The Application of Family-based Early Interventions in the YRD, China: A Project Based on Two Case Studies

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Abstract—Family-based interventions have been dramatically advocated in early childhood educational field, especially for those young children who have special needs. The application of family-based interventions has had a profound influence in the western societies over many years. However, due to a lack of theory basis, the knowledge of how to apply it to help many children with special needs in China, particularly, in Yangtze River Delta Region, is slim. This paper is to explore how family-based early interventions will support the children who have exhibited social-emotional problems and their families in the social context of the Yangtze River Delta Region, China. Thus, the author will address the question by looking into (1) the social context in the Yangtze River Delta Region, China; (2) factors contribute to children's social and emotional problems from the family systems perspective; (3) two families as case studies, and (4) the family-based early interventions designed for the two families.

Index Terms—family-based early interventions, Bowen's family systems theory, professional-centred model to family-centred model

I. BACKGROUND

It is a great concern of Chinese families to rear children, particularly the training of socially and culturally desirable behavior and school achievements (Wu & Tseng, 1985). As pointed out by Chao (1994), "child training" could be used as synonymous with "child rearing" to Chinese families. Traditionally, achievements of sociality and academic are considered as glorifying clan and honoring ancestor (*guāng zōng yào zŭ*) (Chu, 1985). Nowadays, those achievements are more considered as reliable predictors of a prosperous life and upward social status by the families, especially those in cities. Nevertheless, to rear, or train children are challenging tasks, which can be affected by varied factors. Given the social context of the YRD, some key factors contribute to children's social and emotional problems from the family systems perspective are families of one child, families in a network, and families of migrant workers.

Several theoretical frameworks have significantly influenced the development of family-based interventions. Among them, Bowen's family systems theory (cited by Dore, 2008) is considered having one of the greatest contributions, as it provides a framework on how a family constructs and functions, as well as how to collaborate with professionals (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Another theory of enormous influence is Bronfenbrenner's ecology system theory (1979), whose context perspective has been profoundly adopted for studying children, as well as how they are influenced on the intersection of individual, family and community (Brooks-Gunn, 1995). The former identifies four types of family interactions, i.e. marital, parental, sibling and extra-family and places them in the central of the framework. Hence, it constantly reminds the professionals the necessity of understanding a family in order to understand a child (Martino, 2005). The latter places the child in the central and identifies five types of interactions between the child and his/her world, i.e. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Hence, it constantly reminds the professional the importance of understanding the interrelationships between a child and his/her surrounding contexts in order to understand him/her (Darragh, 2010).

In a nutshell, family-based early interventions are programs designated to help the children's developmental problems or at risk conditions in the context of family (Guralnick & Bennett, 1987). As noted by Gargiulo & Kilgo (2005), the research on family-based interventions has evolved from professional-centered model to family-centered model, from which the role played by the families has changed considerably. In professional-centered model, families are merely viewed as the service recipients while professionals are seen as the service providers. However, as Turnbull & Turnbull (2001) pointed, such a model could be problematic, since professional might create a psychological barrier

to collaborate with families, while families might be annoyed by the professional's authoritarian style. In family-centered model, families play a central and dynamic role while professionals are seen as agents and instruments of families (Dunst, Johanson, Trivette & Hamby, 1991). Such a model is considered as the foundation of high-quality services and having satisfactory outcomes, and strongly recommended by many researchers (e.g., Cheney & Ma, 1997; Hamilton, Roach & Riley, 2003; Kumpfer, 1999).

II. Two Cases Studies Project

The First Case

Yangyang (pseudonym) was a seven-year-old boy and a single child who had just started studying in a public primary school. Five years ago, his father came to Suzhou from a village in Anhui Province and had worked as a streamline operator in a factory. Years of hard work earned him a stable job as a quality controller, and then he brought his wife and son to the city. Having influenced by the economic crisis, Yangyang's mother could not find a full-time job in factories, so she opened a small grocery shop. The family rented a cottage in the area where most of the people were "temporary urban citizens" (Rong, 2003). Yangyang had spent one year in a kindergarten which had opened for migrant children. It took a great effort for Yangyang's parents to let their son enroll in the current school, which had an excellent reputation of students' academic achievements. Further, to motivate his learning, the parents spent a few months' savings and bought him a computer. To the parents, it was a perfect start for their son.

However, Yangyang did not follow the direction guideed by his parents. Most of his teachers thought that he had been shy, lonely and unmotivated. For example, his literacy teacher thought that he did not try hard, because he had been always the last one to complete the class work and had tried every effort to escape from doing tasks. His English teacher also mentioned that he had never taken part in class activities. He barely had friends in the class and avoided any afterschool activities. The biggest problem, however, was that he seemed to be addictive to computer games. Since he spent hours and hours on playing computers games and his academic performance started to deteriorate, his parents had been worried and annoyed. Once his mother locked the room where was the computer in, he started to have tantrums. Even since then, he became resented going to school. His parents said they had tried every method they could think of, which included physical punishments. However, his performance even went worse.

Understanding Yangyang and His Family

According to the Yangyang's parents, he used to be an understanding boy. He knew his family's economic status and how hard the parents had been worked. He tried to save money on the expenditure of stationary and clothes. His performance at the kindergarten was excellent, and he made many friends during that time. However, through interviews with him, it could be found that he was over sensitive. For example, when teachers pointed out his learning problems, he thought it was because the teachers did not like him and unsatisfied with his works. Lacking social skills were another weakness of him. None of his kindergarten friends was in his school now, and he was afraid of making new friends because he thought the classmates did not like him either. Compared to communicate with his teachers and classmates, he found that to "communicate" with computer games had been much easier. His third weakness was the limited problem solving skills. As a result, once he thought he could not solve the problem, he would give up and try to escape from the tough situations. These weaknesses had significantly affected his emotional and social development, as well as his academic learning.

In order to earn more money for a better life, Yangyang's parents worked very hard. Nevertheless, they valued their son's success in kindergarten and used to be confident in his ability. Some parental warmth (Chen, Wu, Chen, Wang & Cen, 2001) and consistency could be perceived within the family. However, the lacking of knowledge and skills in rearing child, especially in the development of social and emotion, as well as advocating for their son had seriously hindered the family strengths and became the primary barrier to overcome the difficulty. Before their first contact with the educator, they hardly had heard of children's social-emotional problems or the needs. They believed that the only factor caused their son's "abnormal" status was the computer games. That was the reason why they had tried many times to stop Yangyang playing computer games. They regarded school education as a professional and technical field, and they were incapable to make suggestions and comments. They even worried that to disturb the teachers would be harmful to their son, since the teachers might have biases on him. As a result, they had to accept what the teachers and school had told them.

The Second Case

Chenchen (pseudonym) was a three-year-old young boy and the single child who had lived with his parents in Shanghai since he was born. His mother was a Shanghainese and had worked as a customs specialist in a trading company. His father came to Shanghai ten years ago, and later he had been a department manager of a well-known international enterprise. Both his parents had university degrees and had received high salaries. Not far from the family's newly bought apartment lived his paternal grandparents, who migrated to Shanghai from the northern China three years ago. The only purpose for the old couple to live here was to take care of their grandson and support their son and daughter-in-law by doing the housework. Chenchen's maternal grandparents are Shanghaineses too. Since they lived far from Chenchen's apartment, they saw their grandson once a week.

Although Chenchen had a roomful toys, he had always wanted more. Every time he was not satisfied, he threw tantrums. More than that, he was dominant and easily lost temper, and aggressive to the people he disliked. Eventually,

his parents, paternal and maternal grandparents all felt that Chenchen had been too challenged. However, the ways that they "fixed" this problem were extraordinarily different. His father spoiled him in every aspect, but if he could not stand, he would immediately lose temper and slapped or kicked him. His mother tried to be patient and reasonable at first, but most of the time it did not work. Then she would yell at him or verbally frighten him. His paternal grandparents tried their best to satisfy him to avoid his anger. Ironically, when Chenchen's father used physical punishments, his paternal grandfather could not stand and lost temper.

Such inconsistent parenting styles did not improve Chenchen's behavior at all. Rather, they had helped him to manipulate these adults. Chenchen's parents had frequent quarrels on the education of their son. His paternal grandparents thought his mother had no idea on rearing a child. Meanwhile, his maternal grandparents thought his father had been too violent to the child. As a solution, his parents decided to send him to a pre-kindergarten. However, he was expelled in three days due to his noncompliant and aggressive behavior.

Understanding Chenchen and His Family

Although Chenchen was an angry and spoiled child, he was not without strengths. His physical body, intelligence, and language had developed appropriately. He had many interests such as listening to stories, riding his bicycle, watching TV, doing role plays, etc. Further, he could learn new things quickly in the right mood. Nevertheless, the emotional and behavioral problems hindered the development of his social competence. Through interviews with Chenchen and his family members (including the grandparents), as well as further observations of his reaction to different people, situations and stories, it was discovered that he had not developed proper empathy. Also, his problem solving strategies and social skills were fairly limited. He tended to use physical aggregation to express his unhappiness and solve problems. Such deficits, according to Kirk & Gallagher (1986), if cannot be improved vigorously in the childhood, might significantly affect the future academic achievements, and might develop to more serious problems such as substance abuse and antisocial behaviors.

An obvious strength of Chenchen's family is the economic status, which is a solid foundation for him to receive excellent educational services, including human and materials resources, techniques and other accommodations. The second strength is that both his parents are well educated, which may enable the family empowerment by intensive learning and practicing the knowledge of children and family, as well as the skills such as stress coping and problem solving. The third strength is the high level of concern on child rearing, which may profoundly motivate the family to overcome stresses. The last strength is that sufficient time can be spent on the child, due to the supporting from its networked families.

However, the problematic interaction among his family subsystems is one of the biggest problems of this family and its network. The interaction between his parents and his family and the stem family, father-child relationship, mother-child relationship displayed problems, respectively. These problems in all make the whole family's harmony extremely low. Another serious problem was that the physical and verbal abuse had long existed in the family and its network. Such behaviors hindered his understanding of social cues and provided the negative role modeling to him. Therefore, it may profoundly affect the development of his social value and skills towards violence (Kumpfer, 1999). In a nutshell, the problems of relationships with parental figures and child abuse are two risk factors which contribute to and intensify the challenging behaviors in children from birth to five years old (Michigan Public Policy Initiative, 2002).

III. SUPPORTING THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILY BY USING FAMILY-BASED EARLY INTERVENTION

A sound intervention should be designed to enhance the children's strengths and improve their deficits. Given the nature of family-based intervention, it should enhance the family's strengths and improve the deficits as well. Further, it is essential that the process should be individualized, i.e. taking account of the characteristics of the children and families. This also implies that a one-size-fits-all strategy should not be expected. The interventions for Chenchen and Yangyang and their families were designed under the family-centered model. Therefore, the educational needs should be defined collaboratively between the intervention designer and each family (Dunst et al, 1991).

As the first step, a careful assessment was conducted in two steps: (1) collecting data from interviews, observations, sample analysis and school readiness evaluation, and (2) arranging family meetings to present, analyze and evaluate the child and family's strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the needs for both families could be defined into three categories. First, they needed the knowledge to understand children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Second, they needed effective skills on how to stimulate their children's strengths, as well as how to deal with their weaknesses, which include immediate and long-term strategies. Last, they needed information and skills on how to advocate for their children, as well as how to collaborate with teachers and schools. Based on these needs, the interventions were designed with three components, i.e. family education program, behavioral management program and home-school collaboration program.

Family Education Program

As described by Kumpfer (1999), family education plan was designed to provide families with through lectures or educational sessions on the knowledge and information of family values, responsibility, laws, and strengthening skills. To Yangyang's family, the program consisted of five objectives: (1) to have general information on children's development domains, i.e. physical, cognitive, social and emotional; (2) to have specific information on children's social and emotional development at 7 to 11 years; (3) to have general information on the family systems theory, and to

understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own family; (4) to have general information on behavioral management strategies, and give priority to positive behavior support strategy, and (5) to have general information on how to advocate for the child through effective collaboration with the teachers and the primary school. To Chenchen's family, the program also consisted of five objectives: (1) to have general information on children's development domains, i.e. physical, cognitive, social and emotional; (2) to have specific information on children's social and emotional development at 2 to 7 years; (3) to have general information on the family systems theory, and to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own family; (4) to have general information on behavioral management strategies, and give priority to positive behavior support strategy, and (5) to have general information on how to advocate for the child through effective collaboration with the teachers and the childcare centre.

Although the construct of two programs were similar, the dimensions of the plans, in terms of the target population, entry and exist levels, instructional strategies, etc. had been differentiated. The underpinning principle is that the programs should enhance the families' motivation, in terms of self-efficacy, perceived control, great expectation, energy and persistence (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

The target population

The target population identified for Yangyang's family involved the nuclear family. Yangyang was encouraged to take the sessions related to children's development. To Chenchen's family, the target population did not only involve the parents, but also the paternal grandparents, since they were an important part of child rearing in the family. Further, the study on grandparents' impact on children by Falbo (1991) found that grandparents and grandfather solely with better education would positively and significantly influence children's school outcome and personality, respectively.

Entry and exist level

The entry levels for both families were the same, but the exist level were differentiated among the family members. To Yangyang's parents and Chenchen's grandparents, the expected learning outcomes were at a basic level, and more importantly, were operational oriented, due to their relative low educational backgrounds. To Chenchen's parents, the expected outcomes were at an advanced level, and were theory or principle oriented, from which they were encouraged to create their own methods.

Instructional strategies

Given the educational background of Yangyang's family and Chenchen's paternal grandparents, it was necessary for them to understand the contents delivered by the educator. Therefore, the instructions and materials were presented in a simple style accompanied with examples, most of which were linked with the targeted child. To Chenchen's parents, supplementary reading materials were provided for broadening and deepening their knowledge bases. Discussions and self-reflections were profoundly used for all participants and facilitated their understandings and motivations. After each session, all participants were required to complete direct tasks such as observations to practice their knowledge and skills.

Behavioral Management Program

It was constructed under the theory of applied behavior analysis, which refers to "systematic application of behavioral principles to change socially significant behavior to a meaningful degree (Alberto & Troutman, 2009, p. 423)". As the theory focuses on methodological stance rather than conceptual position (Kazdin, 1978), diverse interventions can be developed. Once again, the behavioral interventions should be designed under the principle of having effective and positive results for children and families. Thus, the plans for two boys were individualized, in terms of the instructional strategies, administration, allocated time, etc.

Instructional strategies

Based on the functional behavioral assessment conducted for Yangyang, the targeted challenging behaviors were identified as: (1) escaping from doing homework; (2) escaping from social activities, and (3) getting the tangible activities in playing computer games. Therefore, the intervention designed for Yangyang's family focused on changing his avoidance and tangible behaviors by using positive reinforcement strategies (Skinner, 1969). For example, token economy (Zirpoli, 2008) was used to stimulate his frequency and duration in doing homework and attending afterschool activities. To insure an effective and positive outcome, the educator only played the role as an organizer and adviser in the procedure development, leaving the choice-making role (Fisher, Thompson, Riazza, Crosland & Gotjen, 1997) such as the decision of the reinforcers and their costs to Yangyang and his parents. In addition, to avoid the over reliance on extrinsic motivation, as well as to enhance the intrinsic motivation (Raymond, 2004), cognitive behavioral strategies (Yell, Busch & Drasgow, 2008) were considered as a supplementary process. Therefore, skillstreaming (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997) such as dealing with stress and aggression combined with a self-monitoring project were used.

The behavioral intervention designed for Chenchen targeted the family and its networked family, and cognitive behavioral strategies were considered as the primary instructional strategy. To Chenchen, such strategies might help him to reverse his cognitive distortions and deficiencies, as well as to reduce the negative or at risk physiological and emotional arousal and aggressive response to external stimuli (Fung & Tsang, 2007). To the whole family (includes the networked family), especially his parents, such strategies might help them to control and monitor the physical and verbal abusing behaviors and to enhance the healthy parental warmth and guidance (Chen et al, 2001). Thus, the program involved family role plays embedded with social skills training intensively. To stimulate the motivation of the target population, the educator also played the role as an organizer and adviser in the procedure development, leaving

the choice-making role such as the decision of played stories, characters and properties to the whole family. In order to stimulate Chenchen to behave appropriately, positive behavior supporting plan, which included crisis management strategies, was developed exclusively for him. The target behaviors in the plan had associated with the target social skills.

Administrations

Both programs were home-based. The program developed for Yangyang was in a six-week period with weekly reviews arranged by the educator. Since he stayed with his mother for a longer time, his mother took the responsibility in recording and exchanging the tokens, as well as co-supervises the procedure with the educator. The weekly reviews were designed to change feedbacks and adjust the reinforcers. Furthermore, to stimulate the intrinsic motivation, Yangyang was strongly encouraged to do self-refection on the activities and works happened in school and home for the past week.

The program developed for Chenchen's family had eight sessions with weekly reviews arranged by the educator. Each session lasted one-week period and involved three or four role plays embedded with one specific social skill. The first role play of each session was organized and recorded by the educator, and the left ones were organized and recorded by Chenchen's mother. Besides, his paternal grandmother and mother took the responsibility in recording information on the day and night time, respectively. The weekly reviews were designed to change feedbacks and adjust the plans.

Home-School Collaboration Program

Having been influenced by Confucius over the lengthy period of Chinese educational history (Zhu, 1992), teachers have long been viewed as the guiders and mentors of moral integrity, culture and social behaviors to students (Donald, 2004). As a result, the ideology of teacher-centeredness may still dominant in many places in China, including the YRD. Further, the role played by parents may still be as recipients of school services (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2005). On the other hand, the shortage of qualified teachers (Paine, 1992), especially those have special education backgrounds (Epstein, 1992) is still a barrier to the modernization of education in the YRD. In that case, it might be unrealistic to expect the teachers in the mainstream education to understand and cater for children with special needs. Thus, effective home-school collaboration programs may be necessary to help those children. Having enlightened by Turnbull & Turnbull's *Empowerment Framework: Collaborating for Empowerment* (2001), the purposes of home-school collaboration programs designed for the families and the schools are: (1) establishing communicating channels; (2) extending or collaborating the interventions with schools, and (3) advocating for school systems improvement.

To Yangyang's family, it was vital for the teachers to recognize his strengths and weaknesses, as well as the importance of home-school collaboration to Yangyang's development. Having discussed with the head teacher, as well as provided with sufficient information on his social and emotional development and purposes and contents of the family-based interventions, she eventually accepted the following process. First, the token economy could be extended to the school. As a result, a report of the target behaviors performed by him was returned to his mother by the end of every school day. Second, Yangyang would be provided with a choice when he could not accomplish the tasks. For example, if he could not complete the writing tasks within the given time in the class, he could take the work home. His mother would supervise him to complete the work. Third, Yangyang's mother had been invited to meet with his teachers of Mandarin, Math and English once every two weeks. The purpose of such meetings was to review his progress at school and home, and then decide if the plan needed updating.

To Chenchen's family, it was also vital for the pre-kindergarten to recognize his strengths and weaknesses, more importantly, his needs of positive and effective socializing with peers and other people. However, since pre-kindergarten is not a part of the compulsory education in China, the school at first refused to enroll Chenchen again. It took a considerable effort to convince the school to accept Chenchen as a part-time student and the home-school collaboration program for a trial in one month. During this period, he took the afternoon session accompanied by one of his paternal grandparents. The positive behavior supporting plan was extended to the school and modified to fit the classroom management. For example, if a child in the class returned the toys in time and place for the whole day, he or she would be rewarded with a star sticker. To Chenchen, every time he returned the toys in time and place, he would be rewarded with a smaller star sticker. His paternal grandparents recorded the information at school. His mother met the class teachers on every Friday afternoon for reviewing the progress and adjusting the plan.

According to the feedbacks from Yangyang's mother after the termination of the intervention, Yangyang had made considerable improvements at school and home. He can complete most of the academic tasks in time and is more active in the class events. Although he still likes playing computer games, he does not rely on them anymore, and his interests and social life have developed. For example, having invited by one of his classmates, he has decided to join the school's film club from the next semester. The relationship between the family and school also has improved. Currently, the token economy is used as one of the management strategies in his class.

The feedback from Chenchen's mother after the termination of the intervention is also positive. Chenchen's aggressive behavior has reduced a lot. Now he is a full-time pre-kindergartener. He receives star sticks almost every school day, and he is quite happy about his kindergarten life. Although he still may lose temper sometimes, his parents and paternal grandparents know how to control the situations. Since his parents seldom use physical and verbal punishment, the family and its networked families have more harmony.

IV. Conclusion

While family-based early interventions have been increasingly recommended by many researches and educational institutions to help children who have developmental delay or at risk in the western societies, it is still undeveloped in the educational system of the YRD, China. Given the social context of the YRD, includes the factors of one child policy, networked families, and migrant workers, family-based early interventions are one of optimal solutions to help children with social and emotional problems. The case studies and the outcome of the interventions lead to two conclusions. First, when children exhibit significant weaknesses in the developmental domain of social and emotion, the parents and other caregivers may be incapable of solving the problems, mainly due to the lacking of relevant knowledge and skills. Second, family-based early interventions, especially those developed under family-centered model, may profoundly support the children and families to overcome the difficulties, as well as to enhance the strengths.

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