

From Parent Involvement to Family Ecosystem Engagement: A Culturally Responsive Framework for Strengthening Belonging and Equity among First-Generation Students

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ABSTRACT

Policies and strategies regarding the interaction between schools and families in the United States have been shaped by assumptions characteristic of Western cultures that view school involvement primarily as parental engagement in activities carried out within the school [1,2,3]. Such frameworks may not take into account the different family compositions and forms of caring practiced by many first-generation and minority students, who may include those from the Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, African and immigrant communities where educational support and care could be provided by a range of individuals such as grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and many others [4,5,6]. Additionally, the structural barriers facing families from under-resourced communities include work obligations, odd working hours, difficulty in transportation, and lack of institutional flexibility, making their participation in traditional school activities difficult [1,2].

A Family Ecosystem Engagement (FEE) Framework will be proposed as a culturally responsive intervention that extends beyond parents to include grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other trusted caregivers in the family engagement process. This structure has been developed using concepts from ecological systems theory, relational developmental systems, and current research on belonging and school connectedness [7,8,9]. It assumes that schools will function as community centers where interactions between educators and extended family members are established intentionally.

Utilizing the ideas of Nancy Hill on family-school partnerships, Richard Weissbourd on relational health and belonging, Stephanie Jones on social-emotional learning implementation, Geoffrey Cohen on identity-safe environments, Christopher Emdin on culturally responsive pedagogy, Deborah Rivas-Drake on identity development, and Stephanie Rowley on identity development and social context, it maintains that extending school engagement beyond parents is a means to promote equity and will enable educators to strengthen belonging among their students, improve attendance, increase academic persistence, and reduce educational disparities among first-generation and culturally diverse students [8,11,13,15,17,18].

A model of the intervention strategy for the school community will be proposed at the end of this paper.

Keywords: family engagement, belonging, first-generation students, collectivist cultures, educational equity, school climate, immigrant families, culturally responsive education, relational health, social-emotional learning

INTRODUCTION

Parental participation remains an essential factor for student success in many educational institutions in the country [1,2]. Some forms of assessment of school participation include parent-teacher meetings, curriculum nights, volunteering opportunities, and governance [1]. Though these methods have shown a link to student academic performance, scholars have criticized these traditional forms of parent involvement based on implicit assumptions of Western and middle-class backgrounds, assuming that caregivers can provide the necessary time, flexibility, and resources to attend such meetings [1–3].

Such assumptions are not realistic for many first-generation and minoritized students who have different familial structures [6,7]. In many Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and immigrant groups, extended family is involved in care and education [6,8,9]. Education and emotional guidance, transportation, child care, homework help, and identity formation occur among all family members and do not necessarily happen only between parent and child [8,10].

Parents from under-resourced backgrounds who have taken on part-time jobs will be forced to work night and weekend shifts, making it even harder for them to participate in school activities [3,4]. Educational institutions might inadvertently interpret such behavior as a lack of commitment to their children's education, although several studies have revealed that immigrants and working-class parents highly value education [11,12,13].

Instead of searching for the presence of parents in schools, educational institutions should ask whether they have designed their engagement practices to consider the realities of the communities they serve [5,6].

The following discussion aims to demonstrate that educational equity involves shifting from the parent-involvement paradigm to family ecosystem engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed Family Ecosystem Engagement Framework is based on a collection of related research [1,2,3].

First, Nancy Hill shows that family engagement with schools requires more than participation in school activities. It should take into account diverse cultural backgrounds and different types of engagement [4,5].

Second, Richard Weissbourd asserts that a sense of belonging and relational health are essential components of the academic, emotional, and moral development of young people [13].

Third, Stephanie Jones states that successful social-emotional learning occurs as an integral part of relational practices, but not through curricula [14].

Fourth, Geoffrey Cohen shows that students attain higher academic results when their schools affirm their identities and provide psychological safety [15,16].

Fifth, research on school belonging demonstrates that a sense of belonging affects motivation, persistence, and educational results [11,26].

Last, Christopher Emdin introduces the concept of Reality Pedagogy, which holds that education should value students' cultures, lived experiences, and knowledge and oppose practices that marginalize their ways of thinking about the world [17].

Likewise, Deborah Rivas-Drake and Stephanie Rowley show similar interactions among ethnic identity, school climate, and family-school relationships [18,29].

Together, these theoretical perspectives indicate that belongingness is not just towards the individual psychological experience, but rather an outcome of a culturally responsive education system [14,15].

Family Ecosystem Engagement Intervention

The Family Ecosystem Engagement Model suggests expansions in family engagement in four specific components.

Extended Family Engagement

For activity engagement, schools consider extended families, including grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins, godparents, and other significant people. Still, parents and legal guardians come first always [1,2].

Flexible Community Engagement

Flexible community engagement consists of activities conducted in the evenings, on weekends, and virtually to ensure accessibility for parents working multiple jobs. The schools collaborate with community organizations, churches, and neighborhoods to hold events in convenient locations [3,4].

Culturally Responsive Family Events

These events help celebrate students' cultural identities through storytelling in different languages, heritage nights for generations, mentoring sessions, cultural exhibits, and community knowledge-sharing [5,6].

Relational School Design

The schools designate Family Ambassadors for different cultural groups and conduct home-community outreach activities, multilingual communication, and relationship-building opportunities among teachers, students, and families [7,8].

Expected Outcomes

The use of the Family Ecosystem Engagement Model is predicted to yield several positive educational outcomes, including:

- Belongingness in school for first-generation and minoritized youth [1,2].
- Trust between schools and culturally diverse populations [3,4].
- Attendance and engagement [5,6].
- Motivation and perseverance [7,8].
- Cultural affirmation and identity safety [9,10].
- Possibly reduced educational inequalities for first-generation and culturally diverse students through greater belongingness and engagement [11,12].
- Improved mental well-being resulting from relational networks [13,14].

Implications for Education Policy

Prevailing educational accountability policies tend to assess family involvement using specific metrics, such as attending conferences or volunteer hours. Such metrics do not include the relational assets of the collectivist culture [1,2].

Education policy should be broadened to include involvement of extended family members, develop flexible programs, finance family coordinators in different languages, and use culturally sustaining engagement practices in school improvement efforts [3,4,5].

Future research should include conducting empirical studies to measure the effectiveness of the Family Ecosystem Engagement Framework within different cultures and education systems. While the framework is guided by scientific literature, it is still important to conduct further research to understand the framework's effects on attendance and academic persistence.

CONCLUSION

Educational equity calls for bringing parents into schools; it involves restructuring schools to recognize the cultural realities of their neighborhoods [1,2]. Understanding the diverse caregiving networks of existing immigrant and minoritized families will help integrate family engagement into a culturally sustaining practice [3,4]. The Family Ecosystem Engagement framework is an empirically based tool to improve relational well-being, social connections, and academic achievement among families and across generations [5,6]. As schools become places where the whole family and not only parents are invited to engage as educational partners, it becomes possible to help first-generation students build connectedness and identity essential for lifelong education and success [7,8].

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