



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory describes children's development as occurring within a series of linking systems. He identifies five systems around children and young people's lives which all influence each other in complex ways. We will consider the relevance of these different systems to teaching and learning. The five systems are as follows:

Microsystem

This system is the one that is closest to the child's everyday life. It includes people, institutions and services that she or he directly interacts with in their immediate environment. Examples are parents, siblings, other family members; school (including teachers, other staff, peers); places of worship, health services, neighbourhood or refugee camp play scheme or project; and (for some children and young people) places of work.

Example: A teacher's relationship with a child is a clear example of what is happening at the microsystem level. If, for example, a new child arrives in class who has recently been displaced by conflict, building a relationship of trust with the child and helping them to feel safe and welcome will be fundamental to them being able to learn in the classroom.

Mesosystem

This system is about how people in the different microsystems around the child interact and are connected with each other. Examples are a child's parents attending a school event; or the leader of a child's place of worship carrying out an event within the child's neighbourhood or school; or a teacher visiting the child's home to find out why they are unable to come to school on time. The ways in which these different microsystems around the child interact directly influence the child's learning and wellbeing.

Example: After several weeks, the teacher feels that the child is still struggling to adapt to the school and the learning environment. The teacher goes to the child's home to talk to parents and to understand better what might be happening in the child's life and how they might help the child to settle in school. This is a clear example of the mesosystem because different elements of the child's microsystem (the child's parents and the child's teacher) are interacting with each other.

Exosystem

This system includes the broader community the child lives in. It includes everything from extended family members, parents' workplaces, neighbours, family friends, mass media, health, education and social welfare services as well as political systems and policies. The child doesn't necessarily have any direct contact with this system but because the people in the other systems closer to the child are affected by the exosystem, it affects the child as well.

Example: The teacher discovers through talking to the parents that one of the things upsetting the child is that there is no place at the school for his younger sister to attend. They are very close and so every day he is missing his sister. The teacher approaches the Head teacher of the school and the education authority to find out when a space might become available for the sister and to make a case that there are many other children unable to attend school. The teacher provides evidence that an expansion of school places for displaced children is necessary. This example shows what is happening at the exosystem because the issue is about wider educational policies and services which are indirectly affecting the child. In order to make a change or try to make a difference, the teacher has to think about a system higher than the microsystem or the mesosystem.

Macrosystem

This system covers things going on at a bigger societal level and how these influence the other systems around the child. It includes ideologies, values, attitudes, laws and customs of a particular culture or subculture. For people who have been displaced – these macrosystem factors fundamentally shape how people are treated and responded to in host countries.



Transforming Education in Challenging Environments



Example: After working hard to find out more about when a place will be available for the boy’s sister, the teacher visits the parents again to talk about the possibility of her attending school. The teacher learns that the parents believe that the girl should not go to school. They believe that making sure boys go to school is the most important thing. This is a bigger issue than what is happening in the children’s immediate lives. It is an example of something happening in the **macrosystem** because it is about customs and cultural beliefs of the family and their wider community. It is unlikely that the teacher can make any direct immediate difference or change. However, they do decide to discuss with the head teacher how these matters affecting girl’s education might be sensitively discussed in school. They volunteer to find ways of how to discuss these topics within the curriculum.

Chronosystem

This system refers to how people experience things over their lifetime. It includes big life changes such as being displaced from one place to another; and other more usual events such as marriage (and divorce) and the birth of a baby etc.

Example: The boy in the examples above has experienced many changes over the past two years. He and his family have experienced war, have been displaced to a temporary camp where they are living. They have lost family members and now the parents are thinking about moving to another country to find a safe and more secure place to live. In order to be able to support the child, the teacher finds out as much as they can about these changes so that they best understand how to support the child for the time that he is in the teacher’s class.

