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DIALOG FROM THE FIELD

Commentary on the Special Issue on Parent Involvement/Engagement in Early Childhood Education

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The articles in this special issue of the *NHSA Dialog* contribute to the growing body of literature on the importance of engaging parents in early childhood education for children's development, learning and achievement. They highlight cultural factors that programs should take into consideration in their outreach to parents, and address a number of potential barriers to their involvement parents may face. Findings reported in this issue also provide evidence-based, innovative strategies for engaging parents. Additionally, the set of articles presents a robust range of ways that parent involvement and engagement in early childhood education can be conceptualized and operationalized. Hopefully by highlighting a diverse set of factors pertaining to parents' involvement and engagement in their young children's education, publication of this special issue can spur integrative scholarship on how Head Start and other early childhood programs can best engage all the families they serve.

Parent involvement is a key pillar of Head Start's mission. Head Start has developed program performance standards for parental involvement that include a broad range of ways to engage parents in their children's education, and which serve as a model for other early childhood education programs (Henrich & Blackman-Jones, 2006). Zigler and colleagues have argued that one factor in Head Start's success over the past half century is the role it has played as a "national laboratory" for increasing our understanding of early childhood development and experimenting with different ways to better serve children and their families (Henrich, 2004; Valentine, 1997; Zigler, 1997; Zigler & Styfco, 2010). In fact, much of what we know about parent involvement in early education comes from research generated in Head Start.

The articles in this special issue of the *NHSA Dialog* demonstrate ways in which Head Start and related early childhood education programs continue to be at the cutting edge of scholarship on parent involvement and engagement. The articles in this issue address several important topics in furthering our understanding of parent involvement in early childhood education: Strategies for engaging parents, cultural factors associated with parents' involvement, and the role played by parent involvement in making an impact on child outcomes. Additionally,

the set of articles represents a robust range of ways that parent involvement and engagement in early childhood education can be conceptualized and operationalized.

Defining Parent Involvement/Engagement

The study of parent involvement in education has traditionally focused on involvement in activities at the school or center like volunteering or going on field trips and involvement in learning activities at home, such as reading, going to the library, or talking about school (Henrich & Blackman-Jones, 2006). More recently, the focus has shifted to parent-school partnerships forged to engage parents in their children's education (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). Such partnerships have long been a goal of Head Start, and the Office of Head Start recently developed the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011), which describes a broad approach to defining parent engagement. The framework delineates seven outcomes that should be observed as a result of efforts to engage parents: (1) family well-being, (2) positive parent-child relationships, (3) families as lifelong educators, (4) families as learners, (5) family engagement in transitions, (6) family connections to peers and community, and (7) families as advocates and leaders.

The articles in this special issue provide a broad perspective on the ways in which parent involvement and engagement in early education can be operationalized. These include traditional indices of parent involvement, such as involvement in activities at school (Hayawaka, Englund, Richter, & Reynolds, this issue; Mendez, Westerberg, & Thibeault, this issue.), and participation in activities at home (Garland, Barry, & Heffer, this issue; Parecki & Gear, this issue; Mendez et al), including those learning activities assigned by teachers (DeBaryshe, Kim, Davidson, & Gorecki, this issue; Parecki & Gear). Articles in this issue also focus on parent participation in home visiting and family literacy programs as one aspect of family engagement (Lefever, Bigelow, Carta, & Burkowski, this issue; Parecki & Gear; Williams & Caille, this issue). The role of parent-teacher communication is highlighted as an important aspect of parent engagement by several articles (Bokony, Whiteside-Mansell, Swindle, & Waliski this issue; McKelvey, Bokony, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, Conners-Burrow, & Twindle, this issue; Mendez et al.).

The breadth of the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework is also reflected in the special issue. Two research articles employ versions of the Family Map Inventory. The Family Map is a tool based on Head Start program performance standards to help early childhood educators engage parents during home visits (Bokony et al, this issue; McKelvey et al., this issue). In addition to facilitating parent-teacher communication, the Family Map is designed to further engage parents through a comprehensive needs assessment and subsequent connection of families to community resources. Williams and Caille (this issue) also discuss participation in home visiting within the broader context of community resources. Other articles in the special issue take parent involvement into account within the broader context of parental well-being and parenting practices (Bigelow et al., this issue; Garland et al., this issue).

Strategies for Engaging Parents

As indicated, scholarship on parent involvement has begun to shift focus from the activities parents engage in to the partnerships forged between schools and parents (e.g., Epstein &

Sheldon, 2006). Head Start has long been at the vanguard of taking a systematic approach to parental outreach and engagement, culminating in the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (US. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). However, despite this programmatic commitment to engaging parents and indications that Head Start parents tend to be highly involved, research using national data on Head Start families has found little evidence that Head Start outreach has an impact on parent involvement – in school, at home, or in the community – above and beyond individual family factors (Hindman, Miller, Froyen, & Skibbe, 2012).

Several articles in this special issue test innovative ways for Head Start centers and other early education programs to engage parents, with promising findings. Bigelow and colleagues (this issue) experimentally tested the effects of adding a cellular phone and texting condition to an existing home visiting intervention on parent program participation. They found that the cellular phone/texting condition improved completion rates and parent satisfaction with the program. McKelvey and colleagues (this issue) describe the development, validation and feasibility of a version of the Family Map Inventory for infants and toddlers, which had high levels of acceptability for teachers and parents. Bokony and colleagues (this issue) tested the effects of a two-pronged training intervention for early educators in private child care centers serving low-income families and found that it improved a key component of parent involvement and engagement: parent-teacher communication. Teachers in the intervention group were trained on using the Family Map Inventory in conjunction with a toolkit on how to talk with parents about their children during home visits. This two-pronged training approach resulted in both parents and teachers rating the quality of communication with each other to be higher.

Cultural Factors

Both Head Start and state public early education programs serve an increasingly diverse group of children and families, and to be successful at engaging parents, efforts should to be sensitive to cultural factors. In particular, Latinos are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups served by Head Start (Garcia & Levin, 2001). Latino parents potentially have to overcome cultural and language barriers to involvement their children's education. However, prior research has resulted in inconsistent findings regarding the relative levels of Latino parents' involvement in Head Start (Zill et al., 2006; Hindman et al., 2012). Effects of ethnicity on levels of involvement appear to vary based on type of involvement, socioeconomic status, and immigrant status. Two articles in the special issue examine aspects of Latino parents' engagement in their young children's education. Mendez and colleagues (this issue) found that Latino Head Start parents in their sample reported more involvement in their children's education at home than in school. Parents who reported easier communication about education in English were more involved at school and at home. More acculturated parents reported higher levels of school involvement, and surprisingly, parents who felt more efficacious about their ability to have a positive impact on their children's education reported less involvement in school.

Williams and Caille (this issue) examined individual and community factors associated with participation in a state-funded home visiting program, investigating effects on participation between and within ethnic groups. Despite reporting more structural barriers to involvement, Latino families had higher program completion rates. Results indicated that risk factors found in non-Latino families to act as barriers to participation had no effect on the participation rate of

Latino parents. On the other hand, Latino parents living in communities with higher ESL rates participated less in the program. Together, these two studies point to the important role acculturation plays in immigrant parents' involvement and importance of programs to reach out to parents in culturally sensitive ways to build upon family strengths.

Child Outcomes

Given Head Start's history as a community action program, its commitment to the "maximum feasible participation" of the parents it serves has been an end-goal unto itself (Harmon, 2004; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Parent involvement in early education is also considered a key means to children's school readiness and academic success (Henrich & Blackman-Jones, 2006). Several articles in this special issue address the role of parent involvement in making an impact on child outcomes. DeBaryshe and colleagues (this issue) employed mixed methods to examine the effects of participation in home learning activities, as part of a curriculum for Head Start teachers and families, on student achievement. They found effects of parent participation on literacy and math outcomes over the course of a school year. Hayakawa and colleagues (this issue) used data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study to examine the mechanisms through which parent involvement in school operates as an intervening variable in the long-term effects of participation in Parent Child Centers during preschool on student achievement through elementary school. The study highlights the dynamic relations over time between achievement, parent involvement, and student motivation over the transition to elementary school.

Whereas much of the parent involvement literature focuses the effects of involvement on academic outcomes, Garland and colleagues (this issue) investigated parent involvement in activities at home as a possible mediator of the relationship between maternal mental health and young children's behavioral problems. They found support for an indirect effect through parent involvement on attention problems. This study highlights how strategies explored by other articles in the special issue for engaging parents through home activities may be of particular help for distressed families and also have broader developmental effects beyond children's achievement.

Next Steps

Articles in this issue contribute to the growing body of literature on the importance of engaging parents in early childhood education for children's learning and development. They highlight cultural factors that programs should take into consideration in their outreach to parents, and address a number of potential barriers to involvement that parents may face. Findings reported in this issue also provide evidence-based, innovative strategies for engaging parents.

Azar, Miller, and Stevenson (this issue) advocate for taking a universal design approach to engaging parents. The premise behind universal design is that programs should be designed with the flexibility to be optimally accessible for all types of parents. Azar and colleagues discuss the systematic and leadership challenges behind such a programmatic approach, and emphasize the importance of connecting Head Start's approach to engaging families with other systems of child care and education.

Systematic efforts to engage parents in early childhood education can benefit from comprehensive models for parent-school partnerships that have been developed for families of school-aged children (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's parent involvement process model highlights the interplay of parents' motivational factors and role beliefs with school outreach efforts for engaging parents (Walker et al.). Epstein and colleagues have focused on the multiple levels of programmatic leadership needed to build sustained school-parent partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). These models can serve as useful guides for future research and practice in early childhood education. Hopefully by pulling together studies of an array of factors pertaining to parents' involvement and engagement in their young children's education, publication of this special issue of the *NHSA Dialog* will spur integrative scholarship on how Head Start and other early childhood programs can best engage all the families they serve.

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