Integration of Family, School and Community

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Introduction

To promote positive development among youth, integration must occur between families, school, and community programs and organizations. Well structured, intentionally-designed programs with high-quality staff can enhance the positive development of youth, promote academic achievement and minimize engagement in antisocial behaviors (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). These programs must also consider other environmental influences as youth are constantly interacting with environmental factors that exist outside their family structures.

Youth development professionals recognize successful positive youth development programs require interaction with and between the various environments in which youth are involved. Understanding why efforts to integrate and how to practically integrate environmental influences will enhance positive youth development.

Research Overview

Environmental Background to Integration

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model offers us an understanding of the interconnectedness of youth, family, school, and community reflected in the nested system of environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The ecological model examines individual development within nested environmental settings or systems that include: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

The four systems:

- Microsystem: Immediate environments (family, school, peer group, neighborhood, and child-care environments)
- Mesosystem: A system comprising connections between immediate environments (e.g., a child’s home and school)
- Exosystem: External environmental settings which only indirectly affect development (such as parent's workplace)
- Macrosystem: The larger cultural context (Eastern vs. Western culture, national economy, political culture, subculture)

Later, a fifth system was added:

- Chronosystem: The patterning of environmental events and transitions over the course of life (Boemmel & Briscoe, 2001)

Individuals interact and live simultaneously within multiple environments. The shaping of the individual and the environment is mutual and changes in response to direct and indirect events. Bronfenbrenner uses the term bidirectional to describe the influential interactions that take place between mother and child, child and father, child and teacher—understanding that the influences go both directions. Bidirectional influences take place when individuals and groups interact and directly affect others who exist within the same layer, as well as those who are in the layers on either side of them (Boemmel & Briscoe, 2001).
The most direct interaction occurs within the immediate setting, the microsystem, of a youth with their family. The microsystem provides the foundation for interpersonal relations, goal directedness, roles and experiences.

The next layer, the mesosystem, reflects the next interrelationship, for example of the interactions between youth and their school or home environments. The exosystem typically are those events in settings that are indirect, and thus do not directly involve or affect the individual. However, the exosystem may affect the meso and microsystems which indirectly impact an individual’s development. A parent’s sick leave employment policy may not allow for a parent to take off to care for a sick child, which affects the child’s experience, and in turn can affect the school if a child is sent to school while still ill. The macrosystem is the overarching ideological and organizational structure of social institutions. These systems may comprise the norms of a particular culture or subculture. The linkages and processes, the interrelationships between school and home, have an impact on a family’s interaction and functions. Successful community youth programs keep in mind these systems and make efforts to integrate and enhance positive youth development.

**Benefits of Integration among Youth, Family, Youth and Community**

According to Nitzbert’s (2005) research, there are five distinct benefits for youth of integration among family, youth and community:

- Youth develop a sense of belonging in the place where they live
- Schools, communities, and other organizations collaborate with youth to respond to the needs of youth and people living with youth
- Youth develop social and personal skills
- Youth are assisted in becoming financially independent
- Barriers to youth’s safety, well-being, and engagement in family and community living arrangement are addressed and reduced

These benefits of integration mesh with the *social capital* theoretical perspective. Social capital describes the benefits derived from personal social relationships (such as within families and communities) and social affiliations. Acquisition of social capital is associated with positive youth development (Runyan et al., 1998; Furstenberg, & Hughes, 1995; McNeal, 1999; Morrow, 1999, Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; White & Gager, 2007; Wright, Cullen, & Miller, 2001). When integration between environments occurs, social capital, when construed as a set of processes and practices (Morrow, 1999), improves. For example, the academic success of a child, especially one from a more vulnerable family, is improved through strategies to create a stronger link between the child’s family and school (Terrion, 2006). Families and school are the two primary sources of social capital in a child’s life. Research suggests that even adolescents who had more social capital at home still benefitted from the additional social capital provided at school (Crosnoe, 2004). Moreover, the quality and intensity of the parent-child relationship has a significant effect on the social capital youth experience in the other environments (Wright et al., 2001).
In Theokas and Lerner’s (2006) examination of 4-H, they conducted a longitudinal study analyzing the amount of exposure to resources and experiences with the degree of synergy between multiple settings to determine the degree to which youth develop positively. They suggest that youth need concrete opportunities for engagement and learning, synergy between key contexts of development, as well as experiences with others that provide support, monitoring and expectations. Furthermore, age, sex, race, residence and family structure are also affected by economic status on youth’s involvement in both school and non-school-related extracurricular activities (White & Gager, 2007).

Practical Application

How do youth programs and youth development professionals serve as catalysts to bring youth, parents, teacher, and community members together?

Consider the following approaches to inviting all parties to be engaged:

- Find out about each other’s interests and needs
- Reach out to potential partners on their own turf with specific offers of assistance
- Spell out the purpose and terms of joint efforts, including: how, who will do what, and by when
- Workout challenges as they arise and change approaches when necessary—be flexible
- Build out from success by sharing positive results and encouraging expanded efforts (Jehl, Blankm, & McCloud, 2001)

How do we increase a young person’s social capital through youth, family, and school integration?

- Encourage parental engagement with a youth’s school work, attendance at program and school
- Schedule parent-teacher/mentor interactions to accommodate parent’s work schedules, facilitate communication through a variety of means, such as email, web blogs, text messages, and have face to face contact to keep parents aware of their child’s progress

What can youth development programs do to facilitate integration?

- Youth development programs need to be aware of coordinating programming activities to accommodate parent’s work schedules and school schedules
- Youth development programs should consider ways to facilitate parent’s involvement and interaction beyond just dropping off their child to a program
- Programs should create a welcoming atmosphere for family members.
- Organizations should hire staff who are skilled in working with both youth and families, who speak the language spoken by participants’ families and who are experienced in (or are receiving training about) the cultures of the participating families.
- Staff should also receive training in these areas to ensure they have the skills and tools necessary to facilitate integration
- Programs should take steps to cultivate diversity in their staff that reflects the population served by the program. Families should receive regular communication in their own language through multiple methods—including in-person, flyers, email, and telephone—about the program and their child’s needs and progress (Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbreton, 2008)
Action Options

**Educators:**
- Seek out opportunities for professional development and training in parent involvement.
- Make parents feel welcome in the school.
- Provide a parent center for parents to use while at school.
- Reach out to parents whose first language is not English.
- Learn about the various ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and know how to communicate with diverse families.
- Accommodate parents' work schedules when creating parent-involvement opportunities.
- Assign homework projects that engage each child's parents and family and make learning more meaningful for the student, such as a family history, interviews with grandparents, or descriptions of parents' daily work.
- Keep parents informed of their children's performance and school activities by means of notes, telephone calls, newsletters, conferences, and meetings.
- Provide clear, practical information on home-teaching techniques for parents of children who need extra help at home.
- Provide opportunities for parents to visit the school, observe classes, and provide feedback.
- Start the school year with an opening conference.
- Develop a plan to promote teacher-parent partnerships at school.
- Invite parents to serve on school or district committees.

**Parents:**
- Identify some ways to answer the question "How can I be involved in my child's education?" and select from among 50 ways parents can help schools, especially those that help promote meaningful, engaged learning.
- Read to younger children.
- Provide a variety of reading materials in the home and frequently take children to the library.
- Promote school attendance and discourage absenteeism.
- Monitor children's television viewing.
- Provide a quiet place for children to do homework; help with or check homework every night.
- Encourage children to participate in learning activities when school is not in session. (Activities that include parents are found in Summer Home Learning Recipes.)
- Encourage children's efforts in school.
- Help children choose appropriate preparatory courses in middle, junior high, and high school.
- Remain aware of the importance of parent involvement at the secondary school level and continue to stay involved.
- Keep in touch with children's teachers.
- Volunteer to participate in school activities.
- Participate in school-improvement efforts and join advisory or decision-making committees.
- Look for innovative ways to improve schools, such as helping to organize public schools called charter schools.
Employers of Working Parents:

- Encourage and support employee and family involvement in education.
- Allow employees occasional time during the work day to attend school conferences or volunteer at their children's schools.
- Develop work strategies that enable parents to become involved in schools.

Summary

Youth development professionals have a strategic role to provide opportunities for youth’s environments, to develop context and connections, between and within. It is clear that positive youth development is enhanced by efforts to establish integration and links between a youth’s context and a connection to their family, school and community environments.
Web Based Resources

*CYFERnet's Community section offers resources on developing community and individual capacity to build stronger communities. It also provides information on mobilizing community members and decision makers to make communities safer and healthier places to live. [http://www.cyfernet.org/index.php?c=4](http://www.cyfernet.org/index.php?c=4)


This website offers Federally-developed interactive tools and other resources to help community organizations and partnerships in your efforts to support youth.

Included are tools and resources to help you form effective partnerships, assess community assets, understand risk factors and protective factors, generate maps of local and Federal resources, and search for evidence-based youth programs.


P/PV's GroundWork series summarizes available evidence on a variety of social policy topics. The first issue, The Case for School-Based Integration of Services, reviews literature on the potential benefits of simultaneously providing healthcare, out-of-school-time learning and family support services in schools. The second issue, Paving the Way for S [http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publication.asp?section_id=24&search_id=&publication_id=269ccess in High School and Beyond], focuses on the transition from middle school to ninth grade—its importance, associated challenges for youth and suggestions for easing the transition


These offer information on integration of family, schools and communities:

[http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa400.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa400.htm)

[http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa100.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa100.htm)

[http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa1lk23.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/famncomm/pa1lk23.htm)

Selected Electronic Journal resources include:


To dig deeper, consider this Wikipedia site on Communities that Care: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communities_THAT_Care_Promotes_Positive_Youth_Development#Essential_components_of_Communities_That_Care](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communities_THAT_Care_Promotes_Positive_Youth_Development#Essential_components_of_Communities_That_Care) – offers a toolkit based upon the Center for Substance Abuse Prevent (CSP) so it’s not a positive youth development framework but does offer a toolkit for community leaders.
References


