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# **“It Takes a Village”: Approaching the Development of School-Family-Community Partnerships through Bronfenbrenner’s Socio-Ecological Perspectives**

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*Improving student learning and development requires a constant exploration of practical collaboration methods with families and educational service providers. Using Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological systems theory can help stakeholders understand how internal and external factors affect a student’s overall performance and raise families’ and educational service providers’ awareness of their roles. The application of this theory encourages stakeholders to extend the existing dual capacity framework between families and schools to the quadruple partnership that further involves communities and universities. When families and educators become more aware of the complexities of the factors and make intentional efforts, they are more likely to create an effective partnership for facilitating student learning and development. Our article utilizes Bronfenbrenner’s theory to address the quadruple partnership of families, schools, communities, and universities. This article summarizes Bronfenbrenner’s theory and discusses how the idea can be applied to quadruple partnerships to improve the collaboration among stakeholders. Implications for practitioners and researchers are further discussed.*

**Keywords:** Bronfenbrenner, socio-ecological systems theory, family-school-community-university partnership, student learning and development

## **Introduction**

Families and educators need to be aware of various factors that affect student learning and collaborate to promote a positive and effective learning environment. Our article utilizes Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological systems theory to address the quadruple partnership of families, schools, communities, and universities. We first summarize Bronfenbrenner’s theory and then explore how it can be applied to quadruple partnerships to improve the collaboration among stakeholders.

## **Bronfenbrenner’s Socio-Ecological Systems Theory**

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) was a Russian psychologist who developed the socio-ecological systems theory to study human development. Bronfenbrenner analyzed proximal and

distal influences from the child to their families, peers, communities, politics, to other aspects of the larger environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). His theory initially examined four systems of interactive influences on an individual. The first system is the **microsystem**, which focuses on the child and their immediate environments such as families, schools, friends, and communities. The second system, called the **mesosystem**, refers to the interactions of any elements in the microsystem, such as family-school partnerships. The third system is called the **exosystem**, which covers factors like parents' health, family income, and school quality that directly or indirectly affect a child's learning and development. The fourth system is called the **macrosystem**, focusing on societal conditions such as politics, economics, ideology, and culture. Bronfenbrenner later added the fifth system, named the **chronosystem**, to address the influences of changes over time for various reasons, from individual to environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner (2005) referred to this theory of "systems within systems" in forming an overarching process-person-context-time model (PPCT). The term "*process*" lends itself to forms of interaction within an environment in which the learning experience to external stimuli initiates. Examining this immediate environment on the **biosystem** level is essential to begin the holistic examination of how parenting styles and attitudes foster the child's well-being and ability to focus and retain knowledge. Further, the "*person*" concept of the model examines the student's "demand," "resource," and "force" characteristics and how student interactions across and within systems hold an effect on their learning outcomes (McLinden, 2017). Additionally, exploring the "*context*" aspect in depth involves focusing on exosystemic aspects, such as the cost of living and family income, along with patterns of potential environmental influence on communities (Tudge, 2016). Examining context is imperative to examine how the intersections of income, quality of the community, and culture can affect stakeholder collaboration, ultimately impacting the child's quality of learning. Lastly, the aspect of "*time*" refers to the outer chronosystem that aids in focusing on the longitudinal impact and context of the learning experience. In this sense, this gives the opportunity to include observations of engagement and evaluate the outcomes (McLinden, 2017). Overall, Bronfenbrenner's theory calls for meeting the needs of the whole child by knowing the factors that affect the child's learning and development.

### **The Applications of Bronfenbrenner's Theory in Education**

Bronfenbrenner's theory has been applied to discover different influences on older students, employees, and other individuals. For example, his theory on the ecology of human development helps establish the national Head Start program, which provides families with lower income the opportunity to enroll children, starting at age 3, into the early enrichment program to foster their social and educational development. Aspects of the theory, such as the PPCT model, were used in taking environmental considerations into student learning. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Head Start program continues to work as a gap-bridging program to help at-risk children access resources and accelerate their learning and development. Since the program was established,

researchers have been using and expanding Bronfenbrenner's theory to diverse populations in education. For instance, McLinden (2017) used Bronfenbrenner's theory to examine the impacts of proximal and distal factors on part-time students' learning experience. The study indicates that different socio-ecological systems have bi-directional relationships with one another. Thus, the more supportive strategies in place (e.g., flexible scheduling and academic resources), the more likely part-time students will complete their programs successfully.

Another study, conducted by Rojas and Avitia (2017), utilized Bronfenbrenner's theory to address variables that affect students' academic performance in urban public schools. The study highlights the necessity of considering the school infrastructure, families' different values, students' socioeconomic status, and educators' cultural awareness. Open discussions are also emphasized if schools want to increase the engagement of diverse families and their children. Recently, Panopoulos and Drossinou-Korea's (2020) study adopted Bronfenbrenner's theory to raise teachers' awareness of how the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem influence how interventions are delivered to students with disabilities. The study stresses that increasing students' learning outcomes in the intervention program requires teachers to consider factors beyond students' disabilities and academic domains and expand to larger aspects of students' lives.

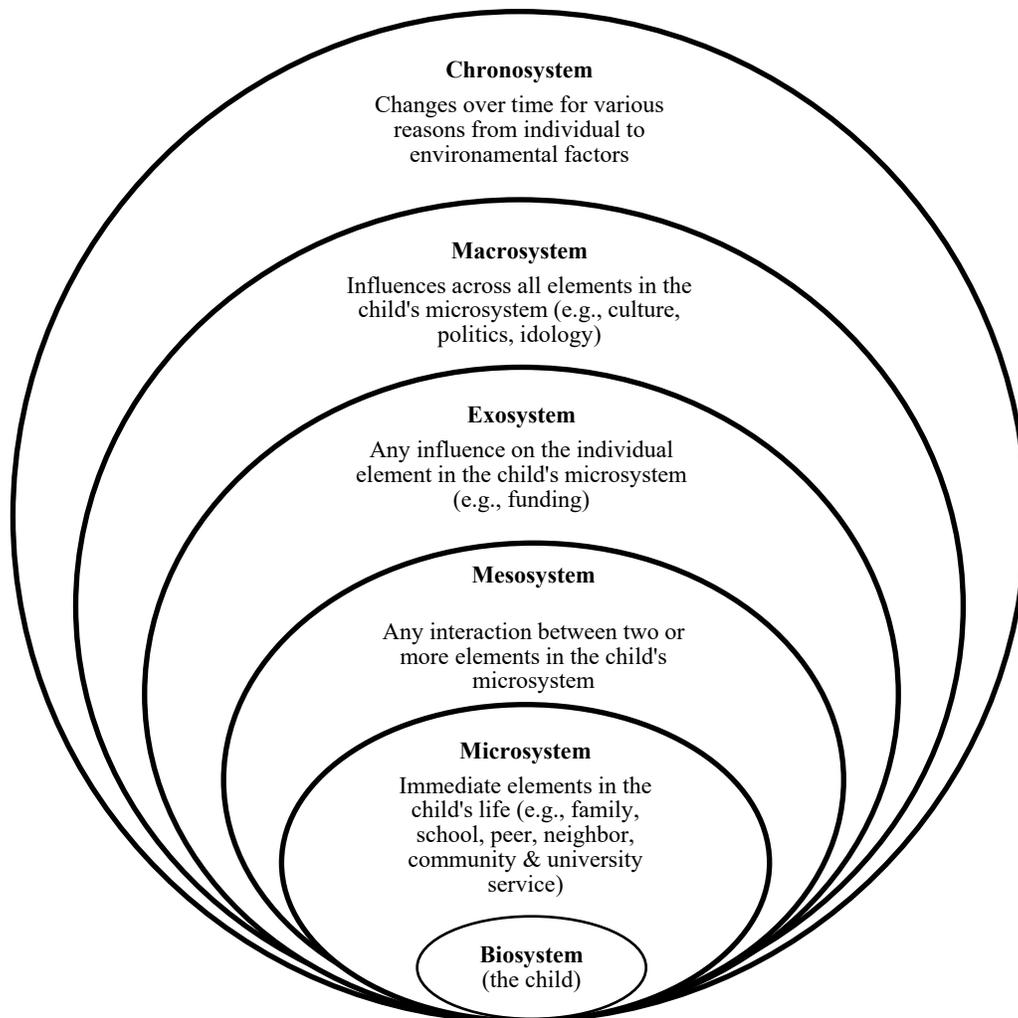
### **The Role of Universities in the Family-School-Community Partnership**

There are many advantages of adding universities to the family-school-community partnership. For example, collaboration with universities encourages the use of research-validated practices. When parents and teachers see the effectiveness of these practices, it will increase families, schools, and communities' engagement to work for student learning and development. Furthermore, the connections between the dyads of school-community, community-university, and school-university create vocational training opportunities for K-12 students to see how their knowledge and skills can be further expanded and applied to solve everyday life problems. This encourages students to start their career preparation earlier and constantly advance their learning. Effective partnership outcomes may be used as an indicator to determine the necessity and worthiness of future funding.

Partnerships across families, schools, and communities are essential to support student learning in the K-12 school setting (Poynton et al., 2018). Such a partnership allows schools to permit families to play a role in their children's education and create more opportunities for community involvement in student learning. Adding universities, which prepare future K-12 teachers, to the existing triadic partnership amongst schools, families, and communities, the quadruple partnership brings more extensive support to K-12 students and those pursuing higher education. It also generates opportunities for stakeholders to improve their education ability and influence others. Each stakeholder can actively contribute to the collaboration by facilitating topics to have more experience and knowledge. Leaders and administrators must be engaged in the partnership

and provide training to stakeholders on critical issues such as engagement, understanding, advocacy, and trust. Addressing these issues earlier will avoid or resolve conflicts promptly and engage stakeholders at a deeper level. Adopting Bronfenbrenner's theory, we illustrate the quadruple partnerships across families, schools, communities, and universities in Figure 1, followed by descriptions of each system in this quadruple partnership.

**Figure 1. An Application of Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Theory in the Quadruple Partnership**



### ***Biosystem***

The child is the ultimate beneficiary of the various system levels. The personal characteristics, which encompass one's identity, social, and cognitive skills, are also known as biosystem characteristics. Bronfenbrenner (2005) acknowledges the individual's biological and genetic aspects unique to the child, yet extensively focuses on how personal characteristics are brought

into social situations. He categorizes the child's characteristics into three groups: demand, resource, and force. Bronfenbrenner (2005) described that *demand characteristics* are "personal stimulus" characteristics that distinguish primary factors that other individuals would notice and further influence their reactions and interactions. These characteristics refer to personal identities such as gender, ethnicity, age, etc. *Resource characteristics* refer to a person's intelligence levels, mastery of skills, and past experiences that influence how they receive and express information. Finally, *force characteristics* introduce personality differences such as attitudes, preference, motivation, and perseverance. Understanding students' demand, resource, and force characteristics are essential for the quadruple partnership stakeholders to build rapport with students and facilitate their learning. It is important to note that students' characteristics are constantly changing, shaped by personal and environmental factors.

### ***Microsystem***

Families, schools, communities, and universities that provide services (e.g., tutoring and materials) to students are involved in the microsystem. Families are the foremost source of influence on their children's development. Since the nature of K-12 students is greatly under parental guardianship, family involvement with the developing child in their academic/social learning holds significant weight in influencing student learning and development. Increasing the engagement of nonprofit organizations and universities in supporting K-12 students' education also contributes to students' development across academia, social behavior, and health. The resources outside the students' families and schools provide needed extra support to the students, their families, and the whole community (Epstein, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

### ***Mesosystem***

The mesosystem refers to the interactions between two or more elements within the child's microsystem. The quadruple partnership at this level focuses on stakeholders' interaction across families, schools, communities, and universities. Communication methods, resources, supportive environments, ethical responsibilities, and relationships are ways to evaluate how well the stakeholders work collaboratively.

For instance, Sheldon's (2007) study on student attendance in a Title I school shows that the partnership among the school, families, and communities positively affected students' academic performance. In collaboration with community service providers, the school adopted multiple ways to engage families and enhance communication, such as workshops, monthly newsletters, site/home visits, phone calls, and emails. In Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) study, they pointed out that the key factors influencing parent involvement in their children's schools include parents' beliefs, feeling welcomed in school, and considering parents' life contexts. Further, it is shown how school administrators can provide training to stakeholders regarding engagement and creating a welcoming climate and culture to help define success (Weiss et al., 2013). Assisting

teachers in building trustful relationships with parents, connecting parents from different cultural and social backgrounds, and sharing accountability are ways to help shape expectations for student behavior and achievement and build effective rapport.

Further in the aspect of the mesosystem, university involvement also assists community development. University students who have grown up in different areas may propose changes to improve their new environment and advocate as human services professionals or educators. In areas that are not in proximity to universities or are not designated as “college towns,” there is still the opportunity for virtual involvement. Increasing university involvement can effectively promote change amongst local schools and communities. Ehlenz’s (2017) study points out how building universities and colleges in lower-income communities can increase new resources for local K-20 students, improve the city, and attract new students.

### *Exosystem*

The exosystem refers to the impacts on the people involved in the child’s microsystem. To illustrate, in any community-sponsored or university-sponsored projects, budget justifications are often required for board committee members to review. The allocation of funding will determine to what degree students and their families can receive the service. The amount of funding allocated also affects the quality and quantity of services, types of involvement, facilities, and training. For instance, Wagner et al.’s (1994) study on the pilot Healthy Start program indicates that different types of involvement, districtwide or schoolwide, are greatly affected by budgeting. Furthermore, family income, government subsidization, and numbers of dependents in an immediate family also matter to students’ learning and development.

The community’s average income where students live needs to be considered due to its impact on students’ living conditions, including resources, environmental safety, and job opportunities. Majee and Anakwe’s (2019) study examined the impact of community resources on African-American youths’ and adults’ perceptions in rural America. The research study shows that structured school-based programs like 4-H and Future Farmers of America encourage more African-American youths to engage in community leadership opportunities than general programs. A structured program that considers students’ complex economic conditions (e.g., limited transportation between school and work, widespread poverty, and high unemployment rates) goes a long way in promoting the partnership among families, schools, communities, and universities. The structured school-based programs also increase the possibility of parents’ participation in the partnership. Parents’ pressure for career security often outweighs the relevance of the activities in which schools, communities, and universities would like them to be involved. Therefore, when their children’s school programs are practical, parents are more likely to support them. As Weiss et al. (2010) concluded in their study of educational reform, in creating meaningful partnerships between schools, families, and communities, particularly in

lower-performing schools, initiatives need to be supported by policies and programs, funding, qualified service providers, as well as accountability measures.

### ***Macrosystem***

The quadruple partnership at the macrosystem level covers cultural, social, and economic dimensions. Culture is what facilitates the commonality of learned values (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The broader aspect of studying different cultures reveals that there are no universal ways of processing information. Thus, there can be conflicts in the family-school-community-university partnership in how information is assessed. For example, parents' lack of education can affect schools' perceptions of students and their families. These perceptions include prejudice and presumption about students' and their parents' capabilities. Sequentially, they may affect what and how students receive their educational services.

In Appalachia Educational Laboratory's (2005) report, the researchers explored studies linking student achievement to school, family, and community involvement. Their report indicates that extracurricular learning is a critical factor in student engagement with their community. They also found that families with higher education and affluence levels tend to be more comfortable interacting with school staff because they can relate to one another (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), whereas educationally disadvantaged parents potentially face a cultural barrier when it comes to communicating with school staff. Additionally, the failure to acknowledge one's privilege in access to gains in society could lead to marginalizing those of minority cultures by upholding a "bootstrap mentality" (Gilling, 2017) that anyone could achieve if they try hard enough. This assumption of a bootstrap mentality can be harmful in which this idea ignores the possible cultural barriers that exist on a broader level.

Bryan and Henry's (2012) school-family-community process model of partnership provides a point of cultural focus amongst stakeholders. In their process model of partnership, Bryan and Henry (2012) explained how additional personnel (e.g., school counselors, social workers, and parent advocates) in the partnership could help bridge the cultural gaps between service providers and diverse families. Non-teaching staff intervenes outside of the classroom may offer equally valuable suggestions to serve students and families, and thus universities should not limit their partnership in K-12 teacher education programs. Counseling and social work faculty and students in higher education can contribute significantly to partnerships across families, schools, communities, and universities (Boehm & Moin, 2014). They can help evaluate communal efforts of mutual support, internalized effects of these interactions, and ethnic affiliation. This aspect represents a sense of belonging with one's ethnic group and how it can manifest in variable community settings. The involvement of counseling and social work programs helps stakeholders better understand all stakeholders' interconnection, evaluate social-cultural considerations in public schools and the student-family relationship, and expand students' learning outside the institutional realm.

In building a culturally responsive partnership among all stakeholders, adequate training and diversity sensitivity are essential to facilitate the involvement of students and their families within this partnership. In several studies involving school stakeholder partnerships, democratic collaboration and social cohesion are noted to promote responsiveness amongst stakeholders through open dialogue. Bryan and Henry's (2012) study, using the principles of democratic collaboration, which welcomes all stakeholders to equally and meaningfully contribute through shared decision-making, is emphasized in helping close the cultural gaps in stakeholders and improve partnerships. Social cohesion is another critical factor contributing to the success of a partnership, which refers to the sense of solidarity among all stakeholders and their strength of relationships to achieve a common goal (Hemming, 2018; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Larsen, 2013). Stakeholders who possess a sense of social solidarity are more likely to compromise personal interest for group interest. At the macrosystem level, all disciplines are valued, and stakeholders are willing to remain resilient and collaborate to maximize students' learning.

In terms of the economic dimension, the ideology of privilege that comes with economic classism is outlined by the macrosystem's normative influence. As part of societal norms, education is often seen as a right rather than a privilege; however, it can be experienced as both, depending on one's contextual lens. Consequently, many of these norms and traditions lead to assumptions and potentially stereotypes based on status and other cultural aspects. Such issues are harmful to a partnership if not adequately addressed. Lack of economic awareness places unrealistic expectations on low-income families, such as the pressure to contribute or involvement that does not navigate work schedules. A typical example is that stakeholders host collaborative meetings when parents need to work and cannot be involved. This also poses a challenge within the mesosystem, which concerns interactions among families, schools, communities, and universities. Addressing this issue through collaborative means like rewriting the rules of engagement, negotiating proper times to meet, adopting multiple communication methods, and enhancing mutual understanding would positively affect the partnership (Ishimaru, 2014).

Furthermore, Jeynes's (2012) meta-analysis research on parental involvement programs indicates that the parent should educate their children through collaborative efforts rather than traditional authoritarian approaches to enhance family-school communication. In this way, students can serve as a bridge to help their teachers understand their economic family structures and the resources that are more accessible for them and their parents. Overall, the macrosystem's cultural, social, and economic dimensions address the intertwined influences on the stakeholders due to societal norms, cultural values, and socioeconomic status. In turn, they will impact student learning and development.

### ***Chronosystem***

The first four layers of Bronfenbrenner's theory measure present and proximal occurrences. The outer-most layer of the chronosystem helps predict future outcomes by evaluating changes within and beyond each level over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). These changes can impact schools, families, communities, and universities and directly and indirectly influence partnership development and outcomes. Using the aspect of the chronosystem and focusing on changes over time helps stakeholders prepare for possible changes in the partnership with anticipated actions and interventions. This action would also serve as a preventive and interventive measure for what occurs over a student's lifetime due to environmental, economic, and educational influence. For example, students' legal status and their immigrant families are impacted directly by changes in legislature.

Further, national or international emergencies can also affect students' learning and development. A relevant example is the COVID-19 pandemic that forces a switch from physical classroom learning to virtual learning and impacts students' access to resources in different school districts (Mladenova et al., 2020). Unavoidably, the pandemic also affects the school-family-community-university partnership in all aspects, from services to communication. Stakeholders need to become creative and flexible to continue creating the best values out of any condition. Overall, exploring the chronosystem regarding partnership development helps stakeholders understand these students' social and emotional learning to inform instructional support and services.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner introduces micro-time, meso-time, and macro-time substructures in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In terms of the quadruple partnership, *micro-time* refers to the quality and duration of time that families, schools, communities, and universities spend with students, directly affecting student learning and development. *Meso-time* describes the extent of interactions between stakeholders over time and is helpful to understand partnership outcomes and social cohesion in terms of days, weeks, or years. *Macro-time*, which describes factors that affect all stakeholders across generations or the lifespan, may shift expectations on a broader range. Although comparable to the macrosystem, *macro-time* addresses the macrosystem's concepts (cultural, social, and economic dimensions) in their specific changes in expectation over a certain period. For example, as discussed in Atkins (2020) article regarding changes in expectations in education amongst those belonging to Generation Z (persons born between 1995 and 2010) and Millennials (persons born between 1981 to 1994), it is shown that those belonging to Generation Z are less willing to settle for jobs that do not fit their passions or promote meaningful change, unlike Millennials who were willing to switch industries in pursuit for growth/finance-oriented opportunities.

### **Practical Implications**

The heart of Bronfenbrenner's theory is the extensive focus of the internal and external factors on human development. It helps stakeholders examine partnerships in which the influences of interactions and outcomes are affected by contextual factors such as individuality, families, communities, and society. Using Bronfenbrenner's theory to examine a quadruple partnership across families, schools, communities, and universities has three implications for practitioners.

First, Bronfenbrenner's theory promotes equity and equality of services to students and their families. In evaluating partnerships, considerations within a societal context (i.e., macrosystem) include the concept of social justice that exemplifies equality, diversity, and advocacy for further pushing laws and policies and expanding civic education. With an ever-changing curriculum in schools, Bronfenbrenner's theory helps evaluate services outside the school setting, the accessibility of resources, and the potential dilemmas in partnership engagement.

Second, Bronfenbrenner's theory in the school-family-community-university partnership can be used to develop, monitor, and evaluate initiatives from present, proximal, to distal aspects. Utilizing this theory will help outline the competencies needed to bridge the gaps between stakeholders. Nodine, Bracco, and Jaeger (2019) argued that the continuously changing sociocultural conditions prompt greater exploration of what can be improved in current and future collaborations.

Third, other school professionals, such as counselors and parent advocates, can also play a role in partnerships. They serve as facilitators for development outside of academics and promote social cohesion. As indicated in Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time model, these professionals are necessary mediators in the quadruple partnership because they bring perspectives and cultural diversity closely tied to the reality of students' specific situations. Evaluating stakeholders' roles in the quadruple partnership through Bronfenbrenner's theory increases understanding of diverse students' unique learning needs and provides them with holistic educational services.

In applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to school-family-community-university collaboration, it is essential to examine stakeholders' perspectives of partnerships, including attitudes towards student learning and engagement, to address further the unique challenges of establishing transparency within partnerships. From taking these unique aspects of engagement, such as the degree of parental involvement and stakeholder socialization. Being aware of the subjective lens of those who receive services and those who facilitate these services helps evaluate the differing outcomes (Sheldon & Jung, 2015). Researchers could compare changes in any of the systems in Bronfenbrenner's theory associated with students' learning and development. This may increase the buy-in of quadruple partnerships and motivate stakeholders to work together.

Furthermore, the context of the partnership's environment is an essential research consideration due to the differences in funding and support. Institutional characteristics create different patterns of engagement (Hutson et al., 2019). Examining the partnership through Bronfenbrenner's lens, the community in charge of significant funding impacts the university system and local school districts' rapport. Both the effects of unevenly allocated funding and poor division of responsibility amongst these sectors could affect partnership effectiveness by causing a disparity in communication and resources that can affect their student's quality of learning. In short, the quality of stakeholders and their relationships are of high consideration. Another potential research area involves utilizing Bronfenbrenner's theory to compare the partnerships' effectiveness in university-bound areas with non-university-bound areas where remote involvement could be of interest. University-bound areas, which refer to cities in which public or private universities reside alongside, are worth considering that these universities often form partnerships with local primary and secondary schools for the professional development of university students/faculty.

Lastly, students' responses to this quadruple partnership should be taken into consideration. Understanding students' perspectives toward the collaboration of their families, teachers, and service providers will add social validity to the application of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Interviewing students, observing their interactions with stakeholders, and examining each student's specific contexts (e.g., language, dis/ability, socioeconomic status, etc.) are ways for collecting data to inform a quadruple partnership.

### Conclusion

Bronfenbrenner's social and ecological perspectives raise families' and educational providers' awareness of what affects student learning and development from immediate to broad environments. The application of this theory encourages stakeholders to extend the existing dual capacity framework between families and schools to the quadruple partnership that further involves communities and universities. As a result, a holistic perspective of child influences will be formed and evaluated. In developing and assessing the quadruple partnership, it is essential to consider Bronfenbrenner's five systems and understand factors that may inhibit or enhance student learning and development.

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