From Parent Education to Partnership Education: A Call for a Transformed Focus

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We strongly agree with the fundamental premise of Mahoney et al. (in this issue) that parent education can be philosophically compatible with family-centered approaches. We agree that parent education has fallen into disfavor over the last 20 years, and we welcome the opportunity to reexamine this important component of early intervention. Within this general agreement, we highlight some cautions about traditional parent education and offer a transformed focus of partnership education.

Traditional Parent Education

Authors' Vision of Early Intervention

From the beginning, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 has included a focus on families. This focus was initially on the enhancement of the child's development through family outcomes. Over time, however, it has become clear that supporting families in other areas is equally important. Bailey et al. (1998) suggested that, in addition to enhancing the family's capacity to help their child make developmental progress, these other family outcomes include enhancing the family's perceived ability to work with professionals, to develop a strong support system, to envision an optimistic view of the future, and to increase their overall family quality of life. Within this vision of early intervention related to broader family outcomes, we question Mahoney et al.'s restrictive definition of parent education as "the process of providing parents and other primary caregivers with specific knowledge and childrearing skills with the goal of promoting the development and competence of their children" (p. 131).

Traditional Parent Education Gone Awry

Mahoney et al. (in this issue) acknowledged a number of criticisms that have contributed to the devolution of parent education over the last 15 years. We want to expand their criticisms by focusing on the potential and unintended implications of a didactic parent–child relationship on the child's sense of self-worth. IDEA strongly supports the provision of services for infants and toddlers with disabilities in their natural environments. *Home* is identified as the primary natural environment for infants and toddlers. Ironically, parent education can alter the home environment and thereby unintentionally create an *unnatural* environment.

The following parent quote exemplifies how parent education for home intervention can change home from a natural environment to an unnatural one:

> The message to me as a mother that was pervasive in early intervention's emphasis on developmental milestones was that we needed to "fix" James. The harder I worked, the more he would achieve. And achievement was the name of the game. "Developmental milestones"—how I learned to hate those words. They were the gold medals for the winners of the "fix it" set.
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> I readily became James' teacher. His playtime at home became "learning time"—actually *all* his time was learning time. Any free time we had was to be spent on his therapy or to be spent feeling guilty that we weren't doing his therapy. I remember one developmental milestone that he never achieved—stacking three blocks. He had finally achieved stacking two blocks; the next milestone was stacking three. I modeled for him, prompted him, and finally held his hand while we did it together. Inevitably, when left to attempt it on his own, James would pick up the blocks and throw them. He found this hysterically funny. His early intervention teacher thought he was noncompliant. James obviously didn't get the fact that his ticket to acceptance rested heavily on stacking those blocks.

In addition to disrupting the natural home environment, parent training can also disrupt family relationships. One of the primary needs that all children require from their family is unconditional love. Unconditional love is the knowledge that someone loves you with all

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your frailties as well as your strengths. This is the kind of love that is supposed to be given between parent and child, whether the child has a disability or not.

Although researchers rarely conduct inquiry into emotions such as unconditional love, studies have examined the attachment of mothers—and, to a lesser extent, fathers—to their children (Goldberg, 1990). Research examining the attachment between mothers, fathers, and their children with disabilities has indicated that the bonds between parents and children can be disrupted by disability (Seligman & Darling, 1997). This disruption may be the result of the characteristics of the child or the parents (Sontag, 1996), of the context in which the bonding is formed (Carmen, 1994), or of a combination of factors.

The formation of unconditional love is basic to the development of the child. Resilience (Letourneau, 1997; Werner, 1990), self-reliance (Marvin & Pianta, 1992), and even self-determination (Abery & Zajac, 1996) have their roots in the parent–child bonding and the unconditional love that develops in the early period of a child's life.

An unfortunate potential outcome of the altered parent–child relationship within a didactic paradigm is that the child over time may begin to see him- or herself as someone unworthy of unconditional love. The child receives the message that he or she must be changed before he or she can have that love. For some reason, the child's characteristics go beyond the allowable frailties into the realm of the unacceptable and the unlovable. Rousso (1984), a social worker with a physical disability, suggested the necessity for unconditional love and commented on the subtle and not-so-subtle messages that children receive from their parents and others that their disability is not acceptable:

> In particular, disabled children need to have their bodies, disability and all, accepted, appreciated, and loved, especially by significant parenting figures. This will solidify the sense of intactness.
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> For all children, disabled or not, the "gleam in the mother's eye" in response to all aspects of the child's body and self is essential for the development of healthy self-esteem. This includes the parent's ability to show pride and pleasure in the disabled part of the body, as one valid aspect of the child, and to communicate appreciation and respect for the child's unique, often different-looking ways of doing things. . . . Parents too often communicate to their child, directly and indirectly, that the disability should be hidden or altered, if not purged—the child should strive toward appearing as "normal" and nondisabled as possible. This attitude can put the child into an identity crisis, causing him or her to push that feeling of intactness way underground. (Rousso, 1984, pp. 12–13)

Often, we do not look at parent education from the perspective of the child with a disability. Although we know it is absolutely unintended by parent education proponents that an outcome such as the one described by Rousso (1984) would accrue, we believe that we need to hear much more from children, youth, and adults with disabilities if we are to understand how didactic relationships affect their lives. Diamond (1981) described her experiences with her parents as she grew up with a physical disability. She has provided insight on the effect that didactic instruction from her parents, provided within the context of typical routines, had on her own sense of self:

> Something happens in a parent when relating to his disabled child; he forgets that they're a kid first. I used to think about that a lot when I was a kid. I would be off in a euphoric state, drawing or coloring or cutting out paper dolls, and as often as not the activity would be turned into an occupational therapy session. "You're not holding the scissors right," "Sit up straight so your curvature doesn't get worse." That era was ended when I finally let loose a long and exhaustive tirade. "I'm just a kid! You can't therapize me all the time! I get enough therapy in school every day! I don't think about my handicap all the time like you do!" (Diamond, 1981, p. 30)

Diamond (1981) has made suggestions about how parents might support their son or daughter with a disability to incorporate the meaning of this ability into their own self-image:

> The Physical, Occupational, and Speech Therapists, by the very nature of their habilitative roles, will work at minimizing the disability. The child will interpret this to mean that the disability is something to be "cured" (gotten rid of). Teachers in the child's life will concentrate on academic ability; unfortunately, with little integration of the disability in the process. Well-meaning relatives and friends will "ignore" the disability or cater to it in a pitying way. The child needs a solid base or frame of reference from which to view the disability. The disability is a fact, not good, not bad, just a fact. It imposes limitations. Society imposes limitations that make the disability more burdensome than it need be. The child must know this about himself

> and his disability, and the parent must teach this. (Diamond, 1981, pp. 47–48)

We believe that it would be highly instructive for the early intervention field to have more perspectives from children, youth, and adults with disabilities on how to develop a genuine respect for individuals with disabilities, which includes valuing them as whole and complete and worthy of unconditional love and unconditional inclusion in all sectors of the home, neighborhood, school, and community. Professional and parent education needs to address the essential importance of *valuing* children with disabilities in the same way that children without disabilities are valued.

Contemporary Partnership Education

We believe that parent education is only a small piece of a larger picture. In this picture, we look to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological approach, as Mahoney et al. (in this issue) did. Rather than focusing solely on the microsystem, we look to the entire ecological system of the child and family for the education and support that is needed. In this section, we offer suggestions for transforming traditional parent education into a new emphasis on partnership education.

Ecological Perspectives on Partnership Education

Mahoney et al. (in this issue) embedded their rationale for the philosophical compatibility of parent education and family-centered approaches in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of ecological systems. Given this ecological orientation, it is surprising that they only emphasized educating parents to foster their child's developmental progress. A primary feature of ecological theory is hierarchical environmental systems of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Peck, 1993). Hierarchical systems of influence refer to the analysis of development within the larger ecological contexts of four levels of systems—micro, meso, exo, and macro—rather than on one level only. Mahoney et al.'s description of parent education primarily focused on the microsystem level of the child's and parent's immediate environment and their face-to-face interactions. Equally important is the notion of enhancing the child's and family's quality of life at the other three levels. We concur with the finding of Bennett, Lee, and Lueke (1998) that many parents are concerned with inclusion in all areas of life (e.g., religious activities, community recreation, neighborhood playgroups), not just with developmental progress.

Figure 1 represents a conception of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model [adapted from work of Singer (1996)] for an early intervention developmental life cycle. Conceptualizing options for parent education only in terms of the potential developmental gains of the child at the microlevel is represented in Figure 1 by the darkly shaded area of the microsystem. In terms of enhancing the overall quality of life for the child and family, it becomes obvious how restrictive this focus is. Ecological perspectives encourage families and service providers to

- regard the child as an authentic member of the family's and community's ecological environments,
- take stock of what is important to the child and the family in terms of quality of life across all four systems,
- determine what is in place that is consistent with their priorities,
- determine what needs to change to create a better match between what is important and what exists in their lives, and
- provide partnership education, supports, and services to create preferred quality of life enhancements.

Thus, the major emphasis becomes "fixing" the multiple ecological environments, rather than "fixing" the child, so that key people in the environments value the child with a disability and eagerly create accommodations and supports so that the child gets the implicit message from the earliest years that he or she *belongs* in an authentic inclusive community. An ecological perspective shifts the focus from only concentrating on the child's developmental gain to concentrating on a transformed ecology in which children with disabilities can flourish in their development as their skills interact with a responsive context.

Although a detailed description of how this process might evolve is beyond the scope of this article (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Blue-Banning, 1994; Turnbull, Turbiville, Schaffer, & Schaffer, 1997), suffice it to say that the framework in Figure 1 could serve as a basis for the family to determine the particular environments in which they and their child would like to interact. Key people in those environments might be identified to join the family and service providers in an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) process (Turbiville, Turnbull, Garland, & Lee, 1996). Given this expanded network of family members, service providers, and people who can enable access to preferred community environments, this *partnership team* might take stock of the strengths, needs, and preferences of all team members for supporting the child and family to attain the quality of life they desire. Taking stock of current skills and competencies of key people in the child's life should lead to the identification of people with *strengths* who can provide training and support and

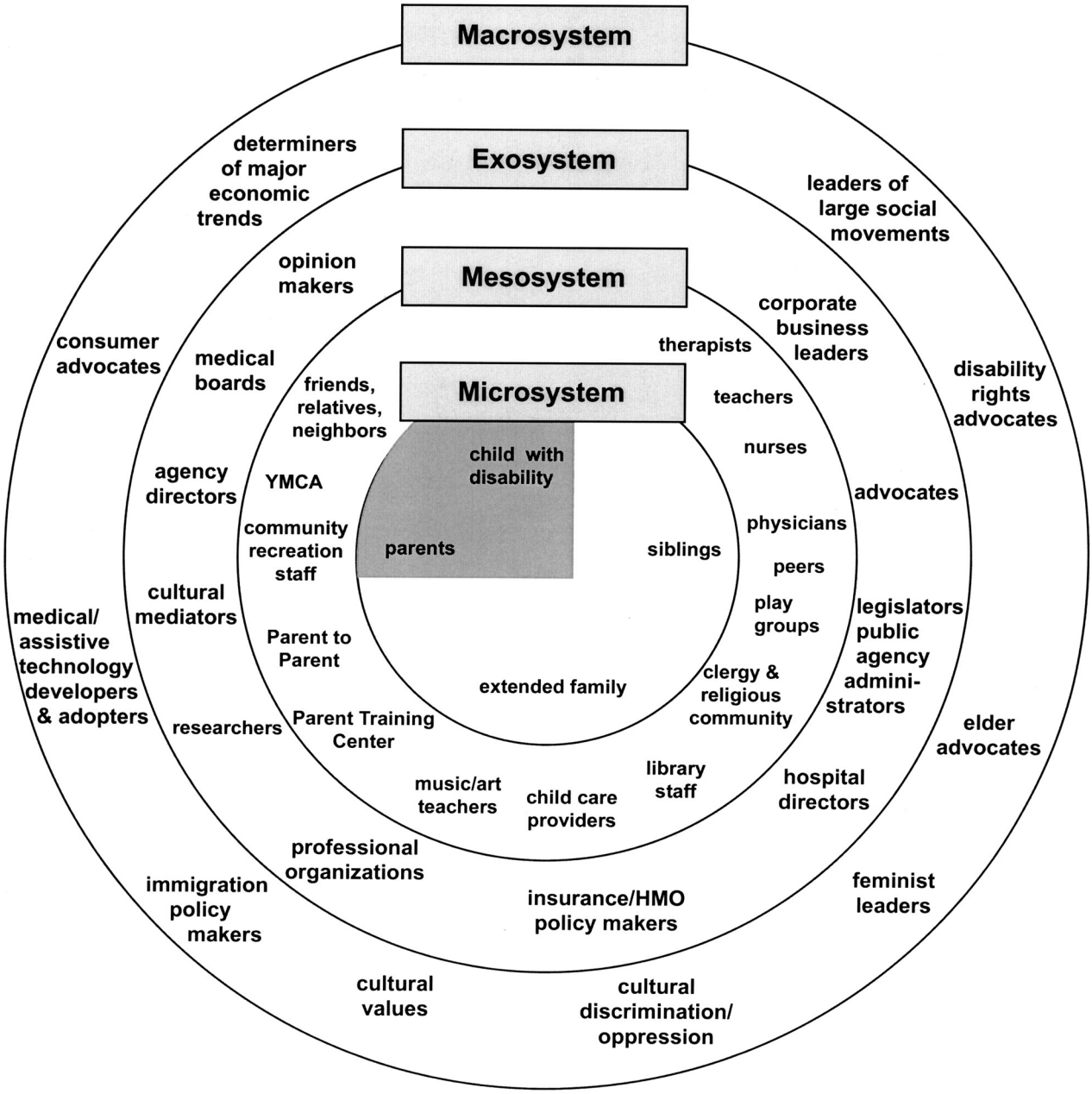

FIGURE 1. Ecological systems for partnership education.

other people with *needs* who will be the recipients of training. For example, it may be that parents, a childcare provider, and a music instructor at the local arts center want to gain more skills in language development. The speech–language pathologist on the early intervention team and a parent of a child with a similar disability might be the best persons to provide this information. In addition to providing information about language development, the speech–language pathologist and the parent can also emphasize the value of unconditionally accepting the child and giving the child an opportunity to truly belong in a variety of community settings including childcare and the local arts center. As another example, clergy at the family's religious organization may need to have more information about architectural and programmatic accessibility for individuals with disabilities, and the parents of the child and an adult with a disability from the local independent living center may be the best people to provide this information. Again, this training can focus not only on accessibility but on the value of the child and family being part of the religious community and the reasonable accommodations and adaptations that will be needed not only to enhance mobility but also to enhance genuine membership. These key people in the family's

environment are at the meso- and exosystem levels in our ecological model. The partnership team for each family will likely include other family members, service providers, and members of the family's community drawn from all four ecological levels depicted in Figure 1. In this ecological paradigm, the provision of parent education is not unidirectional from professionals to parents.

Parents as Providers of Partnership Education

Mahoney et al. (in this issue) varied in their perspectives about the role of parents as being only recipients of training rather than also being providers of training. The assumption throughout their article is that professional expertise is needed to provide education to parents. Mahoney et al. stated that when professionals did not have sufficient skills, educational alternatives might be finding another professional, referring parents for services, and acquiring informational materials for parents. We wonder why they did not endorse the value of parents as potential providers of education for professionals. What does the failure to acknowledge the appropriate role of families as providers of education to professionals say about the hierarchy of power and knowledge, and how does that hierarchy relate to the principle of family-centered services?

Mahoney et al.'s (in this issue) strong emphasis on unidirectional education from professionals to parents appears to be in conflict with one of the key components of the principle of family centeredness—a strengths perspective (Allen & Petr, 1996). Given the critical importance of a strengths perspective, we underscore the expertise of parents and other family members, and the vital resources that they can provide to professional and community partners who work collaboratively to enhance the child's and the family's quality of life.

Programmatically, ecological perspectives of child and family quality of life imply that not all of the expertise resides with the professionals on the early intervention team to make things happen across all four ecological levels, environments, and interactions. Thus, professionals greatly need not only the expertise of parents but also the expertise of key community members. Families as well as individuals across all four ecological levels have strengths and resources that complement, rather than supplement, professionals' expertise.

Finally, from a research perspective, Mahoney et al. (in this issue) called for a broad research agenda that appears to be focused on professionals as providers of parent training. We strongly concur with the importance of this research, but we want to encourage research focusing on the efficacy of parents as providers of education to parents and professionals. For example, some current research findings indicate that

- Parents who use Parent to Parent services benefit from contacts with other parents in terms of feeling better able to cope with their child and family situation, viewing their child and family circumstances in a more positive light, and making progress on goals that are important to them (Singer et al., in press); and
- Parents reported that they found Parent to Parent assistance particularly helpful because of perceived sameness, comparable situations for learning relevant skills and gathering useful information, easy availability of support, and mutuality of support (Ainbinder et al., 1998).

More than one third of the statewide Parent to Parent programs receive Part C funding. An important direction of the transformed focus on partnership education is to work collaboratively with local and state Parent to Parent programs and to possibly expand the funding and support from Part C to underwrite the valuable educational resources that accrue from family–professional partnerships in the provision of education. If we truly value parents as resources to professionals, parents, and community members, it is necessary for us to build an ecology that supports parents to take on this additional educational role. Readers interested in knowing more about Parent to Parent resources are referred to Santelli, Turnbull, Marquis, and Lerner (1997).

In addition to the national Parent to Parent network, other valuable parent-directed educational resources include the federally funded Parent Training and Information Centers, which provide educational support to families to enable them to secure their rights under federal and state laws, the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers, which has comprehensive educational resources that can form the basis of family–professional partnerships, and the Families and Advocates Partners for Education Project, which was specifically developed to provide information to families on IDEA. These last two are located at the PACER center in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Web site: www.pacer.org). Although Parent to Parent and Parent Training and Information Centers are often viewed as resources for parents only, both resource networks also have invaluable training resources available for professionals and for other community members across all ecological levels.

Culture as a Consideration in Partnership Education

As we consider the ecological system of the child and the family as a focus for partnership education, we must also address a major element of the macrosystem: culture. Culture reverberates throughout all four levels of the eco-

logical system as it influences and is influenced by elements of the exo-, meso-, and microsystems. Special considerations need to be given to culturally relevant perspectives on partnership education. Although traditional parent education may have the good intention to deliver best practices to parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to enhance the development of their children with disabilities, for the parents these best practices are, in many cases, a reflection of the priority values of the majority culture. For example, a Japanese mother described the emphasis that the school placed on her child eating with a fork and using a knife to cut; however, this priority was not important to her, because of the way that Japanese food is prepared in small chunks that do not require cutting. She emphasized that it would be impossible for her to work on this with her child at home because of the family's use of chopsticks and their style of preparing food. She said, however, that it was difficult within her culture to disagree with professionals because of the high regard that is placed on professional expertise. Thus, it created a stressful situation for this mother when professionals assumed that their priorities for parent education were the same as hers. As in the development of the IFSP, the first consideration should be given to the preferences, priorities, and concerns of the family in designing partnership education for families from diverse cultures.

Communication between professionals and parents is one of the strong indicators for effective and successful partnership education. Even when parents have enough English proficiency to talk with professionals without problems, the different communication styles still can be a barrier. The majority Anglo-American culture epitomizes a low-context culture that focuses on precise, logical, verbal communication and values direction, speed, and getting the job done. For example, although some parents might need financial supports, they may have little idea of what they need to do when they hear a recommendation such as "go to the SRS office and apply for SSI." High-context cultures, which include Asian, Native American, Arab, Latino, and African American, tend to rely on situational cues, established hierarchies, and nonconfrontational responses in their communication with others (Hall, 1976). When families and professionals differ in the level of context that they use in communication, there may be misunderstanding (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). For example, both giving and saving face are important in communication for cultural groups from Asia. Thus, asking questions is sometimes seen as challenging someone's knowledge, which may be regarded as loss of face (Hanson, Lynch, & Wayman, 1990).

We suggest the following recommendations for creating partnership education with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds based on our experiences and the research with these families:

1. There is a strong need for having written materials in as many languages as possible. The core knowledge (e.g. parental rights, IEP/IFSP, information about financial support, information about community resources) that might be helpful to any parents should be translated into diverse languages. Helpful resources for gaining access to translated materials are international students pursuing degrees in special education at U.S. universities and the Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services at the University of Illinois.
2. For professionals who will be in working in parent education programs, it can be helpful to spend time with the family members and to become familiar with their lifestyle (e.g., food, eating style, relationships with elders, gestures between family members). The personalized understanding of how the family members operationalize quality of life in their own cultural context across ecological levels can serve as the foundation for planning specific partnership education programs.
3. As a part of parent education services, creating access to cultural mediators for parents from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds can be an invaluable resource. Especially when families initially arrive in the United States and need some orientation about the special education system, or when they need some advocacy in an IEP meeting or in an evaluation process, they might contact a cultural mediator to get help.

For example, Parent to Parent Power, a member of the Grassroots Consortium on Disabilities—a network of 15 programs in culturally and linguistically diverse communities that are explicitly focused on providing support to families of children with disabilities—located in Tacoma, Washington, is directed by Mrs. Yvone Link. The following vignette characterizes the support that Mrs. Link, a Korean parent of a daughter with a disability, provides to a mother of a young child with a disability.

> Mrs. Fagan is a Korean mother who receives daily support from Mrs. Link. Mrs. Fagan explains, "My husband left me and our son, because I spend too much time caring for our son. I'm treated inhumanly, because I don't understand all the paperwork that comes in the mail." Mrs. Fagan is not able to speak or read English.

> Mrs. Fagan calls Mrs. Link each morning, and the conversation lasts from 15 minutes to 1 1/2 hours. Mrs. Link helps her get organized for the day and make plans to care for her son and herself. During frequent face-to-face meetings with Mrs. Fagan, Mrs. Link reads her mail to her, helps her write letters to her husband and to the school, teaches her English, attends IEP meetings with her, and frequently receives messages from the school staff with a request to translate them for Mrs. Fagan into her native Korean language. Through Mrs. Link's support, Mrs. Fagan is empowering herself to get the best education she can for her son and also to learn English. Mrs. Link says that "she is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day," because Mrs. Fagan's problems do not just occur during typical work hours.

From this description of Mrs. Link's supports and services, it becomes obvious how much families, as well as professionals and community members, can learn from cultural mediators—especially those who, like Mrs. Link, are also parents of children with disabilities. Consider how valuable Mrs. Link would be for training professionals to provide culturally relevant support to Korean parents of children with disabilities.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (U.S. Department of Education) is just beginning to fund community programs that provide intensive support to families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Speaking from an ecological perspective, all early childhood professionals have an opportunity to express to OSEP their enthusiastic support for funding programs and services similar to those that Mrs. Link provides, not only to serve families but also to serve professionals and community members. This is an example of how partnership education can "fix" the ecology by providing adequate resources to cultural mediators to expand their services. Currently, Mrs. Link is providing all these services with very little financial remuneration. Partnership education can link professionals and parents who have had a great deal of experience in developing and implementing federally funded projects to partner with Mrs. Link and other cultural mediators to share grant writing expertise to enable them to have an adequate piece of the funding pie. True collaboration among all partners on a team from diverse cultural backgrounds who function at different ecological levels can be a synergizing experience for all involved (Thomas, Correa, & Morsink, 1995). This synergy created by the interaction of stakeholders at all levels enables partnership education to transform ecology so that it is genuinely responsive to and respectful of all children and families—including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Summary

We believe that offering parents the sole option of education to enhance their child's development and competence is too restrictive. As important as developmental gain is, ecological perspectives suggest that all the key partners who have a role in enhancing the child's and family's quality of life are potential providers and recipients of education, resources, and supports in a mutually reciprocal fashion. Thus, we envision partnership education as a process of comprehensively assisting parents and other care providers to unconditionally value and love their child with a disability, to regard the child with a disability as having the same rights and opportunities to be included across all ecological levels as children without disabilities, to take stock of their child's and the family's current quality of life, to develop a blueprint of their preferred quality of life, and to actualize the resources, services, and supports to achieve consistency between what the family perceives to be important and what they actually experience in terms of quality lifestyle options. Partnership education incorporates parent education as one of its many components. It also incorporates the education of all the professionals and community members who are working together to enhance the child's and the family's quality of life.

We are eager to embrace the complexity of contemporary partnership education and believe the next important steps include redefining outcomes and expanding our ecological perspectives. To accomplish this, we concur with Mahoney et al. (in this issue) that "As a field, we must discuss" (p. 132) the need "to promote a renewed dialogue about new forms and strategies of parent education" (p. 138). A critical issue is the definition of *field* and the specification of the constituencies that should be represented in the *dialogue*. In the past, when the word *field* has been used in the context of journal articles, it typically has connoted the professional field. Given the strong emphasis on family centeredness in the field of early intervention, we must ask whether the concept of family centeredness applies at the point of transforming and setting new priorities for the broad field of early intervention. If we truly are a field of professionals, families, and community members working in partnerships, we must transform the whole process of how issues such as a new conceptualization of partnership education are discussed to make sure that we do not have a predominantly professional dialogue. We encourage the immediate development of a planning process for bringing families and community members across all

four ecological levels into a pertinent early intervention dialogue with professionals in order to truly discuss these important topics and reflect on them as a field, rather than primarily as a professional constituency. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this dialogue.♦

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This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to the Beach Center on Disability, Grant #H133B980050.