Course Description

This course is offered as a part of the special education and early childhood education programs and is open to enrolled graduate students. It is a required course for students seeking licensure in early childhood special education.

This course focuses on strategies for developing family-appropriate and culturally-appropriate family-professional partnerships to benefit children with special needs. Theories and research that support family-centered practices are explored. The course also provides a focus on family and professional rights and responsibilities in the special education process. This course takes a family-centered perspective and emphasizes the role of collaborative planning with families and caregivers in preparing developmentally supportive environments. Students are expected to become familiar with the cultural context of the families with whom they are working and to consider ways in which their own socio-cultural context influences their work with families of children with disabilities. To increase understanding of family perspectives, the impact of exceptionality on the family is studied in the framework of family systems theory, functions, and the life cycle of the family. The course requires students to examine their values and beliefs about working with families, to challenge their assumptions, and to critically analyze their professional roles in working with families.

Student Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Discuss theories and research supporting a family-centered approach to special education.
2. Discuss the role of cultural context in attitudes, beliefs, values, and child rearing practices.

3. Analyze personal values, beliefs and cultural biases that influence their work with families.

4. Describe underlying principles and ways to work with families that are both effective and enabling.

5. Identify strategies that support and assist families to identify their priorities, resources, and concerns for their children with special needs.

6. Create tailored opportunities for collaborating with families in the ongoing education of children with special needs.

7. Utilize family systems theory to describe and understand family perspectives.

8. Identify specific components of IDEA that support family voices in the special education process.

9. Adopt a strengths-based problem solving perspective when analyzing dilemmas related to partnering with families.

**Relationship of Course to Program Goals and Professional Standards**

This course is a required course in GMU’s Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) master’s degree and licensure program. The ECSE program is an approved program of the Commonwealth of Virginia and accredited by the NCATE national teacher education accreditation system. Thus, the course content has been developed with reference to the licensure and accreditation standards for teachers of young children with disabilities identified by the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. These standards include:

1. The ability to demonstrate an understanding of the role of the family in supporting learning.
2. The ability to understand children in the context of family, culture, and community.
3. The ability to establish positive and collaborative relationships with families as partners in teaching and learning.
4. The ability to provide family-centered intervention.

In addition, the course has been developed to be congruent with the mission of the College of Education and Human Development as a unit. Specifically, the course addresses the College’s commitment to families and communities, to research-based practices, and to social justice.
Nature of Course Delivery

This is an interactive course that requires active participation of students. Out-of-class readings play a critical part in preparing students for in-class discussion. Small and large group activities will enable students to practice what they have been learning. In-class and at-home activities will be structured to encourage individuals to reflect on their own families and on the families with whom they come in contact.

Required Texts:


Required Articles:


Recommended Texts:


Additional Course Resources


**Useful Websites:**


**Course Requirements:**

1. Attend all class sessions and participate actively in small and large group activities.

2. Prepare for class by completing assigned readings prior to class.

3. Complete written assignments. It is expected that assignments be turned in on the due date. A pattern of late papers will affect grading.

4. Maintain an ongoing reflective journal. The journal will provide the basis for the personal applications and reflection portions of papers.

5. Record meaningful dilemmas that occur in your interactions with families. These will contribute to your personal application papers.

6. Maintain a story file to contribute to a broadened perspective about the experience of families. This will contribute to your final family application paper.

7. Participate in online discussions on class Blackboard site.

**Course Grading**

1. Participation and preparation for class 5%

   Participation is graded according to the following criteria:

   a) Attending all classes on time, unless prior arrangements have been made with the instructor;

   b) Completing all assignments on time;

   c) Participating in large group discussion and activities on a regular basis, assuming a balance of leadership and participant roles;
d) Participating in small group discussions and activities on a regular basis, assuming a balance of leadership and participant roles;

e) Working as a collaborative group member, supporting the participation of classmates and recognizing the unique contribution of each.

f) Participation in online discussions.

2. Personal application papers 15%

   Paper #1 due October 6  5%
   Paper #2 due November 3  5%
   Paper #3 due December 1  5%

3. Reading response papers 20%

   Paper #1 due September 29  10%
   Paper #2 due October 20  10%

4. Family resource fair 20%

   In-class poster October 27  10%
   Paper & resources  10%

4. Collaboration opportunities analysis 10%

   Due November 17

5. Family Project 30%

   In class Presentation 12/1 & 12/8  10%
   Final Paper: Family Story  15%
   Final Paper: Story File  5%

**NOTE:** If you require any instructional adaptations, please speak with the instructor prior to proceeding with the assignments. In addition, you are encouraged to make yourself known to the Writing Center and/or the Disability Resource Center. The university is committed to ensuring that all students receive the resources required for their successful participation as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

**NOTE on APA style:** It is the policy of the graduate school that all papers be completed using APA format. Copies of the APA style guide are available in the book store. An abbreviated guide to APA style is available in the copy shop. Please attend to the correct use of references and be sure to credit authors when you use or summarize their words.
NOTE on electronic submission: If you submit a paper electronically, you are responsible for retaining a hard copy of that paper in the event of transmission difficulties.

Assignments of Grades

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT STATEMENT OF EXPECTATIONS:
The College of Education and Human Development expects that all students abide by the following:

Students are expected to exhibit professional behavior and dispositions. See gse.gmu.edu for a listing of these dispositions.

Students must follow the guidelines of the University Honor Code. See [http://www.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/#TOC_H12](http://www.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/#TOC_H12) for the full honor code.

Students must agree to abide by the university policy for Responsible Use of Computing. See [http://mail.gmu.edu](http://mail.gmu.edu) and click on Responsible Use of Computing at the bottom of the screen.

Students with disabilities who seek accommodations in a course are encouraged to register with the GMU Disability Resource Center (DRC) and inform the instructor, in writing, at the beginning of the semester. See [www.gmu.edu/student/drc](http://www.gmu.edu/student/drc) or call 703-993-2474 to access the DRC.

Class Sessions and Assignments

September 1 Overview of the Class
Beginning with our stories
Review of syllabus
Early Childhood Program shared activity: exploring issues of prejudice and discrimination as it relates to our relationships within schools and with families.

Read: Plous, pp. 1-77
September 8  Family Theory: The Developmental Process of Parenting

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapter 8; Begin Spirit Catches You

September 15  Family Theory: Family Systems and Characteristics

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapters 5&6; Continue Spirit Catches You

**Guest Speaker:** Family Systems Theory, Nancy Seibel

September 22  Family Theory: Family Roles, Tasks, and Functions

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapter 7; Continue The Spirit Catches You

**Due:** Identify Choice Book/Find a Partner.

September 29  Family Theory: Family/Professional Collaboration in a Socio-cultural Context

**Read:** Finish Spirit Catches You

**First Reading Application Due.**

**Guest Speakers:** Multicultural Early Childhood Team Training

October 6  Families and Their Children with Disabilities

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapter 1; Begin Choice Book

**First Personal Application Due**

October 13  Family Strengths, Stress and Coping with Children with Disabilities

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapters 4 & 9, Continue Reading Choice Book

**Guests:** Family Panel

October 20  Learning from Families/Communication with Families

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapter 10, Finish Choice Book

**Due:** Second Reading Application

October 27  Family Resource Fair

**Read:** Turnbull, Chapter 3

**Due:** Family Resource Poster and Paper

November 3  Families and Schools
Read: Turnbull, Chapter 1; Lightfoot, Chapters 1&2  
Due: Second Personal Application  
Guest: Negotiating the Special Education Maze

November 10  Family Friendly Schools/ Family-Professional Mutuality

Read: Turnbull, Chapters 11&12; Lightfoot, Chapters 3&4  
Guest: Family Friendly Schools

November 17  Teachers as Advocates for Systems Change

Read: Turnbull, Chapters 13-15; Lightfoot, Chapters 5&6, Conclusion  
Due: Collaboration Opportunities Paper

November 24  NO CLASS – Happy Thanksgiving

December 1  Family Project Presentations  
Due: Third personal application due, first group of presentations

December 8  Family Project Presentations  
Due: second group of presentations; papers and story files from first group of presenters.

December 15  Final date for second group of presenters to turn in papers and story files.

Description of Assignments

1. Personal Applications

These assignments ask you to reflect on course content and discussions as they relate to your own family experience and how that may impact your work with families of children with disabilities. This should take the form of a journal and may be handwritten. You will benefit more from this course when you use classes as a jumping off point for further thought and reflection and maintain a daily reflective journal. In what way are you better understanding your family experience? In what way are you better understanding the way in which your context influences your work with families? Take this opportunity to interview your family members (especially if you are getting together with family for holidays and celebrations), to identify early memories that may influence your practice, to consider differences in your family growing up and your current family. DUE: October 6, November 3, and December 1.

2. Reading Response
In this class you will be reading two current books that tell the stories of families from several different perspectives. One of the books is a required book for the entire book. The other book is a choice book (subject to my approval) that must address the family experience in some way. You must have at least one other person in the class interested in reading this book. These assignments ask you to react to the family story presented in the book. What did you learn from reading this story? What perplexed you? What else would you like to know? How does the story help give light to some of your text readings? What do you see as general implications for professional practice? As a professional yourself working with families of children with disabilities, how will the story guide your practice? How has the story challenged your own beliefs and assumptions? As you are reading the book, post reflections on the Blackboard Site (at least three) and respond to your partners’ reflections (at least three). The paper you submit should be brief and should address the above questions as well as include a reflection about what you learned through interacting with other readers. DUE: September 29 and October 20.

3. Collaboration Opportunities

This assignment asks you to look critically at current practices and opportunities for partnerships with families in your setting or, if you are not currently teaching, that of your partner. In your paper, 1) describe what is, what opportunities there are for family collaboration, in what ways families receive messages that are welcoming, how families from varied cultures might experience the environment; 2) analyze these practices from the perspective of the readings; 3) analyze these practices from the perspective of the families in this setting based upon your understanding of the individual and cultural perspectives of the families. Then, provide a proposal for what could be and how those practices would demonstrate a posture of cultural reciprocity and reflect the spirit of IDEA. DUE: November 17.

4. Family Project

Over the course of the semester you are to identify a family whose socio-cultural context is different from your own. Get to know that family and use this as an opportunity to see the experience of parenting a child with a disability through a different lens. Consider the way in which Fadiman has provided a window on a family and their culture. Consider this as a way to learn someone’s story – how did this family come to be in this place where you have met them? What do you need to understand about their culture in order to understand them? What is their perspective about their child or children? Find at least three opportunities to interact with them in a way other than you would otherwise typically interact with them – e.g., informally away from school if possible.
On December 1 and December 8 students will be presenting what they have learned as a story. This should not sound like a clinical case presentation. Be creative. Consider how you would like your story to be told.

On December 8 or 15, you will submit a final paper. This paper will have four components – the family story, family cultural research, your reflections, and story file. The first component is the family story: describe the family and their story in much the same way as you do for class. For the second component; read at least three references that will give you a window on the family’s cultural context, much as Fadiman does in her book. Discuss what you learned. For the third component, describe how you went about learning the family story, describe your reaction to the family’s story and how your view changed, if it did, over the semester; analyze what you learned from the perspective of the class readings and class discussions; discuss the family story in the light of your own family story. For the final component, attach your story file with notations about how these stories contributed to your view and understanding of the family experience. Over the semester collect examples of stories that tell the experience of families from newspapers, magazines, etc. For each entry, consider how that story helped you better understand the experience of families and how it helped you think about how to tell someone’s story empathically and in a way that engages readers. These entries may be handwritten. When you have compiled the stories, attach a summative reflection that describes how these have contributed to you ability to tell the story of a family.

**Family Resource Fair**

On October 27, we will have a family resource fair. Choose a topic related to families around which you would like to gather resources (e.g., loss of a child, a particular disability, etc.). Search for appropriate resources and bring them to class in the form of a poster presented in a way that would be useful for parents. Create a handout with an annotated list of resources (annotations should note why these are useful, how easy or hard they are to obtain). Provide enough handouts for your classmates. Give me a copy of the handout along with a brief reflection. What did you learn from doing this project? How easy or hard would it be for a parent to obtain this information? What if the parent were not an English speaker?