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Family-Focused Rural Early Intervention Personnel Preparation: Family Stories and Student Development

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Circumstances of practice in rural communities and the rapidly changing professional environment of early intervention present challenges to effective personnel preparation. Case study and ethnographic methods used in the context of student-family field-based experiences appear promising for guiding students in understanding family perspectives and in developing personal theories about early interventions in rural settings. These personnel preparation processes have the effect of helping students engage in a life-long process of establishing their own professional identities.

The importance of family focus in early intervention is well established. Historically, families have served as advocates in developing services for children with disabilities (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). In the past, however, intervention has focused largely on the specific developmental needs of the child; family roles in the processes of intervention have tended to be prescribed by professionals. In recent years, a major shift in the role of families in the intervention process has occurred. Supporting active family involvement in decision making and in implementing intervention is viewed as essential to best practice. Family priorities and strengths, as much as family needs, are important to identify and understand within the context of the complex relationships among children, families, community, and the cultural ecosystems in which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Darling & Baxter, 1996; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988, 1994; Fenichel & Eggbeer, 1990; McBride & Brotherson, 1997).

Although family-focused early intervention practice is acknowledged as a hallmark of best practice, implementation has often proven problematic. Early intervention is a rapidly evolving field. Change initiatives underway, such as the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education and day care settings, the movement toward service integration across community-based systems of support, and the emergence of developmentally appropriate curriculum models, have required states, agencies, and practitioners to question discipline boundaries and how they define the roles of early intervention (Winton & McCollum, 1997). Describing the role of the practitioner in this changing professional environment becomes even more difficult given poor intra- and inter-agency communication, an ever increasing amount of paperwork, limited resources, large caseloads, and inflexible reimbursement policies. A practitioner's best intentions to spend time with any individual family so that family-focused efforts can be planned and implemented are often thwarted. Practitioners report feeling overwhelmed. Family-focused change initiatives are likely to be met with resistance when little energy is left to implement them (King, 1995-96).

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Family-Focused Early Intervention in Rural Communities

Practitioners in rural communities often face particular challenges related to family-focused early intervention. These challenges include (a) a population that is spread over a large geographic area; (b) unequal distribution of service providers, especially related-service providers such as speech and language pathologists or physical therapists; (c) difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified personnel; (d) often diverse geographic and climatic features of the area to be served; (e) a scarcity of public transportation; and (f) cultural values and ways of life that may be poorly understood by mainstream urban or suburban Americans (Forest, 1995; Harris-Unser, 1995). Rural early interventionists travel great distances to families who may lack the means to access needed systems of support. Professional resources, including expertise, is limited especially for low-incidence disabilities. Practitioners are often isolated from one another, and they must deal with the challenges inherent in poverty (Huang & Van Horn, 1995; Weiss & Correa, 1996).

Rural communities also present practitioners with unique advantages. Professionals who, due to shortages of personnel, are called upon to wear multiple professional hats report that this sometimes serves to help them understand the holistic nature of child and family functioning.

The familiarity of individuals with one another in small communities often makes it easy to establish collaborative relationships. Local "red tape" can be cut away fairly easily (Harris-Unser, 1995; King, 1995). Rural day care settings or early education classrooms may have smaller numbers, making it easier for teachers and care givers to individualize their care and instruction (Berkeley & Bull, 1995; Smith-Davis, 1989). Individuals from rural communities often describe a sense of ownership for all children in their community resulting from the fact that the population of rural communities tends to be relatively stable (Butera et al., 1997; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). Under these circumstances, rural schools or social service agencies report having included children with disabilities and their families in their programs for years, and view inclusion as "no big deal" (Cole & Leaper, 1995).

Home visits are often essential to rural early intervention practice. Home visits make services accessible to rural families who lack transportation or are quite distant from the program's center (Harris-Unser, 1995). It is important to note that home visits are a method of providing services rather than a curriculum per se; they are not inherently more family focused (Halpern, 1993). In fact, however, they often do serve to enhance family focus. A home visit provides the early interventionist with the opportunity to observe parent-child interactions in a natural setting. Families and early interventionists can become familiar with one another through home visits because early interventionists relate to only one family at a time. A sense of shared commitment can be achieved. Family support or service coordination issues can be addressed as issues become readily apparent on home visits.

The particular context in which family-focused early intervention is implemented is important to acknowledge by those who design and administer early intervention programs. But the role of the practitioner within this context is critical to the success of program implementation, particularly in rural programs where early interventionists are the primary and sometimes the only point of contact between early intervention programs and the family. The nature of early intervention, especially as it relates to family focus, is determined to a very large degree by the highly personalized encounters between children, families, and practitioners as they set about to accomplish early intervention tasks. Therefore, the personal and professional perspectives and capabilities of practitioners become critical in determining to what extent family-focused practice is achieved in early intervention.

Personnel Preparation for Rural Family-Focused Early Intervention

Given the critical role of the practitioner in rural family-focused early intervention, personnel preparation programs face formidable challenges in addressing their tasks. Providing students with supervised field experiences that develop the professional skills needed for home visits is necessary, but not easily accomplished. Equally important to conveying specialized content knowledge relevant to early intervention (i.e., child development, curriculum), personnel preparation programs must foster values and attitudes about practice and address uncertainties and fears associated with working in rapidly changing systems. (McCollum & Catlett, 1997). Clearly, the roles required of family-focused early interventionists in rural settings are both complex and qualitatively different from the roles required of individuals emerging from personnel preparation programs of the past. Personnel preparation programs must prepare professionals to build healthy relationships with others and to reflect on one's own abilities to interact within those relationships (Fenichel & Eggbeer, 1990).

Under these circumstances, an important focus in personnel preparation relates to facilitating students in a developmental process of their own, even as we ask them to consider the developmental processes of children and families. Student development occurs as they actively engage in addressing issues in the field. It involves trial, error, reflection, decision, tactic, strategy, critique, and revision. In this way, professional competence emerges. It develops; it is not conveyed, transmitted, or possessed. In order to address the needs of practitioners who will implement family-focused early intervention in rural settings, personnel preparation aims to build and strengthen a personal repertoire of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs as they set upon a developmental process that continues throughout their professional lives.

One promising method of delivering field-based experiences that facilitates this developmental process involves case study and ethnographic interviewing in the context of home visiting field experiences. Although case study and ethnography usually refer to research methods, these strategies are borrowed here for personnel preparation because they are particularly well-suited to assisting students in acquiring the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs necessary for rural family-focused early intervention. Using strategies commonly employed in research, students are immersed in the perspective of families. They are assisted in the examination of their own beliefs and attitudes about families in the context of an ongoing family-student relationship. Reflection about the family's perspective is sought and student's are guided towards a family-responsive view from which to understand one's own helping role. Students are supported in trying out theories about early intervention practice and in developing their own personalized theories about the profession, about child development within the context of families and communities, and about their own sense of competence as professionals (Casper, 1995-96; Odom, 1987).

Case study methods of research are commonly encountered by those who study early child development and have more recently been employed as an effective strategy for personnel preparation (McWilliam & Bailey, 1993). Ethnography as a research method evolves from the field of anthropology and is less familiar to early interventionists (Casper, 1995-96; Freel, 1995-96; Norton, 1995-96). In conducting research, ethnographers reject the notion that one's point of view is objective and seek to acknowledge their "positioned" stance (Casper, 1995-96; Rosaldo, 1989; Spradley, 1979). The traditional hierarchic role of the researcher is abandoned and a constant examination of the influences of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and culture on perceptions and interpretation of what is observed is sought. Theory is generated, rather than tested, as the researcher gives meaning to experience through interpretation. As a strategy for personnel preparation, students' experience with ethnography is based only on a portion of ethnographic method. However, the compelling power of story; the immersion with people and issues; the constant effort to peel away preconceived notions about children, families, and culture; and the effort to develop and actively make use of theory in order to make meaning from one's experience assist students in assuming responsibility for their own professional development and identity. Making meaning by listening carefully and reflectively to family stories is at the heart of family-focused early intervention and ethnography (Casper, 1995-96; Freel, 1995-96). These are important processes in personnel preparation for rural family-focused early interventionists.

Putting Theory to Practice in West Virginia

As part of a course in family/professional relationships in the graduate early intervention personnel preparation program at West Virginia University, students establish an semester-long relationship with a family currently enrolled in early intervention. Students offer to assist families by providing them with support (e.g., respite care, tutoring) as a trade for the opportunity to develop an understanding of family perspective. Students spend a minimum of 2 hours per week with their case study family and keep a journal about the experience including records of their family observations; their interactions with the family; and their own feelings, impressions, and beliefs about their experience. Students are guided in ethnographic interviewing and in the collection of observational and case study data, assuming roles similar to those described as teacher-researcher (Casper, 1995-96). Group- and individual-guided discussions assist students in using their experience with families to examine their own attitudes and beliefs about families and about their emerging sense of competence in working with families as they respond to the particular circumstances of the families. Student journals and field notes are gathered and examined in a recursive process used to guide student development. In addition, these methods are used retrospectively in order to seek understanding of the processes involved in the individualized professional development of the student as they relate to rural family-focused early intervention.

Becoming Acquainted

Students are introduced to their case study families in a variety of ways. In some cases, students are introduced to the family by another professional who accompanies them on an initial home visit and provides a context for discussion between the student and a family member. In other cases, students develop a case study relationship with a family they already know. Still other students meet their case study families on their own, having had the family referred to them by an early intervention agency. Students report considerable anxiety about how to initiate contact with families and concern about whether their presence is intrusive. At the earliest stages of the relationship between student and family, interactions tend to be short and purposefully "chatty" as students and families seek to know each other. In most cases interactions between students and families center on child activities, developmental history, or developmental status. Interactions often take on the quality of a "model" home visit or a parent-teacher conference. Both families and students assume that the student acts in a teacher's role. Janet's journal demonstrates an example of a typical student entry at this stage of the relationship. She reports that several planned visits were cancelled due to illness, the weather, and impassable roads.

> Finally!! I visited with C.J.'s family, Catherine and Lloyd. C.J. was tired and stretched out on the floor to watch a video. He'd had a difficult day at school—maybe a weather change or a big storm is coming. He was out of sorts all day. . . . He screamed and cried . . . bit himself and threw himself on the floor two or three times . . . he ate very little and did not rest at all. No wonder he was tired. So was I.

In spite of the clarity of Janet's observations, she goes on to say,

> Catherine, Lloyd, and I had a very nice visit without interruption. We talked about the things that C.J. had learned at school this year so far and began to set some new goals for him.

Relationship Building Strategies

After reflecting on these earliest interactions, students begin to employ a variety of strategies to build the relationship and establish a more authentic "feel" for their family interactions. One of the most commonly employed strategies is a specific offer of help or support as students respond to particular instances of family need. Students offer to provide child care while family members go to the store. They bring families information about disabilities, about resources and services, and about computers and software. They help pick up toys and they run errands. They listen to family members tell about family events, and they begin to understand the family's lives. Karen reports a phone conversation with "Paw" after she is unable to locate her family for several days:

> I came home, disappointed, in the freezing rain, and called Paw to inquire how they all were. Paw and I spoke for about an hour. Apparently Ray (Paw's older brother), his two uncles, and Laura's father have been digging a grave for the better part of the past 2 days. It's a family plot way up on a mountain ridge near M___. Uncle Joe had died, and they did it because the family would not have strangers do such a thing, especially in such awful weather. Paw's back was hurting and so he had to let the younger boys do the work.

Family members reciprocate student efforts to form friendships. Paw tells Karen how glad he is that the family has had her help because "the youngster needs all we can give her." Another student, Marla, relates how her family begins to know her. After telling Marla about her experience learning that her son was deaf, Shelly (the mother) asks Marla about her own life experiences:

> Then Shelly began to ask me about my life. She wanted to know where I lived—in a house or apartment. She wanted to know if I had a boy friend, and I told her that whole story. I also told her that I am a family person and that I go home every weekend. We really had a nice conversation and she told me to call her at work (they have no phone at home) so we could plan some times for me to come when the whole family is there. . . . She said I'm her buddy and laughed. I really like her.

Often students are quite creative, and a variety of evolving strategies are employed that result in a greater degree of reciprocity between the student and family members. After a particularly stressful series of events in her case study family, Julie reports the following about the mother in her journal:

> She tells me she feels depression setting in rather quickly. I ask her what she would need to turn it around. "Time to myself." I asked her what she would do with that time and she said she'd like to just go somewhere for a walk and then go out and sit down and enjoy a long lunch. . . . So, I said "It's a deal!! We've got a date." She has to tell me when and where. This is my Valentine's Day treat for the entire family. When Mom feels good, the whole family feels better.

Throughout the family projects, students express concern in their journals and in guided class discussion about how to achieve a balance in the relationships they form with their families. They wonder about how to maintain the friendship aspect of the relationship while also focusing on the goals of early intervention. They become increasingly aware that the balancing act that early interventionists must perform in this regard can be quite difficult. As students, they see themselves as less clearly required to focus on the early intervention agenda and they wonder about the risks (to the evolving relationships) if and when they have to assume a more didactic role with families. This is especially the case with students who are very young or who lack experience. Discussions about whether one can achieve credibility in working with parents without being a parent are often quite animated. One view often asserted is that one need not be a parent to provide parents with guidance and support. However, students who lack experience remain unconvinced and continue to speculate about these issues. Students who are more experienced (parents) often express their own set of concerns about imposing their preconceived and deeply felt notions and life experiences related to child rearing on families. These discussions provide ample opportunity for students to reflect on their own feelings and beliefs about their professional roles in family-focused early intervention.

Developing Understanding

The experience of interacting with a family over time is related to an increasingly complex understanding of the systems in which families exist and about how the relationships between those systems impact family's functions. Student journals and discussions often include references to extended families, communities, and cultures. Marla reports a home visit with Shelly and family:

> I went today for a visit and everybody was home. Shelly seemed a little down and then, without me asking, she told me that her grandmother had had a stroke. This is the grandmother that Shelly lived with after she had Danny. Shelly said she wants to go to B___ to see her grandmother. She said

> she hated to ask, but did I think I could drive her to the bus station so that she could go and see her in B___? She went on to say how upset she was and that she was especially upset because no one in her family had told her. She found out because her other grandmother wrote her a letter. She said her grandmother wants her to bring Danny. . . . She's not sure about that. The plan is that she can go on Tuesday so I will go and pick her up. I think I can find out about the Greyhound schedule for her too. It's hard for her because they don't have a phone.

The family stories that students report often are replete with reflections of family history and the culture in which they are embedded. Karen's journal relates her ongoing acquaintance with Paw (the grandfather in her case study family), and she begins to appreciate the importance this family member has in the family's lives:

> We talked about other family interests—trades and occupations. Since he is a retired coal miner and now has time to teach skills to younger ones in the family, he is disappointed that none seem to want to learn. . . . He wants to teach about blacksmithing or stonecutting, both skills he could teach anyone in the family interested in learning. His dad was a stonecutter and his maternal granddad was a blacksmith as well as a coal miner. He has all their tools and the time and interest and patience to teach . . . but no one to guide. . . . We spoke of the song "Who will watch the home place when I am gone from here?" . . . Then he said he did have one nephew that he taught to saw lumber who now works near here at that for his living.

Students become aware that the definition of "family" varies and that relationships defined by friendship as well as kinship function to give families support. They comment that events in these systems are likely to impact the family and effect how the family responds to the needs of the child. Julie commented on this:

> [The mother] has been seeing someone. What this means is that he comes over to her house once in a while to sit and have coffee and talk. I think she'd like to have something more because she talks about it quite often. It really helps her feel better, too, and she can do everything better then. She laughs and says "a truck driver would be just the man for me. He is here long enough to keep me happy and gone long enough to keep me ecstatic." She is a very strong woman with an unbelievably great sense of humor. She makes us both laugh.

The relationship between students and families provides opportunity for students to examine theories about child development and the role of families in that development. Guided discussion often examined student observations about child and family interactions and about how the interactions supported (or interfered with) child and family development. In addition, students made use of their observations in their case study families to test their own developing theories about professional practice. For many students, this examination of their personal theories included a growing awareness of the relationship between experiences in their personal families and their professional practice. Julie addresses this phenomenon:

> When I arrived, Sara was in tears. She had just found out that a friend of hers had signed a "do not resuscitate order" on her disabled, 17-year-old daughter. . . . Sara takes the opinion that the girl laughs and cries and is a human being. I sort of played the devil's advocate and gave her several reasons why her friend might do this. I have the same feelings about this as Sara does, but I pointed out to her what a difficult decision it must have been. I don't know how someone deals with making such difficult decisions. . . . This really hit home and brought to me the reality of this fragile world. I gave my own kids an extra hug and kiss tonight, thankful that I did not have to make such a difficult decision."

In another journal entry, Julie considers her own experience as a mother as she tries to understand Sara's perspective:

> Sometimes I think Sara likes having David depend of her so much, and this keeps her from doing things that would help him learn to do it for himself. She wants it to stay that way. Kind of a terrible thing for me to say. But, as a parent, I don't like the idea of my kids growing up and not depending on me for their everyday needs. Sara actually has the power to keep her child depending on her.

In a discussion about the critical importance of respite care for families, Linda remembers her own family:

> My parents were always at home with me as a young child. However, once a month or so they would go out dancing with friends. I'd stay with my grandparents. We'd pop popcorn and watch Lassie. I always felt left out and would wonder what my parents were doing. Sometimes they'd pick me up afterward, and occasionally I'd spend

> the night. I would usually cry a little if I had to spend the night. I think it's important for children to realize that Mom and Dad need to sometimes be alone with each other. As parents make time to spend together, these children learn to rely on themselves more and that's probably good. You can see how respite care becomes so important for families. It was in mine.

Diane tells us about the response of her own extended family to disability:

> Disability in my family of origin is really acceptable. Actually, now that I think about it they tend to go overboard and sort of enjoy talking about it. They really get into feeling sorry for some family members and spend lots of time talking about it. I guess it depends on how the disability came to be, though. I have cousins injured through mining accidents and this is a sort of matter of honor in our family—a physical example of their excellence and manliness. They're real West Virginians because they were in the mines so their disability is a matter of pride. It's proof of their identity. I wonder if folks with other sorts of disabilities get a sense of identity from their disability. Should we then encourage them to be proud of being disabled?

The importance of providing families with support becomes increasingly clear to students as the relationships with their case study families lengthened. They begin to realize that, although service coordination provides families with "formal" support, support is often more effective when it is informal and relates to "being there." Families often tell students how much they appreciate having someone that is willing to listen to them. Students become increasingly aware that friendship is essential for building trust and developing family-focused intervention. As these relationships develop, students become sensitive to events occurring in the lives of their families that impose stress and threaten the family's ability to function effectively. Marla tells us in class about a home visit that illustrates this:

> After the IEP meeting, Shelly invited me back to their house. When we got there, Kevin made some lunch for Danny who had not had a chance to eat yet. He showed me all the groceries that they got at Save-a-lot in G___. They were excited about their groceries, and I was, too! Usually they have to shop in town where prices are higher because they don't have a car to get to G___. We sat at the table and talked. Shelly is concerned about Bridget, their good friend and neighbor. Her boyfriend Lou got out of jail, and Bridget is staying close to him. She said Lou is abusive and Bridget just keeps going back after "he beats on her'." Shelley said, "She just needs to leave him. If I can leave an abusive situation, so can she." Then she raised up her shirt and showed me a scar on her stomach as long as this paper and said, "This is what Carl (Danny's father) did to me before I left."

These vivid stories about family stressors invariably bring class discussion to a temporary halt as students struggle with their own emotional response. When discussion begins again, students express their feelings about the events that are reported before they go on to discuss how the events may relate to the early intervention agenda. This process provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to students the likely experience and response of families to such stressors. As they report feeling overwhelmed, merely hearing about such issues, they comment that keeping track of an early intervention agenda is quite problematic for them. When families report urgent and compelling problems, students must deal with their emotional response to these events before they can begin to consider early intervention. As one student commented, "Here we come with our bag of toys and suggestions. But this mom is worried about the rain coming in on them from the hole in the roof. We must seem pretty ridiculous."

In guided discussion, students worry about how to respond to what is often perceived as overwhelming and urgent family need. Clearly, students begin to appreciate circumstances in which families find themselves and they begin to express the importance of addressing family priorities as a first step in family-focused early intervention. However, they also become increasingly skilled at modeling intervention strategies in meaningful ways even within these stressful family interactions. In her response to the story that Shelly tells her, Marla reports in her journal that she sympathizes with Shelly's concerns about Bridget. Marla goes on to say:

> About this time Danny was finished eating and wanted to play. I helped him help Shelly clean up his lunch, and we signed fork, spoon, plate, and bowl. He brought some toys into the kitchen, and we signed some more. I told Kevin how important it was for Danny to get lots of practice using the signs to play with other kids, too, especially since he was going to start in the preschool soon. Kevin said he would see about borrowing his Mom's truck again so he could drive him to group tomorrow.

The importance of actively listening as a way to provide support for families is also adopted by the students as a means to provide support for one another. In guided discussions, students often bring up the particular circumstances they encounter in working with their case study families. Sometimes these circumstances involve celebrations of family events or aspects of the student-family relationship about which the student feels especially positive. Students also bring up issues of concern to them. Fellow students respond by offering advice or suggesting resources that might assist the student-family relationship in question. Often they mirror the processes of active listening with families by actively listening to each other. Aimee writes about this in her journal:

> Today we talked in class about a problem that my family has. They have a gas furnace that is open. You can just stick your hand right in and into the fire. Apparently, that is just what Darren has done a couple of times, and he's also burned his baby brother in their play around the furnace. We just found this out because it got cold again. Today Darren caught his shirt on fire. It wasn't on him, but he threw it down and then the rug started to smolder. It is not good and yet this family is so proud that they do not get help. Everyone in class got really concerned after listening to this, and they asked lots of questions. Finally, we came up with some long-term ideas. In the short term, we're going to try to figure out how to build a barricade around the furnace and get them a fire extinguisher.

Aimee's comments reflect a discussion that is likely to recur. Students become more likely to withhold judgments about "what to do" and spend more time actively listening to the storyteller as they seek to provide support. They begin to problem solve as a group, creating a learning environment that supports team effort. When this happens, they comment on the importance of team as it relates to their own emerging sense of professional identity. They talk about their efforts to collaborate and consult with others in the early intervention agencies as well as in class, and they acknowledge the important function these team relationships have in terms of providing them with support in their roles within the family.

Service Coordination and Community-Based Support

Issues related to service coordination often are raised in guided discussion and in student journals. As students become increasingly aware of how systems of support serve to enable or empower families to address child and family need, they identify their own needs to inform themselves about how these systems work. They also attempt to understand how to best support the ways in which the family access these systems. Janet describes her efforts to assist her case study family in this regard.

> Catherine and Lloyd were able to leave C.J. at the "Wee Care" Day Care Center so we could attend the autism training together. They told me that some of the vocabulary and information was a little over their head and difficult for them to understand, but that they learned a great deal. They were very glad they went although they got very tired of sitting (9:00-4:30). That was very hard on Lloyd's back. . . . We had lunch together and that gave us a chance to talk about what they had heard . . . how to figure out how it might relate to C.J. and what to do.

As Janet's family continues to seek assistance from an agency that specializes in providing community-based services to children with autism, Janet often serves to translate information and coordinate efforts. Her family is well acquainted with her and trust her to help them implement and evaluate a number of the professional suggestions that emerge from this team effort. As Janet provides this assistance and shares the experience with the class, the importance and complexity of service coordination becomes apparent:

> We met with Dr. M___ from the project and also our speech and language pathologist. . . . C.J. is a visual learner, we think, and is attending to words. . . . I'm going to make flash cards for C.J. to use at school and home. Our speech pathologist is going to make a picture/word communication board for him to help him with sentence structure and transitions. Dr. H., an Ear, Nose, and Throat specialist, recommended an Easy Listener to help him focus his attention better. Lloyd and Catherine are going to refrain from using baby talk. They also want to figure out which of C.J.'s behaviors are especially troublesome in social settings . . . such as the way he eats . . . or when he first realizes he needs to use the bathroom, he pulls down his pants wherever he is. . . . It was a really effective meeting. I think everyone was pleased, including Lloyd and Catherine who got their questions answered for once.

Later, Janet describes helping C.J. and the family adapt to his Easy Listener:

> Right away C.J. was interested in the device because of the buttons and cords, but he would not wear the headphones for more than 3 seconds. He

> pulled on the cords and even chewed on them a few times. We tried desensitizing him to it by having him leave them on for only a few minutes and then taking them off, but he kept disconnecting the wires and taking the headphones off. After 2 days with no success, we contacted the K___ Center and they suggested another device that involves speakers and amplifies the teacher's voice but does not need head phones. . . . Were we relieved!!

The need for the expansion of community-based comprehensive systems of support for children and families becomes evident to students as they gain understanding about the complexity of child and family needs. Students and families struggle to find resources that are appropriate and helpful for addressing identified family priorities. Students wonder about how to help foster independence and expand the family's ability to access systems of support. These issues are often considered in group discussions and are reflected in journal entries. Diane comments about the mother in her case study family who responds to finding the support that was needed to enable and empower her to address family need:

> I stopped by about 3 o'clock with some ice tea for us and some shakes for the girls. We made small talk for a time and then started talking about how when Roberta finishes school, she'd like to move back to Washington. . . . She's working hard on classes at F___ State so she can get a preschool teaching credential. Head Start got her started on that. She likes it and is doing well—mostly As and Bs. . . . She loves her practicum placement at Head Start. We started to talk about dependency, families, and responsibilities. . . . I told her about my own struggles. Roberta told me she herself was pretty neglectful a few years back. With tears in her eyes, she described "running around" and how "I almost lost my kids." But thanks to a lot of coordinated work from several agencies, she was able to get back on the right track. She says it's hard keeping track of all sorts of case workers advice. She's worked very hard to keep her family together, and she feels proud of her accomplishments. She should, too!! Maybe I should have picked someone else without all the agency involvement. I don't want her to think of me as one more person giving hypothetical and idealistic advice. . . . Still, I wish other families had the same experience Roberta has had . . . agencies pulling together for once.

Lessons Learned

In his discussion of the role of theory in the preparation of early childhood special educators, Odom (1987) points out that " teachers build their own theories about the way children learn and the procedures that will work best with individual children (p. 8)." As teachers build an experiential base, they can test the theories that they have formulated. Similarly, Casper (1995-96), in reflecting about the use of ethnography in personnel preparation for early interventionists, suggests that " developing one's own point of view about theory requires ongoing practice testing out theoretical constructs with one's observations" (p. 17). Combining case study and ethnographic methods in personnel preparation for family-focused early intervention has the effect of providing students with an opportunity to use the relationships in which early intervention is grounded—families—to develop the personal theories about which Odom and Casper write. The ultimate aim is to set students on a developmental course that will continue the rest of their professional lives. The ability to develop one's own hypotheses about what one observes, to guide one's behavior based on those hypotheses, and to evaluate the effects of that behavior is critical to all aspects of early intervention (McCollum & Catlett, 1997). It is especially important as it relates to family focus in early intervention. Ethnographic and case study research that seeks to understand student perspective about their experience will serve to deepen our understanding of the developmental process of students as they acquire an understanding of family focus in early intervention. In addition, longitudinal evaluation research is needed to determine what experiences in personnel preparation are viewed retrospectively as especially valuable for developing the necessary capabilities for practicing family focus in early intervention.

The critical aspect of providing students with ongoing support and guidance as they build relationships with families is important to recognize and can challenge personnel preparation programs that attempt to do so. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that the processes of providing guidance and support to students must model the nondirective and nonjudgmental ways in which students are to interact with families. Topics for guided discussion must emerge from real student concern and experience and must serve to assist students in asking questions of themselves and others as they gain confidence in their own perceptions and emerging professionalism. The relationships between students and families can be emotionally loaded, and guiding students response within these relationships involves risk. Despite these risks, however, the opportunity to provide students with authentic experiences that allow them to appreciate firsthand the processes critical to family focus in early intervention makes these methods important to rural early intervention personnel preparation.

The use of ethnographic and case study methods in personnel preparation for family-focused early intervention appears quite promising. Family stories provide a compelling context for the lessons of family-focused early intervention. Students report that the experience of immersing themselves in the perspective of families and of listening actively and reflectively to their stories makes clear to them the importance of family focus in planning and implementing effective intervention plans. The opportunity to reflect about family perspectives both individually in their journals and together in guided group discussions is highly valued. In final journal entries, students comment about how much they had learned from the experiences and how grateful they were to the families who allowed them to share their lives for a time. Aimee reflects this as she closes her journal:

> I will miss them all. I hope I will be able to visit with them from time to time even though I know that I am going to be busy in the lives of another group of children and families. It almost brings me to tears writing this, knowing that some day I won't be able to find them or I won't have the time to run out and see them. I will never forget them, though. They helped me learn some very important things. They taught me that no matter what something looks like on the outside, you must step inside to see the truth.

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