

## **Applying Inclusive Contextual Programming: Adult Relationship Education**

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This paper presents results from a 4-year, mixed-method evaluation of a statewide relationship education program, as well as presents strategies for integrating these findings into programming. Guided by ecological theory and relevant literature on applied programming development, delivery, and assessment, we propose an inclusive contextual model of programming that focuses on involving the perspectives of all those involved with a program (i.e., participants, facilitators, evaluators). When applied to the current program, the inclusive contextual programming approach better met the needs of both the program's target population (i.e., unmarried, low-income, new parent couples) as well as of the program itself, as more effective recruitment, increased retention, and the achievement of program outcomes (e.g., increased communication skills) were found.

### **Importance of Context in Programming**

Educational programming is generally comprised of participants (i.e., the group the program was designed for), professionals (i.e., the group who designs and delivers the program - in the current study referred to as *family professionals*), and evaluators (i.e., the group who assesses the program functioning and outcomes; (Rodgers & White, 1993). Although often conceptualized as separate, these three groups can be highly interdependent, as each has an ability to influence the others. Ecological theory focuses on how interdependent groups are influenced by other actors and environments, such as other people, policies, and neighborhoods (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). These other influences comprise what this paper refers to as *context*. This interdependency is also the theme of ecological theory in individual and family development. Basically, families or individuals are affected by the environments in which they live, and the themes of contextual influences and interdependency can also be applied to educational programming.

Program participants, family professionals, and program evaluators are each impacted, and possibly differentiated, by their own contexts (e.g., in terms of academic background, goals, values).

Mathews and Hudson (2001) emphasize the importance of these contextual influences in educational programming through their expansion of the Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) model of program evaluation. The CIPP model utilizes aspects of context by making contextual considerations the starting point for program delivery and evaluation. Another programming model relevant to the current study is Berge's (2009) use of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which accommodates and integrates the communities a program may interact with in order to co-create knowledge and foster change.

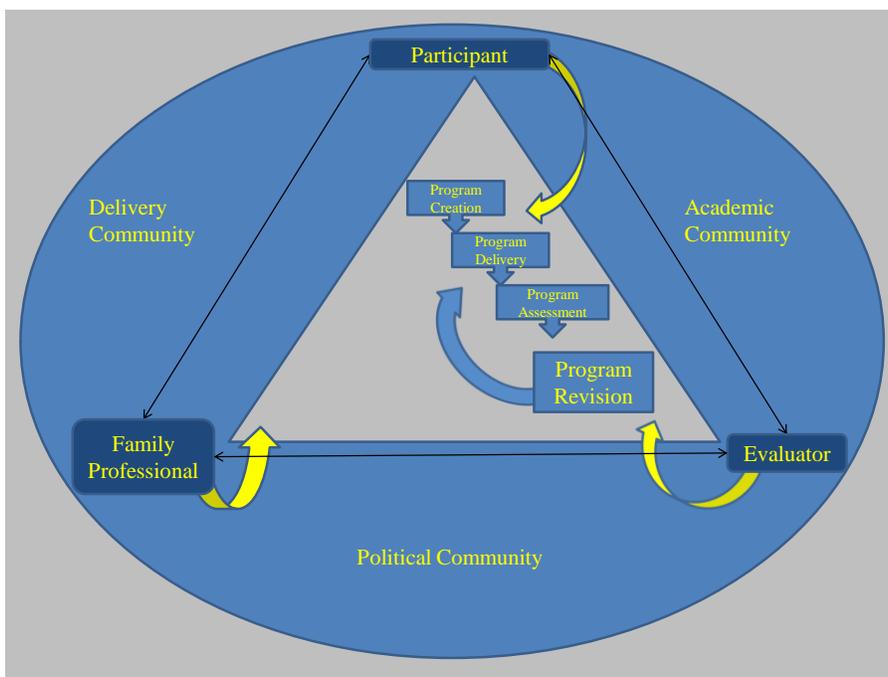
### **The Inclusive Contextual Programming Model**

Guided by ecological theory, we suggest integrating the CIPP model with Berge's community accommodation method when examining/evaluating educational programming. Further, we also suggest program revision include considerations of aspects of changes over time (e.g., effects of economic downturns, new technology) as well as the inclusion of participant perspectives in programming decisions, an approach which has been correlated with more effective program recruitment, increased retention, and better achievement of desired program outcomes (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002). By considering time influences and participant input, ongoing program revision becomes as an important aspect of a program model. We have developed the combination of these foci (i.e., examining contextual influences, recognizing role interdependency, and utilizing inclusive reflection) into what we have labeled the Inclusive Contextual Programming (ICP) model.

Represented graphically (see Model 1), the CIPP model inhabits the inner triangle of the ICP model, with Berge's community recognition comprising the outer regions. The loop of delivery, assessment, and revision (represented in the innermost triangle of the model) stresses that program revision is not the end result of assessment, but is instead the first step in a constantly reflexive process of assessment and reassessment. The influence of ecological theory may be seen by the program-related roles of participant, family professional, or evaluator being imbedded within the greater contexts of delivery, political, and academic communities. These communities contain specific types of influences

that can pressure the performance of roles in different ways, as participants, evaluators, and programmers will have different communities influencing them depending on their background.

Model 1: *Inclusive Contextual Programming Model*



Overall, this approach fits with calls for an inclusive focus in policy interventions, an approach where differences are expressed and actively confronted in an attempt to bring about equity for all involved (Drago, 2009). The ICP model stresses the interconnectedness and importance of all programming stages and participants, as collaboration between all roles is essential for programs to be effective, and contextual influences should be considered from the perspective of all program actors. For example, this could involve consideration of how delivery, academic, and political communities may influence the experiences of, and interaction among, program managers, facilitators, evaluators, and participants. Issues that are identified by any of the actors should be discussed on equal grounds, promoting a consistently reflexive program.

The program the ICP model was first developed from, and later applied to, provides relationship and parenting education for young (18-24), unmarried, low-income expectant or new parent couples. The

Connecting for Baby (CFB) program was funded through a Department of Health and Human Services grant related to the Administration for Children and Families Healthy Marriage Initiative. The program was designed to provide one weekend ‘retreat’ followed by 11 two-hour long information sessions. CFB was initially implemented in five regions in a Midwestern state utilizing a university Extension network. Despite adequate funding and an enthusiastic staff, at the end of first two years the program had only enrolled approximately 30 couples. This prompted a more thorough analysis of project as whole. Staff, program content, and program delivery methods were reassessed using participant reports and programmer observations, a process eventually resulting in staff and delivery changes. These changes influenced the creation and application of the ICP model, an approach that encapsulates how the CFB program was able to begin enrolling hundreds within a year.

## **Methods**

### **CFB Project and Demographics**

Baseline data were collected from participants as a soon as possible after the couple was recruited. Individual data were collected using a structured interview format that included demographic questions as well as measures of relationship commitment, relational conflict, personal health, and marital and family beliefs. Of the 600 participants, the mean age at program enrollment was 23 and approximately 35% had children from previous or current relationships. 56% of the sample was self-identified White and 37% African-American. The sample was 50% urban, 35% metro, and 15% rural. Less than half were working when the data were collected. 73% lived together and 75% high a high school degree or less of educational experience.

### **Mid-Program Participant and Staff Interviews**

After a minimum of 3 months of program participation participants were interviewed using a semi-structured, open-ended interview format that covered the topics of communication, conflict management, program efficiency, and participants’ environment (e.g., resources, neighborhoods). Most of the interviews were conducted over-the-phone, and all were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Data

(i.e., 92 interviews, average length of 55 minutes) were then coded and analyzed using Attride-Stirling's (2001) qualitative thematic network method until we felt the data were no longer producing new codes. Coding was primarily done by two evaluation staff members, who were also regularly involved in some level of programming facilitation. Inter-coder reliability was checked frequently throughout the project, and input was also sought from the Primary Investigators, Program Coordinator, and other evaluation staff of the Connecting for Baby project. Further, program staffs were regularly interviewed for project assessment purposes. These staff interviews were used to further our understanding of the ICP Model. Codes were grouped and analyzed until multiple global themes were identified.

### **Results**

Initially participants reported valuing the program, however, participants also reported a need for an educational setting that fosters open dialogue and provides communication instruction and modeling as a useful conflict resolution skill. It was after reflecting on these early-program assessments that we decided to begin developing and implementing aspects of the ICP model. Although we were able to gather an extensive amount of data on the CFB program, in consideration of the scope of this paper/presentation, we will briefly present data themes that were relevant in the ICP model development as well as present emerging data on how the introduction of the ICP model has benefitted the program.

The creation of the ICP model was driven by ongoing participant feedback, and was developed through the reading and critiquing of existing programming models. The development of the ICP mid-program not only incorporated participant perspectives in evaluation and programming, but also permitted program staff to see the effects of the ICP application while data were still being collected. This consistently affirmed the importance of contextual considerations across program systems. For example, initially programming staff required RSVP's for participation for the practical purposes making food orders. Participants, however, could not guarantee their schedules because of issues such as transportation and variable work schedules. After collaboration, restaurants became a meeting venue, rather than

conference rooms, because programmers no longer had to worry about the availability of food and participants could have more flexibility in when they decided to attend a session or not.

Overall, much was learned from the evaluation. For example, participant satisfaction and program involvement was significantly improved when contextual influences were considered across program role communities. Community aspects of the ICP model greatly informed project revision. Participant needs (i.e., delivery community) were implemented while maintaining content goals (i.e., academic community) and also hitting funding objectives (i.e., political community). Beyond recruitment and retention numbers dramatically increasing, participants overall expressed approval with program structure and as well as identified positive outcomes in their own relationships. In response to lessons learned, as well as those still emerging, we are currently adapting curriculum and changing facilitator training in order to continue to improve the program.

### **Program Structure is Working**

A key aspect of why participants felt the program was functioning well involved the actions of program facilitators. After facilitators were retrained (or in some cases replaced) to foster an open environment that promoted interaction and allowed for individual differences of participants, participants largely viewed facilitators positively and as a major reason why they remained involved in the program.

“All the facilitators I came across have been really outgoing. You know, they’re kind of like the personality that you feel comfortable talking to them. I mean, they just, like they bring a group together really well.”

“Well, just, you know, hearing the teachers talk about, their own lives and what they, they see and like hearing the other people in the class talk about the things that they have experienced and, you know, it helps to, you know realize it’s, there’s other people, you know that are in the same spot an like trying, doing the same thing. And that’s kind of cool.”

Group dynamics were also important to program success. CFB participants felt that an open environment was important to fostering understanding and learning from members. Participants consistently expressed that the community aspect of CFB is what kept them involved with the program.

“Like some of us get there early and we sit there and talk about what is going on in our lives, and some of us stay late and just talk. We’ve become really close to one of the couples there and hang out outside of there.”

Couples looked forward to seeing their fellow CFB couples, catching up, and sharing information and resources. The group-community aspect of CFB is crucial to participation, as participants feel the fellow CFB couples generally know what they are going through and relate to them.

A better program was created by recognizing the importance of the environment created by facilitators and participants, and participants enthusiastically responded.

All my friends keep asking me “How can I do that? What can I do [to attend]?” ... I mean, it’s, you know, the program’s extremely helpful for the people who actually try and do it, and it’s like, you know, I mean, me and my fiancée both agree in the fact that, you know, I wish, I really wish it was more often.

### **Program Perceived as Beneficial**

CFB was found to increase the quality of the couple relationship, by positively changing the way participants communicated. The program focused on increasing listening skills and establishing understanding between partners before any resolution was reached.

“we have always talked about our relationship, but I think we understand each other better now.”

“I understand where she comes from, so I love her more”

“I think we just respect each other more now and we try to learn more about each other”

“We’ll just sit there and talk instead of hollering in front of the kids”

The program also increased discussions about commitment, and most participants communicated that they saw their partners in their long-term future. CFB gave couples the time to focus on the relationship, have budgeting discussions, and increased awareness of child development. Participant issues that are still under discussion concern getting to the session, maintaining quality instruction while still increasing enrollment, and finally organizing childcare.

### Conclusion

By increasing collaboration between family professionals, evaluators, and participants, programming can become more efficient and advantageous overall. The ICP model achieves this by proposing that data be collected from all involved with a program, considered from all perspectives, and then applied to programming, with the revision process being continuous. When this model was applied to a struggling relationship education program, both participant involvement and overall benefit was increased.

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