Family System Theory: Definition, Impact, and Reflection

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Family System Theory is best summed up, in my opinion, by Janet Lerner's interpretation of Rick Lavoie's article *Life on a waterbed: Mainstreaming on the homefront* (Lavoie, 1995). Lerner (2000) writes, "A family of five is like five people laying on a waterbed. Whenever one person moves, everyone feels the ripple" (p. 171).

Within the last thirty-five years, groups of psychologists, sociologists, and educational professionals have worked independently studying children. More specifically, while psychologists were studying individuals, and sociologists were studying families, educational professionals were working on the continued research that pertains to how to best convey information on to the next generation. Over time, the information compiled by these studies has been put together and has become what we know today as an ecological framework of study. Within this ecological model, is Family System theory (Connard and Novick, 1996, p.5).

The theory of the family system as a way of viewing and critiquing a child’s education based on his/her niche within his/her family is an important factor to consider for every child. Family system theory is however overwhelmingly valuable when considering the education of minority students. Even within the relatively small context of a school, great cultural variety is indeed quite prevalent. A given school can be responsible for educating children from different cultures and heritages, who speak different languages and have different customs, and possess differing strengths and abilities. The concept of normal has grown to become highly idealized, distorted, and meritless.

Although the student body has changed over time, the duty of teachers has not. Despite growing diversity, teachers remain responsible for providing each student with the best possible education. This can be achieved today through working with the family system theory.
In order to fully understand the importance of family system theory, it is important to have a core definition of this ideology. Beyond Lerner’s waterbed simile, (2000, p.171) family system theory holds a much deeper meaning. As stated earlier, family system theory is a subset to what has become known as ecological study. Studying through ecological systems refers to understanding the many environments that a person interacts in (p. 115). In the past, the education field has focused on student’s school environment and interaction when examining the child’s overall development. The ecological view however asserts that in order to most effectively understand a given child, one must study not only his/her school environment, but also the child’s social environment outside of school and especially his/her home life. It is the paradigm of studying student’s home life, their family and how they interact within that family that has become family system theory (p. 115).

The family system theory is centralized with the view of the family as a whole. It strives to examine individuals in their greater context as family members. With that being said, the ecological model is more of a “concept”, “process”, or “philosophy” rather than a “practice” or “method” (Connard and Novick, 1996, p. 5). It is generally accepted that the structure of the family is comprised of several important aspects although experts differ slightly on the exact names and details of these prerequisites. It is agreed upon that the family is a complex and open system, meaning that the family, as well as each of its members, interact with each other and with environmental factors outside the family. Information is brought in and out of the system through its members and by the family as a whole (Lerner, 2000, p. 172; Kilpatrick and Holland, 1999, p. 19; Rodriguez, 2009, p. 535). Moreover, the family system is a platform of ongoing feedback in the form of interaction. This feedback helps maintain stability as well as spur change (Kilpatrick and Holland, 1999, p. 19). Connard and Novick (1996) split this feedback
into two categories. The first being “homeostasis” and the second being “morphogenesis.” These principles, like Kilpatrick and Holland’s (1999) feedback point, surround the idea that the family is a stable system that enforces itself with ongoing interaction that enables a flexibility and adaptation to change (Connard and Novick, 1996, p. 7). The family system also is characterized by a concept of “Equifinality” (Kilpatrick and Holland, 1999, p. 19; Rodriguez, 2009, p. 535, Connard and Novick, 1996, p. 7). Equifinality describes the idea that any given event can cause a different outcome when performed multiple times and any given event can therefore be caused by different outcomes. The basic application to equifinality in the family system is that it is far more accurate to study the ongoing status of the family system rather than the events and outcomes of those events (Kilpatrick and Holland, 1999, p. 19). An extension to equifinality is circular causality. This is the notion that there is no linear pattern of cause and effect when studying the family system (p. 19; Rodriguez, 2009, p. 535; Connard and Novick, 1996, p. 7).

In sum, the family is made up of interdependent members that are part of a complex system in which members are constantly growing and interacting with each other, in turn, changing the system and their roles in unique ways throughout life (Kilpatrick and Holland, 1999; Rodriguez, 2009; Connard and Novick, 1996; Lerner, 2000). This system is part of a larger ecological framework that strives to examine students as people within society rather than children within a classroom (Lerner, 2000, p. 115).

Studying the interaction of the family system can help teachers better educate their students. This situation can be greatly amplified when providing an education to diverse students, which as mentioned earlier, is becoming more and more common.
According to Lerner (2000, p. 172), all members of the family are affected by one family member’s disability. Imagine, for example, that the father of an “average” family is in an automobile accident, and loses the use of his legs. This would cause a huge swing in the roles of the family. Initially, one can imagine physical changes within this family’s home to accommodate and provide easy transportation within the home for the father. Also, the roles of each member of the family would be affected, as the father may have a difficult time fulfilling some of his former roles. Altogether, this situation would lead to great change and undoubtedly a diverse situation for each member of the family system. Now, consider that the given situation is only within that family, and the changing roles would make the family itself diverse within society. This is only one hypothetical example of a diverse family system in which all members are affected by one member.

Diverse environments can be characterized in many ways. Connard and Novick (1996) separate environments into either, “supportive of development,” or, “threatening to development”. As children grow, they experience the world in terms of their peers, their social network, and their interaction with society (p. 8). Factors that could be positive or negative may include different ideologies as far as religious or political beliefs, family cultures and traditions, or even family size (Bossard, 1956). It is most effective when examining diverse family systems and their effects on education to focus on specific cases in order to develop strategies for helping diverse students meet their educational needs.

One growing diverse population includes students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. One study of children with autism and their pediatricians examines the effectiveness of a family-centered environment and finds that such an ideal would be greatly beneficial (Carbone et. al., 2010). It is not such a stretch to apply such a model from a medical settling to an educational
setting. Overall, the study finds that parents find such methods to be a superior method, but find it slightly unrealistic in the medical community. Fortunately, the educational community is a completely different environment that is constantly studying philosophies of learning.

Consider as well the different types of disabilities that are seen in schools. Think about physical disabilities. Thousands of children are involved in speech, occupational, or physical therapy in schools across the country. Brennan (et. al., 2009) finds that literacy levels in children with visual impairments can be greatly affected by their parents’ involvement at home. Knowing how the family works together outside of the classroom can be a crucial part of educating such students.

Most common however, especially in certain school districts, may be the diversity of students of different socioeconomic statuses and ethnic backgrounds. Cuthrell (et. al. 2010) studies the, “effect of poverty in the role of schools, families, and teachers” (p. 104). The results found that although school has a large effect of child development and learning, the foundation and basis of education and development rests in the hands of the children’s home (p.105). Although poverty does not necessarily cause any learning effects, this study also notes that previous research has found poverty to be correlated to, “low birth weight, infant mortality, growth stunting, lead poisoning, learning disabilities, and developmental delays” (p. 104).

Some studies research individual minority groups. Pewewardy and Fitzpatrick argue that it is important to realize a level of family and cultural understanding when teaching Native American students because they are so diverse from the typical student (2009, p. 93). Likewise, other studies focus on discrimination coming from two fronts, meaning a student who has a disability and is also discriminated against because he/she is of an ethnic minority (Garcia et. al., 2000).
Still other minority groups exist. Tafa and Baiocco (2009) studied addictive behavior. Their results found that the status of the family system can be a prediction of addictive behavior (p. 391-393).

Thousands of different minority groups greatly affect teaching methods across the world. Despite whether students are of diverse ethnic backgrounds with different cultures and traditions, speak different languages, or have different mental, social, emotional, or physical abilities, teachers must be able to provide a comprehensive education. This can be best achieved by incorporating family system theory.

When working with a diverse student body, it is important to develop effective teaching strategies that help to level the academic playing field without necessarily providing advantages to diverse groups.

One basic, yet sometimes forgotten method of improving the education system is to use the scientific method (Ogrinc and Batalden, 2009, p. 662). Pewewardy and Fitzpatrick (2009) suggest teaching about diversity within our culture (p. 95). By doing this, students are given alternatives to Western ideals of thought.

Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) go further to include six general strategies for working with minority students, specifically students in poverty. These researchers believe that it is imperative to,

“hire and maintain teachers who believe in their students,” “focus on academic achievement...through small attainable goals,” “give assessment a prominent role in the daily activities of students and teachers,” “increase collaboration throughout the school,” “use creative scheduling...to free up time for activities that promote teacher success,” “and spend money on things that work” (p. 105-106).
The group felt that passionate teachers were the driving force of success, and it was most important and effective to promote this belief with monetary resources. Further, it was important to continually assess the progress of students and to give teachers time to help their student’s individual needs through efficient time management (p. 106).

Crow and Crow (1988), through their study of the family system, make the point that it is important to have an ongoing consideration of several aspects (p. 18). The student must be sure that he/she has goals, and what those goals are (p. 18). The goals must be realistic and the student must know of a method to attain them within the positive learning environment (p. 18-19). The student must be responsible for fulfilling those goals but should have a supportive environment around him/her (p. 18-19).

Appleby, Colon, and Hamilton (2007) contribute to the discussion with the view that part of this ecological mindset is the process of working through diverse conditions, possible under stress and discrimination, to become educated (p. 8-9).

All in all, although thousands of different diverse situations are possible, it is important to keep the ecological framework of family system theory in mind in order to be the most effective educator.

As I examine my own education, I can see the importance of my family system and how it has affected me both as a person and a student. At a young age, my parents made, more or less, all of my decisions for me as far as school went. In fact, it wasn’t really until middle school that I made any significant educational decision on my own. And even at that point, my decision was based heavily on the involvement of my family. At that time in my life, I decided to travel with my church youth group to San Antonio, TX for a youth gathering. Now, although I made the decision to go on this trip, the opportunity wouldn’t have been available without my parent’s
membership to a faith and their approval of me to travel across the country without them for a week.

As I grew older and entered high school I became more aware of making decisions socially and economically in tune with my family’s financial status. I had reached an age when I wanted to drive and go places with my friends, but was forced to buy my own car and take several drivers’ education courses to lower my insurance rate before I was able to do so.

Later on in high school, as I was striving to find some independence from my parent’s influence, I found alternative educational opportunities. I attended Boys’ State, an American Legion program where selected boys from across New York met to learn about government. Also, I travelled to Ancaster, Ontario, Canada to attend a leadership program through Rotary International. However, at a second glance, neither of those experiences would have been available if my father wasn’t a veteran of the Air Force, a member of the American Legion, and a member of Rotary.

Even my involvement in sports and hobbies, I have found, reflect traits of my family. I have come to understand that even when trying to find unique and diverse opportunities, I am still insanely tied to my family values and practices.

Now, put into the context of the family system, one can see the influence that my family has had on me. If one were to know about my family, my culture, my beliefs, my values, and my history, he/she would be a much more effective educator of me. When my role as a person within my family is applied to my education, nearly everything in my history is mirrored by my family. I have learned not only how family system theory can relate to all diverse populations, but how it can relate to my own family.
Family system theory, as a branch of the ecological philosophy of education, is extremely effective and is an invaluable resource. In addition to being the most effective method of study, it is also the fairest to individual students as well as different cultures. We see this in not only the cultures of the disabled, but also of the ethnic and social minorities. Teachers, having the role of providing an equal opportunity for an education to everyone, must embrace this concept by having a full comprehension of its meaning as well as implementing the concepts in classrooms throughout the world. Family system theory especially becomes important within this ecological view, because those being educated are most likely to follow the traits of those that mean the most to them, their families. Students will reflect this view, and understanding this concept will greatly benefit the education system.
References


Kilpatrick, A. & Holland, T. (1999). *Working with families: An integrative model by level of*


