Book Review of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*

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The second edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools,* by Joyce L. Epstein (2011) makes a significant contribution to understanding how families and schools work collaboratively to benefit children. Part One focuses on the foundational theory and research of these partnerships. Part Two applies the research to school and classroom practices and to educational policy development. Aimed at university-level audiences of education, sociology, and psychology professors, it aspires to help train the next generation of teachers, administrators, counselors, and other professionals to integrate effective partnership programs in schools. It promises to share recent progress in research, policies, and practices, and to help future educators think in new, more in-depth ways about partnerships.

Divided into four sections, this review first critiques the overall content, research, readability, and value of the edition. Second, it assesses each chapter in Part One for its theoretical contributions and merit. Third, it considers each chapter in Part Two for its potential impact on school, classroom, or policy practices. Finally, a conclusion suggests how the book may best be utilized in college coursework related to educational partnerships.

The author, Joyce L. Epstein, is no stranger to professionals in the field of family engagement. Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and the National Network of Partnership Schools, she is a

research scientist and professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. Epstein's theoretical model using the concept of overlapping spheres of influence is widely used by schools and researchers, and has been adopted by the National Parent Teacher Association as a tool for understanding family engagement and improving partnership practices.

Overview

The book was reviewed with several criteria in mind. First, I looked at whether it achieved its own learning goals and was conceptually sound. Designed as a volume to be used as the basis for a full course on partnerships or to supplement coursework in other areas related to education, I also looked for qualities that would make it an outstanding textbook in its field. According to the author's own insights, a textbook must include (a) differing theoretical perspectives, (b) research using various approaches, and (c) practices that can be put to use in schools and classrooms (p. 13). When assessed by these criteria, the book has strengths and shortcomings. While it excels at describing Epstein's own conceptual framework and the research that supports her theory, it lacks discussion and debate of other theories on family engagement and approaches that may support different ways of thinking about partnership. Applying theory to practice is one of its greatest strengths. Particularly helpful are suggested activities and exercises at the end of each chapter that foster critical thinking. Despite its shortcomings, it provides exceptional insights into the field, facilitating dialogue important to education reform.

The included research studies represent diverse populations and encourage discussion on critical issues facing today's families and educators. Numerous readings focus on traditionally underserved groups, including inner-city families, ethnic minorities, and single-parent families. The volume would be enhanced by adding more recent research including case studies to encourage examination of the impact of race, class, culture, and linguistic diversity on family–school partnerships at a higher analytical level. While the studies are relevant, only 3 of 18 were updated from the first edition, making most of the research 15-20 years old. This limitation can be overcome by the addition of supplemental materials.

A recurring and important question, if addressed, would result in a stronger text. How does Epstein's model and ideas about partnership fit with systems thinking? While many terms are borrowed from systems theorists, including concepts like permeable boundaries (p. 69), social capital, and learning communities (p. 44), it is not clear how the concept of overlapping spheres of influence integrates theoretically with contemporary systems theory. The

addition of this conceptual bridge would lead to greater understanding and applicability of family engagement theory and spark needed discussion and debate among students.

The writing, readability, and organization of this book merit exceptionally high marks. Epstein provides well-articulated introductions to each chapter's readings and well-organized activities and discussion questions at the end. Since Epstein authored or co-authored all of the designated readings in the book, consistency of style prevails throughout. The book's well-organized 634 pages consist of seven chapters, three in Part One and four in Part Two.

Part One: Understanding School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Epstein constructs an excellent introduction in Chapter 1, laying a foundation for what the book hopes to accomplish and why teacher education must incorporate the theory and skills to work with families. She defines *partnership* as a shared responsibility of home, school, and community where "members work together to share information, guide students, solve problems, and celebrate successes" (p. 4). Students are viewed as the active learners in all three contexts, and the book is devoted to developing *programs* that "inform and involve all families" (p. 5). While programmatic development is an essential aspect of partnership, Epstein's definition seems limited, failing to acknowledge the active learner role of all partners, including parents, students, educators, and community members. When these partnerships succeed, they generate new and actionable knowledge, becoming what systems theorists define as natural learning communities or communities of practice (Senge, 2000, 2006; Wenger, 1998; Wheatley, 1992).

The first reading in Chapter 2 builds a coherent argument to support Epstein's theoretical model of overlapping family and school spheres of influence. Several helpful terms are introduced, including descriptions of "school-like families" and "family-like schools" (p. 36). The second reading, new to this edition, includes references to systems-oriented concepts like social capital and learning communities, yet it is difficult to understand how Epstein views her model through a systemic lens. Instead of minor mention of other theories related to family engagement, like Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), a more in-depth discussion of these theoretical perspectives would be helpful. This lack of analysis presents a confusing dilemma when Epstein suggests her model, developed in 1987, would help researchers "think new" about family engagement (p. 45). By this point, the bias towards Epstein's theory and positivist research methodologies is evident. Even

with this limitation, the chapter presents an array of important family engagement concepts, including principles for critically thinking about partnerships.

Chapter 3 reviews Epstein's original research, providing a basis on which studies of family, school, and community partnerships continue to build. The eight readings are unchanged from the first edition and include survey results of (a) teacher practices in inner-city schools, (b) the effects of marital status on parent and teacher interaction, and (c) how homework practices affect student outcomes. Each reading is augmented by valuable suggested activities, including field experience opportunities for students and discussion questions. This chapter provides an abundance of important data but lacks studies from the past two decades, making one wonder how similar studies would differ today, given changing contexts and a greater variety of research methodologies.

Part Two: Applying Research on School, Family, and Community Partnerships

The policy implications of partnerships at the federal, state, district, and school levels are the focus of Chapter 4. Epstein makes an excellent argument for policy changes that involve improved leadership and research. She introduces the concept that school policies must "enable teachers, families, and others in the community to work effectively together—as an action team—on behalf of the children they share" (p. 303). The new reading in this chapter is particularly relevant as school districts struggle to address the implications of "The No Child Left Behind Act" (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and its requirements for parental involvement. The suggested activities at the end of the chapter are timely and applicable to educators, particularly those interested in administration and policy development.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive roadmap of how Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence can be transformed into practice. Delving deeply into its six types of involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community), the readings explore ways to understand each type and activities that are essential to working with families. Epstein describes how it is possible to have high-achieving schools without family involvement, or high family involvement in low-performing schools. Neither of these, she says, exemplifies the kind of partnership that results in a "caring, educational environment" (p. 392). This is arguably the best chapter of the book, with high impact potential for schools and classrooms.

Homework and parent volunteers are central to the readings and discussions in Chapter 6. New to this edition, the first reading introduces the topic

of parent–child interactive homework, pointing out that certain homework designs have potential to involve families. Epstein cites considerable research to support how interactive homework can positively impact parent–child relationships and mutual learning, demonstrating how research is applied in practice through the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) process (Epstein, Salinas, & Jackson, 1995). Also discussed is a process for organizing volunteers in the middle grades to increase students' art appreciation and understanding of the connections between art and history. Readers are asked to consider applications to other specific curriculum areas and grade levels, designing an interactive homework assignment of their own. Particularly relevant to coursework on teaching methodology and practice teaching, this chapter excels at connecting family involvement to academic success.

A summary and call to action, the final chapter asks "How might new teachers, principals, counselors, and others who work in schools and with families be prepared to conduct effective partnership practices?" (p. 573). It addresses issues of diversity and equity in family–school partnerships and advocates for action teams of teachers, parents, and administrators to implement partnership practices. While the chapter contains excellent ideas and applied learning, it is written in a rather directive style, advocating the development of what Epstein calls Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP) rather than encouraging future educators to critically *think anew* about this important question. The text would be stronger with the addition of information on alternative approaches to inquiry, including participatory action research (PAR), a methodology that focuses inquiry to the local context with people involved in the process of planning for change (Stringer, 2007). Epstein's ATP's are perfect arenas for such research but differ from the classic positivist approach of defining variables and predicting outcomes. This is one example where discussion of qualitative research methodologies would enhance Epstein's research and encourage new thinking.

Conclusion

The question of relevance lies at the heart of evaluating any textbook. And certainly this book is relevant, particularly for its ability to provide clear, in-depth understanding of Epstein's theoretical model and how it is applied in practice. But it does not provide the whole picture. Missing are differing theoretical perspectives on family engagement and discussion of other approaches to research—information that would encourage a higher level of critical thinking. Recent calls by family involvement experts suggest the need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework (Caspe, 2008; Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008). Textbooks should attract students' curiosity and pique their

interests in doing research that will contribute to future theory-building. As Epstein suggested, it should encourage them to *think anew*. While this textbook could achieve more, it offers an exceptional window into the field of partnerships and gives future educators tools to integrate effective partnership programs in schools and classrooms. Combined with supplemental readings that provide alternative insights into theory, research, and methodologies, this edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* will achieve its goal of helping future educators work with families as partners in education.

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