# Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks Used in Research on Family–School Partnerships

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## Abstract

This study investigated the theoretical frameworks used to frame research on family–school partnerships over a five-year period. Although many researchers have described their theoretical approaches, little has been written about the diversity of frameworks used and how they are applied. Coders analyzed 215 journal articles published from 2007 to 2011 on family–school partnerships to determine the theoretical or conceptual frameworks used. Of the 153 articles that were empirical, nearly half (46.40%) did not specify a family–school partnership framework. Of the 82 articles that did describe or apply such a framework, four theories were used most often: Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory; social capital theory from the perspectives of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Lareau; Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence; and Moll and colleagues' funds of knowledge. Authors also employed two conceptual frameworks most often: Epstein's types of family involvement, and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of the parent involvement process. Given the lack of theoretical and conceptual foundations for much of the work done over the time period studied, the field would benefit from more focused articulation of theoretical foundations in research and better preparation of doctoral students in applying theory to research.

Key Words: family–school partnerships, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, parental involvement, engagement, families, parents, theory

## Introduction

When families participate in their children's education, there are many academic, personal, and social benefits (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Compared to others, children whose families participate actively in their education tend to have (a) better attendance, (b) higher high school graduation rates, (c) fewer grade retentions, (d) increased levels of satisfaction with school, (e) more accurate placement in classes, (f) reduced numbers of negative behavior reports, and (g) higher scores on reading and mathematics tests (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Through their participation, family members may become empowered and develop leadership and collaboration skills (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Price-Mitchell, 2009). Family–school partnerships are beneficial for schools, too, in that strong, positive teacher–family relationships play a key role in teacher retention (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009).

Research in this area has evolved over time, as have the words that describe such participation. Earlier, researchers used phrases such as "parent involvement," and later there was a preference for "family engagement." Although this is an ongoing issue, more recently, a number of scholars have favored the term "family–school partnerships" (Epstein, 2011; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013). This terminology reflects more recent conceptions of family–school relationships that include other family members and not just parents—a recognition that grandparents, older siblings, and other family members play a role in children's education (e.g., Yamauchi, Lau-Smith, & Luning, 2008). Earlier research tended to focus on White, middle-class families, particularly mothers, explaining earlier conclusions that nonmajority families were less engaged (Auerbach, 2007; de Carvalho, 2001). More recent research emphasized the different domains in which people participate, focusing beyond school-based activities (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Two meta-analyses also found that more subtle aspects of family engagement—expectations, family communication, and parenting style—had the strongest influences on student outcomes (Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2010). Although there has been more attention to the field of family–school partnerships and much research has been produced in this area, implementing strong partnerships remains a challenge for educators in the U.S. and even more so for those serving students from diverse backgrounds (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

Little has been written about the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that frame research on family–school partnerships. We conducted a search of the ERIC database for refereed articles published between 1990 and 2016, using search terms "theories" "family" "schools" "review" (139 results), "theories"

and "family involvement" (148 results), and "family–school partnerships" and "theories" (6 results). Of those results, only one study (Daniel, 2011) appeared to discuss different theoretical orientations to such partnerships. The current study, in contrast to Daniel's (2011) paper, analyzed articles published over a five-year period to determine which theories and conceptual frameworks were applied, the extent to which they were applied, and the benefits and limitations of each framework for shaping research.

## The Importance of a Theoretical Framework

A theoretical or conceptual framework is an essential component of research that shapes the quality and scope of investigations (AERA, 2006). More specifically, a theory is "a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena" (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 9). Theory gives researchers a framework for making sense of their observations by providing an overarching structure to their studies. Through use of a theoretical framework, data that might initially seem unimportant or unrelated may be identified, explained, or related to other data in meaningful ways (Maxwell, 2012). At the same time, theory helps define the phenomenon being studied. It illuminates the data set and helps focus attention on specific events or activities relevant for the research. When researchers do not use theory to inform their research, they risk the possibility of failing to raise and examine theoretically grounded questions and may generate findings of a narrow or limited value. For this same reason, researchers must be cautious when using theory, as while it may illuminate certain areas, other aspects may be overlooked (Agar, 1980). Researchers may miss opportunities to establish new and creative ways of framing phenomena (Becker, 2007).

A conceptual framework is a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2011). Conceptual frameworks provide a model for relationships between variables that may or may not imply a particular theoretical perspective, with the purpose of describing phenomenon (Berman, 2013; Knight, Halkett, & Cross, 2010). Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that a conceptual framework "explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them" (p. 18). Like a map, a conceptual framework guides and provides coherence to empirical inquiry.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks differ in that while a conceptual framework is a structure used to explain the natural progression of phenomena, a theoretical framework is based upon one or more theories that have already

been tested (Camp, 2001). In addition, while a theoretical framework provides an explanation about the phenomena, conceptual frameworks are a type of intermediate or tentative theory that attempts to connect various aspects of inquiry (Maxwell, 2012).

According to the American Educational Research Association standards for reporting research, one criterion for judging the merits of educational research is grounding in a theoretical or a conceptual framework (AERA, 2006). This, as part of the problem formation, shows how the research is connected to previous work. Consistent with this perspective, the National Research Council (2002) suggested that one of the six guiding principles of scientifically based research in education is "to link research to relevant theory" (Eisenhart & DeHaan, 2005, p. 3).

### Purpose

This study investigated the theories and conceptual frameworks that researchers have used to describe and explain family–school partnerships in articles published over a period of five years (2007–2011) to create a snapshot of the theoretical frameworks used during this span of time. Research on family–school partnerships is interdisciplinary, and, although many researchers have described their theoretical approaches and a number of different theories have been employed, little has been written regarding which family–school partnerships theories have been used.

## Method

To conduct our analysis of the research literature in the field of family–school partnerships, we began searching available databases for relevant research. We found that the Harvard University's Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE), part of the Harvard Family Research Project,[1] had already compiled annual bibliographies that were inclusive of what we were finding. Thus, we chose to use the Harvard FINE bibliographies of North American journal articles on family–school partnerships published from 2007 to 2011, the five most recent bibliographies that were available at the time we started this study (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). FINE researchers used several online databases, searching key terms including "parent," "family," "home," "school," "teacher," "engagement," "participation," "involvement," "student," "education," "relationship," and "cooperation" (Harvard Family Research Project, 2011). The bibliographies are not reviewed, and FINE researchers noted that some studies might be missing from their lists (Harvard Family Research Project, 2017).

There was a total of 215 North American articles focused on family–school partnerships in the Harvard FINE bibliographies for the years 2007 to 2011. The present study's four authors coded the data in an iterative process that involved many discussions and recoding until we reached consensus. See Figure 1 for a representation of this process. Initially, we divided the articles among the four of us by years and read them independently. To calibrate our coding, each of us coded the same 21 (9.77%) articles, which were randomly selected from across the five years. After identifying whether an article was an empirical study, we noted which theories or conceptual frameworks were used to frame the research. We then met to discuss our discrepancies and make decisions about the coding scheme. For example, we decided to code the articles based on whether authors cited, described, or applied a framework. "Cited" was used when authors referenced a theory, but did not describe it or apply it to their methods. We coded an article as "Described" if the author described a theory but did not apply it in their methods and coded articles as "Applied" when the research methods were based on the theory and the authors returned to it in their discussion section. We considered description and application as use of a framework and decided that citation alone did not connote use.

After this initial calibration, we divided into two teams, assigned half of the articles to each pair, and coded them using the coding scheme we had developed. Each pair of coders met to discuss discrepancies and to determine a final code. On average, the initial inter-rater reliability was .6 within each pair. We met and discussed discrepancies until a consensus was reached, consulting as needed with the other team about our decisions. To recalibrate across the two teams, the four of us met two additional times to discuss the ways we were coding the papers and to further establish consistency in our analyses. We also held a final meeting to check the coding of all the articles and to discuss specific trends we saw in the data.

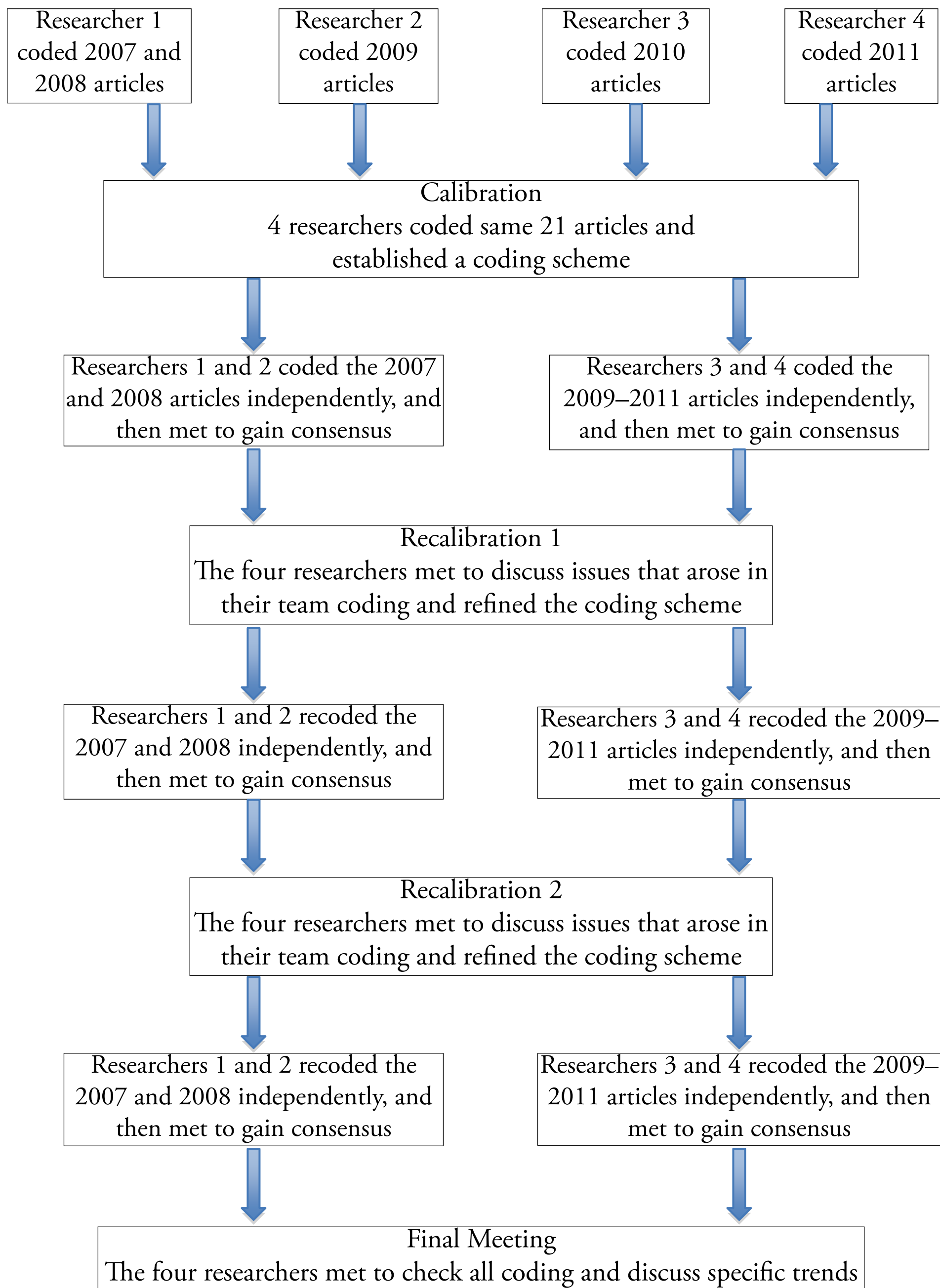


*Figure 1.* Reiterative coding and calibration process of the four researchers.

## Results

### Non-Empirical Papers

The results indicated that almost one-third of the articles (62 or 28.84%) were not empirical. See Table 1 for the number of non-empirical articles published each year. These were published papers that were literature reviews, commentaries, or essays. Once we identified an article as "non-empirical," we did not analyze it further.

### No Family Partnership Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Of the articles reviewed, the majority were empirical (153 or 71.16%). Within this subsample, a little less than half (71 or 46.40%) of the authors did not use a theoretical or conceptual framework to describe their approach to family–school partnerships (see Table 1). Some of these researchers may have used a theory to explain aspects of their work other than family partnerships. For example, Egbert and Salsbury (2009) studied professional development for teachers designed to improve home–school literacy engagement. The authors applied situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to frame their ideas about how student learning occurs, but did not describe a particular theory or framework for their approach to family–school partnerships.

### Theories and Conceptual Frameworks Used

Within the empirical articles, a little more than half (82 of the 153 articles or 53.59%) of the authors included at least one family–school theory or conceptual framework. There were four theoretical frameworks that authors tended to use to explain family–school partnerships: (a) Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2001) bioecological theory (16 articles); (b) social capital theory, as described by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Lareau (1987), and other theorists (16 articles); (c) Epstein's (1987, 1995, 2011) overlapping spheres of influence (14 articles); and (d) Moll and colleagues' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; 7 articles). The authors also applied two conceptual frameworks frequently: Epstein's (1987, 1995, 2011) types of family involvement (25 articles), and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) model of the parent involvement process (13 articles). Various other theories and conceptual frameworks were used, but not often (21 articles). Table 2 presents the extent to which the frameworks were used each year. Note that some articles used more than one theory or conceptual framework, so the total number of entries is higher than the total number of articles.

## Use of Multiple Frameworks

Of the 82 articles in which a family–school partnership framework was described or applied, 25 (30.49%) of the authors used two theoretical or conceptual frameworks for family–school partnerships, and three (3.65%) used three frameworks. When they employed more than one framework, the authors most often used Epstein's types of family involvement (16 articles), Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence theory (12 articles), and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (10 articles). It was not necessarily the case that the authors were using both of Epstein's frameworks at the same time, but six articles did use both Epstein's theory and model.

Table 1. Categorization of Articles

| | 2007 (*n* = 34) | 2008 (*n* = 43) | 2009 (*n* = 56) | 2010 (*n* = 52) | 2011 (*n* = 30) | Total (*n* = 215) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-Empirical Articles | 15 (44.12%) | 17 (39.53%) | 16 (28.57%) | 7 (13.46%) | 7 (23.33%) | 62 (28.84%*) |
| Articles Without a FSP Framework | 10 (29.41%) | 15 (34.88%) | 17 (30.36%) | 22 (55.77%) | 7 (23.33%) | 71 (36.28%*) |
| Articles Using FSP Frameworks | 9 (26.47%) | 11 (25.58%) | 23 (41.07%) | 23 (44.23%) | 16 (53.33%) | 82 (38.14%*) |
| --Articles Using One FSP Framework | 6 (17.65%) | 7 (16.28%) | 14 (25.00%) | 12 (23.08%) | 13 (43.33%) | 52 (24.19%*) |
| --Articles Using Multiple Frameworks | 3 (8.82%) | 4 (9.30%) | 9 (16.07%) | 11 (21.15%) | 3 (10.00%) | 30 (13.95%*) |

* Represents the percentage of articles in each category compared to the overall total of articles (*n* = 215)

Table 2. Empirical Articles Using Family–School Partnership Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks ($n$ = 82)

| Year | Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory | | Social Capital Theory | | Epstein's Overlapping Spheres | | Moll et al.'s Funds of Knowledge | | Epstein's Types of Involvement | | Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler's Model | | Other Frameworks | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Described | Applied | Described | Applied | Described | Applied | Described | Applied | Described | Applied | Described | Applied | Described | Applied |
| 2007 ($n$ = 9) | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 2008 ($n$ = 11) | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 2009 ($n$ = 23) | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 6 |
| 2010 ($n$ = 23) | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 |
| 2011 ($n$ = 16) | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 8 | 8 | 4 | 4 | 9 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 17 | 3 | 10 | 6 | 15 |

## Discussion

The results indicated that between 2007 and 2011, researchers who utilized a family–school partnership framework most often applied one or more of the same four theories and two conceptual frameworks. In the following section, we describe each of these frameworks and discuss its contributions and limitations.

### Theories Used

#### *Bioecological Theory*

In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner introduced ecological theory to emphasize the influence of social, community, and political contexts on development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). He suggested that interactions between the home, family, and peers were critical to children's development and outlined five levels of relationships and contexts that can be viewed as concentric circles extending outward from the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2001).

The first level of the ecological system is the microsystem, the closest factors affecting development, such as the type of school children attend and the type of interactions they experience in the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979). The mesosystem is the next outer layer, characterized by the connection of two or more microsystems in which the individual is an active participant. The third level is the exosystem, which is similar to the mesosystem, except that at least one setting is not directly related to the individual. For instance, caregivers' afternoon and evening work schedules may prevent them from spending time at home, which affects their abilities to support their children's homework. Lastly, the macrosystem is the outermost layer that encompasses the customs, culture, and beliefs of the community or larger society. For example, a Korean immigrant family in the United States might have different ideas about their roles in education compared to families who were raised in the U.S. (Lim, 2012).

In later years, Bronfenbrenner expanded the ecological theory in order to emphasize the role of time (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). He argued that time, or the chronosystem, affected development in two ways—through life transitions and the summative effect of life events—and that the entire ecological system of the child and aging processes should be considered together (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1994). According to Tudge and colleagues (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009), the essence of Bronfenbrenner's theory is the importance of daily interactions and experiences over time.

*Contributions.* Bronfenbrenner focused attention on the importance of the dynamic relationship between individuals and the broader contexts in which they are situated, over time. Rather than looking at the influence of context

alone, he emphasized the importance of accumulated experiences, as described in his "Process–Person–Context–Time" model (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). This idea plays a key role in the application of this theory to the notion of family–school partnerships. Families are important in Bronfenbrenner's theory and are viewed as providing significant and positive influences on children's development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Understanding the influence of social, contextual, and chronometric variables on development can assist educators and family members in implementing meaningful family engagement and overcoming barriers to successful partnerships (Weiss, Lopez, Kreider, & Chatman-Nelson, 2013).

*Limitations.* Because Bronfenbrenner's theory has evolved over several decades, some scholars incorrectly cite or apply his theoretical ideas (Tudge et al., 2009). For instance, authors sometimes mistakenly cite Bronfenbrenner's later work in the 1990s when they are really describing the ecological systems of his early work in the 1970s. Other researchers do not refer to more recent biological or time-oriented aspects of the theory that are key to understanding his ideas.

The general description of Bronfenbrenner's theory and the lack of a prescriptive nature make it difficult for researchers and practitioners to operationalize the concepts he described (Ungar, 2002). Furthermore, the theory does not take into consideration variability across families, such that "an environment that puts one family at risk…may give another family a developmental advantage" (Munhall, 2001, p. 51).

***Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence***

Epstein's (1987, 1992) theory of overlapping spheres of influence combines psychological, educational, and sociological perspectives on social institutions to describe and explain the relations among parents, schools, and local environments. The three spheres are family, school, and local community; the overlapping spheres represent the partnership between these three entities, with the child at the center as the focal point. According to Epstein, the extent to which the spheres overlap is influenced by time, accounting for the age and grade level of the child and historical influences. The degree of overlap is also influenced by the experiences, philosophies, and practices of families, schools, and communities, and the spheres can be purposely pushed to overlap more or less. Much of Epstein et al.'s work focused on the types of family engagement and what educators can do to create more overlap between the spheres (e.g., Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1987, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

*Contributions.* Researchers have shown that the family, the school, and the community influence children's growth and development (Braunger & Lewis,

1997; Hull & Shultz, 2001; Moll et al., 1992). Epstein's (1987, 1992) theory takes into account the importance of these contexts in a child's development, as well as the need for families, schools, and the community to share the responsibilities for the socialization of the child. Epstein acknowledged that some practices of school, family, and community need to be conducted separately but called for important practices to be done conjointly by individuals across the spheres. Epstein used the term "partnerships" to emphasize that schools, families, and communities share responsibilities for children through overlapping spheres of influence.

Epstein's (1987, 1992) theory also suggests that schools should be open to more participation from various stakeholders and that educators should be willing to share responsibilities for student learning with families and the community (Auerbach, 2012). Constantino (2003) calls this process creating "family-friendly" schools. The main goal of these partnerships focuses on student achievement, but there is also attention to home–school communications, making schools more welcoming to families, and helping families increase their general well being. Epstein's theory can be used to establish shared responsibilities across parties and can also suggest policy changes for improved leadership and research in the area of family partnerships (Price-Mitchell, 2009).

*Limitations.* Epstein's theory can be considered an elaboration of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, specific to family–school partnerships. Epstein (2011) explained that her theory was based on Bronfenbrenner's and others' models of "natural, nested, and necessary connections between individuals and their groups and organizations" (Epstein, 2011, p. 26). Scholars have criticized Epstein's theory for continuing to focus on school-based activities and perspectives and limiting the agency, voice, and perspectives of families. For example, Auerbach (2011) noted that although Epstein's theory describes partnerships between families and schools, the description of activities suggests a school-centered agenda that families support.

While Epstein made references to the theoretical aspects of her research (Sanders & Epstein, 1998), such as the relationship of her theory to the social network paradigm (Barnes, 1972; Blau, 1964; Leinhart, 1977) and to the ideas of social capital (Lareau, 1987), some have criticized it for a one-dimensional emphasis on parents helping children learn, rather than on families, schools, and communities working collectively to promote positive student outcomes (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Epstein's allusion to social capital has also led some scholars to criticize its narrow view of partnerships as "a market model whose goal is to generate capital" (Graue, 1998, p. 4) that tends to blame families for not taking advantage of the opportunities provided by such partnerships (Graue, 1998). A more egalitarian approach would position families

as community resources to be sought out rather than people who participate only when invited (Price-Mitchell, 2009).

***Social Capital Theory***

Originally, Bourdieu (1986) extended the economic definition of capital by applying it to other systems involved in the transformation and exchange of assets between individuals (Moore, 2012). He described the relationship between individuals' values, preferences, and ways of interacting, or what he called *habitus,* and the external *field* or social milieu in which they interacted and exchanged resources (Thomson, 2012). Both habitus and field can be used to understand families' experiences, as they include subjective and more objective elements.

The idea of social capital has been clarified and extended by other researchers as they applied it to schools and families. Weininger and Lareau (2003) put forth what they called an emerging consensus of social capital in this context as "the material and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties" (p. 323). These resources are often inequitable based on class, income, culture, and other social considerations.

Social capital is generally seen as having two components: resources that connect to group membership, and social networks (Ream & Palardy, 2008). "Social networks help produce social capital to the extent that they encourage the exchange of information, shape beliefs, and enforce norms of behavior" (Sheldon, 2002, p. 304). Social status is often related to the size of a social network that parents can access, and network size is proportionally related to the amount and variety of capital individuals can access (Ream & Palardy, 2008; Sheldon, 2002). Therefore, network ties provide resources to individuals, such as favors and information. The size of a parent's network can predict the level of engagement in his or her children's schools (Sheldon, 2002). Compared to that of middle-class families, the social networks of lower income families do not tend to facilitate successful navigation of school environments (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

*Contributions.* The application of social capital theory can elucidate and emphasize inequities, potential barriers, and the roles of social networks, especially for communities where families and educators differ in culture, social class, and education. The broad conception of capital that can be applied to cultural, social, and material assets can be helpful in exploring these inequities. The theory's emphasis on the mutual and synchronous experience of the subjective and objective can help to examine the complex relationships between family members' experiences and the contexts of schools.

*Limitations.* The framework is limited by its very theoretical nature, complicating the translation of Bourdieu's concepts into practical strategies for school–family partnerships. Others have found that the theory was conceptually "murky," leading to inaccurate or ineffectual attributions (Portes, 1998). The theory can be viewed as a deficit perspective, such that partnerships are seen as a projection of the model of suburban families from higher classes, rather than an open invitation for diverse families to redefine schooling and the relationships inherent in it (de Carvalho, 2001). Finally, the theory as it is sometimes applied may oversimplify the role of capital and the experiences of families. Researchers using social capital theory tend to use a limited set of methods, mostly quantitative methods that compare objective variables such as test scores and school dropout rates rather than subjective experiences (Horvat et al., 2003; Sheldon, 2007). The latter could lead to better understandings of relationships and greater collaboration and inclusiveness.

***Funds of Knowledge***

The funds of knowledge theory is based on the premise that all families have a wealth of knowledge and resources due to their socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or educational backgrounds (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Oughton, 2010). In this approach, family and community members contribute knowledge, skills, artifacts, and other resources that promote children's development (Moll et al., 1992).

Funds of knowledge theory is based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and attempts to apply his theoretical concepts to change and improve instruction (Moll, 2004). Vygotsky maintained that social interactions were the basis of all psychological phenomena, including thoughts, ideas, and ways of being. The cultural contexts surrounding individuals determine what is learned and developed. Moll and Greenberg (1990) expanded upon Vygotsky's theory by arguing that minority communities' *funds of knowledge* are often overlooked assets. Individuals advance to higher levels of potential through their participation in family and community activities. Thus, networks outside of school contribute to advancing children's learning and development.

Moll and his colleagues (Moll et al., 1992) observed the rich diversity of children in working-class Latino communities as youths learned from and with relatives and other families. The children were active participants in the learning of everyday skills and concepts in meaningful and contextualized settings. When families themselves did not have the necessary resources, they relied upon a social network of other families so that there was an additional layer of funds to draw upon (Moll et al., 1992). In contrast, Moll and colleagues (1992) noted, "teachers rarely draw on the resources of the 'funds of knowledge' of the child's world outside the context of the classroom" (p. 134). They argued that

if schools drew upon these "funds," then these outside-of-the-school networks would positively contribute to school learning (Hones, 2014).

*Contributions.* Funds of knowledge theory helps to shift the portrayal of families from a deficit point of view to one of having resources (Moll, 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). The theory gives recognition to family and community assets and the importance of incorporating them into the school (see Moll et al., 1992). Finally, it describes fairly accessible concepts for practitioners to apply when working with families, especially those of backgrounds different from the educators' backgrounds.

*Limitations.* There are some potential drawbacks of the theory. The concept of funds, while understandable, can be misinterpreted from a deficit perspective to explain that some ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic groups have more funds than others (Oughton, 2010). The funds of knowledge approach may also inadvertently position researchers or educators as the ones who empower families, framing the family–school relationship in an unequal light, with the family "dependent" on the school or researchers (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013).

## Conceptual Frameworks Used

### *Epstein's Types of Family Involvement*

Our results indicated that Epstein's (1987, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2000) types of family involvement was the most popular framework that researchers used to conceptualize family–school partnerships, as authors of 25 articles used it in the studies we reviewed. The six types described in her model are summarized below.

1. **Parenting.** Type 1 refers to parents' provision of basic needs including issues related to health, housing, safety, and nutrition. This type of involvement includes general childrearing and creating positive home conditions that promote children's development and learning.
2. **Communication.** Type 2 includes two-way communication between schools and homes about children's education and progress. Communication can take a variety of forms, including phone calls, notes, meetings, and report cards. Epstein noted that information should flow in both directions, from school to home and vice versa.
3. **Volunteering.** Type 3 refers to families volunteering to contribute to their children's education. This could be in the more traditional form of parents coming to work at the school or can involve families making contributions at home in ways that assist the educational program. Volunteering also refers to families participating as audience members at school performances, sporting events, and other activities.

4. **Learning at home.** This type (Type 4) of involvement includes parents' activities at home to promote their children's education. At home, families may communicate with their children about school, help their children with homework, and develop needed skills. They also make curriculum-related decisions at home, such as determining in which courses their children should enroll.
5. **Decision making.** Families can be involved in the policy and management of the school and the establishment of formal parental representation in school decision-making processes (Type 5).
6. **Community collaborations.** This last type of involvement, Type 6, relates to families' use of community resources and services to support their children's education. For example, families may visit the library or enroll their children in community programs to support learning and development.

*Contributions.* Epstein's model can be used to establish the shared responsibilities of families, educators, and other community members and as a tool for policy changes that lead to improved leadership and research in the area of family partnerships in schools (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Epstein (2011) expanded her theory to show, in a concrete way, what educators can do to facilitate various types of family involvement. For example, she introduced the idea of parent–child interactive homework and discussed processes for organizing volunteers in the classroom, especially at the middle school level (Epstein, 2011). Epstein's model and typologies are fairly easy to understand and operationalize as illustrated in Patte's (2011) examination of preservice teachers' knowledge of family–school partnerships.

*Limitations.* While Epstein' model portrays schools as open to more participation from varied stakeholders and suggests shared activities to ensure families feel welcomed at the school, the framework continues to position the school as the one that sets the agenda. This reverts back to the idea of limiting the goals of the partnership to benefits for the children, rather than focusing on partnerships that are beneficial for all involved parties, including family members and teachers. Epstein's model does not emphasize issues of power and status (Auerbach, 2012; Graue, 1998). Scholars suggest a need for a closer analysis of obligations and outcomes beyond the responsibilities of families and students' behaviors and achievement results. Further, the model is lacking in its examination of the meanings of each type of involvement proposed by Epstein and the power relationships and roles of the various players.

### *Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model*

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler developed a model to describe why parents become involved in their children's education and how such engagement

affects child outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2007; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). The original model presented five sequential levels that influence the involvement process. Based on empirical evidence, the authors subsequently reorganized some of the constructs in the first two levels (Walker et al., 2005). Below, we describe the most recent model.

Level 1 includes three parental belief systems that contribute to parents' decisions to be involved in their children's education: (a) motivational beliefs, such as parents' role construction and self-efficacy; (b) perceptions of invitations to be involved from teachers, children, and schools; and (c) perceived life contexts, including parents' perceptions of their time, energy, skills, and knowledge to be involved (Walker et al., 2005). Level 2 describes the specific forms of involvement in which parents engage. These include school-based behaviors such as attendance at school events or volunteering as a chaperone for a field trip, and home-based behaviors like helping children with homework or reading to them (Walker et al., 2005). The mechanisms through which parent involvement influences children's outcomes constitute Level 3 (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). This includes modeling appropriate behaviors and attitudes, reinforcing children for appropriate behaviors, and instruction for children. Level 4 consists of mediating variables, for instance, parents' use of strategies with their children that are developmentally appropriate, as well as the fit between parents' actions and the schools' expectations. Finally, Level 5 is composed of student outcomes, which include students' knowledge, skills, and sense of self-efficacy regarding success in school.

*Contributions.* Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of the parental involvement process is helpful in understanding the psychological constructs underlying why parents are engaged in both home-based and school-based educational activities (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2005). The constructs proposed are measureable and have stimulated research that has been used to revise the model. The framework is comprehensive in its description of how families' beliefs and experiences affect their involvement and how these practices are related to student outcomes. It also reflects the complexities of family–school partnerships and the different ways that families can be engaged. For example, the framework includes parents' perceptions of whether they have the resources to be involved in both home- and school-based activities and whether they feel invited to do so by school staff and their own children. Finally, the model and the research it has inspired suggest implications for developing strong family–school partnerships, for example, ways for schools to develop a positive climate such that families feel invited and welcomed to be involved.

*Limitations.* As Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model is so comprehensive, most research focuses on specific aspects of the model, and the complete model has yet to be fully tested. The research on the model often focuses on the first two levels (e.g., Walker et al., 2005). More research is needed on the other three levels to evaluate the entire model's utility.

## Implications and Recommendations

### *Use Theories Throughout the Research Process*

Findings of the current study analyzing theoretical and conceptual frameworks employed in five years of research on family–school partnerships suggest that there has been little systematic focus on the various theoretical and conceptual frameworks applied to this work. As noted earlier in this article, a theoretical or conceptual framework is important to provide a lens from which research can be designed, highlighting the constructs of interest and guiding researchers in data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moreover, the use of a theoretical or conceptual framework is a criterion on which the merits of educational research can be judged (AERA, 2006). This standard is consistent with Taylor, Beck, and Ainsworth's (2002) study of manuscript submissions to a qualitative research journal in education. The authors analyzed comments to 75 manuscripts that reviewers rejected, rejected with encouragement, or conditionally accepted. Results indicated that reviewers expected manuscript authors to contextualize their research problems and methods within a theoretical framework to provide a rationale for their methods and an orientation for the study's contributions.

Our investigation analyzed five years of published work—215 journal articles—to determine the types of frameworks that were used. Of the 153 empirical studies, it is notable that nearly half (46.40%) did not use a family–school partnership theoretical or conceptual framework to guide the research. This makes it clear that this field is undertheorized. To use a framework means to describe it, apply it to the research methods, and return to the concepts in the discussion of the results. Some authors mentioned a theory in their introductions, but it was not apparent how they used it in their investigation nor was it mentioned later in the article. This made it appear that the theory came later in the process and was not integral to the problem definition and research design. We recommend that researchers consider theory early and throughout their research processes and that their writing elaborates on the use of their theoretical considerations. Theory can guide data collection and interpretation of findings and, in an area where theory has not often been utilized, its use can push the field forward.

*Include the Use of Theory in Doctoral Preparation*

Our findings also speak to the need to improve the preparation of educational researchers. When comparing doctoral students of education and other fields, Labaree (2003) found that education doctoral students tend to be older than their peers, with 49% of education students being over 35 years of age, compared to 29% in other fields. Labaree explained that doctoral students in education typically come from previous careers as teachers. While this background is helpful to the graduate students' transition to becoming researchers in that they have a strong practical grounding and passionate commitment to the field, many education doctoral students find it difficult to transition from a teacher's worldview that is more experiential to a researcher's worldview that is more theoretical. Labaree argued that education doctoral students often distance themselves from theoretical and empirical literature, promoting their own practical experiences as more important than theoretical ideas. Consequently, doctoral students:

> need to be persuaded to retire teaching experience as a trump card and use it instead as one possible perspective, to explore the possibility that theory can be as useful as experience and that the practice of theory building can be as important as the practice of teaching. (Labaree, 2003, p. 21)

When teaching graduate students about family–school partnerships (and other topics), we recommend that educators point out the theories that were used in previous research and how authors applied those frameworks in their methods. Likewise, the mentoring of graduate students should include them in the process of theoretical considerations, particularly the application of theory to research design. Like any part of the research process, the use of theory needs to be taught and discussed, and students need practice applying those skills.

*Communicate About Theories With Teachers and Teacher Educators*

The lack of theoretical grounding in the field of family–school partnerships not only affects the quality of current and future research, but also has consequences for teacher education. One important and underresearched area in the quest to improve family–school partnerships is how we prepare teachers to become partners. In our work with teacher educators, we have observed a lack of awareness of theories about family–school partnerships among teachers and teacher educators (Traynor, 2016). Not surprisingly, this work indicates that teachers tend to find it difficult to theorize their work in this area. We recommend that teacher education include an emphasis on theories to assist future teachers to be purposeful in their actions and to realize potential relationships between their instructional choices and student outcomes. Thus, theory can

be helpful to practitioners by ensuring thoughtful and informed practice. Of course, for theory to be accessed and used by teachers, educational researchers need to present ideas about family–school partnership theories in venues and ways that are accessible to teachers.

### Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is that it was circumscribed by Harvard FINE's identification of articles on family–school partnerships and particularly to the five years on which we chose to focus our work. As noted in the methods section, the Harvard FINE bibliographies are not reviewed, and some articles may be missing (Harvard Family Research Project, 2017). When we began our study, 2007 to 2011 were the most recent five years of research identified by the Harvard FINE group. Since then, Harvard FINE has identified articles on family–school partnership for subsequent years. Therefore, this paper does not represent the most recent research in the field. By using the Harvard FINE compilations of North American research, we also limited the scope of our study, since we excluded international studies.

In line with the limitations noted earlier, two immediate areas for future research would be to (a) analyze the theories and conceptual frameworks used in more recent years, and (b) expand the scope of the study to include international works. While our study provides a landscape of the theories used in the field of family–school partnerships at one point in time, it would also be helpful to understand how authors used the frameworks and to evaluate which frameworks were more successful in terms of furthering understandings of family–school partnerships. One possible way to engage in a comparison of frameworks would be to use methods such as pattern matching (Yin, 2014) that compare the utility of various theories given particular data sets.

In conclusion, our analysis of five years of research on family–school partnerships indicated that researchers often did not employ theoretical or conceptual frameworks to guide their work. As use of a theoretical or conceptual framework is considered a hallmark of quality educational research (e.g., AERA, 2006; Taylor et al., 2002), the field would benefit from more consistent employment of such frameworks. Grant and Osanloo (2014) suggested similarities between a theoretical framework for research and a blueprint of a house. Like a blueprint, the theoretical framework guides construction of arguments and specifies a plan for data collection and analysis. Many novice researchers struggle to find and apply appropriate theoretical frameworks, and educational researchers in particular often value practical considerations over theoretical ones (Labaree, 2003). As such, the field of family–school partnerships may be enhanced if researchers better articulate their theoretical applications and if

those who prepare educational researchers place more emphasis on the use of theory in their doctoral programs.

## Endnote

[1]The Harvard Family Research Project separated from the Harvard Graduate School of Education to become the Global Family Research Project as of January 1, 2017. To access Global Family Research Project's website, visit https://globalfrp.org/

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