

# Introduction: The Need to Take a Strengths-Based Approach to Facilitate Children's Educational Growth



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Far too many children in the USA, particularly those from low-income, Black, and Latino families, struggle to succeed in school. Weaknesses in these children's traditional academic skills are often evident even before they begin formal schooling (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). These weaknesses, on average, remain fairly constant or even increase as children proceed through school (Duncan et al., 2007; Sonnenschein, Stapleton, & Benson, 2010). Much of the literature on this topic has focused on the skills these children or families lack and has viewed these weaknesses as stemming, at least in part, from deficits in what the families are doing to foster their children's educational success. Interventions designed from a deficit perspective have failed to consider the strengths that families have and, therefore, fail to engage families in a meaningful way. Even ignoring the ethical concerns with such an approach, most of these interventions were not particularly successful. That is, the group-based gaps did not close or even substantially narrow (see Reardon & Portilla, 2016, for review). However, it is critical that we find ways to close the group-based gaps in educational outcomes; thus, we need to look for effective ways to do so. Although schools and communities clearly are relevant for closing gaps, we have opted to focus primarily on the role of families in this book.

We argue that to improve children's educational trajectories, researchers and educators must take a strength-based perspective and consider how family practices are embedded in a cultural system (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993; Sawyer, Cyck, Sandilos, & Hammer, 2016; Yamamoto & Sonnenschein, 2016). Accordingly, the chapters in this book discard the deficit approach and instead take the approach that building upon family and children's

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strengths and understanding the barriers that families face in supporting their children's learning is more effective and empowering. The approach we advocate is consistent with a fairly recent but increasingly popular trend known as strength-based and positive development approaches (e.g., Cabrera & The SRCD Ethnic and Racial Issues Committee, 2013; Cabrera, Beeghly, & Eisenberg, 2012). Such approaches focus on adaptive strengths within families from different backgrounds and emphasize the importance of understanding cultural mores, beliefs, and practices. Some of the chapters in this book describe how Black and Latino families, often with low income, foster their young children's language, literacy, and math skills. Other chapters discuss barriers children and families of color face in school and design culturally grounded educational interventions.

The chapters in this book fall into three groups. Note this is an informal grouping meant merely to inform readers of topical similarities among the chapters. The first set of papers focus on parents' beliefs and practices at home, and in some cases, how this is related to different aspects of young children's achievement. Kuhns, Cabrera, Hennigar, West, and Acosta use data from the Early Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey to discuss family factors that promote the language and social development of low-income young Latino and Black toddlers. Sonnenschein, Metzger, and Gay use a mixed-methods approach with a group of low-income Black and Latino parents of children attending Head Start to document their beliefs about fostering their children's reading and math skills and what they do to facilitate growth in such areas. Bingham and Mason investigate the relation between parenting styles of a diverse group of Black families and their preschool children's writing skills. Williams, Ricciardi, and Winsler use a large data set from the Miami School Readiness Project to document the importance of low-income Black and Latino boys' social and behavioral skills for their subsequent academic progress. Diaz and McClelland document the challenges a group of low-income Latino English language learners face as they enter kindergarten, as well as the importance of self-regulation skills as a potential strength to build upon. These two chapters add to a growing body of research showing the importance of social skills for academic success (e.g., Liew, 2012; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). All of the chapters show that these families from different cultural backgrounds are providing their children with diverse opportunities that promote their early academic development. The chapters also go beyond just considering children's experiences to include relevant topics, but ones less often studied in this context, such as parental beliefs and parenting style. What remains is to make schools aware of what the families are doing and to provide culturally grounded and pedagogically sound experiences for the children.

The second group of chapters emphasizes barriers families face to facilitating their children's educational progress, the need to ground research/interventions in cultural contexts, and different ways these authors made their interventions culturally appropriate. Durand addresses the issues of intersectionality or the need to consider more than one defining characteristic of a person when understanding the challenges Latino families with different educational backgrounds and immigration status face. Hammer, Sawyer, and Cycyk discuss their literacy intervention, *Madres*

*Educando a Sus Niños/Mothers Educating Their Children*. This intervention is designed to promote the language development of preschool-aged Latino Hispanic children who are dual language learners. The authors discuss the various steps they took with families and community members to make the intervention culturally appropriate for these families. Manz and her colleagues discuss a home-visiting literacy intervention for young children from low-income families, little talks, and how the interventionists worked to make the content and strategies sensitive to demographic differences among the families. The three chapters show that interventions that are culturally sensitive are more likely to be effective because they are more likely to be consistent with family mores and beliefs, important issues in designing interventions (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Janes & Kermani, 2001).

The final two chapters in this book are integrative, summary chapters. Montoya-Ávila, Ghebreaab, and Galindo address the need for better and more positive connections between homes and schools, particularly those serving Black and Latino populations. They provide a history of such partnerships, what have been traditional obstacles to successful partnerships, and what needs to be done to facilitate children's academic success. Baker and DeWynngaert provide an evaluative synthesis of the chapters in the book. They discuss theoretical and methodological similarities and differences across chapters. They also discuss topics and methodological considerations for future work on this topic.

We hope that reading these chapters inspires you to consider the families that you work with from a strength-based perspective and reminds you of how important your work is.

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