Following the Family: Applying Bioecological Theory to Strategies Learned From a Family–School–Community Partnership

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Abstract

There are many models and examples of family–school–community partnerships. Local to Savannah, Georgia, Parent University is a unique community organization designed to support, guide, and empower parents and their children (from birth to 18 years old) to build bridges between the community and the schools. This nonprofit has successfully partnered with families, schools, and other community organizations for over 20 years and offers an illustrative example of how schools are crucial partners for the success of family–community programs. In applying theory to highlight the work of a parenting program, the purpose of this article is to (1) describe how the local school system, families, community members, and Parent University work together to engage and empower parents; (2) delineate the characteristics of the program's sustained success through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and (3) highlight the interdependence of Parent University, the local school system, and community organizations. Implications for practices within other school–community organizations are discussed.

Key Words: family–school–community partnerships, family–community programs, bioecological model, community development model, parent education, family engagement

Introduction

Family engagement in schools has long been viewed as a precursor to building positive school–family relationships. More recently, recognition of cultural differences, family needs and views of education, and history of educational systems have been on the forefront in research when considering families' and schools' definitions and assessments of participation (Brandon et al., 2010; Gregg et al., 2012; McCauley et al., 2023; Yamauchi et al., 2017). Extending partnerships to include communities, neighborhoods, and myriad other supports for programs is stressed in the *community development model*[1] of school–community partnerships. Stefanski et al. (2016) described four models in their typology of school–community partnerships. The first, most simplistic model focuses on coordinating delivery of services *to* families, and then the models progress through coordinating an array of modalities to support and engage families.

The most complex of Stefanski et al.'s (2016) models, the *community development model,* includes the traits of the preceding three models then expands to include the goal to "transform whole neighborhoods…beyond the other three in its goals and vision and requires both interorganizational and cultural commitment and change" (Stefanski et al., 2016, p. 141). Empowering parents to act in roles beyond a passive partner, volunteer, or meeting attendee is key to this *community development model* as is the commitment of other community organizations that support families and impact youth.

Parent University of Savannah, Georgia (Parent U) is a family–school–community program that aligns with the *community development model* of school–community partnerships. Parent U has successfully partnered with schools, families, and community organizations for 25 years. Recently, other cities or school districts have reached out to Parent U leadership about beginning a similar program in their communities. As such, it is important to articulate through a rich program description the factors that contribute to Parent U's long-term success so that others can engage in similar efforts. In systematically reviewing literature in family–school–community partnerships, Chavkin (2001) recommends "descriptions of both individual participation and of partnership participation….The former focuses on individuals and families and the latter on the program and partnership work" (p. 90). Additionally, Chavkin (2001) suggests that interpreting relationships between theory and partnership activities help strengthen concepts within specific family–school–community partnerships. Considering these recommendations, the purpose of this article is to (1) describe how the local

school system, families, community members, and Parent U work together to empower parents; (2) delineate the characteristics of the program's sustained success through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and (3) highlight the interdependence of Parent U, the local school system, and community organizations.

What Is Parent University?

Originating in Savannah, Georgia, Parent U defines itself as "a community collaborative that provides services and support to families...[and] encourages parent involvement and participation in the education of our community's children and youth" (Parent University, 2022, p. 3). Their programming includes family-focused sessions designed for parents, caregivers, and other adults with a stake in the lives of children from birth to 18 years old. Parent U was formed through grassroots efforts to respond to community needs, the school district's partnerships with families, and research tied to developmental science. After substantial research and planning, the program leaders, then in partnership with the Savannah Early Childhood Foundation[2], realized that making generational changes in their community had to start with children (particularly those from birth to five years), but to influence children, they needed to reach their parents and caregivers. Over time, the parent-centric approach to supporting community and educational needs has led to a successful parenting education program when measured by the number of attendees at each session over time (Dove et al., 2018).

Parent U's mission, which is to "provide a parent-driven education and development approach meeting 'parents' where they are so they can embrace their full potential and see their value as individuals and parents" (Parent University, 2022, p. 5), has depended on the collaboration and support of the local school system. Since its inception over 20 years ago, Parent U has operated parallel with the local public school calendar and held its events in schools. In a typical year prior to the COVID-19 closures, Parent U could offer more than 20 events in person at Savannah-Chatham County public schools on Saturdays. Since the Fall of 2021, they have alternated in person and virtual events at least twice a month. For all sessions in person, Parent U provides transportation using school buses, childcare and youth programming, meals for attendees and their children, and attendance incentives (door prizes). These efforts removed some of the barriers that often prohibit parent participation (Baker et al., 2016). Their sustained efforts to overcome families' barriers to participation and incentivize attendance has been foundational to their success based on data from program longevity, participant reflections, and consistent attendance.

Hosting events at area schools has helped Parent U overcome some obstacles to family and community participation. The physical spaces within school buildings such as cafeterias, auditoriums, gymnasiums, and classrooms make serving food, caring for children, and holding classes feasible for large numbers of attendees. Additionally, the content of many of the sessions provides parents with knowledge and skills that help them interact more effectively with schools to improve the educational experiences of their children (Harper Browne, 2016). In fact, one of the seminal reasons for the formation of Parent U was a disconnect between a group of families and the school district in 1999 with a goal of supporting families in navigating the school system. The traditional forms of parent involvement (Yamauchi et al., 2017) were not engaging many of the school district's Black families, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and this was exacerbated by allegations of discriminatory practices. Thus, Parent U helped bring a group of concerned parents together to provide recommendations in approaching the school district's partnerships with families. Their early and consistent focus on applying a *community development model* by listening to and learning from parents (Stefanski et al., 2016) resulted in partnerships, trust, and support that were more representative of the diverse needs of the Savannah community.

Inclusion of other community organizations as "vendors" and instructors at Parent U events has been essential in making connections between community resources and community members. The barriers that prohibit caregivers from participating in school-based events are often the same barriers that inhibit their access to resources in the community. Through formal class sessions and informal conversations at booths during the event, community organizations provide information and resources about a wide range of topics such as: supporting literacy development at home, ACES and domestic violence, apartment-style gardening, self-care during the peaks of the COVID pandemic, and employment opportunities/skill development. It is through Parent U that community organizations in Savannah and the Savannah communities they intend to serve can connect.

Who Does Parent University Serve?

Parent U is inclusive of the local population of Savannah (52.7% Black/African American, 38.3% White, 6.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.5% two or more races, 2.8% Asian; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023) with attention to those voices that are often marginalized, particularly in systems of education. Our demographic analysis for the 2022–23 school year (see Table 1), consistent with data collected since 2017, included Parent U Savannah participants[3]

who identified as 85.4% Black, 84.5% female, and 46.2% making less than $35,000 a year (Gregg et al., 2023). Almost 30% of attendees had earned a high school diploma or less, and 28% had at least some college or a two year degree. In all, there were 271 "parents" that attended Parent U sessions during the 2022–23 school year with the majority attending three or more events.

It is worth noting that the connections and sense of community that developed through Parent U was instrumental in supporting families during the pandemic. In the 2020–21 academic year, during the height of the pandemic, Parent U actively and consistently engaged over 200 parents in a virtual format. Of these parents, 86.6% identified as Black, 88% identified as female, 52.9% earned less than $35,000 a year, 24.9% reported their highest education level as a high school diploma, and 30.3% had at least some college or a two year degree. Considering that economically disadvantaged Black families were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2022), the import of Parent U's ability to provide support and resources to families cannot be underestimated.

A limitation of data represented in this article includes the necessity of a research consent. While the data currently (see note in Table 1) reflect attendees who have consented to participate, there are likely a small number missing who did not consent. A remedy for this limitation is already in place, and the research team has helped Parent U take over the database management. In an additional example of our partnership, we continue to use the deidentified data to assist in reporting, but Parent U staff now enter and manage the participant database.

Recently, Parent U leadership has expanded to additional sites in Pensacola, Florida and Chicago, Illinois, and they have been approached by other communities wanting to duplicate their program model. Given that their approach focuses on localized needs of communities and parent ownership, the Parent U leaders' primary challenge in helping other locations replicate their program is that what it looks like in Savannah is not what it will or should look like in other places with different families and social contexts.

Table 1. Demographic Data From 2019–2023 for Parent U Attendees

Year	N	Race	Sex	Income	Education
2019–20	245	82.9% Black 8.6% White	83.7% female 14.2% male	63.3% < $35,000	38.6% high school 28.0% some college/ two year
2020–21	217	86.6% Black 4.6% White	88.0% female 12.0% male	52.9% < $35,000	24.9% high school 30.3% some college/ two year
2021–22	155	85.6% Black 6.5% White	84.3% female 15.7% male	52.6% < $35,000	18.2% high school 39.6% some college/ two year
2022–23	271	85.4% Black 5.7% White	84.5% female 15.5% male	46.2% < $35,000	29.4% high school 28.0% some college/ two year

Note. This data is based on yearly demographic surveys completed by participants who consented to participate and therefore is a conservative representation of the total number of participants who attend Parent U events throughout a given school year. In 2019–20, demographic data was available up until March 2020 when Parent U transitioned to virtual meetings and focused on helping parents with technology and the pandemic. In 2020–21 and 2021–22, all Parent U events were virtual due to the pandemic. Starting August 2022, Parent U events have alternated between in-person and virtual sessions.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory and Family–Community Programs

With supporting other communities in developing and implementing a similar programmatic framework in mind, we examine how Parent U has been successful in working with family systems and supportive contexts through a theoretical model. To do this, we apply Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory as a lens to explain Parent U's components of a responsive school–community partnership. Before delineating the program's characteristics based on the theory, we briefly summarize Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, a popular and useful model for examining family systems, development, educational outcomes, and the interconnections between contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

As a direct improvement to the original ecological model, which stressed the importance of context in human development, the *bio*ecological model reemphasizes the significance of the developing or target individual and their characteristics (thus the addition of "bio") in describing and explaining their well-being. The newest version of this model further posits that development occurs as a result of the characteristics of the *person*, proximal

processes, influences of *context*, and change and stability over *time* (see Figure 1 for a recent conceptualization of this model; Skinner et al., 2022); this is referred to as the Person–Process–Context–Time or PPCT model within Bronfenbrenner's theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Figure 1. Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological and PPCT Model
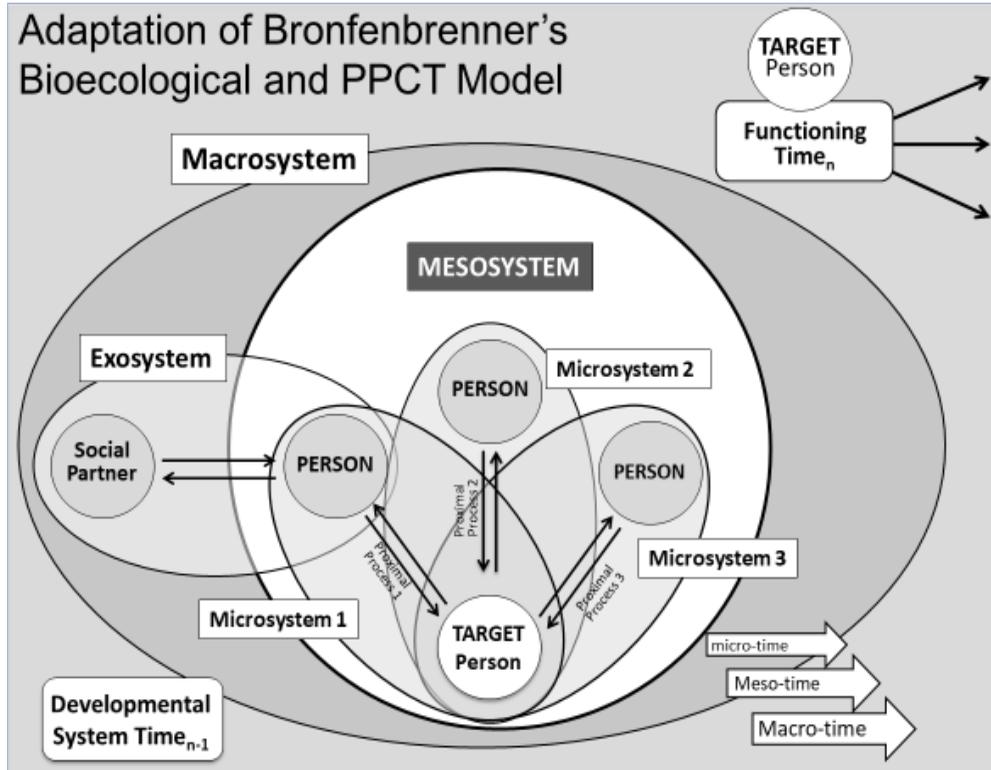
Note. Adapted with permission from Skinner et al., 2022.

Person and Processes

Beginning with the "bio" aspect of the bioecological model, *person* involves forces (e.g., responsiveness, proclivities, curiosity), resources (e.g., abilities, skills, liabilities), and demand characteristics (e.g., attractiveness, sociability, passivity) of a target individual that can foster or disrupt their development and well-being (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Each target individual engages in *proximal processes* with other people, objects, or symbols around them. Considered the engines of development, proximal processes are bidirectional interactions between the developing individual and a person, object, or symbol that occur frequently (i.e., on a daily basis) and adjust or scaffold over time to continue promoting the development of

the target individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, a parent and child reading together is a proximal process: both parent and child are actively participating in the process of reading, on a regular basis, and the parent is adjusting the interaction to meet the needs, questions, age, and interests of the child (the target developing person). Thus, while the child is developing the skill of reading, the parent is also developing teaching, scaffolding, and responsiveness skills, making it a reciprocal or bidirectional process. The characteristics of each participant within the proximal process may support or hinder the developing individual and their partnering person, object, or symbol.

Context

With regard to the "ecological" aspect of the model, it is posited that each person is embedded within a nested structure of *contextual* systems with the developing individual at the center. *Microsystems* refer to the most immediate environments in which proximal processes occur and are contexts that contain the developing or target individual and their social partners (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, the microsystem of the home or family is often where the proximal process of parents and children reading together occurs. Therefore, the quality or characteristics of a microsystem (e.g., supportive, well-resourced, controlling) may moderate proximal processes and their influence on an individual's development and well-being. *Mesosystems* are linkages and processes between two microsystems containing the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Mesosystems may take many forms (see McIntosh et al., 2008; Skinner et al., 2022), but one common example is a parent–teacher conference where the microsystem of the home meets the microsystem of the school as parents and teachers come together to interact and support the child's educational experiences.

An *exosystem* involves the linkages and processes that occur between two microsystems that do not directly contain the developing individual, but nonetheless still indirectly affect them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, a parent's microsystem of their workplace and their proximal processes with their employer or coworkers may impact the parent's interactions with the developing child in their home microsystem; a pay cut or argument with their boss may make the parent more stressed and reactive in their interactions with their child at home. The *macrosystem* refers to the underlying and overarching cultures, norms, laws, governance, and policies that permeate and influence all lower systems (i.e., micro-, meso-, and exosystems; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This could include, for example,

culturally relevant parenting practices, laws on corporal punishment, or the prevalence of government funding for family welfare programs.

Time

Finally, bioecological theory and its PPCT model highlight the role of *time*, which is considered to moderate proximal processes and capture stability and change in the nature of the person's characteristics. This is often referred to as the *chronosystem* or the underlying dimension of time in the ecological model in which microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and the macrosystem fluctuate, ranging from specific episodes or moments (i.e., micro-time) to weekly or yearly change (i.e., meso-time) to wider cultural and historical shifts (i.e., macro-time; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

While the above examples have assumed a child as the developing or target individual at the center of the bioecological model, this framework can be used to highlight or focus on any individual, including a parent. This is of particular relevance when considering Parent U's role in promoting the education, development, and well-being of parents; the contextual influences on Parent U's proximal processes with parents; and change in these relationships and influences over time.

Applying Bioecological Theory to Parent University

Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model helps organizations clearly understand who makes up their community, in particular the "who" within their community that benefits from a program (or who it intends to benefit). Parent U's inclusive approach to who is defined as a parent provides insight to their intended beneficiaries. In considering the impact of Parent U through the *person* level lens, "parents" are the focus of this program's influence (i.e., target or developing individual), yet not in the traditional sense of the word. Parent U does not limit the sphere of influence to just those parents or guardians in a same household but includes the community that surrounds children and those parenting them. Within their strategic plan, Parent U creates a definition of parents most inclusive for their community: "'Parents' are thought of as any person involved in raising or contributing to raising a child, and can include relatives, grandparents, guardians, foster parents, teachers, etc." (Parent University, 2022, p. 3). In accordance with their perspective, we use the term *parent*[4] to include any of the individuals who attend Parent U events and thus potentially influence children within their communities. As Saxena (2022) summarized, extended family is most often considered external to the family microsystem, thus having

less impact on family relationships in a household, until a more cross-cultural understanding of who can fit into a family's microsystem is applied. Considering the direct interactions between intermediate and extended families across cultures and communities, Parent U's definition of "parent" provides a different perspective on those direct, proximal processes that influence family functioning.

Parent U serves to impact those in the lives of children, thus indirectly impacting children. Within the bioecological theory with parents placed at the center or *person* level (see Figure 2 section A), the presumed influence is targeted on parenting knowledge, self-efficacy, confidence, and behaviors. Parent U strives to do this by providing an environment that empowers resilience in parenting, builds stronger networks, focuses on community capital, and supports knowledge of child development (Harper Browne, 2016).

Microsystem: Parent U's Proximal Processes With Parents

As described by Stefanski et al. (2016), the *community development model* of school–community partnerships serve, include, and engage parents but then must show direct, intentional work to extend their reach to empower through "helping parents…develop their leadership skills" and "working to bridge the culture and power gap that typically exists between family and local community members, on the one hand, and the professional educators employed in the neighborhood schools on the other" (p. 152). Parent U recognizes the power dynamics within educational systems, thus placing an emphasis on empowering families with the confidence to share information within their community and in schools. As a mediator between families and schools, this example of recognizing and intentionally acting on potential reasons parents may not engage with schools highlights a strength of this program and illustrates a defining feature of the proximal process between parents and Parent U. At a Parent U session, you can easily recognize parents interacting to teach and support one another to create belonging and trust in their community.

Given Parent U's parent-led approach, the educational component of their programming is culturally and locally responsive. This intentional honoring of parents' values aligns with recommendations of cultural competence and responsiveness in educators (Harper Browne et al., 2016). Thus, trainers for the educational sessions are recruited and vetted not only based on their topics and experience, but on their relevance to the Parent U community. The Parent U Director of Training reviews all trainers' materials to check that they are designed in a culturally and locally relevant way. Considering that parenting beliefs impact parenting behaviors, Parent

U's goal is to directly influence the information parents receive at events and encourage active engagement during these sessions, such as through open discussion. Simultaneously, through this proximal process, Parent U intentionally moves from a focus of family involvement to one of family empowerment, promoting each family as the author of their own story.

Figure 2. Applying Bronfenbrenner's Model to Parent University and Parents
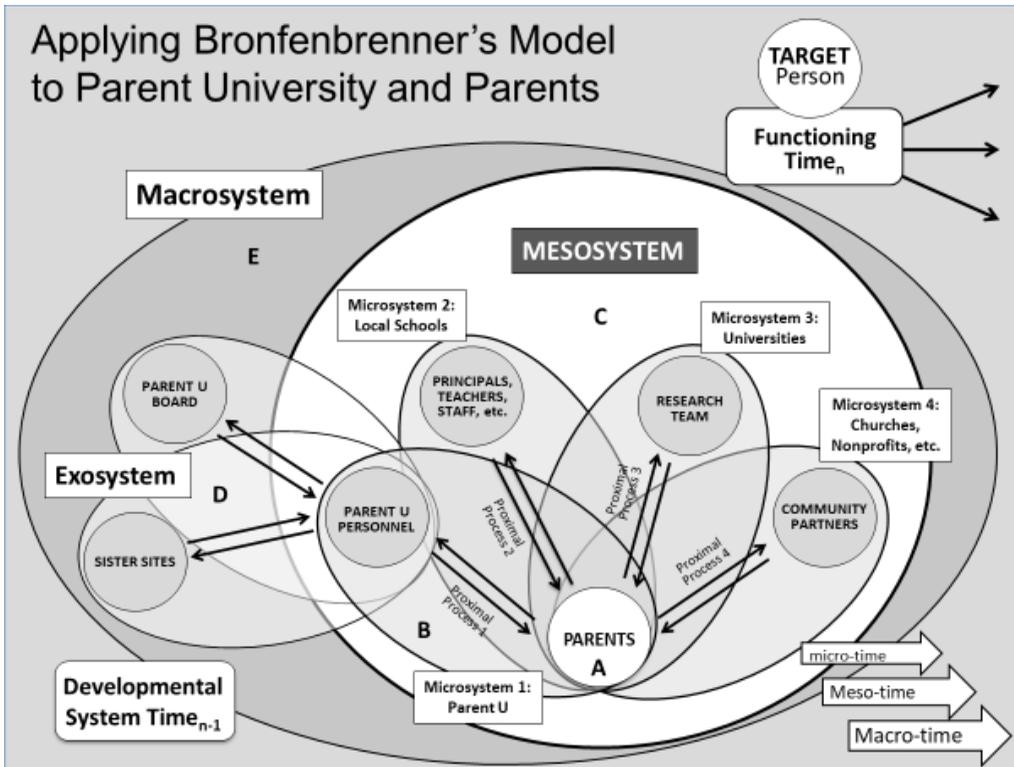
Note. Adapted with permission and applied from Skinner et al., 2022. Section A denotes the characteristics of the target person (parents at Parent U). Section B refers to individual microsystems that support parents, most notably Parent U. Section C highlights mesosystem interactions between microsystems, such as Parent U and school partnerships. Section D denotes indirect exosystem influences on the target person. Section E refers to greater cultural, historical, and macrosystem influences on parents, Parent U, and all other systems.

As we are viewing the parents as the target of Parent U in the model (Figure 2 Section A), without the mediation of Parent U, there would be parents who could not overcome disadvantageous proximal processes with the school thus hindering development for their family. Rather than select a one-size-fits-all parent education curriculum, Parent U responds to the needs of its community. Their equitable program planning includes parent

feedback and also provides information relevant to current community needs. For example, Parent U shares where to find childcare, provides updates on public health concerns, and engages with school staff on changes to education systems. Further, they provide direct, meaningful opportunities for parents to offer input such as at parent feedback retreats in the summer, surveys, informal conversations, and focus groups. The staff ask parents for feedback after sessions to ascertain the instructors' connections with the audience, which assists the staff in vetting speakers in the future. They are responsive by actively recruiting parents to become staff, volunteers, and leaders in the Parent U and related communities. Parent "leaders" can serve in capacities from helping with logistics such as running sessions, collecting paperwork, and driving buses, to completing targeted leadership courses. At each event, the director or assistant director of Parent U remind parents of their role in the ownership of Parent U and empower them to reach out to other families in the community to see what resources are available to them through Parent U. Parent U understands and acts on the importance of the community seeing themselves reflected back in the staff, program leaders, and shared vision of the organization (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Stefanski et al., 2016).

Mesosystem: Parent U's Interactions With Other Microsystems

In addition to acting as a microsystem for parents with frequent, reciprocal, proximal processes, Parent U also supports the development of parents as part of the mesosystem level in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. As a mesosystem refers to two (or more) microsystems interacting to directly support a developing individual, Parent U is active in a variety of mesosystems. As noted in Figure 2 section C, the microsystem of Parent U interacts with several other microsystems, including local churches, other nonprofit organizations in the community, university researchers, and the local school system.

Local School System

Perhaps one of the most important mesosystem partnerships has been Parent U's long-standing relationship with the local schools, principals, teachers, and staff in the Savannah–Chatham County school district. From its earliest beginnings, Parent U has collaborated with local schools to host Parent U events. Most in-person events occur at schools, which shift from event to event in order to better access parents living in different neighborhoods. This is of particular importance as the physical space of the school provides a familiar setting for parents to navigate. Given the early challenges experienced by parents in communicating with schools, Parent U

has acted as a cultural broker (Ishimaru et al., 2016) between schools and families, based on parents' trust, comfort, and familiarity with Parent U. For example, in response to parents' questions and concerns about accessing their child's grades and attendance information from schools, Parent U offered a class training parents on how to access that information through the school district's parent portal. Additional classes have included "Back to School & Beyond: Effective Parent–Teacher Communication" and "Transitioning: Returning to In Person School." Shared characteristics and experiences with Parent U leaders and staff as well as physical proximity to schools at events is one way in which the mesosystem of Parent U and schools has helped facilitate parents' relationships with the local school district. As noted, when describing the microsystem processes between Parent U and families, the *community development model* of school–community partnerships involves "working to bridge the culture and power gap" between local school systems and the families and communities they serve (Stefanski et al., 2016, p. 152). Parent U provides a conduit for this knowledge of the school system from courses on how to speak with staff in the school systems to having school district leaders at sessions. By bridging this gap between community and schools, families at Parent U increase their knowledge of how the school system works and are empowered to advocate for their children, leading to increasing access to concrete support when needed (Harper Browne, 2016).

In addition to brokering these relationships, schools are one of the few physical places large enough to host the numerous attendees at Parent U events while also providing classrooms for the 8–10 breakout sessions during each event. As previously noted, the classrooms, cafeteria, gymnasium, and playground are also critical in supporting the childcare services offered at each Parent U event. Further, Parent U directly works with the school district to facilitate each event, including: reserving school buses to transport parents without cars to events, utilizing school security (as required by principals) during events, and hiring school cafeteria staff to prepare breakfast and lunch (free of charge to all in attendance). While Parent U has occasionally used different spaces for their events (e.g., universities or churches), schools have been the physical bedrock of Parent U events and essential in meeting the needs of and eliminating barriers for parents.

Universities and Researchers

Parent U has also been working with local universities and researchers since 2015, constituting another mesosystem interaction in support of

parents. More specifically, Parent U initiated a research partnership in order to track participation and begin program evaluation, with the goal of better understanding and tailoring Parent U to meet the needs of parents. Initially, the nature of the partnership was focused on supporting data collection and entry to document attendees' demographics. This collaboration has expanded to include: administering brief, yearly demographic surveys and presenting data summaries at Parent U leadership retreats; conducting focus groups and interviews highlighting parents' voices in their experiences with Parent U; attending and observing Parent U events and classes; creating class evaluations for parents to provide feedback on each educational session; acting as representatives on the Parent U board; applying for grants to support research collaborations; and, most recently, training parents as co-researchers through a participatory action research (PAR) project. The goal of this mesosystem partnership has been to help Parent U in assessing and meeting the changing needs of parents, highlighting parents' voices, and promoting their development and well-being, while also aligning with the *community development model* of empowering parents to take on leadership roles in the program (Stefanski et al., 2016).

Partnerships With Other Microsystems

In addition to schools and universities, Parent U has also worked with other microsystems in its mesosystem collaborations to support the development, well-being, and parenting practices of parents. Two of the key staff members of Parent U share employment with community organizations: Childcare Resource and Referral (Parent U Director of Training) and the Wesley Community Center (Director of Children's Programming). These have also included a variety of local organizations, including other nonprofits aimed at supporting and educating parents and their children. For example, Ferst Readers (literacy with children and families), Forsyth Farmers' Market (sustainable food production and education), and Step Up Savannah (financial security for low-income families) have offered numerous class sessions, trainings, and presentations at Parent U events. The One Hundred Children's Foundation often provides opportunities for parents to obtain free books for children during in-person Saturday events. Healthcare providers and organizations have also partnered with Parent U to offer vaccinations and health screenings at in-person events as well as workshops on CPR, basic first aid skills, and information on the SARS-COV-2 virus. Parent U has also partnered with local churches as speakers during class sessions or occasionally as the hosts of Parent U events (e.g., when schools were closed to outside events during the pandemic).

Exosystem: Indirect Influences on Parents Through Parent U

Moving away from the immediate contexts of the developing individual within microsystems and mesosystems, parents who attend Parent U are also indirectly impacted by contexts, people, and events within the exosystem (see Figure 2 Section D). For example, the Parent U board governs Parent U and its funding but does not necessarily directly interact with attending parents. The local Savannah–Chatham County government also indirectly influences Parent U parents through grant funding. The Savannah City Mayor and Police Chief serve as advisory board members and appear at occasional sessions and board meetings to hear about how they can support the community. In addition, Parent U has expanded beyond Savannah and set up sites in Pensacola, Florida and Chicago, Illinois. While Parent U leaders and staff across sites collaborate, share information, and learn from one another, thus benefiting parents, attendees across sites do not directly interact with one another.

Macrosystem: Historical and Cultural Influences on Parents and Parent U

While parents are impacted directly and indirectly by Parent U, mesosystem partnerships, and exosystem influences, their development and well-being is embedded within a larger macrosystem, cultural context (see Figure 2 Section E). More specifically, Parent U and its parents are placed within Savannah–Chatham County. According to the United States Census Bureau Report (2023), most individuals located in Savannah report having a high school diploma (90%), with a smaller number completing a bachelor's degree or higher (31.1%). The median household income is $54,748 (compared to $71,355 for the state of Georgia) with 19% of the Savannah community reportedly living in poverty (compared to 12.7% for the state of Georgia). Parents are embedded in the macrosystem of Savannah, Georgia and their participation in Parent U events allows them to identify and name many of the "invisible" forces impacting their lives and the lives of their families. From educational disparities to transportation and access inequities, there are many aspects of daily living influencing, and often challenging, families. The ability to name the forces impacting their lives is the first step in addressing challenges and taking advantage of the opportunities in the broader community.

Parent U's mission of meeting parents where they are and being parent-centric enables them to co-create their programming and shift strategies without losing sight of their larger goal, even in the face of substantial macrosystem shifts. One illustration of this is how Parent U leaders adapted to

COVID-19 lockdowns. Parent U quickly supported their families through virtual Parent U sessions the week after school lockdowns began in the area. A research team member was able to support this virtual endeavor by providing content quickly and limited technology support, and their parents responded. Parent U quickly had to upgrade to a full, paid Zoom account to accommodate over 100 participants logging in on Saturday mornings. In another application of the *community development model* (Stefanski et al., 2016), Parent U followed the families to adjust their approach to meet families where they were during the COVID-19 isolation and after. Just like for their in-person sessions, Parent U has worked to minimize any barrier a family may have to participating virtually; they walked families through using their phone or student's laptop to join in the virtual sessions. Since August 2022, Parent U has been offering alternating virtual and in-person Saturday sessions each month not only in response to the pandemic, but also due to parent feedback on appreciating having two session formats, which offer flexibility in attendance, reduce the need for transportation, and allow for parents outside of the local community to attend Parent U sessions more easily.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Parent University has been working with school systems and organizations in Savannah, Georgia effectively and productively for over 20 years. As leaders at Parent U are being asked to translate their success with parents in Savannah to other communities, it is imperative to identify a model that helps explain why Parent U is so effective in engaging parents, schools, and communities. Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model as a lens to examine the various systems impacting an organization's "target developing person"—whether that is a child, parent, or other entity—can help identify possibilities in interorganizational and cultural commitment and change that can lead to a *community development model* of school–community partnerships (Stefanaski et al., 2016).

Mapping out the microsystems impacting members of the target audience as they relate to the work of the organization can pinpoint both gaps and possibilities. For example, are principals, teachers, and staff engaging with the target audience through the organization in proximal processes that are bidirectional, frequent, and promote the development of the individual? How can the organization serve to adjust or scaffold those processes over time so that they are positive and productive? The mapping of microsystems can also identify other microsystems or mesosystem

collaborations that can be leveraged to directly strengthen and support both the developing individual and the organization.

Our work with Parent U exemplifies this possibility as well as illustrates the underlying role of time, or the chronosystem. Until 2015, our research team was not a part of Parent U parents' mesosystem. Once Parent U identified a gap (i.e., the need for data to document attendance and impact for continued funding), we began engaging with parents in specific episodes (micro-time) to collect attendance and demographic data. Over several years (meso-time), our proximal processes with parents have shifted to be more bidirectional and productive, particularly as we engage parents in the data collection, analysis, and research processes through our PAR project. Our simple presence as a mesosystem entity with Parent U would not have prompted those shifts. Instead, it was our adjustment of interactions with parents to explain the process and purpose of research to develop trust that eventually led to parents' understanding of the data gathering/research processes. This in-progress PAR project is intentionally designed to gather impact data on participant (parent) behavior change based on their involvement with Parent U. In turn, several parents are now actively engaged in serving as co-researchers and collaborate with the research team and staff to design possible surveys to measure impact on parenting behavior, assess presentation of this data collection process, and eventually collect the data at Parent U sessions.

We posit that if organizations examine their own mesosystem collaborations and the different microsystems that their target audience interacts with as a result of their engagement with the organization, they can identify gaps and strengthen the bidirectional interactions that are happening in each of those microsystems. It is this type of analysis and action that can move schools and organizations from being mere collaborators with families (i.e., coordinating service delivery) toward a model that not only assists parents and their children, but also transforms the community. By identifying possible microsystems to serve parents and then encouraging parents to engage with and make decisions about those microsystems, a school or community organization can progress from simply serving to including, engaging, and eventually empowering parents.

Endnotes

[1]*Community development model* is italicized throughout the article to indicate that this represents the definition described by Stefanski et al. (2016).

[2]The Savannah Early Childhood Foundation (SECF) was designed and operated under the umbrella of Parent U, operating with a distinct focus, board, and budget, until their official merger into one 501c3 organization in December 2020. Parent U maintains the

"Early Learning College" topic classes at each session.

[3]After moving to virtual sessions with the pandemic in March 2020, Parent U was able to reach participants outside of the Savannah area into 34 different states. Given the transition back to in-person and virtual events and the fact that Parent U was originally created to serve parents in the Savannah–Chatham County School District, we report only those numbers from the Savannah sample in this article.

[4]We use the term *parent* as Parent U defines it. As a reader reviews this article, we encourage you to consider all those attending their sessions and events as part of your sphere of thus applying parenting behaviors.

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