

Findings

From the ups and downs of every day employment to the inner workings of an established organization, the culture of work life for the early interventionists at the Family Child Learning Center (FCLC) is crafted from a variety of complex components. From my observations and interviews I was able to construct five major recurring themes that only begin to define the work of an early interventionist at FCLC. The findings include the joys and challenges of working in the field of early intervention, the issues surrounding an establishment focused on training and research, the meaning and integration of a family-centered practice, the dynamics of a collaborative organization of grant recipients, and the implementation of a developmental philosophy.

"I'm here to help:"

The joys and challenges of working in the field of early intervention

The professionals at FCLC work closely with families and young children with delays or disabilities. Each day is filled struggles and obstacles for the family, the child, and the interventionist to overcome. But each day is also filled with small successes, which are celebrated immensely and with sincerity. One day, I was observing an intervention session and got to experience one of these successes first hand.

Maggie (one of the early intervention specialists) walks into the room, greets a mother sitting on the couch, and asks her how her week was. Maggie's attention is stolen away by the child sitting on the floor playing with a toy phone.

The Child picks up the phone and says “hello” and is babbling into the phone. Maggie smiles and walks over to the child. As she makes her way across the room her face lights up, she glances back at the mother and says “it seems like in 30 seconds he is talking more than he has in the last two weeks!” The mother smiles with pride and gives a knowing nod of the head.

Maggie and the child spend most of this session playing. The child continues to talk in one or two word utterances, looking at Maggie, and exchanging vocal interactions with her. Maggie and the mother are both beaming. Maggie says “this is the first week he’s really done this!” After about 45 minutes, the child walks over to his mom, takes her hand, and says “c’mon mommy.” Mom looks at the clock and says “Wow! That was almost 45 minutes before he did that!”

Watching Maggie and this child’s mother smiling and pouring over with pride and excitement was an experience I won’t soon forget. These two women were experiencing a moment that happens to be unique to the world of early intervention. They were watching a child play and talk independently for the first time, after weeks of hard work. The professionals at FCLC work long and hard to help children and their families overcome the challenges of everyday life. Moments like these are the reason the interventionists walk through the door each day and tell the families “I’m here to help.”

"Your life is no longer your own:"

The issues surrounding an establishment focused on training and research

The staff at FCLC noted on more than one occasion, the privilege of the scope of professional development and training available to them. They celebrate the fact that they are free to make decisions, try new things, and pilot projects at their discretion. But with freedom comes responsibility and for some, there is a need to set boundaries. During an interview with Maggie we talked about the training and research focus at FCLC. She explained that she loved the ability to train, the opportunities for research and new projects, and that things never get "stale". But along with this, Maggie admitted to easily getting caught up in "constantly moving forward" and trying every day to have "the best interest of families and kids in mind". She said it's important to have "a team to take care of you and support you in that, but also to remind you to have your own life." Marilyn (the director) has come to terms with this concept, and instead of setting boundaries has accepted the fact that "[her] life is no longer [her] own." She has dedicated her life to making something she is passionate about successful.

"Confidence, empowerment, and hope:"

The meaning and integration of a family-centered practice

Being an early interventionist means working with children in the earliest critical periods of their lives. Recently, a paradigm shift has erupted in the field of early intervention, and professionals are shifting their focus from working

with children, to working with families. FCLC has adopted this approach and incorporates a number of strategies to ensure its implementation. One of these strategies is one that cannot be taught. It's the work of the heart.

During an interview with Marilyn we talked about families, the support they need during the early intervention process, and what she hoped families will leave with after their time with the FCLC. Marilyn stated that she hoped the families left with "confidence, empowerment, and hope". She said that it's all about "telling the families what [she] thinks and know[s] about their child and giving them the tools to help their child".

The integration of a family-centered practice is a topic that also came up during my interview with Maggie. She told me that "it's impossible to separate the family dynamics" when providing early intervention services. Maggie described her position as a "teacher, a mental health professional, some days a friend, some days not." She talked about how there is a need to meet the families needs before meeting the child's needs. The problem is that early intervention specialists are trained in early intervention, assessment, and even family centered philosophy, but not in mental health. Maggie said that when she gets tired at work, that's why. It takes a big heart and an open mind to work with families, and that's what Marilyn will be looking for in a new hire.

"A task force:" The dynamics of a collaborative organization of grant recipients

In a building housing more than --- programs funded by more than --- grants, it is hard not to run into each other occasionally. Each program housed in

the building, has its own agenda, but everyone is in the same business of providing some sort of service to families. Maggie describes the atmosphere as a “task force” functioning as early intervention providers, and wanting to do more training, more research, and more professional development. Their busy lives and the specific nature of their grants keep them from collaborating too specifically, but the groups have no problem sharing resources and supporting each other through tough times.

One resource the group cannot share is the grant money. The employees at FCLC work hard each day, dedicated to serving families to the best of their abilities, while all the while knowing that at any time, their grants could run out, and their jobs would cease to exist. Every person I interviewed at FCLC mentioned this topic at least once. Some of them said if they could change anything about their jobs they would provide the program with a never ending supply of money. Maggie shared a concern related to losing grant money having to go get a job somewhere else. She said “comparatively, nothing else looks attractive.”

“It’s always on the fly:” The implementation of a developmental philosophy

There is a lot of controversy in the field of early intervention as to what approach works best for certain groups of children. Professionals choose “camps” and insist their way is the right way and proceed to badmouth all others. At FCLC a developmental approach is utilized, implemented, and defended, but the badmouthing is not a supported practice at this center. For

example, during one observation I listened to a conversation between Maggie and a mother who was concerned about the effectiveness of a developmental approach versus a behavioral approach. Instead of telling the mother the developmental approach used at the center was the best thing for the child, Maggie told the mom that whatever works best for the child is what she should do. She told her the behavioral approach was research based and gave her “two good books that [she] know[s]”, and then continued to clarify why she believed a developmental approach could also be effective. Maggie explained to the mother that the two approaches were fundamentally the same in that both will require the child to work for what they want. She also tells the mother that “the hard part of play based [approach] is that it’s always on the fly... I’m always deciding what’s a success.”

Defending your work isn’t unique to the world of early intervention, but defending the approach being used to help someone’s child develop is. It’s the work of the heart, always a touchy subject, and probably not for everyone. The interventionists at FCLC have spent years working on their techniques, and yet it’s still “always on the fly.”