

Tyler E. Smith, Zachary R. Myers, Amanda L. Moen, Elizabeth Moorman Kim & Susan M. Sheridan  
Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

## Abstract

Much research indicates that children benefit when families are engaged in their children's education. Family engagement may be particularly valuable for students in rural schools due to the often limited resources available in rural communities (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Rural schools are in a unique position to promote and benefit from family engagement due to centrality within their communities, and by providing opportunities for residents to communicate and participate (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). Recent research has indicated supportive relationships with families as one of the most important factors in determining success for high-performing, high-needs rural schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007). However, there is limited empirical research examining the effects of family engagement in rural settings (Prater et al., 1997). Our research team is currently conducting a quantitative synthesis of research on family engagement interventions. The purpose of this poster is to (1) explore the prevalence of family engagement interventions in rural settings and (2) examine the specific intervention strategies used to engage families in rural settings.

## Introduction

- Family participation in a child's education has repeatedly been shown to be important to a child's social, emotional, behavioral and academic outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Map, 2002).
- In a rural school where resources are often limited, family engagement can be especially beneficial (Witte & Sheridan, 2011).
- Supportive family-school relationships are one of the most significant factors in promoting success for high-performing, high-needs schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007).
- Rigorous research regarding family school partnerships in rural settings has been limited, and there is not a cohesive or full understanding of family school partnerships in that setting (Semke & Sheridan, 2011).
- The current study is part of a larger quantitative synthesis of family engagement interventions. The purpose of the study is to (1) explore the prevalence of family engagement interventions in rural settings and (2) examine the specific intervention strategies that have been used to engage families in rural settings.

### Distinction Between Parent Involvement and Family School Partnerships

Data presented is drawn from two distinct models of family engagement interventions: Parent involvement and family engagement.

- Parent involvement models** are defined as programs emphasizing the participation of significant caregivers in activities promoting the educational process of children to support their academic and social well-being (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005).
  - Parent involvement focuses on **structure**, and what each system (home and school) does in isolation (e.g., home literacy practices, Jordan et al., 2000; communications about school, Kelley & McCain, 1995; household rules and routines, Webster-Stratton et al., 2001).
- Family-school partnerships** are distinct from parent involvement. They are child-focused approaches wherein families and professionals cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to enhance opportunities and success for children and adolescents across social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains (Albright & Weissberg, 2010; Downer & Myers, 2010; Lines, Miller, & Arthur-Stanley, 2010).
  - Family-school partnership models emphasize the bidirectional **relationship** between families and schools, and purport to enhance student outcomes through the development of cross-system supports and continuities across settings.

### Research Needs and Purpose of Present Review

- The present study is a preliminary look at a much larger data set that is currently being coded by trained individuals.
- Little is currently known regarding the frequency and types of setting variables reported in empirical journals, books, dissertations, and theses.

### Research Questions

- How often are engagement studies occurring in rural settings compared to other settings (i.e., urban, heterogeneous)?
- What specific *structural* intervention strategies (i.e., behavioral management, school involvement, etc.) are being used to engage families in rural settings?
- What specific *relational* intervention strategies (i.e., parent-child relationship, parent-teacher relationship, etc.) are being used to engage families in rural settings?

## Methods

### Sample

- Parent involvement and family-school partnership intervention studies ( $n = 76$ ) are reviewed in the present study.

### Coding Variables

- Type of intervention (parent involvement, family-school partnership)
- Relational/structural components of the intervention
- Sample and setting characteristics

### Coding Procedures

- Six trained individuals coded the studies.
- Regular meetings were held to address questions, minimize drift, discuss discrepancies, and reach consensus.

### Study Selection

- A broad search of the literature yielded over 27,000 abstracts
- Multiple approaches were used to identify the relevant literature (1979-2011):
  - Reference databases (i.e., ERIC, PsycINFO)
  - Hand searches of journals
- Abstracts are being subjected to a coding process by researchers, and studies that meet the following criteria for inclusion are being retrieved:
  - Investigated parent involvement (Fishel & Ramirez, 2005) or family-school partnership (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001) up to or including Grade 12
  - Presented outcomes for children, parents, teachers, schools, communities, or partnerships
  - Occurred in a naturalistic, not laboratory setting
- Retrieved studies are being further reviewed to determine their fit to study criteria.

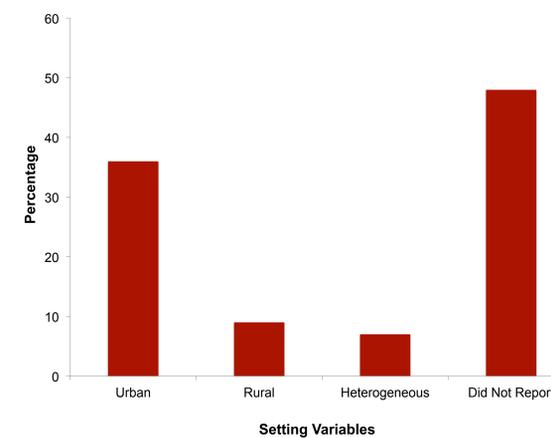
## Results

### Research Question 1:

How often are engagement studies occurring in rural settings compared to other settings (i.e., urban, heterogeneous)?

- Nearly half of coded studies did not report setting variables. Engagement studies are much more likely to occur in urban settings in comparison to rural studies.

Figure 1: Percentage of Setting Variables in Coded Engagement Studies

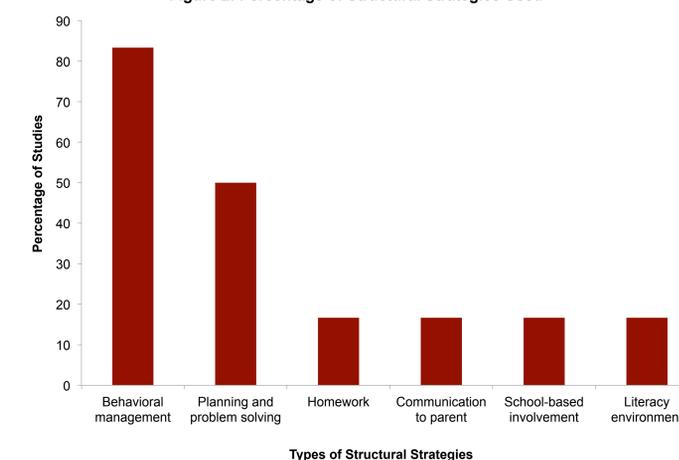


### Research Question 2:

What specific *structural* intervention strategies (i.e., behavioral management, school involvement, etc.) are being used to engage families in rural settings?

- Of the studies that assessed structural strategies, more than three-fourths (83%) assessed behavioral management techniques, while one-half of studies assessed planning and problem-solving strategies. Surprisingly, less than 20% of studies assessed school-based involvement.

Figure 2: Percentage of Structural Strategies Used

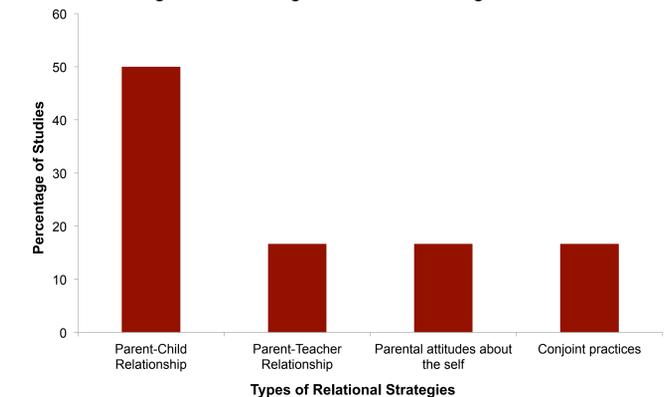


### Research Question 3:

What specific *relational* strategies (i.e., parent-teacher relationships, parent-child relationships, etc.) are being used to engage families in rural settings?

- Of the studies that assessed relational strategies, one-half assessed parent-child relationships. All other relational strategy were assessed by less than 20% of the studies.

Figure 3: Percentage of Relational Strategies Used



## Discussion

- Overall, many studies are not reporting setting variables, making it difficult to exhaustively investigate rural characteristics.
- Additionally, the majority of engagement studies are occurring in other settings besides rural (i.e., urban) indicating a need for family engagement studies in rural areas.
- Based on our subsample of engagement studies conducted in rural settings:
  - Behavioral management and planning and problem solving structural strategies are most likely to be assessed, indicating a need for research investigating other types of structural strategies (i.e., school-based involvement, communication to parent, etc.).
  - Parent-child relationship relational strategies are most likely to be assessed indicating a need for research focusing on other types of relational strategies (i.e., parent-teacher relationship, conjoint practices, etc.)

### Limitations

- Results reported are preliminary and from a much larger database that is currently being coded.
- A lack of studies reported in rural settings makes it difficult to validate the current findings.
- Our definition of "rural" may mask unique characteristics (i.e., population, location, etc.) specific to different types of rural settings.