential spheres of influence
- Overlapping spheres of influence

Asserts that students do better in school when they are supported by home, school, and community.

– **External model** (contexts)

Change and dynamic differences due to forces of time, experiences, philosophies, practices

– **Internal model** (people)

Change and dynamic differences in the interpersonal interactions (relationships) of partners in children's education at the institutional and individual levels.

Theoretical Model
**OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE OF FAMILY,
SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING**

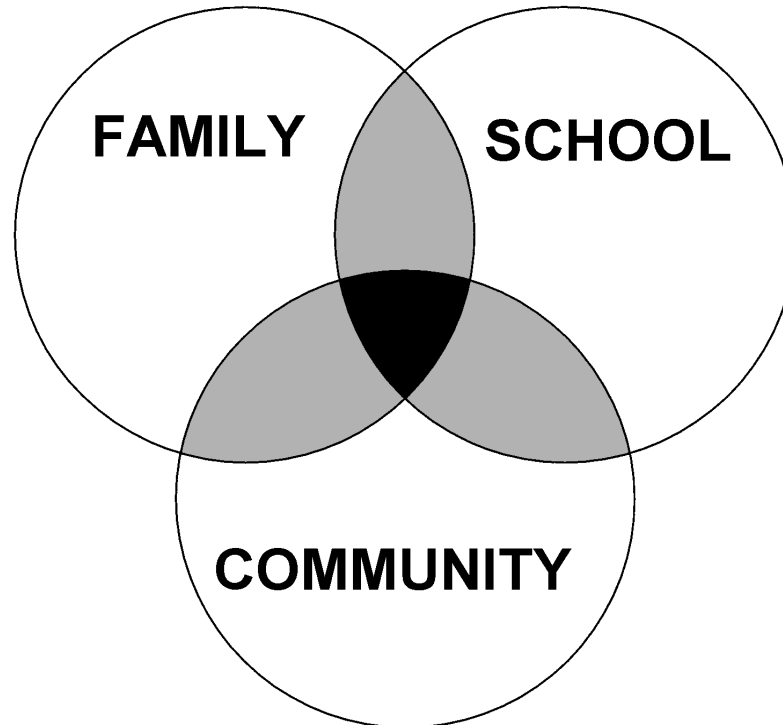
External Model

Force B

**Experience,
Philosophy,
Practices
of Family**

Force D

**Experience,
Philosophy,
Practices
of Community**



Force C

**Experience,
Philosophy,
Practices
of School**

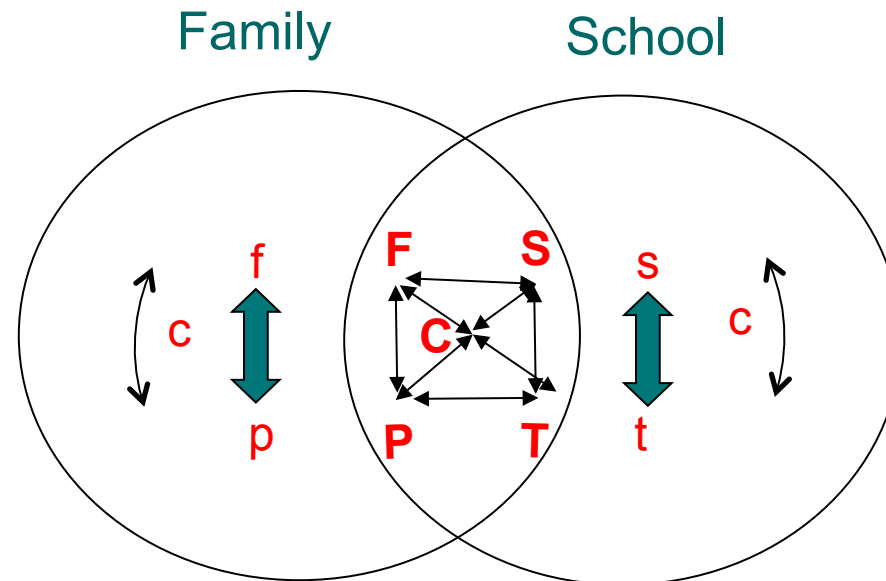
Force A

Time/Age/Grade Level

Theoretical Model

OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE OF FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Internal Structure (Partial)



Intra-institutional interactions (lower case)

Inter-institutional interactions (upper case)

f/F = family

s/S = school

t/T = teacher

c/C = child

p/P = parent

**Similar interactions for community connections.
See Epstein, 2011, Chapter 2.**

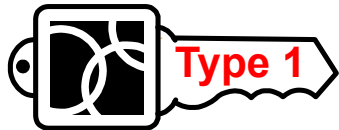
Framework Linked to Theory

Six types of involvement activities
that affect interactions **WITHIN** the areas of overlap

- What do educators, parents, and community partners do to push contexts apart or bring them together?
- What does it mean to be “involved?”
- Which **practices** activate each type of involvement?
- What **challenges** must be solved to successfully implement these practices?
- What **results** for students, parents, and teachers are produced by practices of the six types of involvement?

“KEYS” TO SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL-FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

EPSTEIN’S SIX TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT



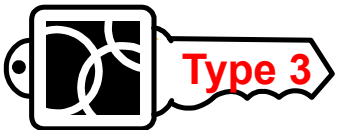
Type 1

PARENTING: Assist families in understanding child and adolescent development, and in setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.



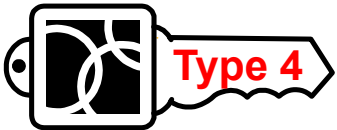
Type 2

COMMUNICATING: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.



Type 3

VOLUNTEERING: Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at school or in other locations to support students and school programs.



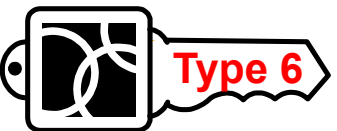
Type 4

LEARNING AT HOME: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework, other curriculum-related activities, and individual course and program decisions.



Type 5

DECISION MAKING: Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, action teams, and other parent organizations.



Type 6

COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY: Coordinate resources and services for students, families, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.

Clarifying Concepts and Contrasts

(Versus? Or chapters and verses?)

Parental Involvement **vs.** School, Family, and Community Partnership

Not a “parent” program, but **a way to mobilize partners and resources for student success.**

Not “external” to the school, but **part of school organization.**

Not about semantics. Involvement, engagement, participation, collaboration, and all **other favorite terms are situated WITHIN a partnership framework.**



Clarifying Concepts and Contrasts

Family-like Schools and School-like Families

Schools understand students as unique and valued **individuals** – the way a family would.

Families understand their sons and daughters as **students** and guide them to fulfill school responsibilities – the way a teacher would.

There are, of course, **differences** in parents' and teachers' feelings for and treatment of students, **BUT** there also are **similarities** in goals and responsibilities for student success.

Clarifying Concepts and Contrasts

Multiplication **vs.** Division of Labor

Teachers and parents have some unique and some shared knowledge and opportunities to help each student succeed to full potential at each grade level.

Students need **multiple sources of support** and some **duplication of messages and actions** to do their best as students. For example:

- **On attendance**
- **On homework**
- **On developing talents and interests**



Clarifying Concepts and Contrasts

Purposes for and Designs of Homework

Ten purposes of homework: **Practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child connections, parent-teacher communications, peer interactions, policy, public relations, and punishment**

Some homework should be designed for students to do alone, **BUT** some homework should be designed to **increase positive conversations, share information, and celebrate learning.**

Development of and research on

Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) Interactive Homework

to improve:

**parent-child connections
teacher-parent communications**
(See TIPS at www.partnershipschools.org.)

Clarifying Concepts and Contrasts

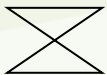
What **IS**? vs. What **MIGHT BE**?

Studies of current practices in the general population focus on **WHAT IS** to identify:

- Haves and have nots / Do and do nots
Resources, knowledge, social ties, norms?
Values, goals, attitudes, behaviors?
- **INEQUALITIES**
e.g., studies of social class ensure some inequalities.

Studies of program interventions focus on **WHAT MIGHT BE** to identify:

- **How to** involve the uninvolved
- **How to** produce greater equality, reduce inequality
- **EQUITY** and **EQUALITY** issues
e.g., studies of school improvement programs encourage attention to issues of equity.



Many Questions for New Research

Studies of People: Who are the “partners” in children’s education? What do they do? How? Why?

Parents, students, teachers, administrators, district leaders, state leaders, school boards, educators of future teachers and administrators, etc.

Studies of Program Design and Implementation:

How does a particular program “work?” What challenges arise?

Which structures and processes are “essential” for all sites?

Which processes must be “customized” to each site?

How well is a program implemented?

What are the theoretical underpinnings of different programs?

How will **program effects** (or **comparative effects**) be studied?

Studies of Paths of Influence/Results:

“**Interim outcomes**” of program(s) for all partners.

How do effects “flow” in an effects model?

“**Ultimate outcomes?**” Direct and indirect effects on student achievement. In which subjects? Attitudes? Behaviors?

For which students, families, schools?)

There always are new and important questions for theory development and research on school, family, and community partnerships to increase knowledge and to improve programs.

Young field of study.

Broad field of study.

Interdisciplinary interests. Wide range of topics.

Family life, child development, school improvement, district leadership, preservice and inservice education, state and federal policy development, and MANY more.

A dynamic and useful field of study.

Potential for direct connections:

research ↔ policy and practice ↔ research . . .

THANK YOU 