

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Readiness Opportunities for Highly Vulnerable Families

Anita S. Charles

Bates College

Mary Anne Peabody

University of Southern Maine

This article describes a qualitative case study within an urban Early Head Start program in the Northeast, designed to reach highly-vulnerable families who were not eligible for Early Head Start due to complex life experiences. The goal of this research was to deepen the knowledge base regarding the benefits and challenges of this approach by learning from parents and the practicing professionals' perspectives. Findings are discussed in terms of literature relevant to ecological theory, family resilience, and coping with stressors with an emphasis on supporting staff who in turn support both young children's school readiness and families in a collaborative community process. This article also identifies next steps useful to professionals and scholars interested in initiating or studying this approach to expand Early Head Start to the most vulnerable infant, toddlers and their families within comprehensive early childhood education programs.

Keywords: vulnerable families, Early Head Start, ecological theory, spatialized critical theory, resilience

Under the standard model of Early Head Start (EHS), programming is provided for children ages birth to three whose parents are either working or enrolled in school. However, many vulnerable families with infants and toddlers facing the greatest risks are not enrolled. Given highly stressed economic and psychological circumstances, some families with young children are not ready for school or employment attendance, making them ineligible for Early Head Start under current guidelines, creating an unmet, yet critical, community need.

This ethnographic case study examines a response to this need through an innovative and integrative approach to supporting eight targeted high-need families served by an urban Head Start center in New England. The model, referred to pseudonymously in this paper as the Capture program, qualifies families based on four key priorities: substance abuse, homelessness, special needs (of parents and/or children) including mental illness, and open cases through Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The work is intended to assist Early Head

Start personnel as well as local, state and national policy makers, in understanding the complex reality of implementation of this type of program for Early Head Start.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

The conceptual framework for our research is based on an ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1994), which considers “place” as an interconnection of layered contexts. In addition, we consider the concept of family resilience in coping with stressors emerging from conditions that place families at risk of school and societal difficulty (Vandsburger, Harrigan, & Biggerstaff, 2008; Wadsworth et al., 2013).

The “child’s ecology” include the immediate contexts of home and school as well as the supporting layers of community, family, and social systems, with interconnections among levels (Weiss, Lopez, Kreider, & Chatman-Nelson, 2014). Geographical space intersects with politics and belief systems and reproduce relationships of power (Gruenewald, 2003). Since poverty is aligned with multiple risk factors, it impacts developmental outcomes in young children (Rafferty, Griffin & Robokos, 2010; Wadsworth et al, 2013), with stresses that are “arduous and dispiriting” (Wadsworth et al., 2013, p. 713). There is often ambivalence in how people in support services and programs regard poor families (Halpern, 1993), and service providers need guidance in building healthy relationships with vulnerable families (Wadsworth et al., 2013; Onchwari, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

We used an ethnographic case-study approach for our research, interviewing six families two times (fall and spring), and two families once. The two program teachers and four administrators were also interviewed in late fall and again in the spring.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Parent Interviews

Parental supports and attitudes. Parental positive beliefs and attitudes toward the Capture program remained consistent throughout the entire year. Parents unequivocally praised and appreciated the program and the teachers. They recognized the access to resources, the ability to “get stuff done” in a day, and the developmental benefits to their children. In winter and spring, parents articulated a number of skills that their children were learning, including toilet training, colors, social skills, routines, songs, and simple sign language. The parents did not feel judged based on their life circumstances. The message sent to the parents was a positive one of support to build on their strengths (Vandsburger et al., 2008).

“System” realities. These parents had strong goals for themselves and the belief that they could achieve them, but recognized that they were entrenched in a larger context that held a strong grip on them. One mother said, “I’ve worked really hard to get my kids back. I’m going

to work the hardest I can.” Some had goals for GED and then college, or career goals. Sometimes the focus was more immediate: safe housing, better mental health, and staying clean and sober. But these parents also had a poignant understanding of being individuals within sociocultural and historical ecologies, and of feeling trapped in a losing situation. One mother stated, “I didn’t picture myself here a year ago. I really thought I wouldn’t make it. Nobody gets out.”

Teacher Interviews

Teacher perceptions and feelings, winter. The teachers provided the most complex aspect of the study, often wavering among contradictory feelings: sympathy for families, with a collaborative sense of respect and communication, but also feeling worn down, burnt out, or frustrated with the parents. (Pseudonyms are used throughout for teachers and administrators.)

In the winter, the two teachers expressed great compassion and eagerness to help the families succeed. However, the teachers expressed ambivalence about their relationships with parents. Marie was yelled at by a parent, and her reflections indicated that she felt hurt, angry, and sympathetic, all at the same time. In similar fashion, the other teacher, Teresa, made remarks that vacillated between care and frustration, compassion and judgment. She expressed genuine concern for families, and yet indicated the desire to fix “everybody” and “everything.” She said, “We need to put ourselves in these parents’ shoes, or try to anyways. But we don’t always, sometimes you forget.”

Teacher perceptions and feelings, spring. In a few short months, the teachers’ perceptions and feelings would undergo a dramatic shift. They had become more overwhelmed, cynical, and burnt out. For example, Marie made the following comment:

[The parents are] pushing the boundaries with us just like any normal child would do. They’re not on their best behavior, they’re not supposed to be... We want to pull our hair out, but it’s ok... It’s not easy for some of them to have to depend on resources. Then you have some of the families that take advantage of having those resources.

Teresa’s impatience of families by springtime is striking. She stated, “We have families that it’s hard for them to follow through. This is a free program, and they think they can just drop off their child and pick them up, and a lot of them don’t want to be bothered with anything else.”

The teachers seemed surprised and overwhelmed throughout the year by the needs of the families.

Better support for teachers. Both teachers recognized their own need for more training on, in Teresa’s words, “how to approach families that have a wall up, and you just can’t get through, and you have a job to do, and you know that the child has needs that need to be met, and how you can handle that, how you can reach out better to those families?”

Staff/Administrative Interviews

The support structure for Capture involved many individuals including: the family services manager (Angela); the education and special services manager (Amanda); the site supervisor (Carla); the director of the agency (Meg). Several of the staff referred to Capture as providing a “safe place” for children to be. Amanda explained:

[This program] allows us to reach that population of families who fall between those cracks but clearly need an opportunity to send their children somewhere safe so they can do the things they need to do to get their lives back together.... [In our other] early classrooms, you have to be working or go to school more than 75% of the time. These folks aren't there yet, they're not ready for that. They need the opportunity to get ready.

Complex “systems” understanding. The administrative staff had a strong understanding of the complex and interconnected “systems” framework happening in these families’ lives. Amanda stated, “If you don’t have a safe place to bring your baby, you can’t go get your counseling, you can’t go for your drug test...” Others echoed these sentiments. The site supervisor, Carla, noted, “I believe that there are a lot of people who want to end the cycle, to change where they are in life. We are instilling the fact that parents are capable. They have worth and that it can be done in small steps.”

Teachers needing more support. Without a doubt, the most urgent need for the program was recognized across both staff and teachers as the necessity for more emotional and educational support for teachers than they received, reflecting research conclusions (Weiss et al., 2014; Onchwari, 2009) of a lack of teacher preparedness to handle the stresses of the population they serve. The head administrator stated, “It’s very easy for [teachers] to burn out. And finding qualified [teachers] is not easy.”

By spring, the staff acknowledged that they had not done enough work in this area to help sustain and retain the teachers. The family service manager said, “I was providing crisis intervention, that’s what I was doing, and they needed more clinical [emotional support]. They probably needed both.” Several others recognized their error in hiring two new staff for a program with sometimes-overwhelming needs.

The director Meg stated, “It’s helping [teachers] understand the value piece, beliefs and values of ourselves and how do you set that aside sometimes. We probably need to do more training around that area, agency wide, around our values and beliefs.” Similarly, the education manager reflected, “We are fixers, so when [parents] share something we want to fix it. Sometimes we speak too soon or we speak a little strong. That piece has been tough. I didn’t anticipate it.”

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is great promise in the Capture program. Results from this study show that Early Head Start can reach out to previously ineligible, yet extremely vulnerable, families and provide services that create opportunities to become eligible for the regular programming. Results from the first year of operation indicate that an increased level of emotional and educational support is

necessary for the teachers. Consistent and frequent clinical reflective supervision from a mental health professional will better position teachers when faced with complex family situations.

The need for professional development training was also identified, specifically around building relationships with parents and deeper understanding of issues of trauma, mental health, impact of cumulative risk factors on families and children, and resiliency.

The administrative staff also felt that, as the program grows, attention to parent education will be warranted. Working closely with community agencies that already offer parent education was discussed as the administrative staff saw Capture as a vehicle that had inherently enhanced strong partnerships, with potential to better integrate services.

Implications of the struggle with transportation and an inadequate busing system were community issues that impacted attendance. Conversations about innovative ways to address transportation issues were emerging based on this study.

CONCLUSION

Difficult life experiences, especially when they accumulate or are numerous, present real challenges. Addressing the multiple challenges families face is difficult, and family change is a slow and often discouraging endeavor. Supporting program staff, engaging in relationships with parents and community partners, and focusing on infant and parent mental health (Anakwenze, 2013; McAllister, 2007) all provide opportunities to reach a previously-unmet population in the field of early childhood. Organizational readiness, including a solid infrastructure that commits to financial resources, mental health supervision for teachers, and expansion of professional development offerings, aligns with the mission, goals and resource allocation of Early Head Start. The most vulnerable infants and toddlers and their families can and should be reached within comprehensive early childhood education programs that give them the opportunity to get ready for the next steps in their lives.

REFERENCES

- Anakwenze, U. Z., D. (2013). Mental health and poverty in the inner city. *Health & Social Work, 38*(3), 147-157.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1974). Developmental research, public policy, and the ecology of childhood. *Child Development, 45*, 1-5.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *International Encyclopedia of Education, 3, 2nd Ed.*, 1643-1647.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(3), 619-654.
- Halpern, R. (1993). The societal context of home visiting and related services for families in poverty. *The Future of Children, 3*(3), 158-171.
- McAllister, C. L. T. (2007). Infant mental health and family support: Contributions of Early Head Start to an integrated model for community-based early childhood programs. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 28*(2), 192-215.
- Onchwari, J. (2010). Early childhood inservice and preservice teachers' perceptions of preparedness to handle stress in their students. *Early Childhood Education, 37*, 391-400. DOI 10.1007/s10643-009-0361-9.
- Rafferty, Y., Griffin, K.W., & Robokos, D. (2010). Maternal depression and parental distress among families in the Early Head Start research and evaluation project: Risk factors within the family setting. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 31*, 543-569.

- Vandsburger, E., Harrigan, M., & Biggerstaff, M. (2008). In spite of all, we make it: Themes of stress and resiliency as told by women in families living in poverty. *Journal of Family Social Work, 11*(1), 17-35.
- Wadsworth, M.E., Rindlaub, L., Hurwich-Reiss, E., Rienks, S., Bianco, H., & Markman, H.J. (2013). A longitudinal examination of the adaptation to poverty-related stress model: Predicting child and adolescent adjustment over time. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 42*(5), 713-725.
- Weiss, H.B., Lopez, M.E., Kreider, H., & Chatman-Nelson, C. (2014). *Preparing educators to engage families: Case studies using an ecological systems framework (3rd ed.)*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.