Facilitating Family Involvement and Support for Inclusive Education

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Abstract

The advantages to a family-centered approach to services have been emphasized in education literature for several decades. Active family involvement and support have been identified as key elements to the success of inclusive early childhood education programs. The purpose of this article is two-fold: to review literature on family involvement in inclusive early childhood programs from the perspective of developmental ecological systems theory, and to describe family-focused programs for developing embedded learning opportunities across multiple inclusive settings. In so doing, we discuss how the four components of the ecological system (the microsystem, parents and siblings; the mesosystem, peers and school; the exosystem, community connections; and the macrosystem, cultural identity) influence the education of the child.

Key words: family involvement, inclusion, ecological systems, parents, siblings, early childhood education, Asian, case, cultural diversity

Introduction

Active family involvement has long been considered to be an important factor related to better outcomes in the education of young children with and without disabilities in inclusive early childhood programs (Berger, 1995; Levy, Kim, & Olive, 2006; Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Research has shown that high levels of parental involvement correlate with improved academic performance, higher test scores, more positive attitudes toward school,

higher homework completion rates, fewer placements in special education, academic perseverance, lower dropout rates, and fewer suspensions (Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan, & Fenstermacher, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Pérez Carreón, et al.).

Parental involvement is important for the education of children of all ages, but it is critical for the success of young children in inclusive settings (Filler & Xu, 2006). Although there has not been a standard definition of the term *inclusion*, inclusive early childhood programming typically reflects three characteristics: (1) full participation of children with disabilities in everyday life activities with their typically developing peers in both school and community settings; (2) educational goals and objectives are developed and implemented through team collaboration by parents and professionals; and (3) child outcomes are measured periodically to ensure the effectiveness of the program (Guralnick, 2001; Hunt, Soto, Maier, Liboiron, & Bae, 2004; Odom et al., 1996; Siegel, 1996).

The recognition that family involvement benefits children does not make clear how the involvement becomes a positive force or what factors act to determine the degree of benefit. Family involvement is not a fixed event but a dynamic and ever-changing series of interactions that vary depending on the context in which they occur, the disciplines from which the collaborative team members are drawn, the resources parents bring to the interactions, and the particular needs of the child and the family. Traditionally, the education agency or school has created structures and activities intended to support involvement. However, as parents become involved, they do so with limited power to define their roles and actions (Fine, 1993). They are often expected to agree with and support the structures and dynamics already in place. Parents who agree with the school and get along with the existing model are seen as "good." Those who disagree are considered "problematic" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Parent involvement is also related to teacher actions. For example, Anderson and Minke (2007) found that specific teacher invitations were significantly related to parent involvement behaviors, particularly among minority and low-income families. They suggested that when parents perceived that their participation was desired by teachers, they would often overcome obstacles to be involved in spite of a lack of resources. Brown and Medway (2007) examined the relationships among measures of school climate, teacher expectations, and instructional practices in an elementary school with a high percentage of low-income, minority children. They found that when teachers valued parental input and family involvement, they created ways to facilitate home-school communication. Exemplary teachers also felt responsible for building a positive relationship with parents and placed a high value on parents helping their

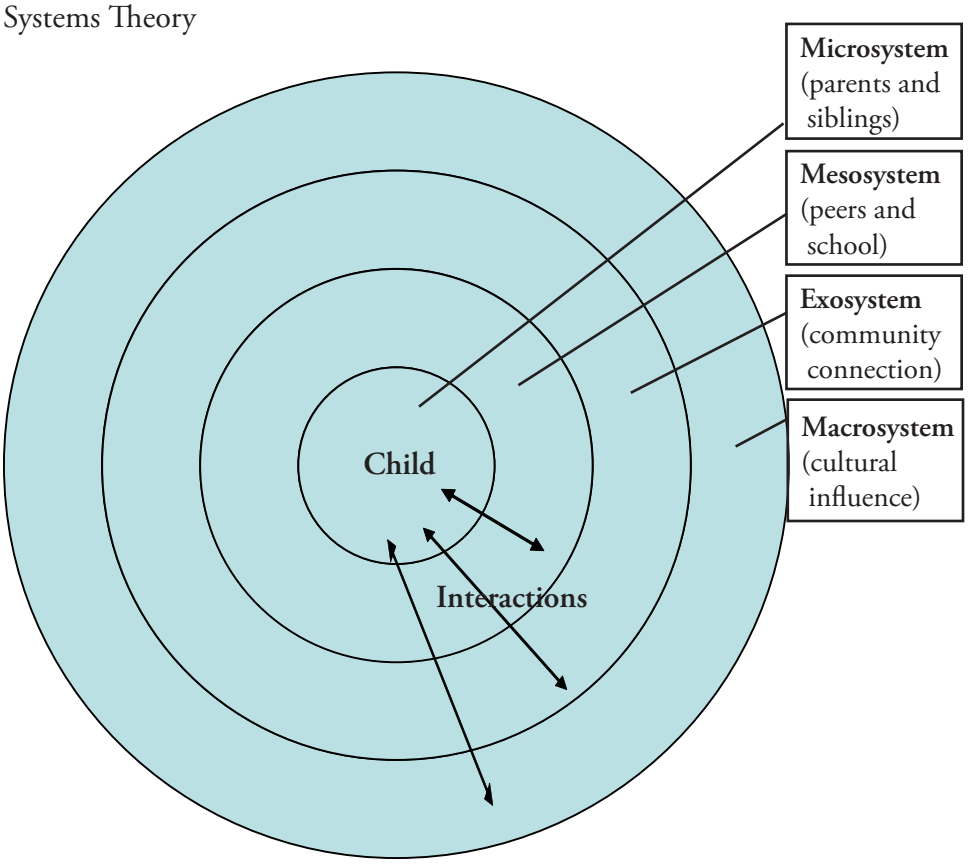
children with homework and other activities. These teachers viewed parent involvement as more than physical presence at school and felt that parents could make a significant educational impact beyond what they may contribute by attending meetings and volunteering in the classroom.

The purpose of this article is two-fold: to review literature on family involvement in inclusive early childhood programs from the perspective of developmental ecological systems theory, and to describe family-focused programs for developing embedded learning opportunities across multiple inclusive settings. We begin the review with a discussion of four ecological systems that are critical to an understanding of factors that may influence the degree and form of participation and then go on to describe a slightly different but complimentary approach that views the child as embedded in a series of interrelated systems that interact with one another.

The Theoretical Framework: Developmental Ecological Systems Approach

The ecological systems model we are focusing upon is based on an approach first described by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1988, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). According to Bronfenbrenner, an ecological systems model views the child as existing within a complex ecological context consisting of numerous intrafamilial and extrafamilial systems that affect children's development. Specifically, there are four interconnected systems that comprise the model (see Figure 1). The first is the microsystem and consists of the immediate family environment or setting in which the child lives, such as parent and sibling interactions that exert an impact on the child. The mesosystem refers to interconnections between two or more settings or the interactions outside the family environment such as school and peer influences. The exosystem is the community context that may not be directly experienced by the child, but which may influence the elements of the microsystem, such as sibling interactions. The macrosystem is the wider social, cultural, and legal context that encompasses all the other systems. An ecological systems view of inclusive education suggests that children with or without disabilities develop in a complex social world and that it is necessary to observe interactions at multilevel contexts and examine changes over time at all levels. To ensure the success of inclusive educational programming, it is critical to integrate individual and contextual processes and to examine interrelations among these systems. As shown in Figure 1, among the multiple levels of influence within the global system, the child's development is most directly affected by the immediate family environment that provides a connection between the child and the outside world.

Figure 1. The Interacted Systems Model Based on Developmental Ecological Systems Theory



Embedded Learning Opportunities

Developmental ecological systems psychologists describe the child as embedded in a series of interrelated systems that interact with one another (McCormick, 2006). The interaction is bi-directional, that is, the developing child both affects and is affected by nested systems. According to the theory, the child's learning occurs within the context of normally occurring routines in familiar settings. For a child with disabilities, these settings refer to the general education environment or any natural setting where typically developing children are present. Therefore, an understanding of the needs of the child with disabilities must be accompanied by a careful analysis of the opportunities that exist in the typical educational setting to address the goals and objectives designed to alleviate those needs. In essence, the schedule of events that comprise the general education curriculum, including the content, format, and length of various learning activities, should be considered relative to target skills or objectives.

The planning for children with disabilities should start with a team discussion of the general education curriculum and should focus on routine and planned activities. One evidence-based approach for this planning would be to develop embedded learning opportunities that are identified by general education teachers, special education teachers, parents, and other individuals who routinely interact with the child. Embedded learning opportunities are short teaching episodes that focus on individual learning objectives and are infused within ongoing classroom activities and routines (Sandall & Schwartz, 2002). The development of an activity matrix is one strategy for implementing embedded learning opportunities (Filler & Xu, 2006; Fox & Williams, 1991; Sandall & Schwartz). Typically the activity matrix includes a simple schedule of the daily activities for the early childhood program setting in which a child with disabilities is to be fully included throughout the day. In this schedule, the instructional goals for the target child are taken directly from the child's individualized family services plan (IFSP) or the individualized education program (IEP). Families' priorities for instruction are considered. Parents and other family members' perspectives are viewed as important and numerous carefully planned opportunities are provided to address high priority skills during daily program activities. Including family increases the probability that skills learned at the center or school are also taught and practiced in the home and other natural settings. Activities that are specifically designed for the child with special needs are based on the family's concerns and priorities and, therefore, are more likely to be appropriate within the cultural context of each family.

The Microsystem: Parents and Siblings

Identifying and Addressing Parental Concerns

As Filler and Xu (2006) have noted,

> the realities of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-ability student population demand a unique and nontraditional approach characterized by an individualization sensitive to both inter- and intra-group identity. On the one hand the early childhood educator must pay individual attention to developmentally appropriate content and strategy and on the other hand, support each family's membership in a class loosely defined by common values, methods of adornment, and views regarding the role of the family in the formal educational process. (p. 93)

The task is no more apparent than in the inclusion of students with disabilities (Xu, Gelfer, & Filler, 2003). As a group, these youngsters not only reflect the racial and ethnic diversities of their typically developing peers but may also

present an additional aspect of individuality: different, and at times frustrating, learning and/or behavioral problems.

One challenge to the identification of parental concerns is the unique characteristics of each family, especially families with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Each family may perceive their needs differently and thus may seek different resources. Additionally, the family's belief system may also play an important role in how they determine their priorities and use the resources (Bruder, 2000; Noonan & McCormick, 2006). Vignette 1 is an example of how a family's perception of needs and priorities may differ from that of a professional. (Note: All the names in the vignettes are pseudonyms.)

Vignette 1: The Chan Family

Ling-Ling is a 4½-year-old girl with Down syndrome. She has been receiving Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) service provided by the local school system. At the beginning of the year Ling-Ling's ECSE teacher was concerned about her delayed speech-language and fine motor skills and suggested Ling-Ling receive speech-language therapy and physical therapy interventions. These suggestions were reflected in Ling-Ling's individualized education program (IEP) goals. Three months later, however, Ling-Ling's ECSE teacher was frustrated with the finding that Ling-Ling made minimal progress in her speech-language and fine motor skills. She further found out that Ling-Ling's parents did not follow through on Ling-Ling's intervention plan at home, a critical determiner of success. What she did not know was that Ling-Ling's family had other concerns.

Having a child with a disability has a fundamental and lasting impact on Ling-Ling's family. It changes the belief system that the family has held for generations. Buddhism is the religious background of this family, and they strongly believe what they do in this world will determine what they will become in the other world after they die. In addition to the time issue (both Mr. and Mrs. Chan work full-time), which was the more obvious and immediate concern that the family had, there was another concern that the family was not willing or ready to share with other people, especially with the ECSE teacher who was from a different cultural background. Mr. and Mrs. Chan believed that having a child with disabilities was a punishment from the heavens for some wrong doing by themselves or their ancestors. Therefore, the only way to deal with the disability was to work harder and repent. They did not believe that they had the power to change or improve Ling-Ling's condition. They believed they should take care of and protect Ling-Ling, the priority for the family. Thus it was not surprising that they did not implement any additional interventions at home. In this case, what a professional considered a priority was not a priority for the Chan family. In terms of resources, they were more comfortable in seeking extended family support instead of obtaining professional assistance.

Without understanding Ling-Ling's family's needs and priorities that were intimately related to their cultural background, professionals could misinterpret Mr. and Mrs. Chan's behaviors as uncooperative or irresponsible. What they failed to see was the strength or the power of the Chan family: hardworking, caring, and supportive, demonstrated by both immediate and extended family members (e.g., brother, grandparents, and uncles). These strengths reflected family values that could actually exert a positive influence by enriching the cultural awareness of the preschool.

While the importance of identifying family priorities and resources are self-evident, how to identify and access family resources is very individualized and not always obvious. As Dunst, Trivette, Davis, and Cornwell (1988) have examined, how one defines a family concern or need has much to do with the approach that one uses to address that need. For these authors, a need exists whenever there is a difference between what the parent sees as normative or desirable and what actually exists from his/her perspective, not the perspective of the educator, social worker, or therapist. The role of the professional is to acknowledge and support each family's ability to identify its own concerns relative to the development and education of the child (empowerment) and to assist the family in acquiring both the skills and resources that may be necessary to effectively address those concerns (enablement). According to several studies, many parents do not feel that the activities organized by the school constitute real opportunities for family participation, and many of them actually feel powerless in decision-making processes (e.g., Weiss & Edwards, 1992; Williams & Stallworth, 1984).

More recent research has shown the effects of involving families by empowering and enabling them in the process of decision making within the ecological systems model. A model called "ecologies of parental engagement" (EPE) explains how parents' practices in relation to their children's school can constitute a transformative process in which parents draw on multiple experiences and resources to define their interaction with schools and school activities (Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). The term ecology suggests the focus on the entire system: families in relation to environment. Instead of "involvement" to describe the specific things parents do, the researchers used "engagement" to include parents' orientations to the world and how those orientations frame the things they do. In other words, the concept of parental and family involvement goes beyond a given individual and his or her participation in an event. It also includes the contexts involved in an individual's decision to participate in an event, including his or her relationships with other individuals, the history of the event, and the intra-familial resources available that may be utilized to support participation or "engagement." Such an approach

views the family as a complex organization of individuals with unique patterns of communication and responsibilities that at times overlap and at other times are unique to subsystems that exist within the larger family system (e.g., the parent-child subsystem, the spousal subsystem, the sibling subsystem, the parent-grandparent subsystem). An intervention that focuses upon any one individual is likely to affect any subsystem to which that individual belongs which, in turn, affects the entire family.

Pérez Carreón et al. (2005) suggested one way to address family concerns in a meaningful manner for all involved is to allow parents' life experiences and cultural capital to inform and shape the school's culture. Schools need to implement parental participation programs by listening to parents' and other family members' voices and, in so doing, acknowledging the often unique needs and hopes reflected in those voices. In this way the distance between home and school may be reduced and a truly collaborative team could be formed. Cooper and Christie (2005) evaluated a District Parent Training Program (DPTP) which was designed to "educate and empower urban school parents" (p. 2249). Although the DPTP was a curriculum-based parent education program with the intent to empower parents in helping their children in content areas such as English and math, findings from the evaluation by Cooper and Christie suggested a mutual benefit between parents and school. While parents felt more empowered through the program, educators and administrators gained a better understanding of family needs by giving those parents the opportunity to articulate their own needs and pinpoint the ways in which they want to gain from parent-oriented programs. They also found that establishing true partnerships with parents requires that educators acknowledge and validate parents' views and ultimately share power. Partnership also requires educators to show sensitivity to the culturally relevant values that influence parents' educational priorities and demands, and recognize that cultural, socioeconomic, and gender factors affect how parents participate in their children's education. It is important to recognize that implicit in such an approach is the assumption on the part of educators that, as Dunst et al. (1988) have noted, every parent has the capacity to identify his or her own educational concerns and to acquire the skills necessary to play a central role in the education of the child.

Identifying and Meeting Siblings' Needs

Clearly the parent-child subsystem is extremely important within the larger family system, but sibling relationships may be even more significant because siblings actually spend a significant amount of time with each other, and those sibling interactions often directly affect the larger set of peer interactions that occur outside of the family. Siblings learn critical social skills from each other,

such as sharing, negotiation, and competition. The impact of a child's disability on siblings' emotional and behavioral functioning is multifactorial and influenced by characteristics of the sibling and sibling dyad, the nature and demands of the child's condition, and parental and family functioning (Sharpe & Rossiter, 2002; Stoneman & Berman, 1993).

Sibling relationships appear especially important for preschool children. At this age, children start to play associatively or cooperatively, and thus interactive play is one of the effective ways of learning for preschool children. However, due to the disability, this interaction for the child with special needs may be disruptive in two ways: to the child with special needs, and to the child's siblings. Most previous interventions tended to focus on the child with special needs. Yet, the impact on the sibling(s) is equally important. Because of the additional attention and care the child with special needs receives, the siblings might often feel ignored or neglected, or even resentful.

Siblings' needs may be different for families from different cultures. For families with strong sibling relationships, parents may share some of their caregiving responsibilities with the children so that siblings are more likely to feel their roles have particular significance to the family. For families with strong individual values, involving siblings in the planning for the child with special needs may help to develop a sense of identity and recognized value within the entire family system. Regardless of cultural differences, siblings are important role models that can either positively or negatively impact the child with special needs.

Dodd (2004) described the development of a support group for the brothers and sisters of young children with disabilities, Portage "brothers and sisters" project. A model for sibling involvement, the home-based Portage Service provides services for preschool children with a wide range of disabilities and their families. The group offers a mixture of socializing, games, and group-work activities that are intended to address the issues that may emerge in family life when a child with disabilities is born. The Portage model is intended to provide support that is flexible enough to accommodate the needs of siblings as well as those of the child with special needs and their parents.

Effective communication between parents and siblings about disabilities may reduce stress felt by siblings. Pit-Ten Cate and Loots (2000) indicated that siblings reported they worried most often about the future and the health of their brother or sister with disabilities. These siblings commented that open communication and trust were the most important component of their relationship with parents. They acknowledged that it could be difficult for their parents to meet the needs of non-disabled siblings because they might be preoccupied with the child who had additional needs and sometimes might also

wish to protect the other children and conceal information from them. Although parents may fear that talking to a child about a sibling with a disability may induce stress, especially when the child is young, evidence suggests that siblings need information that is appropriate to their age.

Mesosystem: Peers and School

Involving Peers in the Process of Planning for Inclusion

Successful attempts to meet the educational needs of children with a wide spectrum of needs in a single setting require careful planning. Key to that planning is the identification of activities that allow for the meaningful participation of each child and are, at the same time, valid for the unique cultural identity of each family. As families, schools, and communities have taken more steps to fully integrate students with disabilities into the schools, families and educators have worked to find effective ways to plan together. One approach that has been used since the late 1980s is the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS). MAPS is a strategy that was originally developed by Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint, Judith Snow, Evelyn Lusthaus, and the staff at the Center for Integrated Education in Canada. One particular characteristic of the MAPS is its focus on what the child can do, instead of the child's weaknesses or deficits (Ryan, Kay, Fitzgerald, Paquette, & Smith, 2001).

A critical feature of the MAPS process is the involvement of typically developing peers and friends of the child with disabilities in planning for inclusion as well as other aspects of the educational program. Typically developing children provide necessary and fresh perspectives on the needs of their peers related to involvement in regular classes and community activities. They also serve a key role in supporting their peer with disabilities in regular activities and settings. Additionally, typically developing peers can help other team members understand and appreciate the dreams and fears of a child with special needs relative to being accepted and valued as a member of the school community. Because the involvement of peers is an essential feature of the MAPS process, the planning should not occur until the child with disabilities has been a member of the regular education or natural community, so that their friends without disabilities can be identified and recruited. Ideally, more than one friend should be included to decrease the likelihood that a child may feel uncomfortable in a predominately or all-adult setting. The planning typically occurs in one or two sessions, but for younger children the session can be broken down into shorter periods. The seven key questions to be addressed by the MAPS include: What is the individual's history? What is your dream for the individual? What is your nightmare? Who is the individual? What are the individual's strengths, gifts,

and abilities? What are the individual's needs? What would the individual's ideal day at school look like, and what must be done to make it happen?

Addressing the questions that compose the MAPS process, however, should be an ongoing activity for the planning team. The facilitator may choose to address the questions in different sequences based on different situations. Peer participation in the planning for inclusion helps the planning team to brainstorm the needs of the child with disabilities, describe the dreams for the child from their typically developing peers' perspectives, share their concerns or fears for the child in inclusive settings, and develop goals that capitalize on the child's strengths within the general education curriculum.

When considering the use of the MAPS process, professionals and parents may ask how the MAPS process relates to the IEP or IFSP development. While the MAPS planning is not a legal process as is the IEP or IFSP procedure, it complements these plans in several ways. First, the collaborative process inherent in the MAPS can lead to a clearer sense of mission and greater sense of teamwork, both of which are keys to early childhood special education and early intervention effectiveness. Second, because the MAPS planning involves the child's siblings and typically developing peers, it provides a source of additional input and perspective that is age and developmentally relevant. Specific IEP goals and objectives and IFSP outcomes should reference skills and concepts taught in general education classes and other typical school and community environments that are chronologically relevant and appropriate (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). Third, the MAPS planning should provide families with an experience that leads to an appreciation for the value of their active participation in educational planning.

Vignette 2: What are our dreams for Ling-Ling?

Ling-Ling's MAPS planning team included Ling-Ling's parents, grandparents, and older brother, her preschool friends Sarah and Tom, her ECSE teacher, her speech-language pathologist, and her physical therapist. Everybody was asked to talk about his or her dream for Ling-Ling. What made this planning process unique were the dreams for Ling-Ling expressed by her older brother, Sam, and her friends, Sarah and Tom. Sam was a very caring big brother, and he often played with Ling-Ling after school. His dream for Ling-Ling was that she could go to college; a dream that he shared for himself. Sarah said her dream for Ling-Ling was that they would go to kindergarten together so they could see each other every day and play together. Tom was a very active boy, and he wanted Ling-Ling to play soccer with him. When asked why, he said because they were best friends. Compared with adults' dreams

for Ling-Ling, which were primarily skill-focused, Ling-Ling's friends reminded the adults that Ling-Ling was first of all a 4-year-old child like other same-age children, and therefore she needed to be with her age appropriate peers in natural settings. In order to make this dream come true, an inclusive early childhood program should be considered for her placement. Through this process Mr. and Mrs. Chan were very happy to discover that Ling-Ling was accepted by her typically developing peers as a friend, which they feared would never happen. They never dreamed that Ling-Ling would go to a regular school like her older brother until then. A new horizon was unfolding for Ling-Ling.

As mentioned before, it is widely accepted that family involvement and support is an important factor for the success of inclusive programs (e.g., Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001; Salend, 2006); however, we cannot assume that family members all understand the value of inclusive practices. The MAPS process provides multiple opportunities for professionals to explain essential features of inclusive programs to families. For example, our experience has suggested that many families initially view special education as a place and not a set of services that are intended to support the successful education of children in the regular educational setting. The provision of an opportunity for parents and family members to ask questions and share concerns about their needs and priorities in a supportive and non-judgmental environment goes a long way toward building a collaborative relationship with the family.

Exosystem: Community Connection

The inclusion of individuals with disabilities in both education as well as the larger aspects of society reflects a much larger multicultural global trend (Erhard & Umanksy, 2005; Gaad, 2004). Inclusion in education is but one aspect of the broader social integration of children (Dyson, 2005; Guralnick, 1994; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Inclusion in not only the classroom setting but also in after-school activities provides important opportunities for meaningful interactions between children with and without disabilities.

Different approaches to the involvement of families in after-school activities have provided examples of the positive impact such activities may have upon the development of young children. For example, Families and Schools Together (FAST) is an after-school, multi-family support program to increase parent involvement in schools, build family-community networks through schools, and improve the academic and social outcomes of children (McDonald et al., 2006; McDonald, Billingham, Conrad, Morgan, & Payton, 1997; McDonald, Coe-Braddish, Billingham, Dibble, & Rice, 1991). Thousands of

low-income families from diverse backgrounds have increased their involvement in schools and communities through the FAST project since its inception in 1988. It has been implemented in more than 800 schools in 45 states and five countries. Positive outcomes of target children include significantly better academic performance, decreased aggressive behavior, and increased social skills (McDonald et al., 2006). In addition, it has shown a positive effect regarding less substance abuse among diverse low-income, urban families. Issues such as income and family-school-community connection are extremely important factors that may influence the effectiveness of intervention in families of children with disabilities.

In the FAST program, a collaborative, culturally diverse team of parents and professionals forms a multi-family group to engage the parents in building social networks through the schools. In these relationships, different levels of the child's social ecology are considered and appear to act as protective factors against the occurrence of negative behaviors such as substance abuse. This multi-family group model emphasizes high engagement and retention rates that reflect the cultural norms of the Latino community. Consistent research findings have supported the primacy of extended families in Latino communities including those of Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (e.g., McDonald et al., 2006; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). Respect for parents as active partners in the process of supporting the child's school success clearly is a key part of the FAST project.

Projects such as FAST teaming are effective because they value the interdependence within the ecological system, an ultimate goal of inclusion. Within this system, the community or societal structure based on reciprocal relationships is a key, yet often lacking, component for families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Research has suggested that the social network beyond school and family does play a critical role in both family functioning and successful intervention for children with disabilities in areas of academic performance, classroom behaviors, and peer social skills. It appears to be especially beneficial for multi-family groups with different cultural backgrounds who may not have social networks available otherwise.

Another model involving parents of children with more severe disabilities such as autism is the Family-Centered Preschool Model that was designed to augment the family support provided by classroom staff members within center-based preschool programs (Kaczmarek, Goldstein, Florey, Carter, & Cannon, 2004). In this model, parents of children with disabilities are assigned as family consultants. The family consultants provide information and support to other families who are receiving early intervention services in the same community. The family consultants, as parents of children with disabilities as well

as paraprofessional members of the early intervention staff, act as a liaison between families and professional staff, the agency, and the broader community. Kaczmarek and colleagues found that families who participated in this program benefited in multiple ways such as obtaining information about specific disabilities, resources, school options, family rights, transition to kindergarten, and potty training. Family members also indicated benefits and support they received from not only the family consultants, but also from other participating families. In addition, the project had a positive impact on parenting skills. For example, parents reported that the project provided support and information, which in turn had helped them to provide better service and advocate for their children. Not surprisingly, positive effects on child outcomes were also observed.

Macrosystem: Cultural Influence

We defined cultural influence as social and/or environmental factors that influence the beliefs and behaviors of individuals who are involved in the systems. According to Lindsey and colleagues (2003), an individual's cultural proficiency in education is the level of knowledge-based skills and understanding that are critical for successful teaching and interaction with students. To be culturally proficient, one needs to understand the concept of diversity that encompasses acceptance, inclusiveness, and respect (Lindsey et al.). One must also realize that each individual is a unique but at the same time inseparable unit within the multi-level systems.

Cultural influence exists in all contexts from immediate family environment to larger social settings within the ecological systems. It guides one's implicit thoughts and feelings towards a specific phenomenon as well as one's explicit behaviors in a social interaction. Weisner (2002) examined cultural influence within the ecological-cultural context and suggested that cultural pathways are made up of everyday routines of life. These routines are cultural activities in which children from different backgrounds may act or react differently. For example, one might expect that children growing up in a culture that bestows significant value to the sibling relationship would respond differently to a brother's or sister's disability than children raised in a culture in which sibling relationships are secondary, even to friendships. Yet cultural context has been given minimal attention in research on sibling adaptation to disability with but a few exceptions.

Culture-related values are reflected in the quality of sibling relationships. Cultures that highly value collectivity and group identity tend to have strong, close sibling relationships. For example, in Latino cultures, siblings' daily lives

tend to be highly intertwined, and sibling caretaking and companionship are routines, as compared to European American youth who report greater levels of companionship with their friends than with their siblings (DeRosier & Kupersmidt, 1991). One study reported that European American children more often directed and rejected their younger siblings' play than Mexican children, who more often commented on and joined in their younger siblings' play (Farver, 1993). In cultures that value sibling companionship and caretaking, older siblings are often given more responsibility by their parents while younger children receive more attention from their parents and older siblings.

On the other hand, in cultures that value the autonomy of the individual child, sibling relationships are less interdependent, and siblings tend to become competitors for their parents' attention. Parents often seek to foster individual identity and achievement, to treat siblings "equally and fairly," and to protect siblings from being "overburdened" by each other's care (Weisner, 1993). Therefore, when one child with a disability receives more attention and care from parents because of his or her special needs, the impact on the child's siblings will vary from culture to culture. The context of cultural beliefs and expectations for sibling companionship and intimacy should be considered when we identify family concerns and needs because of the role they may play in effective intervention for the child with special needs.

Conclusion

Creating inclusive educational programs for diverse groups of young children is a complex and often daunting task. Traditionally, educational practices have reflected a "one size fits all" approach to both curriculum and strategy that ignores fundamental individual differences. Educational programs for young children often reflect practices that homogenize settings to produce an unrealistic uniformity among students that is not reflected in the pluralistic societies in which they live. We now recognize the value that is added to the preschool education experience by diversity and have, in the last few years, attempted to identify critical aspects of successful inclusive programs. Key among them has been parent and family involvement and support for inclusion.

We believe, from both our reading of the available literature and our extensive clinical experience, that the enablement and empowerment of families should be a goal of all educational programs. To reach this goal we need a dynamic, systematic, and comprehensive approach that reflects an awareness and appreciation for the complex ways in which systems act and interact to influence outcomes. The developmental ecological systems model is one of the approaches trying to address this complex set of variables. This model has been

supported with well-established research and evidence-based practices. When educational practices that support inclusion focus upon all systems with active family involvement as the focus of concern, we will be able to achieve the more important goal of education: to prepare our youth for a life that reflects an appreciation of the value and fundamental worth of each individual.

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