Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature

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Table of Contents

Integrated Literature Review

Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that meaningful engagement of families in their children's early learning supports school readiness and later academic success (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Family engagement is often considered in union with children's participation in early childhood education programs. High rates of program enrollment among young children across several ethnic groups may be a possible reason for this trend. In 2005, 60 percent of children under age 6 spent some time in nonparental care arrangements: 62 percent of white children, 69 percent of black children, and 49 percent of Hispanic children were in such programs (Iruka & Carver, 2006).

As a means to supporting family engagement and children's learning, it is crucial that programs implement strategies for developing partnerships with families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). These strategies should be appropriate for the diverse population programs serve and reflect a commitment to outreach (Colombo, 2006; Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). To address these issues, we will review the literature on family engagement that pertains to *all* young children across ethnic backgrounds and early childhood education programs.

Definition of Family Engagement

This review conceptualizes family engagement as essential for enhancing children's learning and family well being. Family engagement occurs when there is an on-going, reciprocal, strengths-based partnership between families and their children's early childhood education programs. From the literature and a synthesis of three definitions of family engagement, Henderson and Berla (1994), Epstein (2001), and Weiss et al. (2006), we have created a comprehensive definition of family engagement that features six factors:

1. Early childhood education programs encourage and validate family participation in decision making related to their children's education. Families should act as advocates for their children and early childhood education program by actively taking part in decision making opportunities.
2. Consistent, two-way communication is facilitated through multiple forms and is responsive to the linguistic preference of the family. Communication should be both school and family initiated and should be timely and continuous, inviting conversations about both the child's educational experience as well as the larger program.
3. Families and early childhood education programs collaborate and exchange knowledge. Family members share their unique knowledge and skills through volunteering and actively engaging in events and activities at schools. Teachers seek out information about their students' lives, families, and communities and integrate this information into their curriculum and instructional practices.
4. Early childhood education programs and families place an emphasis on creating and sustaining learning activities at home and in the community that extend the teachings of the program so as to enhance each child's early learning.

5. Families create a home environment that values learning and supports programs. Programs and families collaborate in establishing goals for children both at home and at school.
6. Early childhood education programs create an ongoing and comprehensive system for promoting family engagement by ensuring that program leadership and teachers are dedicated, trained and receive the supports they need to fully engage families.

While the above definition is composed of six factors, to promote a comprehensive and continuous approach to family engagement it is necessary to recognize how the factors interact and work together. It is not sufficient to focus engagement efforts on one of the components and neglect the others. Simply attending a workshop or meeting does not necessarily result in an educator or family member changing their beliefs or actions (Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). Achieving a strong family-program partnership requires a culture that supports and honors reciprocal relationships, commitment from program leadership, a vision shared by staff and families, opportunities to develop the skills needed to engage in reciprocal relationships, and practices and policies that support meaningful family engagement.

Past Models

In constructing the above definition, we reviewed several past models that have conceptualized and measured family engagement. In this section, we will present these models and will discuss the need to broaden current perspectives on family engagement to one that focuses on strengthening the relationship between families and early childhood education programs as a means to improving child well-being.

Past family engagement research has focused primarily on parent-initiated behavior and on measuring tasks that parents perform either at the program setting or with their children in the home. These tasks are often referred to as "Parent Involvement" and can include (1) discussing the school day with child, (2) direct and regular contact with teachers, (3) volunteering in the classroom, (4) planning or attending school activities or events, (5) actively promoting learning in the home, (7) chaperoning field trips, (8) developing fundraising activities, and (10) working in parent-teacher organizations (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005; Mantzicopoulos, 2003; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino 2004; Rous, Hallam, Grove, Robinson and Machara, 2003).

While research has found positive relations between parent participation in school activities and outcomes for pre-kindergarteners and kindergartners (Mantzicopoulos, 2003; McWayne et al., 2004), some concerns have been raised regarding the traditional parent involvement paradigm, especially in regards to cultural-sensitivity. Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) and Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2006) suggest that the traditional paradigm for parent involvement focuses on the deficiencies of parents and strives to adapt parents to the methods applied by the schools. According to this definition, the responsibility for involvement is placed on the parent and suggests that to be involved parents need to participate in school defined practices such as volunteering in the classroom.

In addition, programs that implement a traditional parent involvement model may also be perceived as insensitive to family members' time, financial, or educational limitations. In the case of culturally-diverse families, other practices implemented at home that support children's

education may be overlooked and underappreciated. These misperceptions of early childhood education programs may lead to a disconnect in the partnership between families and programs (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Wong & Hughes, 2006, Valdes, 1999).

Lastly, in some cultures, multi-generational households are common, and extended family members and fictive kin have important roles in caring for and raising children (McAdoo, 2000; Valdes, 1999). Henderson and Mapp (2002, p. 10) highlight the importance of family by recognizing that "all family members -- siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and fictive kin -- who may be friends or neighbors, often contribute in significant ways to children's education and development." Traditional parental involvement models, however, do not incorporate other important family members that are active participants in the child's development and learning.

Not all models of family engagement have focused primarily on parent-initiated practices, however. There are some models that have recognized the school's role in promoting family engagement. For example, Epstein (2001) presents a comprehensive approach of involvement for family and professional partnerships. The model identifies practices that schools can implement to facilitate parent involvement. It recognizes that diverse needs and expectations exist across families and educators and that what may work in the life of one child may not work for another. In these instances, the model calls for families and educators to work together, to develop goals, and to establish the best possible practices that are meaningful and appropriate for both parties. The six elements to Epstein's model are:

1. ***Parenting*** = Help all families establish home environments to support children as students
2. ***Communicating*** = Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to school communications about school programs and their children's progress
3. ***Volunteering*** = Recruit and organize parent help and support
4. ***Learning at Home*** = Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning
5. ***Decision Making*** = Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives
6. ***Collaborating with Community*** = Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Weiss et al. (2006) also provide an integrative model of family involvement that is evidence-based or clearly linked to positive child outcomes. Their model encompasses three important categories: ***Parenting, Home-School Relationships,*** and ***Responsibility for Learning Outcomes***. ***Parenting*** includes the attitudes, values, and practices that parents use in raising young children. This category would include nurturing parent-child relationships and child-centered practices. ***Home-School Relationships*** pertain to both formal and informal connections between families and young children's early childhood education programs. It may include regular communication with teachers and efforts by the early childhood education programs to increase nontraditional contact between families and teachers such as home-visits or parent-discussion groups. ***Responsibility for Learning Outcomes*** speaks to how parents can support the language and literacy development of their children through direct parent-teaching activities such as reading aloud and engaging in linguistically rich conversations with their children.

While our conceptualization of family engagement draws from past models in some ways, there are also substantial differences. First, the paradigm proposed in this paper emphasizes **engagement** rather than **involvement.** In so doing, it takes a strengths-based perspective that all families are involved in their children's learning and well-being. The issue, however, often lies in the ability of programs to engage families so that they can effectively work together on behalf of children. High levels of engagement often result from strong program-family partnerships that are co-constructed and characterized by trust, shared values, ongoing bidirectional communication, mutual respect, and attention to each party's needs (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004). Henderson and Mapp (2002) highlight research by Swap (1993) and others that confirmed that the partnership approach to family involvement had the greatest impact as it allows parents to be involved in all areas of school life. Constantino (2008) states that family-school relationships are the foundation for real or meaningful family engagement. Furthermore, the concept of family engagement (versus parent involvement) recognizes all members of a child's family (not just parents) and emphasizes the importance of the reciprocal relationship between families and schools. Program staff must be aware that family participation in both the program and the home can take on many forms and depends on the unique characteristics of each family.

Review of Family Engagement Literature

Ecological and Social Exchange Frameworks

The family engagement literature clearly supports the importance of strong partnerships between families and early childhood education programs. Positive family-program connections have been linked to greater academic motivation, grade promotion, and socio-emotional skills across all young children, including those from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Christenson, 2000; Mantzicopoulos, 2003; McWayne et al., 2004).

A developmental-ecological perspective explains the dynamic between family-program partnerships and children's developmental outcomes. According to this theory, children's development and learning occurs within a series of embedded and interactive contexts or systems. Systems range from distal (e.g., culture and society) to proximal (e.g., school and family), and their effect on child development may be direct or indirect. All systems influence and are influenced by the cultural and socio-economic context; however, two of the most influential systems for young children are their homes and their early childhood education programs. Both systems serve as critical learning environments for children. Harmonious interactions between systems promote family engagement and children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 2004, Xu & Filler, 2008). While the ecological perspective may explain the importance of family-program partnerships for children's development, it does not explain the motivation for parents and schools to work together. This information is especially crucial for early childhood education programs who are concerned with a perceived lack of involvement with families from diverse backgrounds (Marschall, 2006).

Social exchange theory may shed light on how social partnerships develop and maintain. According to this theory, social relationships develop depending on the exchange of resources between parties and the weighing of costs and benefits. Perceived resources or benefits can be tangible (e.g., adult education courses) or intangible (e.g., warm and welcoming environment).

For example, if a family member was asked to volunteer in the early childhood education program, the social exchange theory predicts that the family member would begin to weigh the cost of volunteering in the program against the benefits the family receives from the program. If the family member feels that the benefit (tangible or intangible) he/she receives from the program outweighs the costs of volunteering, he/she may decide to volunteer at the program. However, if the cost of volunteering outweighs the benefits, then he/she may decide not to volunteer. The concept of trust is also at the essence of social exchange theory. As mutual trust evolves between the family and the program so will the extent and commitment to the partnership. If trust is lost, however, the commitment to the relationship will begin to diminish, as will feelings of engagement (Early, 1992; Lopez, et al., 2004; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008).

Structure of Review

The following review of the literature on family engagement is organized according to social exchange and ecological theories. According to the social exchange theory, the literature will be divided into two sections: (1) evidence-based resources that early childhood education programs can offer to the program-family partnership, and (2) evidence-based resources that families can offer to the program-family partnership. Culture is an important influence on child development and will be considered across all program and family resources, as indicated by the ecological framework (see Figure A).

Figure A

Figure A depicts family engagement as intricately linked to a strong program-family relationship. A strong program-family relationship is defined as one in which both programs and families contribute resources and work together on behalf of children's well-being. When there is a strong program-family relationship in place, family engagement will increase, which ultimately benefits the development of children.

It is important to mention three issues in regards to Figure A. First, cultural sensitivity is (and should be) considered across all program and family resources. Also, it is important to note that this model may modify according to child age, readiness-level of family member, and readiness-level of the program. Lastly, this model is cyclical. As child and family outcomes improve, the strength of the EC program-family partnership and the level of family engagement may also increase.

Figure A: Social Exchange Model of Family Engagement*
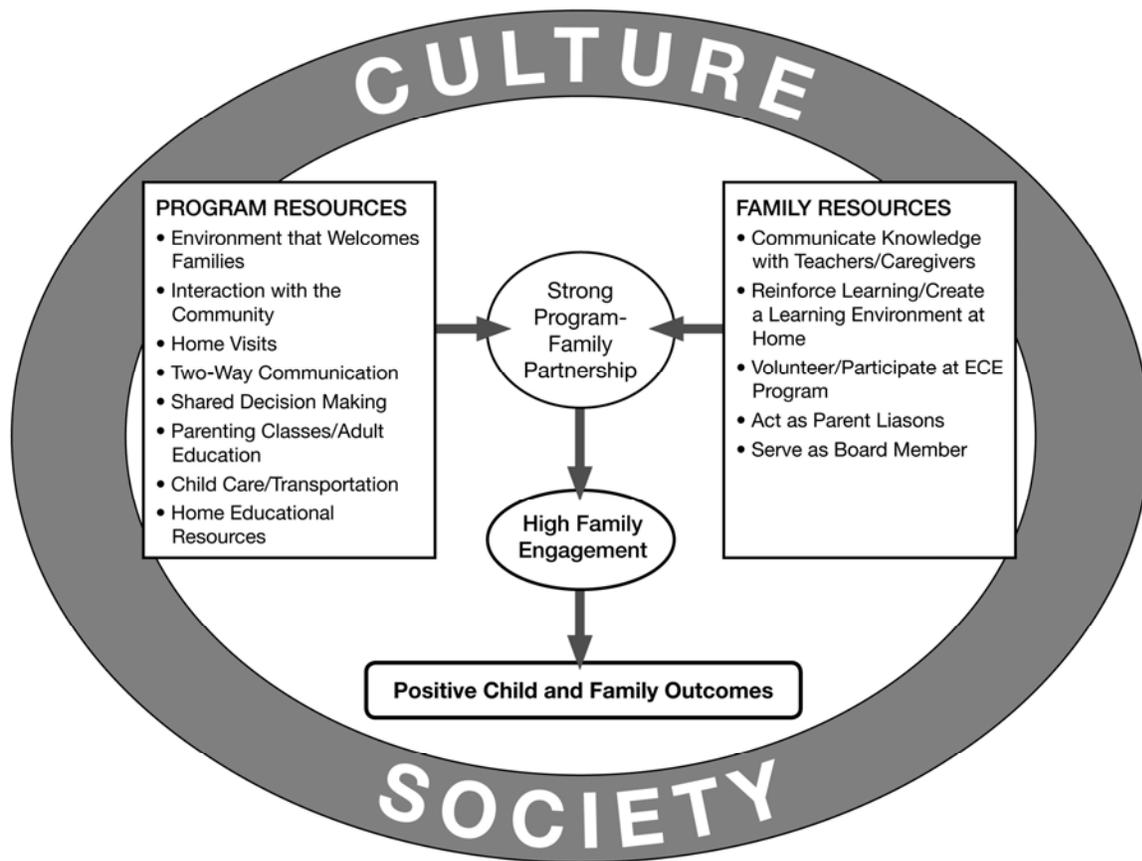
Early Childhood Education Program Resources

To foster family engagement, programs must focus on offering resources that have been found to promote children's learning and that are perceived by families as beneficial. These resources can be either tangible or intangible and can include (a) creating a welcoming environment; (b) interacting with the community; (c) conducting home visits; (d) promoting respectful two-way communication with all families; (e) incorporating families within the decision making process, (f) providing opportunities for adult education and parenting classes; (g) offering resources such as child care and transportation supports; and (h) providing resources for extending learning experiences at home. Together, these resources offered by programs to families aid in creating the reciprocal partnership discussed earlier in this paper. Further, they help parents develop new skills, create social networks, and decrease obstacles for family engagement.

(a) **Environment that Welcomes Families.** To encourage families' participation in the program-family relationship, programs must provide a welcoming environment to families. Constantino (2008) suggests that "a welcoming environment implies that a program has focused efforts on maintaining an atmosphere that is inviting to families and honors their presence (p.25)."

In a review of why families become involved, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) found that "how welcoming the program is" was one of the most influential indicators of family engagement. Programs can strive to become more welcoming in a number of ways ranging from having staff greet families at the door, to hanging signs so that families can navigate the building more easily, to establishing a "parent room" where parents can mingle, find information on child development or the educational program. To ensure that all families feel welcomed, programs can incorporate role-models from diverse backgrounds and celebrate the cultures of all members of the program community. Intangible benefits that result from a welcoming environment such as feelings of acceptance and appreciation are also important for promoting partnerships with families (Constantino, 2008).

(b) *Interaction with the Community.* Cultural differences and language barriers may lead to misconceptions about families' participation in their children's education. Programs can limit these barriers by being involved in the community and striving to learn about the different cultural backgrounds of the children they serve and by hiring staff with similar cultural and language backgrounds as the children in the program. Biases, even unconscious biases, by teachers and administrators can harm the partnerships between programs and families and discourage families from participating (Ferguson et al., 2008; Sanders, 2008).

By encouraging teachers to interact with families in their own communities and to think about their inherent biases, programs can limit these ill effects. Recent research has found changes in teachers' negative beliefs about Latino and other immigrant families after having direct contact and experiences with these families in their communities (De la Piedra, Munter, Giron, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2008). In addition to changing existing biases, holding family-program meetings in neutral or unthreatening locations in the community allows families to feel more comfortable and increases their attendance due to transportation and convenience (Quiocho and Daoud, 2006). Community meetings may also demonstrate to families the value early childhood education programs place on their participation (Constantino, 2008; Rous et al., 2003).

(c) *Home Visits.* Home visits provide opportunities for teachers and families to connect in an informal setting, to prevent and resolve problems in a more succinct and efficient manner, and to expand the teacher's knowledge of students' home life and cultural backgrounds (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Ginsberg, 2007; National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1994; Sanders 2008). Logan and Feiler (2006) also found home visits to be beneficial to parents of young children. In their study, home visits were associated with greater confidence in parents' interactions with children's educational programs.

Research on home visits have found positive short- and long-term effects for children, families, and teachers. Compared to control groups, home visits have been associated with higher scores for children in math, reading and classroom adaptation (Baker, Piotrkowski, and Brooks-Gunn, 1998; Kagitcibasi, Sunar, & Bekman, 2001). Children who receive home-visits are also found to have greater engagement in literacy activities and are more likely to choose and participate in group activities (Logan & Feiler, 2006). Furthermore, kindergarten through second grade teachers who participated in home visits believed that they resulted in more positive relationships with both children and families. They also reported that home visits led to improved communication with parents, enhanced understanding of the child, and a greater insight on how the home environment influences school performance (Meyer, & Mann, 2006).

Home visits are a hallmark of Head Start, Early Head Start and many other early childhood and family literacy programs. Most Head Start programs require at least 2 visits a year and consist of several objectives such as (1) informing parents about Head Start and services offered, (2) assisting with basic needs, (3) providing information about their children's progress, (4) offering counseling to address personal issues or family health issues, and (5) providing educational experiences for Head Start children in their home. Among families surveyed in 1998 for the Head Start FACES study, parents most frequently reported participating in home visits (82.9 percent) as an example of their involvement in their child's program. The survey also revealed that most parents surveyed were satisfied with their child's Head Start program and felt that the home visits helped to aid their child's development and learning (O'Brien et al., 2002).

(d) *Two-Way Communication.* Communication is the basis for any strong relationship and especially important with respect to family engagement in early childhood education programs (Baker & Manfredi-Petitt, 2004). Marcon (1999) stated that communicating with families is often the program's first step toward increasing engagement. Teachers and administrators can communicate with parents through a variety of different means including newsletters, e-mails, translated materials, web postings, telephone calls, home visits, videos or photo albums that depict a day in the class, and face-to-face communication (Carlisle et al., 2005).

It is critical, however, that programs use communication practices that are sensitive to the diverse language and cultural backgrounds of the families they serve. Sohn and Wang (2006) found that Korean born mothers, even those who spoke English well, had difficulty communicating with teachers face-to-face. Due to their strong reading and English grammar skills, their preference was to communicate with teachers through email or program letters. Rous et al. (2003) also found that families who do not speak English well may have difficulty understanding phone conversations as they are unable to rely on non-verbal cues. Lastly, DuPraw and Axner (1997) and Rous et al. (2003) found vast cultural differences in communication styles and nonverbal behavior across families in their studies.

To strengthen two-way communication with families, there are several evidence-based practices that early childhood programs can implement. First, programs should ensure that all written communication is translated into the native languages of the families they serve and that there are translators regularly available for face-to-face or phone communication. Second, programs should utilize the best forms of communication by asking parents' preferences at the beginning of the program year. Lastly, early childhood education programs must not only focus on providing information to parents, but should pay equal attention to listening to families and gathering their feedback. Programs can encourage feedback by creating a help desk, holding meetings with administrators that have open agendas, and providing a place to ask questions on the schools website. These techniques help to encourage continuous communication, resolve misunderstandings, and provide more accurate information in a timely manner. (Constantino, 2008; Engagement: From parent chats to asking question, 2008; Rous et al., 2003; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

(e) *Shared Decision Making.* A very important but often over-looked form of family engagement is the concept of shared decision making between families and programs. Early childhood education programs need to provide families with an opportunity to voice their

opinions and share in the decision making of program practices and policies that affect their children.

As an integral part of its two-generational approach to early intervention, the Head Start model allows families to participate in leadership and decision-making roles. The Policy Councils help to make decisions about the kinds of teachers that should be hired and help to design early childhood curriculum and program practices. By including families within the decision making process Head Start demonstrates that families' opinions are valued and generates a sense of parent "ownership" and pride in the program. Similarly at the Vaughn Family Center, a combination charter program and service provider, parents make up half of the centers governing board which is responsible for hiring staff and selecting the services that the center provides. One parent said "Parents have found that they can have a lot of power and say about what goes on at Vaughn and that the administration listens and respects their concerns" (Cochran, 2007 p. 165).

While some programs may offer forms of parent leadership, Flaugher (2006) suggests that their opportunities to actually engage in decision making in their children's programs are usually quite limited. Research on culturally-diverse families also indicates feelings of reservation and alienation on the part of family members from participating in school leadership councils (Sohn and Wang 2006; Schaller, Rocha, and Barshinger 2007). In order to support a true family-program partnership programs must work to balance the power structure and find ways to incorporate the voices of all families across race, cultural background and socioeconomic status.

(f) ***Parenting Classes/Adult Education.*** Early childhood education programs can offer a variety of different resources to families through parenting and adult education classes. Both types of courses provide parents with valuable knowledge, skills, and enhanced social networking opportunities that directly and indirectly affect children's well-being. In particular, decreased levels of parental stress and high levels of parental warmth and nurturance have proven to be highly influential in the social and academic success of young children (Cochran, 2007; Connell & Prinz, 2002; Dilworth-Bart, Khurshid, & Vandell, 2007; Weiss et al. 2006).

In parenting classes, parents learn ways to enhance their relationship with their children and use techniques that promote learning. Past research has found numerous benefits for children whose family members participated in parenting classes. For example, Caspe and Lopez (2006) conducted a review of family workshops and parenting classes that showed positive family and child outcomes through rigorous evaluations, including randomized control trials and longitudinal studies. Some examples of the programs that were reviewed include "***Dare to Be You"*** (Miller-Heyl, MacPhee & Fritz, 1998), Early Risers (August, Realmuto, Mathy, & Lee, 2003) and "***Incredible Years"*** (Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Hammond, 2007). In addition, Chrispeels and Rivero (2000) conducted a study that examined the impact of Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) on a group of Latino immigrant parents in California. All of the families surveyed for the study reported shifts in their parenting styles as a result of involvement with PIQE. They noted changes in their discipline methods, improved communication within the family and with teachers, and increased awareness of how to build the child's self-esteem.

Many schools and programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start, provide a variety of adult education classes to families including job training, GED courses, English as a Second

Language courses, stress management courses, first aid, money management, substance abuse classes and more. The offering of adult education classes may directly and indirectly effect children's well-being. Classes may provide family members with skills needed to help their children with homework. However, the enhanced social networks or increased self-esteem that family members may experience from participating in classes may also help improve their childrearing abilities, indirectly (Cochran, 2007). Findings from Head Start indicate that participants in adult education classes reduce their reliance on public assistance, find employment, earn college credit or degrees, and own homes after their experience with the program (Oyemade, Washington, & Gallo, 1989).

(g) ***Child Care/Transportation Services.*** To encourage the participation of families in school events and meetings, early childhood education programs must decrease the number of barriers and cost perceived by family members. This may explain why when programs provide on-site childcare, transportation, and refreshments at events, families are more likely to participate. To decrease the financial burden on programs, high school students may serve as a valuable resource that can provide childcare and tutor children while their families participate in program related events and activities. In addition, programs can work with local transportation companies to provide vouchers to parents for transportation to certain school events (Constantino, 2008). By providing families with incentives to attend events and resources to overcome transportation and child-care barriers, programs are able to ensure that families are able to take advantage of the resources that they provide and to be involved in program activities.

(h) ***Home Educational Resources.*** Not only can schools provide children with instruction and learning opportunities during the school day, but by understanding their role in the family-program partnership, they can also help families enhance children's early learning at home. Bouffard and Weiss (2008) explain that ***complementary learning***, a systematic approach that intentionally integrates school and nonschool supports to promote educational and life success, is one of the most effective means to enhancing the learning and developmental experiences of children.

There are several ways in which early childhood programs can support the learning of children at home and strengthen the family-program partnership. For example, programs can provide families with activities and materials to use at home or in the community. They can also support the emerging literacy skills of young children by offering family members tips on reading aloud and provide literacy learning kits (Crawford and Zygouris-Coe, 2006). Bracken and Fischel (2008) found that parent-child interaction and access to literacy materials was significantly related to children's emergent literacy including child's receptive vocabulary, story and print concepts and general emergent literacy skills for low-income preschoolers in Head Start.

Other effective examples of how programs can facilitate home learning include videotaping the classroom to show what is being taught and demonstrate instructional techniques that parents could use at home, conducting photo projects, encouraging journaling and cooking activities at home, and incorporating interactive homework assignments (Bailey, 2006; Feiler, Greenhough, Winter, Salway, & Scanlan 2006; Hughes & Greenhough, 2006; Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). By providing families with resources and activities that further the work that is being addressed within the classroom, teachers help families feel more connected to their child as well as to the program.

Family Resources

Just as the early childhood education program can provide resources to families in an effort to improve children's learning, families have equally important resources that they can contribute to the partnership. The link between families and programs is further developed when family members (a) communicate knowledge with teachers or caregivers, (b) create an environment at home that reinforces and complements classroom experiences, (c) volunteer or participate at the early childhood education program, (d) act as a parent liaison, and (e) participate on program boards or councils.

(a) ***Communicate Knowledge with Teachers/Caregivers.*** Across all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, family members are important sources of knowledge on their children's development and learning styles. It is imperative that families regularly communicate this information to teachers/caregivers in the early childhood program. Research has found strong relationship between parent-teacher communication and children's outcomes. In a sample of low-income, ethnic minority kindergartners and their primary caregivers, McWayne et al. (2004) found that direct and regular contact between parents and school was related to children's ratings of positive engagement with their peers, adults, and learning. Similarly, in a sample of low-income 4 year-olds attending public pre-k, Marcon (1999) found a relationship between parent-teacher communication and preschoolers' language, self-help, social, motor, and adaptive development skills.

(b) ***Reinforce Learning/Create a Learning Environment at Home.*** Creating a rich home learning environment for children is another important feature to family engagement. Families who reinforce educational concepts introduced in programs at home increase their children's chances for academic success (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008). For example, McWayne et al. (2004) found that families who (a) promoted learning at home, (b) structured the home environment to support children's learning, and (c) spent time talking with children about their school-based activities were more likely to have children with higher academic functioning, greater academic achievement, and higher academic motivation.

In addition, Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAdoo, and Garcia Coll (2001) found that home-learning stimulation and parental responsiveness were significantly related to motor and social development, language competence, and achievement test scores across poverty levels and different ethnic groups for children birth to age 13. Research has also found that parent engagement in child learning at home predicted greater academic achievement in children than any other form of parent involvement (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Downey, 2002; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendich, 1999).

The varied activities that families engage in at home have an impact on the success of their children at school and on the over all family-school partnership. The beliefs family members share with their children at home regarding education, their children's educational program, and their children's abilities are other areas in which families can influence their children's academic success. Research has found that family expectations for their children and their beliefs about school are strongly related to children's academic outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Mantzicopolus, 2003; Clark, 1993). Parents who do

not believe in their child's academic success may negatively influence their child's outcomes (Jeynes, 2005).

(c) ***Volunteer/Participate.*** Research has found a strong, positive relationship between parents' volunteering and attending program activities and preschooler's language, self-help, social, motor, adaptive development, and mastery of early basic school skills [these findings were especially stronger for boys than girls] (Marcon, 1999). Mantizcopoulos (2003) found that parent's attendance at school events significantly predicted whether the child was promoted from kindergarten to first grade.

There are numerous ways in which families can volunteer and participate in the early childhood education program. Family members can plan and attend school events, chaperone field trips, attend fundraising activities, work in parent-teacher organizations, or meet with school personnel to forge relationships with school leaders (Rous et al., 2003; Carlisle, et al., 2005). Parents can also provide support for schools through donating their time and resources, such as by painting, fixing playgrounds, cleaning, or fundraising. Resources may also include donating toys, supplies to use in art projects, furniture and more (Cochran, 2007). Lastly, families can volunteer to assist in classroom activities or come in and share their expertise and interests (ex. cultural, musical, culinary, gardening, and storytelling talents) as a guest speaker (Carlisle et al. 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Parent participation not only helps to influence their child's academic achievement and social development, but it can also help to dispel teacher biases and help make families feel more comfortable within the program (Quiocho and Daoud, 2006). McWayne et al. (2004) caution family feelings of disconnectedness and little contact with the educational program may lead to higher rates of externalizing and internalizing behaviors. However, it should be recognized that many families *want* to participate but are constrained by work schedules, child care needs, transportation, or language barriers (Pena, 2000; Cochran, 2007; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006).

(d) ***Act as a Family Liaison.*** Serving as a liaison between early childhood education programs and families has the potential to greatly influence family engagement. Since family liaisons often observe classroom routines and speak regularly to teachers, the ability for a family member to serve as a liaison creates ample opportunities for him/her to learn about their own child's program and have direct access to program officials. Family liaisons not only increase their own opportunities for engagement at their children's educational program, but they also increase the likelihood of engagement for many other families attending the same program (Muscott et al., 2008).

Family liaisons are often members of their local community and share similar beliefs, languages, and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds as other families participating in the program (Sanders, 2008). These similarities allow for increased communication between programs and families. Since liaisons are aware of classroom routines, expectations, and academic demands, they are able to share this information with other families. In programs that serve linguistically and culturally diverse families, liaisons can especially help teachers by contacting families and translating during meetings. They support families by gathering their feedback and relaying information to the educational program. Colombo (2006) found that

involvement in a parent liaison program was linked to increased family and community participation and significant progress in children's reading, verbal communication, and behavior.

(e) ***Serve as a Board Member***: The voices of families are valuable resources that are often overlooked and underappreciated by early childhood programs (Flaugher, 2006). By serving on the program's board, family members can contribute to decision making in educational programs, advocate for their communities, and become actively engaged in their children's educational experiences (Muscott et al., 2008). In addition, Moore (1998) found that elementary schools that experienced improvements in reading achievement from 1990-1997 were more likely to have had active parenting boards. He also found that cooperation between the parents, teachers, administrators, and community members were related to trends in academic improvement.

Conclusion and Draft Recommendations

This paper provided an extensive review of the research on family engagement. With high enrollment in early childhood programs across several ethnic groups, particular attention was paid to including practices associated with young children from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The literature clearly indicates that in order to promote optimal development for all children, early childhood education programs and policy decisions must be respectful of the cultural and ethnic ideals of the families they serve, not just those that fit within the preconceived beliefs of teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

Using ecological and social exchange theories as frameworks, several practices that support strong family engagement and that have been linked to positive outcomes for *all* young children were presented in this paper. Based on our review of the literature, we will close by providing final recommendations for enhancing family engagement in early childhood education programs.

Practice Recommendations

- **Integrate Culture and Community.** Promote acceptance of all families by incorporating role models of different cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds and by celebrating the cultures of all families. Translate all materials into native languages of families and have an interpreter available for face-to-face and phone communication. Encourage program staff to interact with families and/or teach children outside of the school context and within their communities. Hold program focused meetings within the community.

- **Provide a Welcoming Environment.** Make navigating the school easy by having staff greet families near the entrance and ensuring that signs are posted and clear. Ensure there are clear continuous channels of communication. Encourage families to provide feedback through a variety of venues.

- **Strive for Program-Family Partnerships.** Include families in decisions related to both their own child's education and the early childhood education program as a whole. This includes on-going, collaborative goal-setting of children's outcomes between teachers and families. Facilitate complementary learning by providing families with information and resources to connect activities being conducted during the program with the home.

- **Make a Commitment to Outreach.** Conduct home visits, if families are comfortable, where teachers can learn from families about children's home environments and best learning styles. Model educational activities that families can do at home to support children's learning. Ask families for their communication preferences at the beginning of the school year.

- **Provide Family Resources and Referrals.** Provide resources and/or referrals to families in areas of preventative health and family services. Resources may also include offering child-care, transportation, and refreshments to help overcome barriers, and encourage participation in school activities and events. Create a two-generational model that

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provides opportunities for families to participate in both parenting and adult education classes.

- **Set and Reinforce Program Standards:** Set clear program standards and provide on-going professional development opportunities on culturally-sensitive, evidence-based family engagement practices. Standards must be comprehensive and emphasize on-going outreach.

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