

A Thesis in the Field of Early Childhood Education
for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

Art of Teaching Program

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

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Abstract

When I began student teaching at Ridgeway Elementary School in January 2025, I met two students who I will call Juliana and Shelly. Both of the girls' mothers are battling cancer. Developing relationships with both girls inspired me to center my Masters Thesis around the effects of a parent's catastrophic illness on a child. I explore the child's social/emotional development, school performance, and coping behaviors. Drawing from my *Human Development in Context* and *Theories of Development* courses, I outline key theories and thinkers that connect to the topic. These include family systems theory, holism, and Urie Bronfenbrenner. During the research process, it became evident that I needed to conduct interviews with individuals I have worked with in the three schools to better understand the implications of having a child with a catastrophically ill parent in the classroom. Two organizations that provide support for those affected by cancer, Cancer Support Community and Wonders & Worries are explored. The vital role of the teacher is the next section, with steps that teachers can take to ensure that students are supported well during this difficult time. And finally, I conclude with concrete steps for bridging the gap between home and school through positive relationships.

Acknowledgments/Dedication

First, I would like to thank my thesis advisors, Kim Ferguson and Jerusha Beckerman, for helping me throughout the entire process of writing my thesis project. They have provided me with invaluable feedback and guidance that has helped me immensely.

I would also like to thank my parents for being so supportive of my work in the Art of Teaching program. I would not have been able to finish this project without their help in developing my foundation.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunities to work in classrooms at Mamaroneck Avenue School, and Ridgeway Elementary School. The experiences of working alongside host teachers Angela Novielli and Odalys Cedeño have prepared me well for my own future classroom.

I am so grateful for the wonderful teachers I got to work with at the Sarah Lawrence ECC, as well as director Lorayne Carbon, who played such an important role during my time in the Art of Teaching.

I would like to acknowledge my wonderful professors at Sarah Lawrence College, as well as my classmates who have been amazing to collaborate with during these two years.

Dedicated to Shelly and Juliana, two girls who inspired me everyday that I worked with them.

Annotated Outline

Introduction

★ Background information

- Juliana and Shelly
 - Difficult home lives
 - Academic struggles
 - Speaking about their situations unexpectedly
 - School absences

★ My interest in this topic

- Disposition in classroom
- Getting to know them both
- “As I have gotten to know these students better, I began to think about what support systems are available for students struggling with issues like catastrophic illness in their homes.”
- In this presentation, I will reflect on my student teaching experiences throughout my time in the Art of Teaching program.

Research

★ Effects of an ill parent on the child

- Stoeckel and Weissbrod, 2015, American University

★ Severity of the parent’s illness

- Importance of parent’s physical condition

★ Lacking research on child’s perspective

- Faulkner and Davey, 2002

★ School-aged children and coping

- Armsden and Lewis, 1994

- Lack of research investigating parental illness and child's psychosocial development
- ★ Differentiating between an ill parent or ill family member
 - Society of Behavioral Medicine, Pakenham and Cox, 2014

Theories

- ★ Human Development in Context class
 - Family systems theory
 - Christian, 2006
 - Family behavior as a whole
 - Six characteristics of a family system:
 - Boundaries, roles, rules, hierarchy, climate, and equilibrium
 - Holism
 - Michaelson et al., 2016
 - Child as part of a family system
 - Relating this to Juliana and Shelly
 - Struggling with school
- ★ Theories of Development class
 - Urie Bronfenbrenner
 - Ecological systems theory
 - Five socially organized subsystems
 - Ranging from school and family to economy, customs, and bodies of knowledge
 - Subsystems provide contexts in which children develop

Reflection/Interviews

- ★ Conducting interviews
- ★ Interview with Odalys Cedeño
 - Resources available for students with chronically ill family members
 - Responding to students' thoughts on their situations
 - Strengthening communication between home and school
- ★ Interview with Lorayne Carbon
 - Resources available for ECC students and families
 - Important steps for ECC teachers to take
 - Contacting families
- ★ Interview with Angela Novielli
 - Her experience with a student with an ill family member
 - Support and communication with the family
 - Creating a safe classroom environment
 - Collaborating with school psychologist and social worker

Support Organizations

- ★ Interventions and services available for students like Shelly and Juliana
 - Cancer Support Community (Formerly known as Gilda's Club)
 - Their visit to Ridgeway and meeting with Juliana and Shelly's teachers
 - Cancer support organization Wonders and Worries

Role of the Teacher

- ★ Steps for teacher
 - From interviews: create a line of communication between school and family
 - Reach out before issues begin happening
 - Make an effort to learn about the child's family (system)
 - Resist judgement
 - Create a safe classroom environment

- Collaborate with colleagues and outside organizations, if necessary
- Children's literature
 - A Treasure Hunt for Mama and Me: Helping Children Cope with Parental Illness, Le Verrier, Frank, and Taylor 2013

Conclusion

- ★ Bridging the gap between home and school through positive relationships and awareness
 - Influences on children
 - Foundation for a positive home and school relationship
 - Encouraging students to do their best

Process Paper

When we first started discussing our Master's thesis projects, I was not entirely sure what I wanted to write about. I felt like there were so many directions that I could take with this project, and frankly, I didn't even know where to begin. I started to research a topic that I was not very passionate about, but I ultimately decided that I would rather rethink my topic. After considering the experiences I had had thus far in my second grade classroom at Ridgeway Elementary School, I felt inspired by two girls, Juliana and Shelly. Both of these girls' mothers have cancer, and it got me thinking about what supports are available for students in their situations. I just knew that I had to include them in my presentation.

An issue that I ran into quite early in my work is that at my other two student teaching placements, I did not know of any students who were in the same situation as Juliana or Shelly. As far as I knew, none of the children that I worked with had had parents or other family members in the home with catastrophic illness. I knew that I had to find a way to connect my experiences from Ridgeway with my experiences at MAS and the Sarah Lawrence ECC. It was only after reviewing my notes that I realized I *could* connect these different chapters in my time in the Art of Teaching program. Even though I did not know of any catastrophic illnesses in my students' homes or families, that does not mean that they were not there. It simply means that I did not know about it.

It became clear to me that I needed to interview those that I student-taught with at the three schools. I decided to interview Lorayne Carbon, Director of the Sarah Lawrence ECC, Angela Novielli, my host teacher from MAS, and Odalys Cedeño, my host teacher from Ridgeway. The questions that I asked each of them were not all the exact same, as not all three

educators shared the same experiences. These interviews were an integral part of my presentation, and they helped me better understand my experiences with Juliana and Shelly.

I started this process by writing a very rough draft of my outline. Doing this helped me plan exactly what I wanted to say and when it felt appropriate to say it. I continued editing my outline up until the day of the presentation. Next, I began researching the implications of parental illness on a child. Surprisingly, there seems to be a lack of sufficient research on this topic, with one article even stating that research is mostly focused on the patient and/or their spouse. The articles that I did find were exactly what I was looking for and served as part of the foundation for my presentation.

Early on in this process, I met with librarian Emily Johnson for a research consultation. This was immensely helpful in finding relevant information and sources. I felt quite overwhelmed when I had to find sources, and I did not even know what terms to search for. Meeting with Emily helped me work through my broad ideas, develop a thesis, and come up with clear research questions that would guide my writing. We found dozens upon dozens of sources, but not all of them were applicable to this specific project so many of them were not used. I ended up meeting with Emily twice, as I had made slight changes to the focus of my research.

Developing questions and then conducting interviews was the next step. I took quick notes during the interviews and then synthesized the information in my script. I then reflected on the Cancer Support Community meeting I attended earlier in the semester. It made me wonder about other cancer support organizations, which eventually led to me discovering Wonders & Worries.

Ultimately, I was hoping to learn how I can support students who are experiencing parental illness in my future classrooms. This is not an unheard-of problem, and likely millions

of children have found themselves in this predicament. I knew that the teacher plays an important role in a child's support system, and I could see how both Shelly and Juliana relied on Odalys in our classroom. I wanted to learn how to be the best teacher I could possibly be.

I was also hoping to learn more about the impact of parental illness on children. As I mentioned in my presentation, I was incredibly privileged to never have experienced anything like this as a child. Having two healthy parents was something that I took for granted. Even though I never spoke to Juliana or Shelly about what they were going through, I knew it had a strong impact on them.

I was not sure if it would be appropriate for me to speak with both girls about this because I did not want to upset them. As far as I knew, Juliana rarely, if ever, brought up that her mother had cancer. I only remember her saying that her mother was sick. Shelly had brought up that her mother had cancer, but never to me. Eventually, I decided it was better for me not to interview them.

An aspect that I was not expecting to focus on was communication with families. Although I knew that that would be something that I need to be mindful of in my future classroom, I did not realize how important communication is for the benefit of the child. When teachers and families establish an effective line of communication, they create a strong support system for the child that empowers them. Children have been proven to perform better in school later on when their teachers and family members communicate well. Potential issues and concerns can be worked through, and good progress can be shared, both from home and school.

I am left with more questions about the long term effects of parental illness on children. My presentation focuses on shorter term effects, such as school performance, but I wonder what the future looks like for kids like Shelly and Juliana. Unfortunately, Juliana's issues in school had

not improved significantly in the time that I taught in her class. Typically, she can only read three letter words, and she has trouble writing on her own. Even with the interventions from the school, she still struggles. She has told me she does not want to start third grade because she has so much trouble reading, which I did not know how to respond to. I hope that she makes more progress, and that her mother recovers from this illness. Shelly, on the other hand, is not struggling nearly as much as Juliana. In addition, I found out some great news: Shelly's mother is in remission. I could not be happier for her.

I was surprised to learn about Lorayne, Odalys, and Angela's experiences with catastrophically ill parents. For it to be Odalys' first time working with ill parents, and for it to be two different students in the class, she handled it amazingly well. I was surprised to learn that she has never been in this situation before. Both Lorayne and Angela had such valuable information that I appreciate them sharing with me. I am glad that I had the opportunity to learn so much from such great educators, and I am incredibly grateful for these student teaching experiences.

If I had had more time, it would have been beneficial to also touch on intentional language. The ways in which teachers and other adults speak to children plays a big role in how children perceive things. Something that Odalys and I spoke about when I was interviewing her was how the word "sick" is understood by children like Juliana and Shelly. When they hear that somebody else is "sick", they might wonder if they are sick like their mothers. If that person's sickness will cause their hair to fall out, or for them to get extremely tired. It is important for teachers to be aware of the weight of their language.

Ultimately, I believe that this presentation prepared me well for my future career as an educator. One of the central themes of the presentation, clear lines of communication, is something that I plan to tackle head on. I look forward to these new experiences.

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