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## **Book Review of *Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework***

*Michelle H. Abrego and Jesus “Chuey” Abrego*

Key words: family, engagement, ecological systems framework, book review, parents, involvement, diversity, Harvard Family Research Project, case studies, teacher preparation, preparing educators, engaging families, practices

*Preparing Educators to Engage Families: Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework* is in its second edition. The first edition was entitled *Preparing Educators to Involve Families: Theory to Practice*. Notable in the second edition's title is the word change from *involving* families to *engaging* families. The change in wording is important, as involvement often implies one-way communication from the school toward the family, and engagement denotes a much richer concept in which a reciprocal and dynamic relationship exists between schools and families. Specifically, the book presents family engagement as a shared responsibility of parents, educators, and community entities. Such shared responsibility is co-constructed over time (birth to adulthood) and across a variety of contexts. These contexts go beyond the home and school to include a broader group including community centers, libraries, after-school programs, faith-based institutions, and so on.

The casebook is authored by Heather Weiss, Holly Krieder, Elena Lopez, and Celina Chatman-Nelson. Three of the authors are currently or were previously associated with the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). The lead author, Heather Weiss, is the founder and director of HFRP. The authors' experience and background in carrying out research on family engagement brings unique and authentic perspectives to the casebook. The authors' membership

in the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood provided the data sources for the book's development. The research data was based upon a longitudinal mixed method study of about 400 low income children from the elementary grades (K–5) located in three separate sites across the country. In particular, research from one case study of a “subsample of 23 early grade children and their primary caregivers, teachers, and schools” provide the basis for most of the cases (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2009, p. xiii).

The authentic cases represent critical issues and dilemmas faced by families and educators today. The families featured in the cases are those whom are traditionally left underserved by schools: low income, ethnic minorities, and culturally and linguistically diverse. The focus on diverse families allows for the examination of issues such as race, culture, and class divisions and their resulting impact on school–family relationships.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

The book uses a framework of family engagement based on research from HFRP. The framework is composed of three key components: (1) Family engagement is a shared responsibility between the home, school, and community and is shaped by communication and interactions between these groups. Some families will find it easier to interact with schools than others and not all families interact in the same way; (2) Family engagement is ongoing throughout a child's lifetime and varies over time. Research shows that families can play a significant role in children's education and have many positive effects; and (3) Family engagement takes place in a variety of settings/contexts including the home, school, and community (HFRP, 2005). The book emphasizes the fact that family engagement is best studied within a variety of contexts and settings rather than viewed as a series of isolated events.

The casebook is 164 pages in length with a total of 10 chapters. Five of the chapters present theoretical perspectives related to family engagement, and five chapters contain 12 case studies tied to the theoretical perspectives presented. A total of seven theoretical perspectives about family engagement are presented throughout the book. They serve as lenses by which the case studies are to be analyzed. These perspectives include: children's motivation to learn; the impact of developmental disabilities on families; the social executive functioning model for managing children's lives; community support for learning; school-based family support; ecological understandings of children's developmental pathways; and the relationship between families, time, and learning.

The authors further organize the book's 10 chapters into five parts which directly correspond to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory framework: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such organization allows the reader to further examine interactions among and between systems which may directly or indirectly influence children and families over time. For example, some case studies ask the reader to consider immediate contexts which directly impact children such as relationships between adults who teach and nurture children. Still other case studies consider economic policies (e.g., welfare) and their indirect impact on children's lives.

## Teaching Cases

The race/ethnicities of the families included in the cases are Mexican American (immigrants), African American, Caucasian, Native American, and Cambodian (refugees). All involve students struggling academically and/or socially and need their families to be meaningfully engaged with the school.

Most of the featured families are also in need of community support to provide additional resources that can strengthen families' parenting skills and resources. Common to almost all cases presented is the deficit thinking that occurs by school personnel in their view towards poor minority families. Educators often view such families as unable or unwilling to positively impact their children's education. Also depicted throughout the cases is the inadequate communication and collaboration occurring between home, school, and community as well as the cultural mismatch taking place between immigrant families and the school.

The dilemmas faced by families in the cases are compelling and reflect real life situations which impact education. They include engaging families in placement decisions related to bilingual and special education; motivating disengaged students to learn; linking families in crisis with appropriate community agencies for support; supporting low income, single parent families struggling to balance work and parenting; effects of race and class on students' school experiences; and consideration of how immigrants' and refugees' homeland and neighborhood contexts shape family engagement in schools and aspirations for higher education.

The teaching cases are particularly rich in detail due to the wide variety of character perspectives presented. The perspectives include those of the student, his or her teachers, parent(s), grandparent (s), principal(s), and/or social service representative(s). All educators will gain deep insight into families' thinking and be led to the realization that families often bring a unique perspective to school problems that differs greatly from the school's viewpoint.

The complicated nature of the cases and the related theoretical perspective takes the reader well beyond simple solutions. Readers must think at a high analytical level in an effort to fully comprehend the complexity of the cases and the intertwining issues.

## Utility

The book is very relevant for today's educators as increasingly more and more students come from culturally and linguistically diverse families. As many as one in four children under the age of 18 have a parent who is a recent immigrant (Russell, 2010). School personnel are challenged to help all of their students be successful and to meaningfully engage all families. Therefore, it is imperative that educators (both practicing and preservice) and school leaders purposely examine their own individual and collective assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and behaviors towards culturally and linguistically diverse families and students. Such examination may reveal beliefs and biases toward poor or ethnically diverse families that create barriers to family engagement.

This book would serve as a useful reflection and discussion tool within an educator preparation program or a book study with practicing educators in a campus or district setting. It is designed to promote deep reflection, rich dialogue, and collaborative problem solving about key issues that confront diverse families resulting in their exclusion from schools. Such discussion is especially needed for those educators who may have little to no experience working in diverse settings with underserved families or those educators and schools who are currently unsuccessful in their attempts to meaningfully engage families in the school community.

A major strength of the book is that the authors designed the text to be a teaching tool. For readers unfamiliar with case methodology, the introductory section of the text includes a helpful section on how to use the casebook and the case method. Readers will find the discussion questions provided for each case invaluable. They follow a sequence specifically designed to promote a thought provoking group discussion and to ensure a thorough analysis of the rich dimensions within each case.

## Conclusion

Professors, in particular, seeking a compelling and interesting text regarding family engagement should consider *Preparing Educators to Engage Families*. It can enhance existing courses or serve as a stand alone text for a specific course on family engagement. Students will find the text invaluable in terms of how

they will learn to respect all families and better understand other points of view, and they will learn to view families from a strength perspective as opposed to a deficit perspective. The strength perspective regards all families as having something valuable to offer their children, schools, and community.

The Harvard Family Research Project describes its mission as “to improve practice, intervention, and policy to support children’s successful development from birth to adulthood” (Weiss et al., 2009, p. 160). Thoughtful readers of the text will be moved to support this mission. They will feel compelled to become advocates for all families and strive to improve their school’s family engagement practices, intervene differently and more effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and carefully examine and revise school policies to support families.

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