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Special Issue: Family Science Careers Through the Eyes of Theory

This manuscript is part of a special issue of Family Science Review entitled Family Science Careers Through the Eyes of Theory, edited by Raeann R. Hamon, Ph.D., CFLE. The authors of these deliberately unconventional manuscripts were asked to select and describe a career that a professional with a family science background might pursue. After outlining the professional role, authors reflected upon the family theories that most influence the way they approach their work and perform their professional duties. Authors briefly review the scholarly literature on selected family theories, provide case studies or work scenarios as illustrations of theory in action, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the theories in their unique professional contexts. The Special Issue articles are designed to be used individually or in combination, and feature articles about careers in early intervention, special education, family court, child life, and higher education. The introduction to the special issue is available at <https://doi.org/10.26536/GMJK4953>. The complete special issue is available at <https://doi.org/10.26536/ZLUL3923>.

Using Relational Feminism as an Approach to Practice in Working with Families in Special Education

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ABSTRACT. Families of children with disabilities have unique relational needs that may be addressed by practitioners in the field of family science. In this article, we discuss how relational feminism was used as an approach to working with families in a rural Special Education program to facilitate success for very young students with neurodevelopmental disorders and non-specified disabilities. This article provides a brief history of families' roles in Special Education advocacy, along with the tenets of relational feminism. We discuss ways that relational feminism was used to create connections within the professional community, and with marginalized families. We also discuss the strengths and limitations of using relational feminism to promote connection and voice for families of marginalized and vulnerable individuals in the public education context.

Keywords: Relational feminism, Special Education, family science, Autism Spectrum Disorder, rural communities

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Using Relational Feminism as an Approach to Practice in Working with Families in Special Education

Families of children with developmental delays and disabilities are at a significant disadvantage as compared to families of typically developing children (Barnett et al., 2003; Peer & Hillman, 2014; Smith et al., 2012). Rural families of children with disabilities are uniquely challenged due to multiple factors, such as high rates of financial difficulty, fewer specialized services and therapies, and a lack of health care providers (Tomeny et al., 2023). Unfortunately, family science has not adequately examined the issue of how to support rural families with children who have social-emotional and behavioral challenges. In this article, we propose that relational feminism is an approach that is well-suited to serve as a paradigm of practice for educators working with these families in Special Education due to its focus on connection and relationships (Gilligan, 1993; Raider-Roth, 2005) and the ethics of care (Gilligan, 2011).

Special Education Teacher

When I began my career in Special Education in 2010, I carried with me ideas about working with families of children with developmental delays and disabilities that I had developed while working in Early Childhood Intervention in a growing metropolitan area of Texas in the 1990s. My work at that point had been informed by Selma Fraiberg and her contributions to the field of infant mental health (Cummins, 2019; Fraiberg et al., 1975). I recognized the value in supporting parents as they came to terms with their children's diagnoses, their challenging behaviors, and their long-term care. Home visiting work was family-focused, so frameworks for how to support families through the process of attachment and acceptance were abundant. On the other hand, public education operates within a completely different paradigm. Special Education is child-centered, and the services provided to students are based upon a service delivery model (Huerta, 2008). Within this framework, children are evaluated using standardized tests, and therapies are planned and delivered according to their unique academic needs (U. S. Department of Education, 2019).

At the time that I began my work in Special Education in an elementary school in 2010, I worked for a large school district in a metropolitan area of Texas. I learned how to fulfill the role according to the preparation I received from an Education Service Center (ESC) Educator Preparation Program (EPP). In addition to the daily routine of teaching life skills such as communication, feeding, toilet training, and hygiene, I also worked with my students on academic skills, behavior management, and social skills. One of the greatest challenges of the role came from the amount of documentation and data collection that were required of the position. Federal legislation defines the development of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and its implementation (U. S. Department of Education, 2019), a process that is meticulous and time-consuming.

After moving to a rural community in 2021, I accepted a position as a Special Education teacher at an early elementary school in a neighboring district. Upon accepting the position, it became clear that there would be many challenges: Nearly the entire class had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Levels II and III, and most of the students had been denied opportunities for inclusion with their typically developing peers for a variety of reasons. The previous school year had been especially challenging due to COVID-19 restrictions, compounded with the lack of resources in the local area and the economic challenges of the families in the community. The students also had complicated learning difficulties due to co-occurring disorders, trauma, limited English proficiency, and a lack of access to childcare programs and therapies within the community. Even the school building itself raised

issues for inclusive practice, as it had been built in the 1950s long before the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Fresh from completing my doctoral program in Family Studies, I considered the multiple challenges that lay before me and decided to consider the most pressing needs for serving the families of the students in my class. Family science encourages practitioners to consider the unique contexts in which families live, their family culture, and how public policies affect them (Bond Burgess, 2022). Because family science is a strengths-based approach, I was able to look at the challenges ahead with a focus on opportunities for growth, specifically in relationship building.

The administrators of the elementary school and the Special Education department were both fairly new in their positions and were aware of the difficulties of building an inclusive program where one had not existed before. As a family scientist, I considered how the families and caregivers of the students must have felt for the last few years as they saw how their children were excluded from participation in regular activities with their typically developing peers. Aside from the legal aspects of that, the children—and by extension, their families—had been denied the opportunity to develop connections with the other children and families in the community. This must have been deeply upsetting to them.

The development of connection and relationships between children is a natural part of the educational environment and is encouraged in numerous ways. Children make friends with the other children in their homeroom class, which leads to invitations to parties and playdates. From this, relationships develop between caregivers and siblings. Inclusivity in the classroom leads to relationships that extend beyond the walls of the school building and the playground. Going further, the intent of inclusive education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is meant to not only benefit students with disabilities, but also to empower parents and guardians in their roles as parents and advocates, and to facilitate partnerships between parents and schools (Ashbaker, 2011; Erwin & Soodak, 2008; Hott et al., 2021; Huerta, 2008).

Relational Feminism, Special Education, and Family Science

Current practice for working with parents of children enrolled in Special Education in the public school system is typically guided by deficit-based service delivery models that frame professionals as experts to whom families should defer (Mahmic et al., 2021). Family systems approaches are often used in early childhood intervention approaches (Mahmic et al., 2021), and newer, naturalistic approaches in early intervention for children with ASD are designed to include families within children's naturally occurring environments (Schreibman et al., 2015). While family-focused frameworks are typically utilized in early intervention (birth to age 3) programs that are publicly funded, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) characterizes developmentally appropriate practice in programs for children birth to age eight as being most successful and most equitable when children are learning together in a caring environment that partners with families (Wright, 2022). Generally, public schools tend to be child-centered, but for Special Education programs to be individualized and unique to the educational needs of the child, they must include the concerns, participation, and perspective of the family (Erwin & Soodak, 2008; U. S. Department of Education, 2019).

For decades, there have been many proposals to improve the success of students in K-12 public education through a variety of ways (Hill et al., 1997; Mahmic et al., 2021; Orr & Rogers, 2010; Thomas, 1954). Families may find support through food pantries, Communities in Schools ([communitiesinschools.org](https://www.communitiesinschools.org)), and immunization programs or health clinics in some neighborhood schools. Even still, rural families struggle due to a lack of higher-paying jobs in their communities, long

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distances to commute for work opportunities, and a lack of available childcare (Ontai et al., 2018), which also strains their ability to be involved in their children's education.

Families of children with disabilities struggle in unique ways. Parents who have children with intellectual or developmental disabilities are at greater risk of chronic stress and the poor health that typically accompanies this state of being than parents of typically developing children (Peer & Hillman, 2014). Likewise, parents of children with ASD are more likely to experience divorce than parents of same age, typically developing peers (Hartley et al., 2010).

However, there is good evidence that formal and informal sources of social support provide protective factors for both the parent-child and marital relationship (Peer & Hillman, 2014). Social support also appears to mitigate the chronic stress and depressed mood experienced by parents of children with ASD (Peer & Hillman). In their review of coping mechanisms for parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Peer and Hillman (2014) stressed that both formal and informal sources of social support are of "primary importance...to maintain cohesiveness and stability in the midst of the stress that coincides with responsibilities placed upon these parents" (p. 96). Providing a listening ear to families of children with disabilities helped to ease their burden and stress (Peer & Hillman).

Special Education and Families

The federal government of the United States has mandated how the provision of free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students receiving Special Education services should be accomplished through IDEA legislation and Supreme Court rulings (Hott et al., 2021). Effectively, school districts are obligated to follow an Individualized Education Program (IEP) developed by students' IEP teams, which are comprised of Special Education teachers, general education teachers, parents/caregivers, students, campus administrators, and any other Special Education personnel deemed necessary and relevant to the students' specific educational needs (Erwin & Soodak, 2008; Hott et al., 2021; Huerta, 2008). The civil rights of students with disabilities have been advanced by families in both local and national advocacy groups and legislation (Erwin & Soodak, 2008). Unfortunately, the family-school partnerships promised by legislation, and best practices guidance has been unevenly applied in rural communities for a number of reasons, such as poor teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools (Rude & Miller, 2018).

Relational Feminism as a Family Science Paradigm

Relational feminism, as articulated by Carol Gilligan (1982/1993), Belenky et al. (1986/1997), Raider-Roth (2005), and Freedman (2007), explores how relationships, connections, and interactions shape one's identity and experience. When Gilligan began writing her landmark book *In a Different Voice* in the 1970s, she challenged the assumptions of traditional developmental theory (Gilligan, 1982/1993, 1996). In her research, she found that women's developmental crisis focused on remaining in connection with others, which challenged the view by Freud and Erikson that all human development proceeds toward individuation through separation (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Erikson, 1950/1993; Erikson & Erikson, 1982/1997; Gilligan, 1982/1993; Gilligan, 1996; Raider-Roth, 2005). Her work argued that women have a different "voice" or perspective on morality, ethics, and social issues, one that is based on care, responsibility, and relationships, rather than the traditional, individualistic perspective of justice and rights (Gilligan, 1982/1993, 2018). According to Gilligan (1982/1993), voice is a powerful, natural, and cultural instrument that allows us to amplify our inner selves. For those whose voices are marginalized within mainstream society, we may create a more equitable and just society by listening to their voices and acting on what we learn with care, empathy, and compassion (Freedman, 2007).

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Through later research, Gilligan and other relational feminist researchers discovered that both boys and girls were born with the same capacity for care, empathy, relationship, and connection, but that boys are socialized to disregard that desire for the sake of social expectations (Chu, 2005; Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Gilligan, 2011; Gilligan, 2018). It is this recognition, that all people desire meaningful and authentic connection, but that patriarchal society subverts this, that appealed to me as a paradigm for practice with families. Relational feminism posits that patriarchy marginalizes people, and that restorative work should be democratic, equitable, reciprocal, and relational (Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Freedman, 2007).

Relational feminism has been used within school contexts, to focus on the importance of relationships and connections in shaping students' experiences and identities (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, Gilligan, 2011; Raider-Roth, 2005). This approach creates more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students. One way that relational feminism is applied in the classroom is by emphasizing the building of positive and supportive relationships between students, teachers, and staff (Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Gilligan, 2011; Raider-Roth, 2005). Providing opportunities for students to connect and collaborate fosters community and a sense of belonging within the classroom. As relational feminism focuses on recognizing and valuing the different perspectives and experiences that students bring to the classroom (Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Raider-Roth, 2005), it means ensuring that curriculum and teaching practices consider students' needs and experiences from multiple perspectives (Gilligan & Goldberg, 2000).

Relational feminism also supports the development of students' care and responsibility for others by fostering an ethic of care in the classroom (Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Gilligan, 2011). One way that this might be seen in a classroom would be the promotion of empathy, compassion, and understanding toward others and the encouragement of students to actively create a safe and inclusive learning environment. Finally, relational feminism recognizes that students' experiences and identities are shaped by their relationships and interactions with others, including family, friends, and society (Raider-Roth, 2005). This could involve providing support and resources for families and caregivers and creating opportunities for students to connect and build relationships with community members and organizations.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is an organization that focuses on the education of children from birth to age 8. They have developed a position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) that outlines the principles and guidelines for providing high-quality education and care for young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Both relational feminism and DAP principles accentuate the significance of connections, interactions, and relationships. Like relational feminism, DAP emphasizes that children learn best through engaging and meaningful experiences based on developmental level, strengths, and interests (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). DAP also emphasizes the importance of considering the child's family, culture, and community context in the design of the curriculum and the assessment of the child's learning (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Applying Relational Feminism in Special Education

A relational feminist approach to working with families of young children may fundamentally be defined as a developmentally appropriate practice. With all of this in mind, I decided to adopt a

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relational feminist framework (Gilligan, 1993; Gilligan, 2018) to develop trusting partnerships with the families of the students in my classes.

Creating Connections with Marginalized Families

The development of connection with families must first begin with attentiveness to and listening to their voices (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Gilligan, 2018). Teachers run the risk of being didactic in their discourse; it is our nature to take charge, to instruct, and to lead. Developing authentic connections with others requires a different approach—one that inclines the ear in the direction of the one who is speaking with the intention and determination to develop a relationship with them (Gilligan, 1982/1993). In pursuit of connection, I had to listen with empathy to what the families of my students had to say, and to my colleagues, as well.

Developing Connections Through Professional Development

Prior to the first day of school, the administrators asked if I would lead a professional development session on the topic of inclusion. This opportunity allowed me to speak directly to instructional staff and district leadership about the intent of inclusive education from a relational feminist perspective. Of course, I included information on the legal and ethical aspects of IDEA, but the main focus of my presentation was developing a connection between children with disabilities and their typically developing peers. As a point of illustration, I told the story of one of the children I taught previously with Down Syndrome and her best friend, a typically developing peer in her general education class. Both children's parents gave permission to include their stories in our training session and sent pictures of the two girls over the years that I included in my presentation. Their story of enduring connection and friendship was the most impactful of the information that I presented and elicited the most comments and discussion.

Developing Connections Through Communication

To facilitate connections with caregivers, I met families at their cars after school to talk with them; I called them during my planning period to learn about their background and heritage; I responded to their messages on the district's web-based application used for communication; and I sent them photos and videos of their children making their own connections at school with their peers. The district's communication application permitted me to send messages to families in their native language, as well. By doing this, I learned of their hopes and fears for their children; their private, and sometimes, painful histories; their traditions and rituals; and their challenges and successes. By listening to my colleagues, I learned of the challenges to inclusive practice and the misunderstandings that many held. I also learned that some of the teachers had their own children with disabilities and that the lack of inclusion on the campus had hurt them deeply. Listening to their stories was deeply moving and humbling and called to mind the intent of inclusive education in the first place (Erwin & Soodak, 2008).

One unique challenge faced by families of students with ASD pertains to deficits in social communication and language, significant features of this disorder (Lord et al., 2020). When a child has ASD, the parent may struggle to know how to read their child's signals (Leclare et al., 2014), which undermines their confidence in their own skill. It was this difficulty that the parents of the children in my class returned to again and again: Did I cause this? Am I responsible for my child's difficulties? Oftentimes, there were difficult conversations about their child's challenges in conforming to societal expectations. One parent questioned the validity of her child's diagnosis when his behavior was criticized by a person at a community event. Another mother expressed great love for her child with Level III ASD by saying, "The world just needs to change for [him]."

Creating Connections Through Curriculum

While Special Education is meant to be inclusive, it is also meant to be educational. I had to develop innovative ways to implement the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the education standards developed for Texas public schools by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, n.d.) in my classroom. After I had acquired knowledge of the children and the families I served, I was able to determine the specific interests of the students and their cultural heritage. I created a series of social studies lessons that focused on the holidays, rituals, and traditions of various cultures around the world. I informed my students' families that we would be learning about these things and that I wanted to include them in planning for our lessons. I also entreated the paraprofessionals in the classroom to share with me their holiday traditions from their home country, Mexico. Because many of my students' families shared the same Mexican heritage, we decided that our culminating activity would be an enactment of Las Posadas, the Mexican holiday commemorating the procession of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

I listened carefully to the stories that the paraprofessionals told about how they had celebrated this holiday growing up in Mexico. With their stories and suggestions, we determined that we would enact the processional throughout the school and would visit the members of faculty and staff who served in leadership positions and who served within the school community as therapists and fine arts teachers. All of the chosen faculty and staff members had developed trusting relationships with the students. Some of the faculty and staff were of Mexican heritage, so they were delighted to share in the Las Posadas celebration with the students. The teachers and members of staff who were participating in the event would serve as the *posadas* (inns) of the traditional celebration. The students would visit each office or classroom, sing a Spanish song, and then they would receive a small token from the teacher or staff member. This ritual also served another purpose from an educational standpoint: it permitted my students with ASD to engage in social interactions in order to strengthen their social skills.

I invited the students' parents to participate with us as we walked throughout the school singing a traditional Spanish song to the participants. At the end of the processional, the students, their parents, and the teachers and staff members who had participated with us were invited back to the classroom for *postres* (Mexican desserts) and hot chocolate. One of the parents brought in a pan of traditional sweet bread that she baked from a family recipe to share with everyone. While many of the parents were not able to join us, the messages I received from them were encouraging and appreciative of the effort to include them. One of the parents who participated mentioned that she appreciated that her heritage was included in our lessons and celebrations. She also mentioned that it had been meaningful to her to see her child engaging with people throughout the processional. Members of staff were equally encouraging. They appreciated being included and were grateful to see a cultural celebration on display.

Discussion

As a practitioner working with families of children with disabilities, I have found that using relational feminism as an approach to practice has been helpful to the development of connections and relationships with caregivers and colleagues. This framework guided my work with my students' families and informed my work in advocating for inclusive education with my colleagues at the elementary school. Drawing on the work of Gilligan (1982/1993, 1996, 2018) and Raider-Roth (2005), I sought to improve the circumstances of students with ASD through the development of relationships with their caregivers. My work diverged from Gilligan's and Raider-Roth's in two fundamental ways: 1) My students were unable to express their inner feelings through their own voice; and 2) I sought to build collegial relationships in order to build an inclusive program on the campus where we worked.

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Because ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects individuals' ability to communicate and engage socially (Lord et al., 2020), I had to rely heavily on the families of my students to understand the ways in which they were able to communicate. I also had to pay close attention to the students' body language to determine their wants and needs. The speech therapists, instructional aides, and I used assistive technology and sign language to teach the students how to express themselves. This meant that we were listening to the children intently, but it was not possible to use Brown and Gilligan's (1992) method of listening to determine who was speaking, in what body, etc. Teaching children with ASD to communicate can be painfully slow and requires patience. This meant that it was vital to include families in this process because they were the experts of their own children. Many of the parents of the students had learned to anticipate their children's needs without forcing them to use words or signs. Part of the development of relationships with parents was helping them to learn new strategies, such as waiting for a response or using assistive technology in the home.

My colleagues were eager to be a part of building an inclusive program for the students. From the very beginning of the school year, it was necessary to show them how important they were in fostering relationships between the students with disabilities and their typically developing students. In order to develop relationships with the rest of the staff, I had to take time to listen to them and to observe the ways in which they fostered relationships with their students and between their students. I affirmed them and encouraged them to trust their ability to foster relationships with my students with ASD. By doing this, I noticed that these teachers were often seeking out my students at various times throughout the day and that my students became inclined to be near the general education teachers at recess, the one time during the school day when the students could be unencumbered in their movements.

The most gratifying part of my work while using the relational feminist paradigm was having caregivers tell me that they felt heard. Again and again, parents spoke of their feeling that they had not been included or listened to prior to my arrival as their students' teacher. Developing connections with the families of my students improved their experience with public schooling for their children by including them. These connections also drove collaboration through the development of the IEP, which improved the students' academic program.

Limitations

There are several limitations to using relational feminism in working with families involved in Special Education programs through public schools. It is a labor-intensive process that involves being intentional about developing connections with families. In my situation, I was fulfilling several roles on campus, a situation necessitated by the lack of teaching personnel in the rural area where I taught, a situation that is common in rural areas (Rude & Miller, 2018). Teaching in Special Education is already laborious, due to the amount of paperwork and data collection required for the position. Performing the work of several teachers was difficult, at best. When I added to this already cumbersome situation the intention to make connections with my students' families, I found myself to be mentally and emotionally exhausted. Some of the stories that parents told me about their previous experiences with the school, their traumatic life experiences, and the burdens they carried for their children with disabilities were difficult to hear. When I look back on this experience, I wish that I had had the opportunity for reflective supervision. This was not an option in my position, and Special Education teachers are often not afforded reflective supervision.

Another limitation is the lack of research on using relational feminism in practice with families. Gilligan's work in schools (1996; Brown & Gilligan, 1992) has tended to focus on the voices of students and faculty members. Raider-Roth's work (2005) took Gilligan's theories and placed them into practice

in teaching by focusing on the relationships that developed between teachers and students and between students themselves. To date, relational feminism has not been studied as a paradigm of practice in working with families in public schools. With the current focus in education on accountability testing and academic performance, the benefits of a relational approach may not translate into the kind of success that appeals to school districts or to a consumer-driven mindset toward education. A relational approach would therefore be a qualitative improvement in the collaboration between schools and families, an improvement that may be difficult to quantify. Practically speaking, in the current educational environment, a relational approach is difficult to justify without research backing its efficacy.

Strengths

There are strengths to a relational approach, however. For one, I felt that I had done the best work of my career as a public school teacher by using a relational feminist paradigm. Because my students' voices were absent or difficult to understand, it was imperative that I engage in collaboration with their families. I listened carefully to their perspectives and learned a great deal about their cultures, their values, and their beliefs. I learned how to relate to my students by relating to their families. In doing so, I learned a lot about the community and about the traumas endured by these families. I learned about their hopes and fears for their children and used this information to craft a program that was built upon familial strengths, in addition to the strengths of their children. Prior to this experience, my practice was built upon developmental knowledge, curricular expectations, and legal requirements. By seeking to build relationships with families through intentional listening, empathy, and connection, I was able to add to my practice the awareness of the unique experiences of my students' families. In this way, my students' educational experience was truly individualized, as Special Education is intended to be.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shared my experiences using relational feminism as a paradigm of practice as a Special Education teacher working with families of children with disabilities. We have shared the ways in which the families benefited from a relational approach and the challenges of this approach. For family science students considering a career in Special Education, coursework should focus on families that are often marginalized by systemic issues and social change. Because of the demanding nature of work with children with disabilities and their families, students would benefit from coursework that offers opportunities for both reflective supervision and reflexive practices. Students in family science programs must also learn how to advocate for their own mental health care and learn to prioritize self-care, an area that is often lacking in university and college programs. Social work degree programs often focus on developing empathy and mutuality in working with clients (Freedman, 2007), and family science programs should also provide students with awareness of these concepts in working with families from a relational feminist approach. While the relational feminist approach has both strengths and limitations as an approach to family practice, we feel that the usefulness of this approach merits further investigation.

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