Family System Theory

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The idea and benefits of a supportive family is not new. Since the beginning of time, people lived in community with their family and extended family to learn life skills, find security, food, and to nurture one another, until old age. The family has been the glue that holds society together and creates strong and productive individuals; it is where learning begins. As Vygotsky points out, “Instruction, after all, does not begin in school (2002). Families come in all shapes and sizes. Before looking at the family system theory, it is important to define what a family is. According to the Family Systems Theory (2008), a full definition that encompasses both the structure and functions of a family says:

“A unit or group of two or more individuals (or beings) formally or informally connected through birth, law, and/or commonly recognized choices, circumstances, shared bonds, and personalities, who are connected by a structure of relationships and unique interest for achieving the functions of connection, guidance, and assignment of meaning, while also serving as a reflective network that brings strengths talents, and commonalities in providing emotional, spiritual, and/or social support.”

In today’s society, as you see both parents working more often, more weight for educating the child has fallen upon teachers. Parents are too busy with their jobs and external affairs. As I currently am observing in a Rochester City Elementary school, I notice that young students lack foundational skills in reading and writing. It’s hard to pinpoint where they missed essential tools that build their early literacy foundations. This is especially true as children come from culturally and linguistically diverse family environments, the child is often set back as they don’t have the full support or are not aware of resources in the community that are available to them (Connard & Novick, 1996). It is also shown that African-American males living in poverty are among the least likely children and adolescents to receive mental health services in the United States, even though they are more likely to be referred to mental health agencies for help Tucker & Dixon, 2009). These statistics show that there is still a problem in the current system and that there needs to be more effort to work in conjunction with teachers, parents and the community.

Murray Bowen is the “father” of the family systems theory. A psychiatrist, he used systems thinking and knowledge from family research to show that people are capable of thinking, to use language, have a complex psychology and culture, but also do all the ordinary things in life that other species do (Bowen, 2010). The family system theory looks at human behavior and views the family as an emotional unit, using systems thinking as a way to explain the complexity of interactions that take place within that unit and shows how members of a family are very much connected emotionally (Bowen, 2010). Connard & Novick (1999) say that one person within the system cannot be understood in isolation from the others. The family systems theory looks at the family as a whole and each person is identified in relation to the family (Family Systems Theory, 2008). This is why it is so important to build connections with family members and learn their culture and way of life. A teacher can only implement an effective curriculum if they are familiar with the family’s background and culture.

The Family Systems Theory seeks to not look at the child in isolation but attempts to look at the larger picture of one’s life. To give an example: a Vygotsky principle shows a puzzle of Pedro’s life. He had a language barrier, was from a different culture, from low socioeconomic status and was in special education. Though he was dealing with these areas of his life, teachers saw him as the problem and failed to look into his background. It was not until one teacher in six-grade looked deeper into his life and placed him with another student who understood his language and culture, plus with two boys who were friendly and English-dominant. With this new environment for him, he finally began to succeed with a lot of understanding and commitment from students and the teacher (Wink & Putney, 2002). With more communication between parents and teachers, problems like these could be much less common and teachers will be more equipped to help create a positive and culturally sensitive atmosphere. A family plays an important role in helping to shape a child’s development. This is where they first learn to speak, communicate, play, explore, love and acquire personal skills to interact with others. The family is also were a child should have their biological and physiological needs met. If they do not feel safe at home, how can we expect them to be safe in the school? If a child does not feel accepted in his home, it will affect their whole educational journey. The family systems theory recognizes a strong correlation between biological, genetic, psychological, and sociological factors in determining individual behavior (Bowen, 2010). This is why it is important to strengthen families and guide them to community resources and support.

Characteristics of the family system are often impacted in a strong way by their cultural values and beliefs. For instance, research shows that in some households, the family unit includes extended family members or clans, which includes several households of relatives with a commitment to a support network that is family-based, while other families tend to focus on the immediate family and make use of external support networks (Bruns & Corso, 2001). In understanding the variety of family structures, teaching professionals will have a greater ability to effectively help them. It is also important to recognize that families within the same culture differ greatly. Some of these differences could be the primary language the family speaks at home and in the community, the family’s level of education, their religious affiliation, their country or origin, the length of time the family has lived in the United States, the family’s degree of acculturation, and where the family currently lives (Santos & Reese, 1999). One family I worked with personally was a family from Congo that came as refugees. Barely speaking any English, the children were put into the education system. I am not sure what special services the children received, but I can imagine that without knowing English, it would was difficult. They struggled their first year in school to find friends and the boy often was picked on and became more aggressive toward his classmates because of this. From when they first arrived in America, our church took this family under their wings. People within our church volunteered to provide tutoring services, help them with basic needs, gave them rides, and most of all, wanted to be their friend. A few years later, the children speak English fluently and are doing well in school. I truly believe that if it was not for a joint effort of many individuals, both in and out of our church, they would not be where they are today. Sadly, many refugee families who come to America never succeed and find that life here can be much more challenging then they ever anticipated upon arriving. One common thread that determines their success is the specific family being “adopted” by someone, to help them integrate into society.

One common need that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often face is their reading abilities. Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, brings to light the number of issues that are relevant to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds displayed in their reading-achievement difficulties (McCollin & O’Shea, 2005). Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often experience hardships with phonological awareness, mainly due to their limited levels of literacy development in the home setting, both in their native languages, “cultural disparities and/or cultural deprivation” (McCollin & O’Shea, 2005). One strategy for helping these students is to find early opportunities to read material that is culturally and linguistically relevant. I feel that the sooner we can get the family involved in the child’s learning process, the better chance the child has in succeeding.

African American males are often overrepresented in most categories of learning, emotional, and behavioral disabilities (Tucker & Dixon, 2009). Tucker and Dixon (2009) go on to say that African American males are highly overrepresented in areas of disability that are connected to disruptive and inappropriate behavior at school compared to categories of disability that describe a specific learning problems. This is true for Matthew who was referred for an evaluation, but the choice was not clear cut. They said he either had a learning disability or an emotional disturbance issue. Though Matthew was close academically to his peers, he was placed in a special, self-contained class for children with emotional disturbances. In this school, though only 17% of the students were black, they represented 35% of those served in special education classes for children with LD (Klinger, 2006). Rather then supporting the child, they are often recommended for a learning disability. Klinger (2006) says, “these social processes do not occur by happenstance, or by the good or evil intentions of a few individuals, Rather, they reflect a set of societal beliefs and values, political agendas, and historical events that combine to construct identities that will become the official version of who these children are.” African American are also far more likely than Euro American or female peers to be suspended, expelled, or subjected to corporal punishment (Tucker & Dixon, 2009). As many of these statistics come from low-income families, it as also been theorized that living in poverty creates higher stress levels, which can lead to higher levels of child abuse, depression, drug use, anxiety, and behavior problems, while it is these families who are not often informed or having knowledge of professional help that is available to them (Tucker & Dixon, 2009). I believe African American children come from a beautiful and caring culture. The system should not push for them to change, but should accommodate their teaching styles and adapt to provide better recourses for learning and an awareness of community help available. Elementary teachers are predominantly white females. If they teach according to their own knowledge and styles without looking deeper into the African American culture of learning and interacting, it will ultimately hinder their learning and not show value for their way of life.

As America is a melting pot of many diverse cultures, it is important to understand and appreciate their ways of life and customs. Children from different cultures often view authority figures and parental roles differently, depending of their culture of origin. For example, children from Asian and Native American cultures are often taught from a young age to be obedient and submissive to adults and authority figures (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). For child from these cultures, these traits are vary valued and important to their society, but may lead to a limited assertiveness that is very necessary in the US classroom (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). On the other end of the spectrum, African American children are often brought up in families that teach the importance of being outspoken and a strong individual. These children are taught to not automatically follow authority figures, which can make them appear to be defiant and disrespectful in various social situations (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). With a stronger teacher-parent partnership, many misunderstandings can be eliminated. There needs to be a balance though to not accept every cultural norm, if it does not agree with specific values of the school. For instance, many African American children who come from violence-prone areas are taught to be tough and physically aggressive as a means to survival (Cartledge, Singlh, & Gibson, 2008). In these conditions, teachers need to communicate alternative social skills to the students and families and to follow up with families to reinforce these behaviors in their home life. It has been found that parents of African American boys in elementary school can play an important role to helping reduce aggressive behaviors, and even more effective in teaching social skills to CLD learners in school (Cartledge, Singlh, & Gibson, 2008). At the Rochester City School where I observe, almost half the children have an IEP. I was surprised to learn this fact but also saddened to hear the special ed. teacher say that it’s difficult to get in contact with their parents, and the involvements of parents in the school setting is very little. Research and clinical practice have shown that a student’s developmental outcomes, including school achievement, motivation to learn, and self-esteem, are very much improved when the parents are “actively and constructively involved in facilitating their child’s development and education (Kahn et al., 2009).” One longitudinal study that followed 281 low-income, ethnically diverse children from kindergarten to fifth grade, has shown that parental involvement greatly improved a child’s literacy achievement and they found as parents become more involved, so did the child’s performance in literacy (George, 2010).

There are a few ways in which schools can help encourage positive relationships between staff and parents. Firstly, schools need to communicate to parents the importance of their role to help in the child’s educational process. After this, schools should inform parents about which of their behaviors greatly enhances their child’s learning, and thirdly, they need to find ways to welcome and invite parents to engage with the school staff and the education of their own child (Kahn et al., 2009). In doing these, it not only gives a child an advantage, but if a parent of a student, especially one with special needs, can be a part of their child’s learning, they will be able to reinforce concepts learned in class, at home. If parents are to become more involved in the school and community, they need to know that they are respected and welcomed. Ertel (2009), says that teachers need to be open-minded and non-judgmental and should help families feel valued and respected in the classroom.

Early Intervention is a key to giving a child with special needs a head start. Early interventions programs help lower the risk that is connected to genetic and developmental handicaps and opening new avenues for growth and learning (Connard & Novick, 1996). Research also shows that interventions that involved the family were more successful then interventions without the family. These programs created a partnership between the family and teacher and recognized their right to be a part of the decision-making process for the child, as well as providing the family with much needed information and support (Connard & Novick, 1996). One community support network is the Head Start Programs. They work with children to reduce risks associated with poverty, prevent negative chain reactions that often begin at an early age and create new opportunities for children and their families (Connard & Nocick, 1996). But this program also puts a strong emphasis on parents being a part of the program and services that are offered to them. This approach seeks to strengthen the family’s health, education and provide them with services to give them a “head start” (Connard & Nocick, 1999).

Once the parent wants to be involved in the education process, it is important to keep families well informed of their role they can play. Say a child will be receiving an IEP, the teacher should inform the parent who will be there, what each person’s role is, what will happen in the meeting and letting families know that they can bring advocates with them to the meeting (Ray, Pewitt-Kinder & George, 2009). The more knowledge people have, the more empowered they will be in life. With the success of parents involvement in early intervention, parents should no longer be treated as children to be “schooled by experts” who know everything, but should be seen as partners with different expertise that bring to the discussions and decision making process of what is best for the child (Connard & Nocick, 1999). With these different voices and a full picture of the child and culture, better assessments can be made and the creation of relevant materials that encourage active and social learning.

My personal history is one that is quite unique. Growing up in East Africa, I was exposed to numerous types of schools. I went to a British school, three different American-bases schools and was homeschooled about four years. I can say that for the most part, none of the schools really encouraged teacher-parent relationships. It was to my benefit that I grew up in a safe and nurturing environment that valued education. As I was a poor reader, my mom read daily with me to strengthen my reading skills and build my vocabulary. Looking back, I struggled quite a lot in school and feel I could have been a candidate for some special need in learning. I was extremely slow in test taking and had a difficult time concentrating on reading, making comprehension of material an issue. Because there was no such thing as an IEP where I went to school, there was no choice but to do the best you could with what you’ve got. I can attribute my success in school to my parents support for me over the years. School never came easy to me, but they taught me to work hard and persevere. I don’t think one can separate their school from their personal life. As the family system looks at the child within the family, I can say that we had an emotionally healthy family environment that fostered care and trust. Outside out home, my community were the African people. The atmosphere is very different where I lived. There were no outside resources to turn to for help, if needed, and the locals, though valuing education, were often denied it because of family obligations or lack of financial resources. Being surrounded by this reality, I valued my education and realized the blessings I had to attend good schools.

My family and culture in African definitely taught me to look up to and respect authority figures. Though I believe this is a good thing, as discussed earlier in this paper, I have not fully developed my own voice. Though I feel my opinion counts, I would never stand up to someone who seems more confident and secure in themselves, even if I don’t agree with their perspective. Recent years I have seen this begin to change and have come to see what a necessity it is in America to stand up for yourself and your beliefs. Though I am white, I feel I relate to native Africans in many ways: I am slow-paced, easy going, never in a hurry and strongly believe in the words, “hakuna matata” –meaning no worries! If I can keep these characteristics, while develop my self-confidence, I believe I can be a more effective future teacher. Because of how I was raised, I can pride myself in being a good listener, open-minded, understanding of others and someone who cares for the needs of others. These all created a positive learning environment, which ultimately benefited me academically and socially.

From doing this paper, I have gained a greater insight to how culture and family can play a big role in a child’s development. To sum up the family systems theory, I would say that it believes strongly in relationships that are vital to building a strong community. As Connard & Novick (1999) pointed out, no child is to be viewed in isolation from their family and community. We are all connected and in some way and influence each other whether we realize it or not. Fostering relationships between parents and teachers is one way to bridge the gap between students learning, culture and making teaching material more relevant linguistically and culturally. In today’s society, home life can greatly influence student’s performance in school. By building relationships with parents, teachers can understand the child in a deeper way and more efficiently practice methods in teaching that can engage the child in culturally appropriate material. If the child can relate to what they are learning, they are more likely to become engaged in active learning. Teacher’s job is to first understand the child, their needs and learning styles before trying to teach them. The schools should also understand that learning takes place everywhere, so if parents and teachers can come on board with what the child is learning, there will be more consistency in the child’s life. The school also has a responsibility to show families, especially with special needs, the resources available in the community that can aid them and strengthen their families. If we can all learn to respect each other and work together and learn from each other, as the family systems theory suggests, the problems facing schools will be lowered greatly.

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