

Collaboration in the Context of Appalachia: *The Case of Cassie*

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A broad perspective on child development is important to understanding collaboration in special education. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development provides a backdrop to this case study of collaboration on behalf of Cassie, a 4-year-old child with disabilities in a small West Virginia community. The story of Cassie and her family is used to examine special education in a socio-cultural context. The implications of the research for special education in general and professional development in particular are discussed.

Cassie

Meeting Cassie for the first time is a memorable experience. At 4 years of age, she is tall and slender. Her mixed European and African American heritage is evident in her wiry hair and brown-hazel eyes. Cassie is not at all shy and readily engages with others, even unfamiliar adults. She wears thick glasses fastened at the back with an elastic strap to keep them from sliding off her face. The strap does not help all that much. Her glasses are often smudged and smeared, and she frequently pushes them back up her nose, especially when she is thinking or trying to communicate.

Cassie is often trying to communicate. She clearly enjoys social interaction and is delighted with opportunities to play with other children or adults, even those who are unfamiliar to her. Her speech is mostly unintelligible, and it is difficult to decipher her meanings until you come to understand her utterances and gestural language over time. She is eager to help you out with this. Cassie throws her whole body into the task of trying to express herself. She flings her arms wide, squats, and then jumps to emphasize feeling. She uses facial expression frequently, grimacing, raising her eyebrows, pursing her lips, and sticking out her tongue in apparent efforts to convey what her speech leaves unclear. Conversations with Cassie can be exhausting, but they are seldom boring. Although occasionally frustrated by her lack of success in communicating, she is persistent in her efforts and finds humor in your mistaken attempts to respond to her.

Cassie attends a preschool classroom for children from low-income families at Brewster Elementary School, a Pre-K–8 school of 535 students located in a small community in Rainelle County, West Virginia. She has been identified by Rainelle County School District as having developmental delays in several areas and receives speech and language, occupational, and physical therapy while at school. Cassie is also

seen by a preschool special educator three times a week at school. She and her family receive home visits every other week from a Rainelle County School District home–school coordinator, who provides Cassie and her family with activities designed to prepare her for kindergarten next year. The six school district professionals who see Cassie sometimes work with her in her preschool classroom. Most often in their work with Cassie, they take her out of the classroom and work with her individually in the hallway or in a small group in an office down the corridor.

Cassie and her family receive educational and social services from three different community organizations in Rainelle County. They are enrolled in home-based Head Start and receive a home visit once a week from a Head Start home visitor. Cassie and her mother (Martha) also attend Head Start socialization groups twice a month, riding the Head Start bus together with the other moms and children to Brewster Elementary, where the Head Start classroom is located. A case-worker from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services (WVDHHS) also visits the family at home once a week. Cassie is a patient at the Rainelle County Public Health Clinic. She has frequently visited the clinic during the past year with her family as they attempted to understand and address her developmental difficulties (see Table 1).

The sheer number and complexity of services received by Cassie and her family serves to underscore the importance of collaboration between practitioners and families in the provision of effective services designed to optimize outcomes for children with developmental delays or disabilities. Although Cassie's case may be exceptionally complex in this regard, the involvement of multiple individuals and agencies in the lives of children with disabilities and their families is not unusual and has been a frequent topic in the literature in recent decades (Desimone & Gallagher, 1995; Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2002; Gallagher, 1999; Hanson & Widerstrom, 1993;

Kagan, 1991, 1993; Kagan & Pritchard, 1999; Mostert, 1998). While there is ambiguity in the term *collaboration*, in general it is considered a more global term than *coordination* or *cooperation*, which usually refer to individual efforts to work together. Kagan (1991) defined *collaboration* as “organizational and interorganizational structures where resources, power and authority are shared and where people are brought together to achieve common goals that could not be accomplished by a single individual or organization independently” (p. 3).

In addition to the legal mandates that underlie collaboration in special education, the push to collaborate no doubt emanates from the recognition that most individuals with disabilities and their families have multiple needs that call for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to service delivery. It is important for professionals to collaborate so that they work in concert instead of at odds with each other. Because the mandate to provide a free and appropriate public education is accompanied by an insufficient supply of the resources needed to do so, collaboration is necessary to avoid duplication of services and to find the most efficient ways to address identified needs (Kagan, 1993; Mostert, 1998). Nevertheless, research on collaboration points to the fact that, although it is both necessary for and beneficial to effective practice in special education, it is seldom easily accomplished. In particular, an array of studies related to Individualized Education Program (IEP) process and implementation (Butera, Klein, McMullen, & Wilson, 1998; Desimone & Gallagher, 1995; Gallagher, 1999; Goodman & Bond, 1993) suggest that, policy mandates notwithstanding, the implementation of IEP decisions is highly problematic in practice when they depend on collaboration.

Commonly encountered barriers to collaboration are well described. Gallagher (1989, 1999) codified these barriers as institutional, psychological, sociological, economic, political, and geographic. He pointed out that, given the range of potential barriers, it is hardly surprising that policies change shape and contour as they are transformed from federal to state to local implementation. He suggested that the term *context* can be used to account for the fact that environmental variables are quite likely to affect the individual and may substantially determine outcomes. To understand how collaboration on behalf of children with disabilities and their families occurs, it is necessary to account for the effects of contextual variables (Gallagher, 1989, 1999).

A broad perspective on child development is required. This perspective was provided by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), whose model of the ecology of human development can be used to examine the systems that surround children and their families and deepen our understanding of the effects of contextual variables on collaboration and special education. Bronfenbrenner’s paradigm is often referenced as a conceptual base in special education. However, special education’s traditional focus on response contingencies in the immediate environment sometimes precludes extensive examination of contextual variables. Further, the complexity of accounting for multiple settings can easily be viewed as overwhelming for

TABLE 1. Cassie’s Educational and Social Services

Organization	Professional	Role
Rainelle County School District	Kathy	Early childhood special educator
	Josette	Speech and language therapist
	Andrea	Occupational therapist
	Lynn	Physical therapist
	Audrey	Home-school liaison
	Linda	Preschool teacher
Rainelle Head Start	Lisa	Home visitor
West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services (WVDHHS)	Roberta	Caseworker
Rainelle County Public Health Clinic	Nancy	Nurse-practitioner

special educators whose primary focus has traditionally been the individual (Sontag, 1996).

Bronfenbrenner pointed out that relationships between individuals and their environments are transactional (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Odom et al., 2004; Peck, 1993). In the case of Cassie, both Cassie and those who might collaborate on her behalf affect the environment as it affects them. Change occurs in a reciprocal and co-evolutionary way so that changes in any one aspect of her environment influence other aspects even as both are affected by changes that originate elsewhere. These changes may be institutional, psychological, political, and so on, to borrow Gallagher’s (1999) descriptions, or they may relate to the differences between cooperation, coordination, and collaboration that Kagan and Pritchard described (1993, 1999). It is important for special educators to understand that what happens in their daily lives and in the lives of the children they work with, the children’s families, and practitioners with whom they may collaborate can best be understood by studying the multidirectional ways various aspects of the “case” affect other aspects and ultimately the special educators themselves and the child in question. To understand the role of collaboration in any particular case, those who are called on to collaborate must acknowledge that children’s developmental outcomes may in fact be predicted in part by their collaborative relationships with one another. It is also important to understand the impact of the environment surrounding collaboration and acknowledge its potential to influence children’s developmental outcomes.

The story of Cassie and her family allows us to examine the interrelationships among children, families, practitioners,

and the organizations in which they work, as well as the sociocultural environment that surrounds them. Furthermore, it allows us to study how these transactional interrelationships may facilitate or impede collaboration on her behalf, potentially affecting Cassie's progress on IEP goals and objectives and her development over time. Using the case of Cassie for analysis, the overall purpose of this study was to understand how contextual variables affect special education practice in general and collaboration in particular.

The Context of the Study

Rainelle County is bordered by the Ohio River. The county's largest towns cluster in the river valley and, in the heyday of West Virginia's coal economy, Rainelle's river communities bustled with barges carrying coal upstream to Pittsburgh, fueling that city's growth. These towns along the Ohio have quieted now as the demand for coal has declined. Mountains rise above the river valley, and access to the county from any boundary besides the river is difficult, especially in the winter, when roads are icy and snow-packed. Subsistence farms dot the countryside, surrounding villages in the county's center. Unemployment throughout Rainelle County has been an ongoing problem for decades, with a severe shortage of jobs, especially in the interior. Cassie lives in Brewster, a community in the heart of Rainelle.

Brewster Elementary is located outside of town on the main road that runs west. The school is part of Rainelle County School District, which was established more than a decade ago, when a court order brought about statewide school reform and the consolidation of all of West Virginia's small school districts into countywide systems (Spence, 1998). Shortly after consolidation, Rainelle County schools applied for and received state funding to build Brewster Elementary, a source of pride in Rainelle County, as it is the newest structure in this part of the state.

Cassie's classroom appears well equipped, clean, and brightly painted. Sixteen 4-year-old children attend 4 days a week in the morning. Classroom activities center on weekly themes, usually related to the time of the year. Children complete art projects as a large group, and they are read to daily. Each morning, children engage in a variety of free-choice activities. They may paint or use Play-Doh, blocks, or puzzles. Two children in addition to Cassie are identified as having developmental delays.

Undertaking the Study

We came to know Cassie as her story emerged from a 5-year evaluation study about collaboration in Head Start, which was conducted to inform program improvement (Butera, 2001). Cassie had been named by Rainelle County Head Start personnel who were asked to nominate enrolled children whose

circumstances appeared to require collaboration and whose families seemed likely to be comfortable discussing their experiences. Employing purposeful sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 1990), we selected Cassie as one of six children from across the state, chosen to represent diversity of child age, ability, gender, ethnicity, and life circumstances. Our plan was to use what we learned from examining each child's experience as a lens to view family, school, and community perceptions about and responses to child need. Each case was to be examined to discern how practitioners and family members collaborated with others on behalf of the child in question over time. Across the course of the study, four researchers participated in data collection. Each researcher focused on a specific case but also participated in data collection for the other cases and shared overall project aims under the direction of the author. In the case of Cassie, most of the data were collected by the author over an 8-month period, during which daylong visits to Rainelle County occurred at least weekly.

Using emerging research design methods (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 1990), three data collection strategies were used throughout the study: observation, artifact examination, and interviews. Forty-three distinct observations, amounting to nearly 57 hours of observational data, were recorded by all four researchers. The purpose of the observations was to enrich our understanding of the climate and context of the study. Observations took place at community events, in school and classroom settings, and in Cassie's home. The length of observations varied considerably (15 minutes to 6 hours), as did the circumstances (e.g., in the presence or absence of Cassie). Nearly a third of the observations were collected with two researchers recording the same events. Two of the four researchers were participant observers who were unaware of the study's purpose; they were well known in the community as field placement supervisors for university students. In Cassie's case, they were asked to focus their observations on social and academic interactions in various settings, paying particular attention to children with disabilities. Field notes were compiled on the spot and expanded shortly thereafter. These notes, which were examined on an ongoing basis, sought to characterize the substance and nature of interactions and describe the setting. As the study gained focus, researchers who were aware of the purpose of the study (and who were also well known in the community) sought specific activities or events in the observations that might confirm or disconfirm emerging themes, categories, or hypotheses.

Cassie's mother and her preschool special educator collected artifacts and gave them to one of the four researchers to "help us understand Cassie and how we might work together to help her." The artifacts included eight school and classroom newsletters, 5 notes exchanged between practitioners and Cassie's family, and 12 notes related to practitioners' communication. A daily journal accompanied Cassie to and from school. Cassie's IEP documents and five samples of Cassie's artwork and classroom projects also became part of

the data set. The data were examined initially to assist the researchers in understanding the context of Cassie's case and were later used to confirm or disconfirm emerging themes, categories, or hypotheses.

Thirty-seven semistructured or open-ended interviews with family members, teachers, therapists, school administrators, and practitioners from community organizations were conducted, 27 of them by the author. The purpose of the interviews was to capture perceptions and beliefs about Cassie's case and the collaboration that ensued on her behalf. They were used to create an opportunity for dialogue between the interviewee and the researchers so that meanings could be pursued in detail. Overall, approximately 40 hours of interview data were collected. Cassie's mother was interviewed four times, Cassie's preschool teacher was interviewed three times, and the preschool special educator was interviewed twice. The remaining 28 different interviewees included Cassie's family members (7), school district personnel (11), and practitioners from community organizations (10). All but 8 interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety, allowing for thorough examination of the interviewee's explanation of events. When interviews were conducted without the benefit of the audiotape (because circumstances were not suitable for taping), running field notes were used to capture the essence of the interview. These data were analyzed separately from the audiotaped interview data.

Interpreting the Data

Researchers involved in the study were experienced special educators trained in case study research methods. All had more than 5 years of experience in special and early childhood education. The two researchers who were aware of the purposes of the study had 8 and 15 years of experience in the field. Three of the researchers were native to Appalachia.

With a primary perspective as special educators, we began the study with the assumption that collaboration would occur as the result of Cassie's involvement in special education and her enrollment in Head Start. We understood that practitioners and family members were likely to be initially uncertain about how to collaborate; their collaboration was viewed as likely to occur as a result of ongoing decisions they made about how to translate what they knew about Cassie into activities intended to support her development. We assumed that collaboration was likely to benefit Cassie by facilitating the implementation of coherent and well-coordinated activities directed toward her IEP goals and objectives. We assumed also that the activities were likely to result in favorable outcomes as described by professionals and family members, and that the decisions made and the activities that resulted would be influenced by contextual variables, including the availability of resources, the discipline roles of various individuals, and the characteristics of the organizations in which they worked.

To ensure that our understanding of Cassie's story was credible and reliable, we employed a variety of methods. In addition to the prolonged engagement and persistent observation that was afforded us as our daylong visits to Rainelle County over 8 months accumulated, we repeatedly reviewed our field notes to corroborate our impressions during regular debriefing sessions. We used multiple data sources (e.g., multiple methods, participants, and situations) to triangulate data and increase the reliability of our findings. We also used member checking of our interview and observation notes to ensure accuracy. This occurred informally when we asked questions of interviewees who had talked with us previously to check and see if "we got what they told us right" at the start of each new interview. We also provided practitioners with one-page bulleted summaries of interviews and observations three times during the study, reviewing them with practitioners and asking again if "we got it right" or if "there was something else you wanted to tell us." Participants in the study were provided with an earlier version of this manuscript, and the contents of this edition were discussed with three of the interviewees at length. Three times across the course of our member-checking study, participants corrected our errors or provided us with additional information that then became part of the data set (LeCompte, Millroy, & Priessle, 1992; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Smith, 1992).

Although data analysis in the study was ongoing, as data collection came to an end, we employed strategies described in the literature on qualitative research methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; LeCompte, 2000; Merriam, 1988, 1997; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The first phase of intensive data analysis involved organizing the data chronologically and topically and reading the entire set several times, jotting down notes in the margin, and keeping a separate running list of major ideas that cut across data types. In this way, data were consolidated, reduced, and, to some extent, interpreted. A descriptive case study was written at this time, providing a narrative account of the findings. A second level of analysis was subsequently undertaken to develop theory about educational practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1988). We employed constant comparative methods, and as tentative themes, categories, properties, and hypotheses emerged and were tested against the data, we sought to identify disconfirming data where possible and make use of it to question our emerging hypotheses. Five preliminary categories emerged from this data analysis that roughly corresponded to various descriptions of collaboration in the research literature (Gallagher, 1999; Kagan, 1991) and Bronfenbrenner's *Ecology of Human Development* (1979): *Cassie's Home*, *Cassie's School*, *Relationships Between Cassie's Home and School*, *Cassie's Family and WVDHHS*, and *Cassie in the Context of Appalachia*.

To address the original aims of the research project, much of this analysis was set aside to be examined later. Within and across each category, themes specific to collaboration and useful for the purposes of the project were identified. These were given code names to be recognized by Ethnograph, a qualita-

tive analysis program designed to organize and retrieve data. Dyads of researchers reviewed coded transcripts of the interview and observation data, when they were available, and coded other data by hand and checked for agreement, using alternative qualitative methods for establishing what is essentially interrater reliability (Patton, 1990). The final data reduction process at this phase of data analysis involved clustering themes into larger themes related to collaboration. In some cases, themes that were closely related were collapsed. In other cases, categories or comments not considered directly related to the overall research purposes were again set aside for later analysis.

Because the overall aim of the study was to collect formative data to assist in the design of a statewide collaboration initiative, these analyses were given priority status. However, mapping themes and categories that emerged from Cassie's story suggested considerable overlap between themes and the original categories. As an example, one theme ("Cassie is appealing") occurred most often in the category Cassie's Home and was often captured in observational data collected on home visits; however, this theme also cut across other categories as practitioners explained their willingness to persist in teaching her and working with others on her behalf because "Cassie is so cute" or "she tries so hard, I guess I should too." It even emerged in discussions with those who did not know Cassie directly when school board members or state legislators described children like Cassie who had disabilities and were also viewed as appealing. This provided us with support for our hypothesis that Cassie's appeal led to increased efforts to collaborate. In addition, however, her attempts to communicate were sometimes described as annoying and problematic, especially in school settings. This observation and the interview data served as disconfirming data and eventually strengthened our notion that the "Cassie is appealing" theme was important to note even though it was not especially helpful in assisting Head Start target program improvement. The "Cassie is appealing" theme, therefore, was set aside for later analysis, and the data were mostly subsumed in other themes at this stage of analysis.

In this article, we return to our original categories to address issues more relevant to special education. Specific themes are again subsumed and discussed in each of the original categories that emerged from Cassie's story to provide a more parsimonious conceptual framework for the study findings and a more holistic view of Cassie's case.

Cassie's Home

Cassie lives in a two-bedroom apartment over an automotive repair shop in Brewster with her mother, Martha, her younger half sister, Aretha (age 2), and a married couple (Carolyn and Harold) and Carolyn's 13-year-old son, Jeremy. Martha explains that Carolyn was previously married to Martha's brother.

She and Carolyn had become good friends as sisters-in-law, and Martha explains, "Just because they couldn't get along, I couldn't see why we shouldn't stay friends. It wasn't our divorce."

Carolyn and Martha share childcare. Carolyn usually provides more of the physical care, changing Aretha's diaper, bathing both girls, and helping them dress. She often takes them to the park in the afternoon to play. Martha does most of the cooking and shopping. Harold is considerably older than Carolyn and a retired coal miner. He moved in with the family when he and Carolyn married, about a year ago. Harold's pension from the mines amounts to a substantial contribution toward the family's expenses. He appears less involved with the children's daily activities than the two women, but he is the one who is the designated disciplinarian, threatening to "whop 'em" when they get loud. He sometimes reads to them, and they like to sit with him when he watches television.

None of the adults in the household are currently employed. Expenses are paid in a variety of ways, including the monthly check Martha has received since Cassie was determined eligible for Social Security disability. Martha can afford the rent on the apartment because she qualifies for Section 8 housing. The apartment is clean, but somewhat crowded. Toys and books are strewn around, and the television is almost always tuned to sports or soap operas. The apartment is sparingly furnished and Martha, Cassie, and Aretha share one bedroom. Harold and Carolyn share another, and Jeremy sleeps on the living room sofa, where he often falls asleep while watching television with Harold.

Jeremy is enrolled in special education at Brewster High School. He explains, "I'm not dumb but I can't read." He often gets into trouble at school for fighting or being disrespectful. Family members sometimes defend him to school officials when this happens, but he "gets it" when he gets home. He usually plays with Cassie and Aretha after school, and although Martha and Carolyn worry that he is sometimes "too rough," Cassie and Aretha delight in his antics and enjoy his attention.

Martha is forthright about her family relationships. Cassie's father was never married to Martha. He is currently in prison in Tennessee. Although Cassie does not know her father, she is well acquainted with her paternal grandparents, who live in a community nearby. Every month or so they stop by to visit Martha and Cassie on their way to shopping in a nearby town, occasionally taking Cassie home with them for a few days' visit. According to Martha, Cassie enjoys this enormously, getting to know her large extended African American family. Martha also has a large and gregarious extended family that live in the community. They visit the apartment regularly, frequently sharing resources and childrearing advice with one another. An assortment of relatives and friends can often be found seated around Martha's kitchen table late in the morning each weekday, drinking coffee and exchanging gossip about recent community events.

Cassie's School

Our observations of Cassie's interactions with each of the practitioners who work with her suggested that Cassie enjoys all of them. It is also clear that they enjoy her. She invariably greets each with a ready grin and a "high five" slap on the hand. Activities related to Cassie's IEP goals and objectives and the discipline of the professional ensue. Those who work with Cassie agree that she is a hard worker who wants to please. Kathy, the early childhood special educator, summarizes this common sentiment about Cassie:

Cassie will try anything, although she does become frustrated on occasion. Once she loses confidence she'll stop trying but she almost always tries initially. She's pleasant to work with almost all of the time. She's funny. She has a sense of humor and she's good about sharing with others.

Despite the usually positive comments made about Cassie at school, differences of opinion about her and effective ways to work with her abound. Josette thinks that Cassie exhibits "soft neurological signs," which are also noted by Andrea during Cassie's occupational therapy. Both women believe that obtaining a neurological examination for Cassie is essential for their work. They also believe that reducing stimulation while working with Cassie is important. Cassie appears to realize their expectations about this, putting her index finger to her lips and whispering "shhh" when we arrive at Josette's office. Kathy, on the other hand, dismisses this notion immediately when asked about it and describes Cassie as having "across-the-board developmental delays." Cassie needs "activity and stimulation, not quiet," she explains. Lynn, the physical therapist, shares Kathy's views. She also states that "attention is not a problem when Cassie is working with me."

Audrey is aware of the disagreements about Cassie and has worked to try to resolve them. As the school's liaison to the home, she considers it her primary responsibility to help Martha understand professional viewpoints. In this effort, she is frustrated by her own inability to understand the confusion. Nevertheless, earlier in the year, she helped Martha arrange to have Cassie seen at the public health clinic in Brewster, in response to Josette and Andrea's concerns. A nurse-practitioner (Nancy) saw Cassie at that point. After examining her, she told Martha and Audrey that she did not see any reason for concern but said, "You might think about taking Cassie to the clinic at the university." Nancy wrote a letter to Martha and the school explaining the role of the public health clinic in referring children with "special needs." She tells us that "schools expect too much from us" when we ask about Cassie. While discussing these events with us, Audrey sighed and reported, "Nothing ever came of it. I don't think anyone else thought it was important. But who knows?"

Both Audrey and Kathy express concern about the potential effects of Cassie's delays on her peer interactions and

her ability to make friends. In her interview, Linda, the classroom teacher, does not mention these concerns. Kathy observes that Cassie is often seen in the classroom off to the side, playing by herself, and that she does not seem to be an involved member of the classroom's social group. She reports discussing her concerns with Linda, who had apparently not noticed that Cassie was often playing by herself. Later, Audrey reports:

A while later, I brought it up again. I don't think Linda was paying enough attention to whether Cassie was included in the play. After talking to her awhile, I did get her to admit that Cassie appeared to have only one friend in the class.

Relationships Among School, Head Start, and Cassie's Home

Relationships between Cassie's home and school were quite strained during the time we came to know Cassie. An unfortunate incident at the school serves to illustrate this. Martha volunteers regularly in Cassie's Head Start classroom and has been a parent volunteer at the school, working there on a weekly basis. When she stops coming to help, Linda and several others assume that the provisions of welfare reform have made it impossible for Martha to be a stay-at-home mom and that she is now at work and can no longer volunteer. However, Martha tells a different story. A few weeks ago, some money was missing from the school office. The principal believed that it was parent volunteers who took the money and, without consulting any of them, decided to disallow parents from working in the office. Martha and other parent volunteers are upset about this, and it has been a discussion topic at Martha's kitchen table. They do not believe that any parent stole the money, and, even if one of them did, they believe that the decision to ban all parents from working in the office is unfair. Many of the parent volunteers have stopped offering their help, whether they were working in classrooms or the office. These circumstances go unnoticed in the school office and are largely misunderstood in the classrooms.

Martha discusses her feelings about the situation with Audrey during a home visit. Overall, Martha reports feeling that she has little control over Cassie's schooling. She complains that meetings about Cassie are held without her knowledge. She also feels that the school fails to keep her informed about Cassie's progress. "From the school, I hear nothing," she says. She tells Audrey that she is surprised and shocked when she attends the IEP meeting and is told by Josette that Cassie is "not doing well."

Interviews with school professionals about their collaboration with Cassie's family are replete with stories of the difficulties they have had finding time to communicate with Martha. Josette's explanation is typical in this regard:

It is hard to find the time to call her and sometimes, when I do, her phone is disconnected. This is during my lunch hour, mind you, so I'm really not pleased. She used to come to school all the time and I'd talk to her then. She's good in that way but I have not seen her for a while. I don't know what happened to her but it's too bad. I had a chance to tell her before what we were working on. That way she could work on it at home.

Interview data confirm that several professionals view collaboration with Cassie's family as unlikely to benefit their efforts to work with her. Linda described it this way:

They're just one of those families. It's not that they don't care about their kids, but other things are more important to them, I think. And they don't value education. I could spend a lot of time making suggestions to Martha about what to do to help Cassie but I doubt if she'd do any of it. I'd rather spend my time with families that want my help.

There is evidence that the disagreements among school professionals about Cassie influence Head Start's efforts on Cassie's behalf. In her interview, Lisa, Cassie's Head Start home visitor, says that she is confused about which aspects of Cassie's development are of concern to school personnel. As a result, she has given up trying to embed activities related to Cassie's IEP goals and objectives in the weekly visits she makes to Cassie's home. Instead, she essentially and unknowingly replicates what Audrey does in her visits with Cassie by providing Cassie and Martha with inexpensive books and activities designed to ready Cassie for learning to read. Cassie is proud of these books, asking Martha to take them down from their location on the refrigerator's top when we arrive to visit so that she can show them to us. Harold tells us that he reads them to her often, and the smudged and folded appearance of the pages suggests that this is so. While we are there, Cassie corners Aretha and tries to "read" the book to her. Aretha is uncooperative, and Martha intervenes, returning the book to its secure location.

Lisa has discussed her work with Josette, explaining that Josette informs her about the sounds she is working on with Cassie each week. Lisa and Josette attend the same church and are friends, which may account for why Lisa shares Josette's views about the importance of working with Cassie on speech and language development. They have the opportunity to discuss working with Cassie, unlike the others who work with her. Lisa explains that "Cassie's come a long way" but "improving Cassie's intelligibility" should be "given top priority." She also explains, "I'm inclined to think Cassie has neurological problems that have resulted in oral-motor delays. She does not communicate with us." Josette, on the other hand, does not know what Lisa does when she works with Cassie on her weekly visits except that "she is the only one who will actually try to work on her speech sounds."

The role of the IEP meeting in providing a venue for joint planning is considered an essential part of special education practice. Yet, in Cassie's case, there is little evidence that IEP meetings have been helpful. In thinking about the most recent IEP meeting, Audrey reports that "it was way too long and repetitious. People stopped listening after the third person said the same thing." The IEP meeting was also described by most as dominated by school district administrators who focused on the importance of obtaining a neurological examination for Cassie, despite Audrey's descriptions of her previous efforts to do so. Lisa reports that she attended the IEP meeting but was not asked for her impressions about Cassie's status and felt uncomfortable interrupting those she viewed as "far more knowledgeable about this than me." Both Kathy and Audrey confirm that Lisa was there but that "she didn't get to say a thing."

Implementing decisions made at the IEP meeting also proves problematic for a variety of reasons. Audrey explains:

At the IEP meeting, we all agreed we would make contact with each other at least once a week. It almost never happens, though. It's too time-consuming to reach people on the phone and especially if someone's not at school or somewhere you can find them. You have to make so many calls just to get through to them. I mean a telephone line that isn't busy. I already spend more time on Cassie than I do any of my other children. I can't afford to give her too much more time just making phone calls.

Cassie's Family and WVDHHS

Bronfenbrenner (1979) acknowledged the importance of events that occur in settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but that nevertheless affect them. A series of events described to us by almost every interviewee suggests how this might occur in Cassie's case.

Cassie and her family have been clients at WVDHHS for a number of years—since Cassie's half brother Nate was placed in a school for troubled youth in Ohio. Nate's social-emotional and behavioral problems had come to the attention of school officials, who referred the family to WVDHHS because they were concerned that Nate's problems resulted in part from abuse or neglect. Although Martha vehemently denies any abuse or neglect, she acknowledges that parenting Nate had become increasingly stressful for her. Martha was 15 when Nate was born, and she says, "I got started too early." Martha describes the mental health services provided to her after the school's referral as "helping me do some growing up I needed to do to be a good mom." Roberta, the WVDHHS caseworker, agrees with Martha's assessment of her parenting. However, she continues to focus her work with the family on Martha's ability to care for her children, in part because of the urging of school officials. She describes a recent incident:

One of the kids had an accident and was shoved into the wood stove. The school called us. It looked like a burn, from what I understand, that someone gave him on purpose, to the school. The family denied it, of course, and they were eventually told it was okay as long as they do everything they're supposed to do. I'm not sure what the school thinks that is, frankly. I see them once a week and I don't see any evidence of abuse or neglect. That family loves those kids. But they'll stay a family we pay close attention to, though.

Events in school board meetings and legislative sessions have the potential to directly affect children's daily lives and are, therefore, important to understand. In Cassie's case, decisions made in these settings are quite likely to affect the resources available to professionals who work with her and may account in part for some of the communication problems between practitioners. Rainelle County is one of 15 counties designated as persistently distressed economically by the Appalachian Regional Commission. The per capita income of the county in 1997 was reported as \$13,070, compared with the state per capita income of \$16,748 (49th out of 50 states in the nation). Decades of hard times have left communities like Brewster with no surplus to address urgent needs that may unexpectedly arise. Difficult decisions about how to expend scarce resources are made in school board and county administrative offices and affect those who work with Cassie and her family. An absolute lack of resources in the community, county, state, and region allows very little flexibility in how these decisions are implemented (Butera & Maughan, 1998; Caudill, 2001).

In Cassie's case, the impact of scarce resources on the ability of practitioners and family members to collaborate with school professionals is illustrated by telephone difficulties. Brewster Elementary may be newly built and have brightly painted classrooms, but it is also disadvantaged by a shortage of phone lines, which are considered too costly for the school budget, according to our interviews with school administrators. This rural and mountainous part of the state does not yet have full access to advanced telecommunications. Cell phones do not work reliably, and Internet access is extremely limited. This is just one of many ways the lack of community resources affects those who attempt to collaborate on behalf of Cassie and her family.

Cassie in the Context of Appalachia

Cassie's family is Appalachian, members of a cultural group often unacknowledged in discussions about American subcultures. West Virginia, the state in which they live, is the only one of the 13 Appalachian states whose boundaries lie totally within Appalachia, which extends from northern Georgia to upstate New York. Its history includes a series of stories about

exploitation from outside the region and grinding poverty as a result. Stereotypes of Appalachians are invariably negative and include derogatory labels such as "rednecks," "hillbillies," and other equally unflattering references. Although it has become politically incorrect to berate members of many American subcultures, Appalachians continue to be frequent targets of jokes, in which they are invariably portrayed as ignorant, lazy, poor, incestuous, dirty, and clannish (Butera & Maughan, 1998; deMarrais, 1998). The coffee drinkers around Martha's table acknowledge their membership in this cultural group by regularly referring to each other as "rednecks," and they ask if we came to "take a look at us hillbillies" when Martha explains our presence to them.

The strong attachment to family, community, and place common in Appalachia is apparent in Cassie's family, who have lived in Brewster for generations and are deeply embedded in the community's history as well as its current events. This attachment to place contributes to the family's sense of identity and provides them with opportunities that might be unavailable in a community where they were unknown. For many Appalachian families like Cassie's, it is more important to maintain these ties than to secure a high-paying job elsewhere. It is not unusual for families to subsist on a combination of government benefits or a series of part-time jobs. Family resources are often enhanced in a number of ways. Cassie's extended family members cultivate an impressive garden each year, the produce from which is preserved and shared by family members, along with game procured from hunting and fish from mountain streams. Additional cash is also earned by collecting bloodroot, ginseng, and moss. As Martha explains it,

We make do. I'm not saying there are not jobs. There are jobs, but they're 30, maybe 40 miles off. And you have to have a car and a driver's license, which I don't have, to start with. And maybe I could do it, but it would be pretty hard and what would I do about getting Cassie to all the things she needs? I could ask Carolyn and Harold but that seems like a lot to ask. I mean she's my girl, not theirs. They help enough and Harold's sick anyway. So we make do.

As Martha's reference to Carolyn and Harold suggests, ties of kinship and family relationships are highly valued in Appalachia, but they are sometimes difficult to decipher. Extended family members often play important decision-making roles even though the ties are less formal than is the case in mainstream American culture (Butera & Maughan, 1998; Kennedy, 1999). Martha credits the advice of the regular morning coffee drinkers around her kitchen table as critical support for her family. The importance of informal kinship is also illustrated by Harold and Carolyn, important members of Cassie's family who contribute substantially to the family's overall well-being, though neither is related to Cassie by blood. Further, it is evident in the ongoing contributions of Cassie's pa-

ternal grandparents. Although their visits are seldom scheduled in advance, they are regular, important to the family, and an essential connection to the African American community to which Cassie also belongs.

Churches in Appalachia often play an active role. Cassie's family attends one of the small, fundamentalist, non-denominational churches that dot the West Virginia countryside. The family attends Sunday morning services and Wednesday evening prayer meetings. In this way, they are afforded regular opportunities to socialize with others. Martha and her children are well accepted by the congregation, who take no special notice of Cassie's developmental difficulties, dismissing her problems as "just Cassie, that's all." Usually led by part-time or lay ministers, Appalachian churches such as the one Cassie's family attends often provide the impetus and organization behind community food and clothing drives. The church serves as a distribution center for supplies gathered during these drives. Martha takes full advantage of this, and the church basement is often the source of the family's clothing and some menu items. In addition, church congregations are often the first to respond when a community member is in need. In Cassie's case, this is illustrated during the spring of the year, when the congregation takes up a collection to buy her a T-ball uniform, thus enabling her to participate in an activity likely to enhance her gross motor and social skills. Martha discusses how she feels about her church:

We were all raised in God's way. See, the Bible reads about the church of God. I'm afraid if we didn't go to church, we'd be lost. So we go. I go on Sunday and I go to Wednesday prayer meetings. It helps me find my way. All the family goes. I take Cassie and Aretha. Cassie goes to Sunday school. My church loves my kids. I may be a sinner, but I know I'm saved. So will my kids be saved.

Most of the practitioners who work with Cassie tell us they were born in Rainelle County, and virtually all of the teachers at Brewster Elementary come from West Virginia. On the surface, they share many sociocultural characteristics with Cassie's family. Like Josette and Lisa, they regularly attend one of Rainelle County's small churches. A table in the Brewster Elementary faculty lounge often is heaped with bounty from teachers' vegetable gardens in the early fall, and as regular visitors, we are urged to help ourselves. The school principal proudly tells about bagging a deer during the first week of deer season. Despite these connections to Brewster and Cassie's family, professionals who work with her differ in ways that make it clear they share more of the views of mainstream America about families, childrearing, and lifestyle choices than does Cassie's family. Their income and education have provided them with status and, in fact, in Brewster, they are clearly among the wealthiest members of the community. They often appear eager to distance themselves from families like Cassie's, even as they acknowledge their connection to them. Brewster's principal explains it this way:

Martha and her people are hill people, even if they are living in town now. They lived up on Shad's Ridge for generations. Don't get me wrong. My people lived up there too, and that's where the home place was, you understand. But we've been down here for a while. These hill people are good folk, salt of the earth. But they're ignorant.

In the Case of Cassie: Lessons Learned

The story of Cassie illustrates a perspective about children's development that may assist special educators in viewing the transactional interrelationships that serve to facilitate or impede collaboration on their behalf. This view might allow us to develop an understanding of the impact of contextual variables on special education practice in general and collaboration in particular. Interactions between practitioners and family members, the characteristics of Cassie's various caregiving and educational environments, and the sociocultural and political influences on the systems that surround her combine to make this an enormously complex task. However, it seems unlikely that effective special education to support Cassie's development can occur without concerted effort to take into account the contextual variables that contribute complexity, especially when collaboration among practitioners, across organizations, and with families is required (see Figure 1).

The descriptions of Cassie that emerged from our data underlined what we came to know about her from our own experience. Cassie is likable. She tries hard. In Bronfenbrenner's terms, Cassie demonstrates "an active orientation toward and interaction with the environment" and provides evidence that she has "a conception of self as an active agent in a responsive world" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 219). Virtually everyone we talked to told us with a smile or chuckle that they enjoyed their interactions with her, and this was clearly apparent in the interactions we watched between Cassie and various individuals. It was not uncommon to be told that Cassie received more effort and attention than "any other child in my caseload." Thus, our data support the contention of Bronfenbrenner, among others, that individual characteristics make a considerable contribution to outcomes. For special education, the lesson to be learned is that Bronfenbrenner's ideas about the reciprocal nature of interactions and their subsequent effects on development validate the traditional focus on response contingencies in the immediate environment as useful for those who work with children like Cassie on a daily basis.

However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) made the case that it is the characteristics of the environment as it is experienced by the individual that influences development. If we agree with this assumption, an effort to view Cassie's story from her perspective causes concern. Although Cassie's appealing personal characteristics contribute to the well-intentioned efforts of professionals and family members to support her develop-

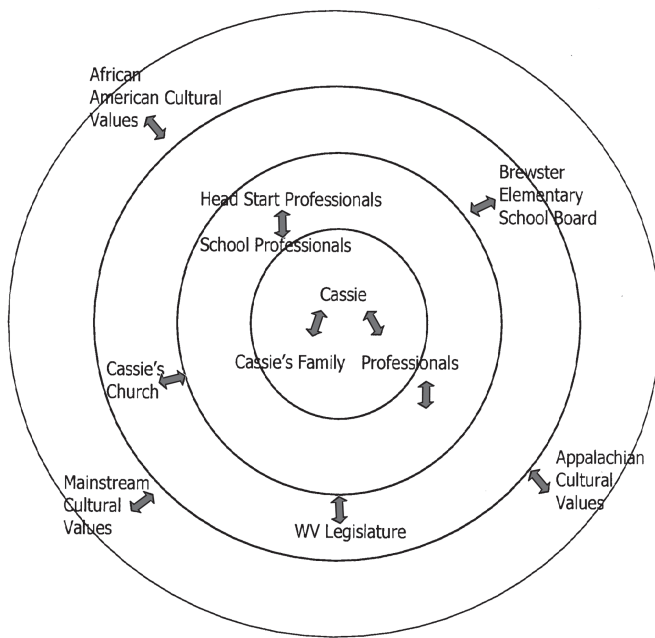


FIGURE 1. The ecology of Cassie's development.

ment, when these same individuals are called on to collaborate on Cassie's behalf, their good intentions alone fail to create a coherent or comprehensive set of planned activities. Key stakeholders disagree with one another. They lack the opportunity and resources necessary to resolve these differences, and they fail to engage in meaningful partnerships. An overall lack of resources in the community impedes both program planning and effective policy making that might provide more opportunity for effective collaboration. Viewed from Cassie's perspective, inconsistencies across environments must seem especially confusing. Her ongoing and energetic efforts to communicate with us are especially poignant, given these circumstances.

Difficulties in collaboration in Cassie's case are made more complex by sociocultural differences between Cassie's family and many of the individuals who work with her. Because the values and ideologies of Cassie's family differ from those of the mainstream, professionals struggle to understand the underlying beliefs and values held by her family. Martha is aware of these differences and the problems they create. However, she feels powerless to address them and has withdrawn from participating in circumstances that might erode her confidence as a parent. The assets present in Cassie's home environment go unrecognized. This is unfortunate, because they might be used as a basis for the professional-parent partnerships viewed as critical in special education.

The ways in which social class and cultural differences complicate efforts to collaborate with Cassie's family are also evident in the interrelationships between professionals. Status and power differences among various individuals in Cassie's case interfere with effective collaboration. This was evident

in the ways school district personnel dismissed the importance of observations from Head Start or WVDHHS practitioners about Cassie, for example, as well as the ways in which the IEP meeting was dominated by school administrators. It is important to note that personal relationships between individuals usually had the effect of facilitating collaboration to some extent, as was illustrated by the friendship between Lisa and Josette. However, it is also important to acknowledge that status and power differences played a role here, too, as communication between Lisa and Josette tended to lack reciprocity.

The case of Cassie has important implications for professional development. Providing preservice and in-service professionals with strategies that serve to facilitate collaboration is clearly essential. Those who work with Cassie need to learn how to resolve differences of opinion to facilitate effective program planning. However, they clearly need the opportunity to communicate with each other as much as they need the skills to do so. Working in resource-poor communities makes their work difficult. The enormous challenge of managing limited time and resources across large geographic areas is well known to those who work in rural places. Although advances in communication technology hold potential for helping them, solutions to the problems of those who work in rural communities like Brewster are likely to remain elusive, and this should be acknowledged. Descriptions of best practice that is impossible to achieve given local circumstances probably serve to undermine professional confidence and may contribute to special educator burnout.

It is especially critical that professional development programs provide professionals with a broad perspective on child development that acknowledges the ever-changing and transactional nature of the ecology of human development, especially as it relates to cultural competence (Lynch & Hanson, 1998; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Cultural groups are not static, and individuals are members of more than one cultural group. As Appalachians, for example, Cassie's teachers and therapists shared cultural values and ideologies with her family even as they were more acculturated into the dominant American culture. Cassie herself is a member of two non-dominant cultural groups, as an Appalachian and an African American. Thus, describing culture-specific characteristics of children and families, such as beliefs about disability, child-rearing, and communication style, is similar to aiming at a moving target, and the importance of emphasizing this similarity to novice practitioners can scarcely be overstated to avoid stereotyping. Personnel preparation programs would also do well to provide practitioners with opportunities to examine their own sociocultural backgrounds and to think about how their backgrounds may relate to assumptions they have about the families they work with and about each other (Butera, 1997; Butera, Matuga, & Riley, 1999; Sandall et al., 2000).

In the center of Cassie's "case" is Cassie herself, who is, after all, not a case at all but a child, moving rapidly through time toward adulthood. It is important for special education

to view her up close and at a distance, using every lens possible to understand her growth and development and assist her. She is surrounded by those who struggle to support her. It remains our challenge to help them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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