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Parental Involvement and Engagement in Higher Education: Reconceptualizing Family Roles in Adult Learning Contexts

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Abstract

Parental involvement and family engagement have been extensively studied in primary and secondary education, yet their roles in higher education remain comparatively undertheorized and empirically underexplored. As the demographic profile of university students has diversified to include greater proportions of first-generation students, adult learners, and students from collectivist cultural backgrounds, the assumption that family influence diminishes upon tertiary enrollment has come under increasing scrutiny. This theoretical and literature review synthesizes research published between 2000 and 2025 to examine the nature, scope, and consequences of parental and family involvement in higher education. Drawing on Epstein's model of school-family-community partnerships, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and the sociological concept of social capital, the review critically evaluates how family involvement shapes student academic outcomes, sense of belonging, persistence, and well-being in university contexts. The review further examines how institutional responses to family involvement, including family orientation programs, communication policies, and parent portals, interact with student autonomy development and institutional cultures of independence. Key tensions are identified between family-supportive and autonomy-protective institutional orientations, and between the differential experiences of traditional-age, first-generation, and culturally diverse students. The paper concludes with a reconceptualized framework for understanding productive family engagement in higher education and proposes directions for future research and practice.

Keywords:- Parental Involvement, Family Engagement, Higher Education, First-Generation Students, Social Capital, Ecological Systems Theory, Student Persistence, Helicopter Parenting, Autonomy Development, Cultural Diversity

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of parents and families in shaping educational outcomes has been a cornerstone of educational research for more than five decades. From Coleman's (1966) foundational analysis of family background as the dominant predictor of student achievement, to Epstein's (2001) influential models of school-family partnership, to the vast literature on early childhood and secondary school parental involvement, the message has been remarkably consistent: families matter profoundly for educational processes and outcomes. Yet as students cross the threshold into higher education, institutional and cultural assumptions about the appropriate role of parents shift dramatically. The prevailing ethos of most Western universities holds that enrollment in higher education signals a transition to adult autonomy, and that the legitimate sphere of parental influence correspondingly contracts, if not disappears entirely (Coburn, 2006; Fingerman et al., 2012).

This assumption, however, is increasingly at odds with the lived realities of contemporary university students. Demographic shifts have transformed the profile of the higher education student body: first-generation college students, who rely heavily on family networks for emotional support and practical guidance even while their parents may lack experiential knowledge of university life, now constitute substantial proportions of enrolments in many national systems (Pascarella et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2012). International students, many of whom come from collectivist cultural traditions in which family involvement in educational decisions remains normative well into adulthood, bring radically different expectations of appropriate family roles (Yeh & Inose, 2003). And a generation of students raised in the era of intensive parenting, enabled by mobile technology to maintain constant contact with parents, arrive at university with family relationships that bear little

resemblance to the relatively clean breaks assumed by traditional models of college student development (Fingerman et al., 2012; Lythcott-Haims, 2015).

These demographic and cultural shifts have generated a growing body of research examining parental involvement in higher education, yet this literature remains fragmented, theoretically underdeveloped, and characterized by a persistent ambivalence. On one side, researchers document the benefits of family support for student persistence, well-being, and academic performance, particularly for first-generation and minority students (Dennis et al., 2005; Stephens et al., 2012). On the other, a prominent strand of research and popular discourse warns against the pathological excesses of overinvolved, so-called helicopter parenting, which is associated with impaired student autonomy, reduced psychological resilience, and diminished readiness for adult responsibility (LeMoyné & Buchanan, 2011; Lythcott-Haims, 2015). Navigating between these positions requires theoretical frameworks capable of capturing the nuance, conditionality, and cultural variability of family involvement in higher education.

This literature review is organized around five major sections. The first examines the nature and forms of parental involvement in higher education. The second reviews the principal theoretical frameworks informing the field. The third explores the consequences of family involvement for key student outcomes, drawing distinctions between different student populations. The fourth examines institutional responses to family involvement. The fifth synthesizes key tensions and proposes a reconceptualized framework for productive family engagement in higher education contexts.

II. NATURE AND FORMS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1. Defining Parental Involvement in the University Context

Parental involvement in higher education encompasses a wide spectrum of behaviors, attitudes, and relational dynamics that extend well beyond the tangible forms of participation characteristic of K-12 settings. Johnson et al. (2007) proposed a typology distinguishing among financial support, emotional support, academic involvement, social involvement, and decision-making involvement. Financial support, encompassing the provision of tuition, living expenses, and material resources, remains the most prevalent and practically consequential form of parental involvement across all student groups, though its distribution is highly unequal (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Emotional support, including encouragement, validation, and the management of academic and social anxieties through frequent communication, has grown markedly in prevalence with the ubiquity of smartphones and digital communication platforms.

Academic involvement takes more varied forms at the higher education level than in school contexts. Parents may assist with course selection, advise on career pathways, intervene directly with faculty or administrators on behalf of students, or provide subject-matter guidance where their own educational backgrounds align with their children's fields of study. Coburn (2006) documented a substantial increase in direct parental contact with university administrators over the preceding decade, raising complex questions about student privacy, institutional authority, and the appropriate boundaries of family involvement in adult educational contexts.

2.2. Helicopter Parenting and Overinvolvement

The concept of helicopter parenting, coined by college counselor Foster Cline and popularized by Howe and Strauss (2003), describes a style of parenting characterized by excessive proximity, monitoring, and intervention in children's lives well beyond the developmental stages at which such involvement would typically be considered normative. In the higher education context, helicopter parenting behaviors include contacting faculty to dispute grades, completing assignments on students' behalf, accompanying students to academic advising appointments, and intervening in roommate conflicts or disciplinary proceedings (Lythcott-Haims, 2015).

LeMoyné and Buchanan (2011) conducted one of the first empirical examinations of helicopter parenting in higher education, finding that students who reported high levels of parental overinvolvement scored significantly lower on measures of psychological well-being, autonomy, and self-efficacy compared to those with less involved parents. Importantly, however, the relationship between parental involvement and student outcomes is not linear: the same study found that moderate levels of parental involvement were associated with more positive outcomes than either very high or very low involvement, suggesting an inverted U-shaped relationship that more nuanced theoretical frameworks must account for.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

3.1. Epstein's Model of School-Family-Community Partnerships

Joyce Epstein's (2001) model of school-family-community partnerships, originally developed for K-12 contexts, identifies six types of involvement that constitute a comprehensive partnership framework: parenting (supporting family conditions that promote student success), communicating (maintaining two-way information exchange between schools and families), volunteering (family participation in school activities), learning at home (family support for academic work), decision making (family participation in governance), and collaborating with the community (connecting families with community resources). While this framework was not designed with higher education in mind, several researchers have adapted its core typology to the university context, identifying analogous forms of involvement suited to the distinctive features of tertiary education (Ward, 2005).

The principal modification required for the higher education context concerns the reconfiguration of the locus of authority and the role of the student as an adult agent. In K-12 settings, parents and schools share formal responsibility for the child's education; in higher education, the student is both the primary client of the institution and a legally autonomous adult with rights to privacy and self-determination. Epstein's framework, adapted for higher education, must therefore position the student, rather than the institution, as the mediating agent through whom family involvement is channeled, and must theorize

the conditions under which student-mediated family support is most likely to be constructive rather than intrusive (Coburn, 2006; Ward, 2005).

3.2. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides a multilevel conceptual architecture for understanding the nested contexts within which university students are embedded and through which family influence operates. The family constitutes a primary microsystem for most students, shaping their values, expectations, study habits, and help-seeking behaviors well before and throughout their university careers. The university itself constitutes a second microsystem, with its own norms, relationships, and opportunity structures. The mesosystem, encompassing the relationships between these two microsystems, is the analytical space in which parental involvement in higher education is most directly located.

Ecological systems theory draws attention to the way in which the quality of mesosystem connections, that is, the degree of alignment or misalignment between family norms and university culture, shapes students' experience of institutional fit and belonging. Stephens et al. (2012) provided compelling evidence of this dynamic in their research on first-generation students, demonstrating that the cultural mismatch between the collectivist, interdependence-oriented norms of many first-generation students' families and the individualist, independence-oriented norms of elite university culture creates a chronic sense of social-class identity threat that undermines academic performance. The ecological framework thus illuminates family involvement not merely as a dyadic relationship between parent and student but as a structurally situated phenomenon shaped by the cultural and institutional environments in which both parties are embedded.

3.3. Social Capital Theory

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, and its elaboration by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), offers a third theoretical lens through which family involvement in higher education can be understood. Social capital refers to the resources, information, and support that individuals access through their social networks. In the higher education context, families serve as repositories of social capital that students draw upon to navigate institutional processes, make informed decisions about coursework and careers, access professional networks, and sustain motivation through periods of academic difficulty (Yosso, 2005).

Critically, however, the social capital embedded in family networks is highly unequally distributed. Students from highly educated, affluent families can access forms of capital, including familiarity with academic culture, professional networks, financial safety nets, and strategic knowledge about how universities work, that are simply unavailable to first-generation students whose parents have no experiential knowledge of higher education (Pascarella et al., 2004; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) importantly challenged deficit framings of minority family capital by articulating the concept of community cultural wealth, which encompasses aspirational, navigational, social, familial, resistant, and linguistic capital present in the families and communities of many students of color, though not recognized or valorized by dominant university culture.

IV. CONSEQUENCES OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT FOR STUDENT OUTCOMES

4.1. Academic Achievement and Persistence

The relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement in higher education is more complex and conditional than in K-12 settings. Several studies have documented positive associations between family support and first-year GPA, credit hour completion, and sophomore-year retention, particularly among first-generation and minority students (Dennis et al., 2005; Sy & Romero, 2008). Dennis et al. (2005) found that among a sample of Latino undergraduates, family encouragement and emotional support were significant positive predictors of academic self-efficacy and GPA, consistent with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive framework in which vicarious encouragement from significant others constitutes a key source of efficacy information.

The relationship between direct parental academic intervention, such as assisting with assignments or contacting instructors, and achievement is considerably less consistent. Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) found that behavioral over-involvement by parents was negatively associated with college students' academic performance, autonomy, and life satisfaction, even after controlling for the positive effects of emotional support. These findings suggest that the form of parental involvement, rather than its mere presence or intensity, is the critical moderating variable, with emotional and aspirational support producing positive effects while behavioral intrusion into student academic decision-making produces negative ones.

4.2. Sense of Belonging and Social Integration

A substantial strand of the literature examines how family involvement shapes students' sense of belonging and social integration within the university. Tinto's (1987) influential model of student departure posits that persistence is a function of the degree to which students become academically and socially integrated into the institutional community. From this perspective, excessive family involvement that anchors students to their home communities and inhibits social engagement on campus could theoretically undermine integration and increase departure risk. Empirical evidence on this question, however, is mixed and appears to be significantly moderated by student background and institutional context.

For traditional-age, residually enrolled students from majority cultural backgrounds, high levels of home contact are associated in some studies with lower campus engagement and reduced sense of institutional belonging (Fingerman et al., 2012). For first-generation and minority students, however, family connection frequently serves as a protective buffer against the alienation and cultural mismatch that many experiences in predominantly white, middle-class institutional environments (Stephens et al., 2012; Yosso, 2005). Castellanos and Jones (2003) documented that for many Latina/o students, familismo, the strong cultural value placed on family interdependence and obligation, served not as a barrier to academic integration but

as a fundamental source of the motivation and resilience that sustained engagement under conditions of institutional marginalization.

4.3. Psychological Well-Being and Autonomy Development

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) offers important predictions about the relationship between family involvement and student psychological well-being in higher education. The theory holds that well-being is contingent on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Family involvement that satisfies the need for relatedness while respecting student autonomy, that is, involvement that provides emotional connection and encouragement without controlling or substituting for student decision-making, is theorized to enhance well-being. Involvement that is experienced as controlling or contingent undermines autonomous motivation and is associated with anxiety, lower intrinsic motivation, and reduced psychological adjustment (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011).

Emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000) provides a complementary developmental lens. Arnett characterized the period from the late teens through the mid-twenties as a distinct developmental stage marked by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and the feeling of being in-between adolescence and full adulthood. University enrollment typically coincides with this stage, and the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, including the consolidation of identity, the development of autonomous decision-making capacity, and the formation of intimate relationships outside the family of origin, have direct implications for how parental involvement should be conceptualized and evaluated. Involvement that supports these developmental tasks is constructive; involvement that substitutes for or impedes them is developmentally regressive (Arnett, 2000; Lythcott-Haims, 2015).

4.4. First-Generation Students and Family Involvement

First-generation college students, defined as students whose parents have not completed a four-year college degree, present a particularly important and underserved case for understanding family involvement in higher education. These students often navigate a fundamental cultural tension: the aspiration to succeed in higher education while maintaining meaningful connection to family and community networks that may not share the norms, values, or practices of the university environment (Pascarella et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2012). This tension manifests in multiple dimensions, including pressure to contribute to family financially or practically while managing academic demands, guilt associated with perceived abandonment of family obligations, and a sense of cultural dislocation as students acquire social and cultural capital that distances them from their home communities.

London (1992) described this experience as a process of straddling two worlds, a metaphor that has resonated throughout subsequent scholarship on first-generation students. Institutions that fail to acknowledge or respond to the family contexts of first-generation students effectively require these students to choose between educational belonging and family belonging, a false and damaging dichotomy. Goldrick-Rab (2016) documented the material dimensions of this tension in vivid detail, showing how food insecurity, housing instability, and the diversion of educational resources to family financial emergencies destabilize the academic trajectories of many first-generation students in ways invisible to institutions committed to the fiction of a financially independent adult student.

V. INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

5.1. Family Orientation Programs and Communication Policies

Many higher education institutions have developed formal structures for engaging parents and families, including parent and family orientation programs, family weekends, dedicated parent portals providing access to institutional information, and parent associations or councils. These initiatives reflect institutional recognition that family involvement is a reality to be managed rather than a phenomenon to be wished away, and they aim to channel family engagement in constructive directions while establishing appropriate boundaries. Ward (2005) analyzed family engagement programs at 15 U.S. universities and found that the most effective programs shared three features: they provided clear information about institutional norms and the developmental needs of emerging adults; they offered constructive channels for family support that respected student privacy and autonomy; and they explicitly acknowledged the diversity of family contexts and the legitimacy of different cultural models of appropriate family involvement.

Privacy and confidentiality frameworks present a particular institutional challenge. In many national contexts, including the United States, legislation such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restricts institutions from sharing student academic records with parents without student consent, a provision that reflects the legal status of university students as adults but that frequently conflicts with parental expectations, particularly among families who are contributing financially to their children's education (Coburn, 2006). Navigating these legal and relational tensions requires clear institutional communication about privacy rights and the constructive redirection of parental energy toward forms of support that do not require access to confidential student information.

5.2. Cultural Responsiveness in Family Engagement

A significant limitation of most institutional family engagement programs is their implicit assumption of a culturally homogeneous family type: typically, the two-parent, college-educated, English-speaking, middle-class family for whom institutional communication, parent portals, and campus visit programs were designed. For families from immigrant backgrounds, non-English-speaking families, single-parent families, and families with no prior experience of higher education, these programs may be inaccessible, alienating, or simply irrelevant to their actual experiences and needs (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

Culturally responsive family engagement requires institutions to move beyond the assimilationist assumption that all families should be socialized into dominant university norms, toward a genuine recognition and valuation of the diverse forms of family capital that students bring to campus. This may involve providing multilingual communication, creating community liaison roles to bridge institutional and family cultures, designing first-generation-specific family engagement programs that acknowledge the distinctive challenges and strengths of these families, and training faculty and student affairs professionals to recognize and respond constructively to family-related student needs (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

5.3. Toward a Reconceptualized Framework for Family Engagement in Higher Education

Synthesizing the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in the preceding sections, this paper proposes a reconceptualized framework for understanding productive family engagement in higher education. The framework is organized around three key dimensions: the form of involvement, the developmental and cultural context of the student, and the institutional mediation of family engagement.

With respect to form, the evidence consistently distinguishes between emotionally supportive and aspirationally oriented family involvement, which is associated with positive outcomes across student populations, and behaviorally intrusive or decision-substituting involvement, which is associated with impaired autonomy and negative psychological consequences. A reconceptualized framework must therefore move beyond simple binary distinctions between involved and uninvolved parents, or between high-involvement and low-involvement families, toward a more differentiated account of what kinds of involvement support student development and under what conditions.

With respect to student context, the framework must be explicitly conditional rather than universal. The consequences of family involvement are systematically moderated by student generation status, cultural background, developmental stage, and institutional fit. A framework adequate to the diversity of the contemporary higher education student body must resist one-size-fits-all prescriptions and instead provide conceptual resources for understanding how the same form of parental behavior can be constructive for one student population and counterproductive for another. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework is particularly valuable here for its insistence on recognizing the assets embedded in diverse family forms rather than measuring all families against a middle-class, college-educated norm.

With respect to institutional mediation, the framework recognizes that universities are not passive recipients of whatever forms of family involvement students and parents bring to campus. Through their communication practices, privacy policies, orientation programs, advising cultures, and curricula, institutions actively shape the conditions under which family involvement occurs and the meanings that students and families attach to it. Institutions that create culturally responsive, student-centered family engagement structures are better positioned to harness the genuine benefits of family support while protecting the conditions necessary for student autonomy development and academic engagement.

VI. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this paper reveals a field at an important juncture. The dominant cultural narrative of the university as a space of autonomous adult development, in which parental involvement is at best a peripheral and at worst a regressive force, is being challenged from multiple directions simultaneously: by demographic diversification that has brought to campus students for whom family interdependence is both culturally normative and practically necessary; by technological change that has rendered the expectation of clean geographic and communicative separation from family largely obsolete; and by growing evidence that family support, appropriately channeled, is a significant protective factor for student persistence and well-being.

At the same time, the evidence on helicopter parenting and the developmental imperatives of emerging adulthood provides genuine warrant for concern about forms of parental involvement that substitute for rather than support student agency. The resolution of this tension, however, is not to privilege an individualist developmental ideal that systematically disadvantages students from collectivist or resource-constrained family backgrounds, but to develop theoretically richer accounts of what constitutes developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and institutionally constructive family engagement across diverse student populations.

For researchers, the field would benefit substantially from greater methodological diversity and longitudinal scope. Much of the existing quantitative literature relies on cross-sectional self-report data from convenience samples, limiting causal inference and generalizability. Longitudinal designs tracking family involvement across the full undergraduate career, qualitative studies exploring the meanings that students and families attach to their relationships and interactions, and comparative studies examining how institutional structures and national policy contexts shape family engagement patterns would all significantly advance the field.

VII. CONCLUSION

This literature review has examined the nature, theoretical foundations, consequences, and institutional implications of parental involvement and family engagement in higher education. Against the persistent institutional assumption that family influence is a diminishing force in adult education, the evidence reviewed here demonstrates that family relationships remain profoundly consequential for university students' academic outcomes, sense of belonging, persistence, and psychological well-being, though the nature and direction of these consequences is highly contingent on the form of involvement, the cultural and generational background of the student, and the institutional context in which engagement occurs.

For higher education institutions, the challenge is to develop family engagement frameworks that are neither naively welcoming of all forms of parental involvement nor reflexively dismissive of the genuine support that families provide. The reconceptualized framework proposed here offers a starting point for thinking through what productive, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate family engagement might look like in practice. Ultimately, the goal is not to determine whether families belong in higher education, but to understand how institutions can work with the full diversity of family

forms and relationships that students bring to campus in ways that support, rather than undermine, their educational success and personal development.

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