

PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION ABOUT DRUG OR ALCOHOL-IMPAIRED DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

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Abstract

While legislation such as Goals 2000 mandates that educators assume the primary responsibility for increasing parental participation in schools, teacher education curricula have historically been devoid of any relevant and meaningful content. New teachers are placed at an even greater disadvantage due to the increasing number of American families rendered dysfunctional by excessive and unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse. This article provides an overview of family systems theory, with a particular focus on the roles adopted by children in dysfunctional families. In addition, analyses of narratives about dysfunctional families, written by 125 preservice teachers, provide implications for new directions in teacher education.

In 1990, the United States Congress enacted the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and created the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) for the purpose of monitoring state and national progress towards meeting the goals (National Education Goals Panel, 1998). In the eighth goal of this legislation, school-home partnerships were elevated to a prominent position on America's national education agenda: "Goal 8: Parental Participation. By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (NEGP, 1998, p. vi). Clearly, Congress sent a forceful message to all citizens that educators must begin to proactively recruit, and meaningfully include, parents and community members in policy decisions as well as the daily operations of K-12 public schools. Common sense suggests that such partnerships between schools and students' families should be the foundation upon which the entire educational enterprise is built. Indeed, there has emerged convincing research evidence to suggest that when schools and parents coordinate their efforts, children are the beneficiaries (Epstein, 1987, 1991). Historically, though, it can be argued that for much of this century many public schools have succeeded, either unintentionally or by design, in minimizing the level of parental/family engagement in productive, reciprocal relationships (Hamburg, 1994).

Numerous cultural, political, historical, and idiosyncratic human factors have contributed to the current tensions in school and community relations (Allison, 1995). It is unfortunate but predictable (Sarason, 1998) that Goals 2000 and other well-intentioned legislative

actions fail to recognize the complex mix of individual, group, and system dynamics that impinge upon school personnel and the multiple agendas they are expected to fulfill (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993). Nevertheless, in response to the pressing call for practitioner expertise in working effectively with parents, a few teacher education programs have developed and incorporated into their preservice programs course content designed to enhance the parent- and family-relations skills of their graduates (Harvard Family Research Project, 1997). The minimum professional knowledge required to develop successful partnerships between teachers and competent, functional parents has been delineated in various publications (see, for example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1994; Harvard Family Research Project, 1997).

While it is easy to converse at the abstract level about our changing national culture and the importance of school/home/community partnerships, the harsh reality is that this work has always been hard and it is becoming even more difficult as schools become increasingly politicized (Marsh & Horns-Marsh, 1999). With few exceptions, students are members of deeply interwoven family systems and, unfortunately, there is a steady increase in the number of troubled and ineffective American families (Hamburg, 1994; Pipher, 1994). Acknowledging the changed social milieu of contemporary America, Goodlad (1994) observed that "there is much that teacher educators must do to prepare those who work in schools for the realities of today's communities" (p. 226).

One necessary but neglected element in teacher education curricula concerns professional relationships with those persons who are perhaps the most resistant to productive and continuous engagement with public school personnel: the members of what mental health experts clinically regard as "dysfunctional families." The first section of this article contributes to the scant teacher education literature on such families (Powell, Zehm, & Kottler, 1995) by summarizing a conceptual framework drawn from professional practice and research in the field of human addictions. Next, an example of how this information might be used in teacher education is provided. Based on their study and discussion of a small book about children raised in alcoholic homes (Reed, 1992), 125 preservice teachers were asked to submit written reaction/reflection papers. A summary and an analysis of these written narratives are explained in the second section. The third and final section consists of recommended practices for preservice teacher education programs.

A Systems Perspective on Families

While there are various theoretical perspectives about the intrapersonal features and the interpersonal dynamics of dysfunctional families, the framework developed by Wegscheider (1981) is supported by clinical documentation of other mental health professionals, especially experts in the field of alcohol addiction (Black, 1982). Wegscheider's conceptual framework is based on the innovations of pioneering family systems therapist Virginia Satir, who explained that families are dynamic systems in which every member affects, and is effected by, every other member, as well as by events that occur outside the family constellation (Bandler, Grinder, & Satir, 1976). Developed originally from her personal and professional experiences with alcohol and other drug (AOD) abuse and addiction, Wegscheider's model remains as an insightful and well-regarded framework for understanding troubled families, including those whose core dysfunctionality derives from factors other than parental AOD abuse (e.g., parental sexual addiction, parental chronic mental illness, or extreme levels of parental control marked by child maltreatment). Hence, while there may be anyone (or more) of a variety of excessive or addictive parental behaviors that account for the initial familial dysfunctionality, a common outcome is that the children raised in such families are prone to adopt one or more stereotypical roles in an unwitting attempt to help maintain the status quo. When these family system-determined roles become the central organizing purpose and experience for a child and, further, when these roles are carried into adulthood and become manifested again in new family relationships, then that person is said to be "codependent" (Gravitz & Bowden, 1985).

Unless there is a clear and direct therapeutic intervention of some sort, an adult child from a dysfunctional family of origin can “live out” the role in his or her new family, thereby contributing to the frequently observed phenomenon of intergenerational dysfunction. Bradshaw (1988) explained:

The chief component of the family system is the marriage relationship. Mom’s relationship with herself and Dad’s relationship with himself and their relationship with each other is the foundation of the family. The husband and wife are the architects of the family. Dysfunctional families are created by dysfunctional marriages. Dysfunctional marriages are created by dysfunctional individuals who seek out and marry each other. (p. 61)

A Delicate Balance

As noted previously, a systems perspective assumes that every family will continually interact for the primary purpose of maintaining balance. In other words, families will seek ways to live together so that life’s daily demands can be met in such a way that the status quo is maintained. In functional families, such balance seeking occurs in ways that are healthy and life enhancing for each individual as well as the group. However, dysfunctional families are impaired because one or more members engage in excessive or addictive behaviors like AOD use, work, gambling, shopping, or sex. When this dynamic is operative within a family, all family members must adjust, often by assuming unhealthy roles for the benefit of the family. Bradshaw (1988) elaborated on this point:

In themselves, roles are not bad and as Shakespeare wisely pointed out, we all play many roles in our lives. The roles in dysfunctional family systems are different. They are not chosen or flexible. They are necessitated by the covert or overt needs of the family as a system. . . . In every case the person playing the role gives up his unique selfhood. In dysfunctional families, the individual exists to keep the system in balance. . . . Each person lives in reaction to the distress coming from chemical abuse, incest, violence, work addiction, eating disorders, the parents’ rage or sickness, or whatever the compulsivity is. (pp. 77- 78)

The Toll on Children

There is an extensive research base that suggests that children raised in homes marked by excessive and compulsive parental behaviors suffer impaired development in a whole host of ways. In their extensive review of the research on children of alcoholics, (COAs) Nastasi and DeZolt (1994) summarized the deleterious effects of parental addiction on children:

Research with children, adolescents, and adults indicates that COAs are at risk for developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, aggressive and delinquent behaviors, somatic disorders, academic and work-related adjustment difficulties, and alcoholism. Furthermore, there is evidence that their personal-social competencies are less well developed. COAs, compared to non-COAs, are more likely to have low self-esteem and poor self-efficacy, difficulty establishing and maintaining intimate relationships, and less effective interpersonal problem-solving skills. (p. 30)

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed by Wegscheider (1981) suggested that children in dysfunctional families are unwittingly coerced into adopting one or more roles necessary for the maintenance of the family as a system.

The Four Roles

When explaining the adaptive family roles assumed by some children, Royce (1989) commented that:

. . . it is important to remember that the characteristics [of children from dysfunctional families] are developed unconsciously, over a long time—not deliberately. No- body in the family quite realizes what is going on. . . . Denial is insidious. . . . While the alcoholic is often anesthetized by alcohol, the family bears the full brunt of its effects, which may include, besides guilt and confusion, battering, incest, and often verbal abuse more painful than a beating. (p. 163)

Wegscheider (1981) has identified four distinct roles that the children in a dysfunctional family can assume. Although a comprehensive theoretical treatment of these roles is beyond the scope of this article, a brief explanation based on the works of Wegscheider (1981), Nastasi and DeZolt (1994), and Royce (1989) is provided as necessary conceptual grounding for the remainder of the article.

The Hero. The child who adopts the role of the Hero (often the oldest child) seems to be a “Superkid” because he or she assumes a heavy managerial role in the family. These children typically perform to very high self-imposed standards both at home and at school. They are active in many clubs and extracurricular activities at school and, upon arrival at home, they may fix dinner, clean the house, and care for the younger children. By achieving at school and by assuming such adult-like, parental responsibilities, the Hero brings positive recognition to the family and to him/herself. Unchecked, these patterns can carry over into adulthood and become manifest in a compulsive need to be responsible for nearly everything and everybody, and to “fix” all problems perfectly.

The Scapegoat. Often the second-born child, the Scapegoat can become the stereotypical juvenile delinquent who manages to find him/herself in conflict with authority figures at home, at school, and in the community. Craving attention and unable to compete with the Hero, the Scapegoat acts out his or her anger via AOD abuse, promiscuous sex, or aggressive, antisocial behavior. Without intervention, the Scapegoat may very well end up incarcerated or pregnant and married as a teen.

The Lost Child. Often the middle or only child, the Lost Child is a very quiet person who spends an inordinate amount of time alone. This child has significant interpersonal dilemmas within the family and at school, due in large part to his or her chronic sense of helplessness, loneliness, and anxiety. Because he or she is invested in avoiding attention at all costs, the Lost Child may be unnoticed in the classroom setting. If allowed to develop into adulthood, the Lost Child syndrome may lead to a life either void of intimacy or, conversely, a series of distressed relationships in which he or she is continually victimized.

The Mascot. Usually the youngest child, the mascot is perceived as “cute and charming” by people within and outside of the family constellation. Spoiled by parents and siblings, the Mascot’s role is to break the tension in the family by playing the clown, thereby providing comic relief for everybody. Internally, Mascots tend to be anxious and insecure individuals who crave attention and protection. In school, these children usually are identified as the “class clowns” who can make anybody laugh. Unfortunately, a Mascot who does not receive help may perform poorly throughout school, thereby wasting his or her unique talents and subsequently settling for a life that lacks personal fulfillment.

Wegscheider’s (1981) framework parallels those of Black (1981) in the identification and characteristics of the distinct roles assumed by children in addictive or otherwise dysfunc-

tional families. As explained in the next section, this information was presented to third and fourth-year preservice teachers via an assignment in a university course on teacher and parent/family relations.

Narrative Inquiry

One hundred and twenty-five early childhood and elementary education majors in a Midwestern university were given the assignment of reading *Lost Days: Children from Dysfunctional Families in School* by Thomas Reed (1992). In his book, Reed uses real life vignettes to embellish his explanation of Wegscheider's (1981) conceptual framework. Additionally, the preservice teachers were required to write a paper in which they used the framework to demonstrate their own understanding of family systems theory, and how familial dysfunction might negatively affect children. Considering the statistical likelihood that some of the preservice teachers were raised in alcohol-impaired or otherwise dysfunctional families, the instructor was careful to provide three alternative perspectives that students could use when writing the paper: (a) they could use a detached "clinical perspective" and explain the four roles exclusively at the theoretical level; (b) they could summarize the four roles and then use the framework as a lens to examine a family who they knew intimately; (c) they could summarize the framework and then use it as a lens to perceive their own families in novel ways. Because of the possibility that a required text like *Lost Days* might trigger into conscious awareness unresolved personal issues from a student's family life, it was essential that each person had the freedom to determine which perspective to use; hence, students who experienced any degree of discomfort while reading the book could choose to keep their emotions in check by reading and writing exclusively at the cognitive level. The three perceptual lenses and the instructor's rationale for providing alternatives were carefully explained to the students before they read the text. It was interesting to note that in spite of the possibility of a self-confrontation with unresolved feelings or tensions from the past, more than half of the respondents chose to use Wegscheider's (1981) framework as a way to examine and understand their own families.

Methodology

Upon receipt of the written narratives, the instructor made a copy of each one. On the last day of class, after returning the graded papers and explaining this research endeavor, the instructor provided a written permission form on which each student could either approve or deny permission to use his or her narrative in this inquiry. As an assurance of unbiased instructor evaluation of student performance in the course, the permission forms were collected, secured in a file drawer, and not examined until two weeks after final grades had been submitted. All narratives approved by the respondents were used in this inquiry.

Qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for this inquiry because the examined phenomena are idiosyncratic, phenomenological, and interpersonal. Specifically, narrative analysis (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995) was used to uncover and make sense of three dimensions of the written assignment. Each document was read and coded for analysis (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992). The inquiry questions provided three precise coding categories: (a) What conceptual understandings did the students derive from the theoretical framework provided in *Lost Days*? (i.e., was their interpretation of the theory accurate, coherent, and practical?); (b) When using the framework as a lens to view their own or another family, what did the students discover? and (c) What implications for their future work as elementary school teachers did the students recognize as a result of this assignment? Although the students had to choose one of the three instructor-determined "lenses" in writing the paper, beyond that parameter the assignment provided flexibility for individually determined interpretation and application. The first research question about conceptual understanding was straightforward and readily amenable to coding and analysis. However, responses to the other two research questions were

more difficult because each respondent's perceptions of family units were idiosyncratic, as were their implications for classroom teaching. In each submitted paper, the respondent's words were highlighted and coded. Subsequent analysis of the 125 documents led to the identification of distinctive patterns concerning content knowledge, family applications, and class-room implications.

Emergent Themes

Understanding Theoretical Content

Analysis of the theoretical review sections of the narratives revealed that about 80% of students derived a conceptually accurate understanding of the essential components of Wegscheider's (1981) theoretical framework as explained by Reed (1995) in *Lost Days*. In particular, about half of the respondents mentioned that Reed's use of illustrative vignettes, written by adults who had grown up in dysfunctional families, helped clarify their understanding of family systems theory and each of the four family roles.

One element of the framework deserves mention because it was the only component incorrectly interpreted by about 20% of the respondents. Wegscheider's framework posits that a child's birth order may influence the role he or she assumes in the family system. However, both Wegscheider (1981) and Reed (1992) explicitly state that birth order is not the dominant factor in determining which role(s) a child assumes in a family. Some students' interpretations of the framework incorrectly attributed family role adoption exclusively to birth order and, if the framework did not correlate with their own family birth order experience, they then dismissed the entire framework as inaccurate and therefore of little value. A typical misinterpretation is exemplified in this narrative:

When I read *Lost Days*, I realized that growing up is a very difficult task. It is even more difficult when a child comes from a dysfunctional family. According to Reed, the role that a child takes is based on his or her birth order. I feel that Reed's beliefs are not necessarily accurate. The reason I feel this way is because I am the second of three children, and I do not think that I have to compete for attention with my older brother because I was the one who worked hard to get the grades so that my family would be proud of me.

For this respondent, her older brother (often, but not always, the Hero) did not earn good grades in school, whereas she (the second-born, often the Scapegoat) did have to earn good grades in order to please the family and bring positive recognition to herself. In the conclusion of her written assignment, this preservice teacher summarily discounted the entire framework (and, apparently, the rest of the book's contents) because her own family experience did not correspond to her selective, but incorrect, interpretations.

Another significant revelation that emerged from the narratives was the extent of respondent naiveté concerning the complexity and diversity of contemporary American family systems. About 90% of the elementary education majors in our program are Caucasian women from middle-class families. Analysis of the students' narratives clearly indicated that most of them were entering the teaching profession quite uninformed about any type of family system other than their own. Especially lacking was even a faint awareness that many of their future students will arrive at school each morning, having just survived another night of unhealthy—perhaps even dangerous—family interactions. For example, one woman explained her reaction to the book this way:

When I started thinking about how I was going to write this paper about people who are from dysfunctional families, I was very sad and very happy at the same time. I was happy because I could not think, off the top of my head, of anyone in my family who was in a situation as bad as the ones I have read in this book. I felt I was fortu-

nate because as a child I was not abused mentally, physically, emotionally, nor sexually—neither was my brother. Then I felt very sad. I was sad because there are children out there who did and still do live in families like this.

Another respondent explained her dawning awareness of the prevalence of AOD-impaired families this way:

I think that it is extremely hard to imagine a childhood filled with such baggage from a dysfunctional family of origin. I luckily never faced such a traumatic childhood. I think that it is difficult to relate to many students way live in homes of abuse, alcoholism, neglect, and instability.

Personal, Practical Applications of the Framework

The respondents had the option of using Wegscheider's (1981) framework as a perceptual lens to reflect on one family unit—either their own or another family with whom they were intimately acquainted. Of the 100 respondents who chose to apply the framework to a family, 70 decided to examine their own. It was common for these students to discover new, sometimes dramatic insights about themselves or their family. One person wrote, "Aha! Now I understand myself and my family!" The following examples illustrate similar insights.

Application to family of origin. For some students, learning this family system framework was a long-awaited verification of what they had intuitively known for many years. For example, one respondent wrote,

After reading the book *Lost Days*, I see that a lot of the situations and/or experiences that have occurred throughout the course of my life have come from situations described in this text. I have had to deal with many people who exhibit one of the four personalities described in the text within my own family or group of friends. After reading about the four different descriptions and scenarios of the four common dysfunctions within families, the experiences and encounters that I have had now seem to make a lot more sense to me.

Another respondent said,

I really liked *Lost Days*. It explained my family's life perfectly. I gave it to my mom to read and compare the three of us [children in the family] and I know her analysis will be the same as mine. The stories of people in the text were fun to read also. The examples given were sometimes very close to my own stories.

Some respondents were able to gain alternative perspectives on the style of parenting they had received. One woman explained a new and rather troubling insight about her father:

In my family situation, I feel that my sisters and I played the roles that Reed discusses in his book. After reading this book, I have discovered that my father has been very controlling of my life and my sister's, and this has created tension within our family. My mother is like the enabler [the spouse of an alcoholic] who just sits back and allows everything to happen without her opinion counting for much. In a way, my father's control has helped us to see the difference between right and wrong and helped us make the right decisions, but he still wants to have that control in our lives. I feel that we are old enough to make our own decisions and learn from our own mistakes.

A few students were aware of dysfunctional patterns in their families before reading *Lost Days*. Still, these students gained valuable conceptual information, including an accurate vocabulary, to use in their evolving understanding of self and family. One preservice teacher explained her new insight:

By reading these different roles, I can see my whole family in this book. I would say that my family was dysfunctional. My father came from a dysfunctional family and I can see it in him now. My father was and I guess you could say still is an alcoholic. My parents were married for 28 years before they separated. My father had an affair and left my mother. Recently, my father has married "the other woman." It has affected my brothers and me very much, but each in a different way.

Application to another family. The respondents could choose to use the framework to analyze a family other than their own, provided they had an intimate knowledge of the other family. A typical narrative of this category included this explanation:

As I read *Lost Days*, I thought of several families that have members who fit these categories [family roles] perfectly. One family that kept coming back to me is a family that I know almost as well as my own. This is the family of my best friend. She has been my best friend since kindergarten and for the first sixteen years of our lives, we were inseparable. I almost spent more time at her house than my own during our elementary and junior high days. In the case of the Z. family, the age-based roles fit perfectly. A. is the Hero, B. is the Scapegoat, C. is the Lost Child, and D. is the Mascot. Mr. and Mrs. Z. have been on rocky ground since they moved into the house across the street from mine twenty years ago. I could never imagine living in a household like theirs.

The examples provided here are illustrative of the kinds of insights about families that were discovered by the student authors. For all but a few respondents, the knowledge derived from reading *Lost Days* equipped them with a novel, practical, and meaningful lens for understanding families.

Application to self. Many respondents were able to "see themselves" in the family roles described in *Lost Days*. Reed (1992) included an autobiographical section in which he detailed his experience of growing up as a "Lost Child." His personal narrative resonated strongly with a number of students who had been lost children in their own families. One student explained her identification with the author:

This book was meaningful to me because Mr. Reed is a lost child like me. I feel he truly understands my emotional pain, and I can relate to most of the symptoms and experiences of Lost Children in his book. As a dysfunctional adult, it is imperative that I learn to stop the cycle [of abuse], or at least put a chink in its armor. That's what dysfunctional coping methods are—armor to fend off the abuse, a retreat in which to hide. Mr. Reed helped me see myself more clearly. I have a better insight into my parents and my children, and why they behave as they do. I have struggled for a long time to overcome my dysfunctional coping skills, and this book has helped to give me the hope that I can change for the better.

For this middle-age, non-traditional student, the course assignment gave her an opportunity to re-examine her own life, which resulted in a renewed sense of hope—for her own future as well as her children's futures. Such discovery of certain facets of self were commonplace, appearing in about 95 of the narratives.

Implications for Teaching

The final purpose of this inquiry was to determine if the students could identify any implications from *Lost Days* for their future work as elementary school teachers. Such implications were intentionally NOT included in seminar discussions before the written assignment because the instructor did not want to bias the respondents' thinking. In virtually every case, the narratives contained accounts of the personal and professional value the preservice teach-

ers gained from the Lost Days reading and reflective writing assignment. Illustrative comments drawn from the narratives highlight the significant connections discovered by the respondents:

- As a teacher I can see the benefits of recognizing the characteristics of children who are having a difficult time at home. This knowledge can help me to try to supplement their school day with the support and encouragement that they need to be healthy and happy individuals.
- The overall theme that was presented in Lost Days is for a teacher to be aware. Teacher awareness is one thing that could aid children from dysfunctional families in their development throughout the school years. If someone would only see through his or her behavior, that it is all a cover-up to what is really going on, then maybe something would be started and accomplished to help the student. As a teacher, I may be the only person in a particular student's life to take any interest in or make any effort with him or her. Just a small dose of compassion toward a scared, confused, misunderstood student could change their whole outlook of school, education, and their future.
- Reed wrote about many important issues in his book. As a future teacher I think it is important that anyone who plans to work with children in any way should have to read this book and become familiar with the four categories of children from dysfunctional homes. I think after reading this book that my eyes are going to be open wider and I may realize that a child may be acting a certain way because of family problems and not just because.
- I personally found the book Lost Days to be very enlightening and informative. It is my hope that I can have a positive influence on all of my students. I now realize that each child comes to school with a different and unique background.
- As future teachers we all need to be aware of the roles children take on in families. We need to be aware of how they live so that we can better understand why they act the way they do in the classroom. I feel that this is a great book for future educators to have. I think the main thing for future educators is to be caring, loving, and understanding; and to listen to the children.
- This book has made me aware of the different types of children that I will have in my classroom. It has made me realize that children are going to behave in different ways because of their home lives. This book has helped me to have a better understanding of the reasons why people act the way they do. As a result of reading this book, I have gained new ways of handling different types of children.

These illustrative comments suggested that the Lost Days reading and writing assignment engendered in the preservice teachers a deeper understanding of the familial origins of many student behaviors as well as a heightened sensitivity and empathy with all children. Importantly, most of the respondents recognized their potential significance as teachers in the lives of students. Finally, they gained new, practical, and proactive strategies to employ in their classroom work with children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Preservice teacher education curricula can be improved by effectively translating for classroom application the conceptual and practical dimensions of family systems theory, including explanations and descriptions of healthy, functional families as well as those rendered dysfunctional by compulsive parental behaviors. Such knowledge and skill attainment is essential if teachers are to have a realistic chance of achieving America's Eighth National Education Goal of "increased parental involvement- and participation in promoting

the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (NEGP, 1998, p. vi). This content knowledge and concomitant interpersonal skills, combined with wisdom and compassion, will enable teachers to make a profound difference in the lives of the children and families placed in their care. All educators should maintain awareness that:

- Many of the skills developed by children in AOD-impaired or otherwise dysfunctional families are useful, and perhaps even necessary, for their personal survival in a confusing, unstable, and potentially dangerous family system (Burke, 1993).
- Many of the behaviors learned via the four family roles can be consciously modified during adulthood and transformed into assets. For example, Louie Anderson was the Mascot of his family of origin. He parlayed his childhood role of “clown” into a successful career as a stand-up comedian, appearing in nightclubs and television shows. Similarly, the academic and civic achievements of Heroes can form the basis of distinguished careers in public service: Presidents Clinton and Reagan were both raised in homes marked by paternal alcoholism.
- The four family roles that are distinctive hallmarks of dysfunctional family systems may also be seen, at a dramatically lower degree of personal constriction and rigidity, in functional families.
- The roles and their accompanying behaviors are adopted and maintained by children for the purpose of meeting the family’s needs as well as a personal defense against feelings of rejection, fear, anger, hurt, and guilt. It is the family system and its inherent dysfunctionality that provides the impetus for children to adopt one or more of the four roles. Hence, these children will play-out their roles in all social settings, including classrooms.
- Teachers can better serve the academic and psychosocial needs of their students if they maintain an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the patterns of common behaviors and attitudes exhibited by COAs.
- According to Black (1982), children learn well the three “rules” that characterize most dysfunctional families: (a) Don’t Talk; (b) Don’t Trust; (c) Don’t Feel. These family rules, deeply ingrained in the psyches of children, can have far-reaching, deleterious effects on their personal, social, and academic achievements.
- Not every child raised in a dysfunctional family system will suffer negative outcomes such as depression, codependency, and/or rigid role adoption (Royce, 1989). Educators must be judicious in their use of labels to describe students.
- Although some children may manage to thrive in distressed home environments, it is generally the case that such homes are stressful for all family members, and there is a significant likelihood that the children will suffer negative effects (Nastasi & DeZolt, 1994).

The conceptual framework and the qualitative inquiry explained here can serve as an entry point for teacher educators to consider the necessity of incorporating curriculum about family systems theory into general education preservice programs. The intent of such curricula is to equip new teachers with a broader, ecological vision of children’s lives, as well as a deeper understanding of the complex and variable nature of family systems. Such knowledge will strengthen a teacher’s ability to respond to children in appropriate and healthy ways—and may instill in them the courage and confidence needed to skillfully engage all parents in meaningful school/home partnerships.

Now that the deadline for implementing the changes prescribed in Goals 2000 has passed, interested groups are assessing our national progress (or lack thereof) in public school reform. While the political and ideological rhetoric about Goals 2000 drones on (Ohanian, 2000), every weekday morning children of all ages arrive at the schoolhouse door having just survived yet another night of family chaos. If teachers are not equipped with the prerequisite human relations skills in their preservice teacher education programs, then it is predictable

that they will flounder in their work with America's millions of troubled children who are living in distressed and dysfunctional family environments.

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