

CHAPTER 9

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHRONOSYSTEM

The **chronosystem** refers to the element of time, both in the individual's life trajectory and historical context. Suzanne M. Bouffard and Heather B. Weiss lay out children's learning and family engagement as it occurs throughout the day and year, across contexts, and across developmental periods. Using this layered perspective, time becomes not just an obstacle to educational engagement for families, but also an opportunity.

FAMILIES, TIME, AND LEARNING

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As educators and families are well aware, time is one of the most important factors in why and how family engagement does—or does not—occur. Although time can pose challenges for family engagement, it also creates opportunities, because family engagement can occur across the day and year, across contexts, and across ages. Children's learning is not bound by the classroom and takes place in physical and virtual spaces at any time; as such, family engagement happens wherever and whenever children learn. Understanding the role of time can help educators and families to address common challenges and barriers to engagement and realize the full potential of family engagement. The chronosystem—that is, the role of time—has an important relationship with family engagement. Time influences the means and methods of engagement, and engagement influences where and how children learn.

Understanding the role of time is particularly important because family engagement is an ongoing process rather than a single moment or event. Family engagement patterns often become established early, but they are malleable. Engagement in one educational setting can lead to engagement in others (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Even more striking, increased engagement at one grade level can lead to sustained increases in engagement and student achievement over time, and these increases are greatest for families who are initially least engaged and at greatest educational risk (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider, & Simpkins, 2004). Research findings such as these demonstrate that thinking about the role of time—across development, across the day and year, and across historical periods—creates opportunities for maximizing family engagement and its associated benefits for learning.

Family Engagement Across Ages

Just as children and youth learn at all ages, family engagement matters at all stages of development. It helps children get ready to enter school, succeed throughout the school years, and graduate and go to college. To be effective, family engagement must change over time and be matched to the child's and school's stage of development (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Young children need more direct support and more structure, but as they get older, they crave independence and need to begin taking responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, families' abilities and needs change; for example, many parents feel less capable of providing direct instruction and support as their children enter higher grade levels and their work becomes more advanced (Eccles & Harold, 1993). In the adolescent years, schools also change, becoming increasingly large and bureaucratic and less welcoming to families (Eccles & Harold, 1993). As a result of all of these trends, family engagement practices that are more direct (such as volunteering at school, helping with homework, and attending parent-teacher conferences) decline as children get older, whereas less instrumental forms of engagement (such as discussing college plans, communicating high expectations, and monitoring school performance) become more common and more effective as children enter adolescence (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; Toldson, 2008).

Educators play an important role in offering families the opportunities to be engaged in developmentally appropriate ways. This includes sharing information about how families can support learning at different ages and sharing relevant information about school programs and policies at all grade levels. With the advent of online parent portals, schools are beginning to share student data with families in new and timely ways (see Lopez and Weiss, this volume). When meaningfully presented, these data can be a useful tool to help families understand a child's progress and performance within and across grade levels, and therefore to establish a pathway of engagement focused on promoting student learning toward successful graduation. School outreach is essential, because families are most likely to be engaged when they feel invited, believe it is appropriate, and believe they can be effective in helping their children as well as when teachers reach out to them (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004/2005; Sheldon, 2005; Simon, 2004).

Outreach from educators is especially critical as children navigate educational transitions. Transitions are periods of heightened risk for students, but family engagement can serve as a buffer. For example, families serve as an important bridge from preschool to kindergarten by establishing shared expectations and facilitating continuity (Kreider, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). However, family engagement often drops off during transition periods. This pattern is evident as early as the transition from preschool to kindergarten, despite the fact that many parents experience stress and anxiety about this transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999). Research suggests that when educators reach out to families, they can turn such times into moments of opportunity (perhaps partly by harnessing families' nervous energy). One national study of the transition to kindergarten found that, when teachers reached out to families before the start of the school year, families were more likely to be engaged *and* children had higher grades at the end of the year (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005).

Family Engagement Across the Day and Year

Children spend 70% of their waking hours outside of school (Larson & Verma, 1999). Because these hours are critical for their learning and development, communities across the United States are implementing a range of approaches to maximize learning time, including afterschool programs, extended school days and years, and community schools (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). In all of these **expanded learning opportunities**, families can and should play an active role. Broadening the definition of “family engagement” to include all of these settings provides more opportunities for families, reduces or compensates for barriers to traditional forms of family engagement, and promotes continuity of family engagement. In addition, digital media is opening new resources for children’s learning, and families gain new opportunities to support and supervise their children’s learning through these new media (see Takeuchi, this volume). Parents play several roles in developing their children’s expertise in acquiring the attitudes, skills, and values related to digital media and new technologies. For example, they can serve as *providers* of resources such as computers, tablets, and cell phones; *collaborators*, who help their child with digital projects; and *brokers*, who connect their child with people and programs that can enhance their child’s digital learning experiences (Barron, Martin, Takeuchi, & Fithian, 2009).

Although the phrase *family engagement* often evokes images of parent-teacher conferences and other school-based activities, research shows that what families do with their children at home plays an indispensable role in learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Children whose parents read to them, use more complex language, and create stimulating home environments have better cognitive and social-emotional skills throughout the school years (Barton, Coley, & Educational Testing Service, 2007; Belsky et al., 2007; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). This is not to imply that educators play no role in promoting learning at home; on the contrary, they play an essential role. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of many school- and community-led programs, practices, and policies that help families learn how to be effectively engaged from **early childhood** through high school, from home visiting and family literacy initiatives to programs that teach parents how to help with homework in supportive ways (Jeynes, 2005; Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2006; Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004).

Research also demonstrates numerous benefits of family engagement in expanded learning opportunities. When their families are supportive and engaged, children and adolescents are more likely to participate in afterschool and summer programs (Simpkins et al., 2009). These programs have been shown to offer a range of academic and social benefits, including improved attitude toward schools, better grades, and less instances of delinquent and unhealthy behaviors (Little et al., 2008). Furthermore, family engagement in such programs can increase the likelihood that families will be engaged at home and in schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Afterschool and summer programs often bridge the family-school relationship by creating an informal, supportive environment where parents can develop the confidence to approach school personnel. Research suggests that family engagement in these programs is associated with improved communication with teachers

and involvement in school activities, including parent-teacher conferences (Riggs & Medina, 2005; Warren, Hong, Leung-Rubin & Sychitkokhong-Uy, 2009).

Family Engagement Across Historical, Political, and Cultural Periods

Efforts to build and sustain family engagement must acknowledge the influence of cultural, political, and historical trends. The definition of family engagement has changed over time, as have policies and practices to support it. These changes are due in part to advances in research about the benefits of family engagement and the factors that enable or constrain it and are also influenced by changes in American families and schools.

Recent research has demonstrated that some forms of engagement are more beneficial for learning than others, and the definition of family engagement has begun to shift accordingly. Studies now show that family engagement is most effective when it is directly linked to learning, for example, family-school communication about student progress, parent-child discussions about future education, and family engagement in reading and homework help (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). This represents a movement away from past efforts focused on activities such as volunteering and chaperoning and away from “partnerships for partnerships’ sake” (Mapp, as cited in Bouffard, Goss, & Weiss, 2008). There is also a growing acknowledgment that to be effective, family engagement efforts must move beyond “random acts of family involvement” (Gill Kressley, 2008) to be ongoing, systemic, and an integral part of education across ages (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008).

Approaches to family engagement must also acknowledge the realities of today’s families. There are more dual-earner and single-parent families today than ever before. More than 66% of mothers with children under 18 work outside the home, and that number rises to approximately 73% among mothers with children ages 6 to 17 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003). Research is mixed on whether mothers’ work status affects family engagement, but studies do suggest that income level plays a role. One study found that working poor mothers were significantly less likely than nonpoor working mothers to have the paid sick time, paid vacation time, and flexible work schedules conducive to educational engagement (Heymann & Earle, 2000). Many working poor families experience competing demands on the time spent working (e.g., working long hours and taking two or more jobs to earn a living) and the time to support and monitor their children’s learning (Chin & Newman, 2002; see Henly, this volume). Another study of low-income families found that part-time working mothers were more likely to be engaged than either full-time or non-working mothers (Weiss, Mayer et al., 2003). Regardless of income level, work-family integration is a major issue facing parents today, causing high levels of stress and anxiety, particularly during children’s afterschool hours (Barnett & Gareis, 2006). These trends require that educators think creatively and inclusively about how to engage working families (see Dearing and Tang, this volume). Research finds that some educators are working with families and employers to find individual solutions (Weiss, Mayer et al., 2003) and that many schools are utilizing communications technologies such as voicemail, online parent portals, and social media to complement in-person conversations (Bouffard, 2009).

Changes in educational policies also have implications for schools' practices to engage families. Although federal policies have been shifting and inconsistent over the past several decades, recent and proposed legislation has shown some signs of addressing family engagement in systemic ways, with a focus on student learning. Federal policy now requires Title I districts and schools to spend 1% of their Title I funds on family engagement, to create and update family engagement policies and compacts across grade levels, and to provide understandable and useful information to parents about their children's learning and their schools.

Conclusion and Implications

Although time often poses challenges for family-school relationships, thinking broadly about the role of time also presents many opportunities for increasing and maximizing family engagement. Recent research has highlighted the benefits for families, educators, and, most important, students of building family engagement pathways that reach across ages and developmental stages, across the day and year, and across settings, as well as of incorporating developments in policy and practice that have occurred over the past several decades.

Create pathways of engagement that reach across time and settings. Educators can promote systemic and sustained family engagement by creating schoolwide strategies that involve all grade levels. By working together across classrooms, grades, and even school buildings, teachers and administrators can send consistent messages to families, create opportunities to bridge transitions, share information about families and students in informal ways, and build formalized programs and policies. They can collaborate with other institutions and programs to promote family engagement in **expanded learning opportunities**.

Offer families opportunities to be engaged that are developmentally appropriate and that strike a balance between what students, parents, and schools need and want. As children get older, they tend to become more self-conscious about their parents' presence in the school building. Educators should therefore provide information about ways that families can be engaged at home and in community-based settings. They should also show families that they value these contributions, for example by sending appreciative voicemail or e-mail messages, notes, and other communications and by hosting family appreciation events. Across ages, but particularly as children get older, educators can provide opportunities for families to come to school in ways that engage students and allow them to showcase their competence and independence, such as performances and displays of their work.

Conduct parent-teacher conferences in ways that are matched to students' and parents' developmental needs. As children get older, they can play a leadership role in parent-teacher conferences by facilitating conversations, showing their work, and playing an active role in creating and assessing learning compacts and progress reports. Conferences and communications should also be respectful of parents' developmental needs and treat them in respectful ways. Parent-teacher conferences that place parents in child-sized chairs and opposite large teacher desks, though logistically practical, can make families feel infantilized

or intimidated (Lightfoot, 2003). In contrast, creating an environment of mutual respect and authority can facilitate positive interactions and relationships (Lopez et al., 2004/2005).

Engage families in educational transitions by reaching out and maintaining communication. Transitions are not a moment in time but, rather, an ongoing process (Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000). Educators can help families get and stay engaged by holding orientation events, sharing information about expectations and progress, maintaining frequent contact, and working with teachers in previous and subsequent grade levels to create continuity.

Be sensitive to cultural differences within and across time. Families from all backgrounds value education and want their children to do well in school, but families' beliefs about the roles that are appropriate for them in learning, parenting strategies, and expectations and values for their children sometimes vary across cultures. For example, research has found that many families from Latino cultures, who tend to highly value education and American schools, believe it is disrespectful to be equal partners with teachers and even to express their concerns and dissatisfaction with topics such as school quality and lack of emphasis on goals they value such as interdependence and humility (Hill & Torres, 2010). Studies have also found that some Latino families report confusion or discomfort with traditional family engagement structures, such as parent-teacher organizations, but that many attend these events even if they do not understand them to demonstrate that they value education (Hill & Torres, 2010). Educators can honor these differences and promote engagement among diverse families by offering multiple ways for families to be engaged, avoiding assumptions about families' attitudes and values, asking families to share their beliefs and experiences, and creating opportunities to honor all cultures both informally and through formal events.