Engaging Families in School Mental Health
Using Empowerment and Social Capital to Level the Engagement Playing Field
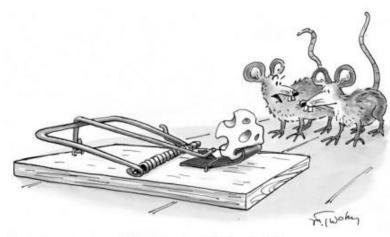
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Objectives

- Describe the ways in which families may engage in school mental health (SMH) and identify potential facilitators and barriers to family engagement.

- Compare and contrast empowerment and social capital theories to inform family engagement strategies in SMH.

- Identify three strategies for engaging families in SMH based on research rooted in empowerment and social capital theories.

Parent Involvement Discourse

- Parent as Problem
  - Parents are unengaged, do not do enough
  - Without parent support, nothing else matters

- Parent as Protector
  - Bring parents into schools, let them have decision-making power, schools will improve
  - Parents must protect children's interests, school will not

"Careful—it might be a trap!"

Nakagawa, K. (2000). Unthreading the ties that bind: Questioning the discourse of parent involvement. *Educational Policy, 14*(4), 443-472.

What do we mean by involvement?

Traditional models of Parent Involvement

- Commitment of resources to children's academic lives (Grolnick & Sloqiaczek, 1994)

- Two arenas (Pomerantz et al., 2007):
  - School-based involvement
  - Home-based involvement

- Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision-Making, Collaborating with the Community (Epstein et al., 2002)

Empowerment

- "a process by which individuals gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community" (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988)

- Fundamental Assumptions

  - **Power** is the ability to access and control resources and people.

  - **Powerlessness** arises from **stratification** that creates marginalized groups that are negatively valued.

  - Empowerment is a **process** and an **outcome.**

Empowerment Theory

- 3 Components
  - Self-Efficacy: judgments of one's own capabilities to execute actions required to achieve specific goals
  - Critical Consciousness (or Knowledge): general understanding of the context, content, and power dynamics related to goals
  - Effective Action (and Competence): abilities and actions related to goals

- Personal and/or collective goals

(Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010)

"Empowerment theorists emphasize that empowerment practice must address the personal, interpersonal, and institutional, or political dimensions…"

- (Robbins et al., 2010, p. 95)

What's wrong with empowerment theories?

- *Sense of* empowerment is not the same as actual increases in power.

- Traditional notions of empowerment are based on traditionally masculine (and western) characteristics.

Self Empowerment

(Riger, 1993)

Parents' Barriers to Engagement

- Lack of time

- Unreliable child care

- Not feeling valued

- Previous negative schooling experiences

- Lack of transportation

- Work schedule

- Feeling unwelcome

- Not knowing how to contribute

- Feeling judged

- Low confidence

- Stress

- Unmet basic needs

- Embarrassment

- Language

- Competing priorities

- Perspectives differ from teachers

- Health concerns and special needs

- Mental health issues

- Misunderstand the importance of involvement

(Anderson-Butcher et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2006)

Schools' Barriers to Engagement

- Poor communication
  - Frequency
  - Timing
  - Jargon

- Lack of knowledge

- Lack of skills

- Services are not tailored to parent needs

- Resistance

- Fear of losing control

- Negative perceptions of parents

- Unwelcoming facilities

- Inconvenient location

- Lack of transportation

- Lack of child care

- Inadequate funding and resources

- Language differences

- Staff is not representative of parent population

- Low value placed on parent involvement

(Anderson-Butcher et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2006)

I use academic strategies and then whatever homework I have left I do at home.

5. What would you like to do when you grow up and why?

I want to own a house arcitecture buissness and a plant shop and the worlds biggest pet store. I also want to be in a tv show like Full House.

6. What are your goals for high school?

I want to pass

Social Capital Theory

- Definition of social capital (Coleman, 1998; Putnam, 1995)

- Relationship to engaging families (Mellin & Weist, 2011)

- Types of social capital
  - Bonding (Putnam, 1995; Forbes, 2009)
  - Bridging (Putnam, 1995; Forbes, 2009)
  - Linking (Warren, 2005; Forbes 2009)

Case Example

Putting it to use…

Empowerment

- Key components: self-efficacy, knowledge, competence

- A process and an outcome

- Power, powerlessness, and agency influence ability to reach goals

- Personal, political, and institutional dimensions

Social Capital

- Reciprocal trust and cooperation that provide support and resources to achieve shared goals

- Bridging, bonding, and linking

- Confronting and managing power inequalities

Jack

Jack is new to your middle school in 7th grade (building is grades 6-8). He is one of a handful of racial/ethnic minority students in the entire school of 600+ students, which is located in a wealthy suburban town of under 20,000 people. Jack qualifies for free lunch.

Jack lives with both parents, who are in and out of work, and his younger brother. Jack and his brother lived with his grandparents out of state for an unknown number of years prior to this school year. Jack is capable academically and socially, but continues to have a difficult time with completing his schoolwork. Mom reports that he used to have anger issues where he would "lash out" at home, but this hasn't happened in a few years. Jack needs glasses, and the social worker has contacted home on multiple occasions to set the family up with a resource for him to get an eye exam and new glasses for free, but the family has not responded after six weeks of school.

Jack's teachers all think he is a nice kid, but are "fed up" with his disregard for his belongings (e.g. coming to school without materials, not having a PE uniform) and lack of work completion. The social worker has reached out to mentor groups in the area regarding a positive community connection for Jack and is waiting to hear back. Jack made the school basketball team, but was unable to play for most of the season because of his grades.

Potential Strategies

- Reduce immediate barriers (transportation, child care, etc.)

- Increase self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence

  – Multiple and varied methods of sharing information

  – Formal knowledge-sharing and capacity-building

- Develop relationships that are bonding, bridging, and linking

- Address and manage power inequalities

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