

Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory

Yukti Ahuja

Introduction

One of the well known scholars in the field of developmental psychology, Urie Bronfenbrenner has been the primary contributor to the ecological systems theory. The ecological theory defines four types of systems which contain roles, norms and rules that shape development. The systems include a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The **microsystem** is the family, classroom, or systems in the immediate environment in which a person is operating. The **mesosystem** is two Microsystems interacting, such as the connection between a child's home and school. The **exosystem** is an environment in which an individual is indirectly involved and is external to his experience, yet it affects him anyway i.e. a child's parent's workplace. The **macrosystem** is the larger cultural context.

By creating these systems, Bronfenbrenner was the leader in introducing researchers into examining the family, economy, and political structures as influencing the development of a child into adulthood. This paper will attempt to better understand the findings of Bronfenbrenner as it relates to child development, also look at environmental influences on the whole child's development and finally how it relates to early education programs.

Various development theories place emphasis on the nature and nurture interaction in the development of children. But Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory looks at the child's environment in terms of its quality and context. He states that "as a child develops, the interaction within these environments becomes more complex. This complexity can arise as the child's physical and cognitive structures grow and mature. So, given that nature continues on a given path, how does the world that surrounds the child help or hinder continued development?"

The ecological model of Bronfenbrenner's theory attempts to explain the differences in individual's knowledge, development and competencies through the support, guidance and structure of the society in which they live. According to Bronfenbrenner, the interactions between a number of overlapping ecosystems affect a person significantly. The family, peer group and classrooms or neighborhoods are called the microsystem, which is the primary unit around a child influencing its development directly from these sources. As two microsystems begin to work together i.e. teacher and parent working together to educate a child it happens through the mesosystem. As external factors not directly related to the child influence its development, this ecosystem impacts the child's development by interacting and changing its microsystem. Finally, the society and culture in which children are raised is the underlying influence to all systems and this is the macrosystem.

Understanding the interactions of these systems is the key in understanding how a child develops and what factors lead to the failure. Research done by Paquette & Ryan, (2001) looked at the impact of the working environment on the family microsystem. With technology increasing in the work place, the work environment is moving away from an

industrial model and more to a technical model. However, the work settings continue to reflect factory work ethic. We still work the same factory hours, work demands more face time rather than less, and women in the work place are also exposed to the same demands as men. All these factors place family life on the back burner making work the primary goal. The instability and unpredictability of family life gives children little interactions with parents and other important adults in their lives and this according to Bronfenbrenner is the most destructive force to a child's development. The break down of a child's microsystem leaves a child with no tools to explore other parts of his environment. Without proper adults and supervision or love available, children look for attention in inappropriate places and these behaviors give rise to problem especially in adolescence such as little self discipline, no self direction and anti-social behavior. Even the support from the government falls short of giving the best environment most needed for healthy development of children. According to the 'deficit' model support given by the government for struggling families requires that one must be defined incapable or deficient in some way. This policy not only labels families to be known as deficient, but also encourages them to become more deficient because the more deficient you are the more help you get. This strategy of support does not take families out of poverty but rather encourages them to continue to live in such conditions. The deficiencies in a child's microsystem cannot be replaced by over compensating in other systems. According to Bronfenbrenner, primary relationships must be those that last a life time such as with parents and deficiencies in these relationships cannot be replaced with others. Supporting the primary relationship is the key to better development of children and we as educators must work to support these primary relationships by creating an

environment that welcomes and nurtures families. Teachers cannot become parents for children; however they can educate parents about the developmental needs of children. With the main problem being conflict between work and family, government policies around the support of families should be the priority providing support to families who stay together and raise their children. More resources for parents should be made available to able them to play a larger role in the lives of their children which will foster better development of children (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

The ecological theory is used to describe the development of children by looking at the environmental factors and external influences that aid in the positive outcome of children. Children with behavioral issues are also able to gain from the same theory. A study done by Karan, Theberge & Karen looked at the issue of depression in children by using the ecological model. More and more educators are having to deal with students with social and emotional needs today. With the rise in demand for mental health and drop of services available, school counselors are becoming one of the main sources of support for many families. Since the ecological model uses external influences, it is better able to incorporate the student's school, family, community and culture to provide a better understanding of all the factors that could be contributing to the person's depression. The inclusion of all areas in a student's life makes the ecological model a better framework for identifying appropriate interventions for students with depression. By understanding the four systems at work in the life of a student, the counselor is not only looking at causes but also looking at possible sources of strength and healing within these systems. Whether in school or home or in ones culture or community, the counselor is better able to determine which system can offer healing and resilience. Starting at the

individual level, one must look at the student's physical, mental, behavioral aspects to determine any deviations. Once the assessment is done, the microsystems in the student's life, such as the family, schools, parents, siblings, teachers, friends in school are all looked at for any causes of conflict. Students experiencing problems with parents, having issues with close friends, or the student's behavior in class with teachers and friends, or his school work all must be studied to see areas of depressive behavior. Looking in the student's community can also provide insight to other areas of support for the student. Macrosystem also help explain depression in many students, with cultural values moving more towards high passed, technology oriented thinking, we tend to have little time to talk and listen to our children. Social conditions adding to the stress and anxiety of a child also help explain why depression is at a rise in our society and counselors can than use this to determine exactly where the problems arises to finally develop a plan for healing to begin. The goal of looking at the ecological model for students with depression is to better be able to design and implement effective interventions to address depression. Collaborating with all people involved in a child's life, interventions can refocus from the person to rebalancing the systems of people, place and things that directly and indirectly influence the person. The ecological model opens up the areas of the student's depression and areas of support and healing within their systems (Karan, et al 2005).

The ecological model incorporates all areas of influence on the development of children to assess the cause and also the solution to some of the increasing behavioral and emotional problems seen today. To see the interplay of micro and exosystems, research by Warren looked at the habits of television viewing in children in relation to parental

mediation. The study looked at African American families with children between 3 and 5yrs old. Using surveys, the amount of time spent watching television, television mediation, attitudes about television, and parent involvement was measured. Findings from the study show that low income parents use more restrictive methods to limit television watching in their children with parent having negative attitudes about television being more restrictive. The study also shows that a parents' work is not a predictor of mediation on television viewing. Parents working long hours do not necessarily translate into more television viewing. Hence, the interplay of ones work did not necessarily translate into more television viewing; here the exosystem did not produce a negative effect on the microsystem (Warren, 2005).

Conclusion

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development has been proven beneficial in providing insight into all the factors that play a role in the growth and development of individuals. It also shows how all factors are intertwined and impacting the development cycle. This model has provides the ability to see how our lives are balanced between every aspect of our environment. The ecological model helps in developing government policies and programs that can benefit our society.

The model also allows for treatments of various emotional and behavioral problems because the model places treatment externally and changing environmental factors can provide healing and strength. Educators can use this model to asses problems in a child's life and aid in the rebalancing of a child's environment to begin the healing. Most people fail to realize that their actions towards their children have a lasting impact in the future relationships and adjustment of their children. Using the Bronfenbrenner

model, it is easy to see that we as a society together are influencing the lives of all people we interact with and knowing this, hopefully we can try to become a better society at least for the sake of our children.

The most useful aspect of this model is that we as a society can together raise children, if we worked in harmony together, provided our children with a community that supported each other, the outcome on our children will be profound. If our next generation fails, if our future citizens are weak, if mental disorders and illness are on the rise, then it is because we all failed. Before we are swept away in our fast, high stress lives, lets use the ecological model to put the pieces together where our children can experience their lives in harmony.

Our goal is to grow our children to follow in his direction with love, respect and care of each other. If we as parents, as teachers, communities and societies work together then ours will be the nation of success, good health, respect and love.

Bibliography

Dede Paquette – John Ryan, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory; (1 of 4)
[7/12/2001

<http://pt3.nl.edu/paquetteryanwebquest.pdf#search=%22ecological%20theory%22>

Abrams, Karen,. Theberge Susan K., Orv C. Karan., Children and Adolescents Who Are Depressed: An Ecological Approach. Professional School Counseling 8 no3 284-92 F 2005.

http://firstsearch.oclc.org/WebZ/FSQUERY?sessionid=fsapp4-57951-esezkv9g-70v5wg:entypagenum=7:0:numrecs=1:searchtype=locateFT:tdbname=WilsonSelectPlus_FT:query0=sc%3d%221096-2409+200502+8+3+284+CAAWAD+%3F%22:format=BI:entityftoprecno=4:next=NEXTCMD%7FFTFETCH:rule=0:tdbname=WilsonSelectPlus_FT:issuesici=1096-2409+2005+8+3:fetchtype=fulltext:tdisplaydbname=WilsonSelectPlus_FT:thirdpartybid=461:isbillable=TRUE:isdirectarticle=FALSE:numrecs=1:format=BI:ftformat=PDF:entityemailfullrecno=4:entityrecno=4:entityemailfullresultset=2:entityemailftfrom=WilsonSelectPlus_FT:%7F

Warren Ron, Parental Mediation of Children's Television Viewing in Low-Income Families. Journal of Communication, December 2005 (847-863).

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=1&did=944322101&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1158959493&clientId=23696>