Building a Collaborative Mesosystem: Activating Special Education Strategies Within Faith-Based Communities

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Literature Review

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory shows that human development isn't just shaped by isolated environments, but by the mesosystem, which is how different spaces connect and interact. For a child with developmental disabilities who needs extra support, their faith development relies heavily on whether their school and church are on the same page. Historically, the research breaks down these cross-setting connections into two types. Primary links, which is when a child is physically transitioning from one place to another, and supplementary links, which are built when the adults from both sides interact and work together to make things easier for the child.When these microsystems operate in a vacuum, individuals with disabilities may face environmental alienation. Even though special education keeps getting better in public schools because of legal mandates, churches are legally exempt from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This creates a massive gap between a family’s desire to belong to a church community and the actual support available in those spaces. Building a connected mesosystem fixes this by letting evidence-based strategies transfer from schools to churches. This changes the faith community from a place where a kid is just sitting in a room to a space that actually practices real, neuro-affirming inclusion.

Research shows that when different environments work together, it directly breaks down the physical, behavioral, and emotional walls that people with disabilities hit in community networks. McIntosh et al. (2008) systematically evaluated cross-setting measurements within models of collaborative care, which demonstrated that the

structural density of a mesosystem, which is measured by the frequency and quality of cross-setting communication and shared cross-setting knowledge, directly predicted the long-term success and fidelity of community-based interventions. The study also shows that when environments are officially connected, a person's anxiety drops and they cooperate more, proving the classic systems theory that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Conversely, without a real system in place, the process can hit a wall. It can reinforce all the old institutional barriers and basically leave families feeling completely isolated.

This multi-setting framework is further supported by the empirical findings of Unwin and van Ommen (2024), who conducted a rigorous principal components analysis which evaluated sensory and social barriers encountered by autistic individuals within faith-based environments. The data reveals that autistic individuals experience extreme sensory challenges and barriers when found in a traditional community setting, which directly or entirely limits their attendance. One crucial point of the study highlighted a statistically derived component that linked a sense of control and predictability over sensory and social environmental inputs to one’s ability to experience a connectedness to their Higher Power and communal engagement. This promotes neuro-affirming evidence that environmental adaptations, or the awareness of someone’s, are essential pieces to helping the individual feel a sense of safety and belonging within their church. Additionally, the reciprocal benefits of implementing peer-mediated interventions within structured community transitions are documented across secondary and postsecondary inclusive frameworks. Balsino et al. (2026) conducted a comprehensive research review

of peer support frameworks, establishing that structured peer buddy systems can function as a foundational bridge that reduces social barriers, builds resilience, and drives self-advocacy for learners with disabilities. The research shows that these buddy systems are a win-win for each party involved. Students with disabilities get practice with communicating, feel way more accepted by their peers, and adults aren’t the only ones who are always with them and teaching them. At the same time, the neurotypical volunteers learn how to be more empathetic, build up their own social confidence, and actually start to understand what real inclusion looks like on a larger scale. But the researchers make one thing clear, buddy systems only work if the administration actually backs them up.

Finally, van Lith’s thesis (2026) shows how these dynamics play out in real life by connecting group contact theories with social capital in a real-world buddy program. The data makes it clear that while pairing people up can build social bridges, real inclusion doesn't just happen out of nowhere. For these social bonds to actually last, the program needs four things: equal status, shared goals, teamwork, and strong backing from leadership. van Lith proves that when a structured program actively breaks down cultural biases and fixes scheduling mismatches, random connections turn into long-term community networks. Ultimately, the research proves that to fix inclusion issues in churches, organizations have to stop just randomly throwing volunteers together and start using a structured, proven plan.

Extension

This collaborative mesosystem conceptualized in the literature review, built around faith-based communities systematically implementing evidence-based special education strategies within their programming and communal events, is completely possible with a bit of extra attention. While keeping in mind private religious organizations are exempt from federal special education mandates, this section will outline the ability to create proactive, cross-system structured framework for faith formation and growth. According to Chalas (2025), a faith-based community cannot achieve true inclusion simply by making surface-level policy changes or legal adjustments. By combining ecological systems theory with Edward T. Hall's 'iceberg model' of culture, Chalas proves that surface-level changes completely fail if you don't actively re-train people's deeper biases, cultural mindsets, and hidden attitudes about disability. Considering this research, the first step in application requires the establishment of some sort of Faith-Based Accommodation Plan (FBAP), which can serve as a bridge between the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and goals being set for the child in the faith-formation setting. Allowing parent-led knowledge transfer directly to the church allows this cross-system communication mechanism of the mesosystem to ensure a transfer of strategies from the school microsystem to the faith-formation microsystem.

The next step in application focuses on practical environmental and sensory changes, directly tackling sensory barriers and anxiety issues that Unwin and van Ommen (2024) found in their research. Guided by the research executed by Banks (2024) and the comprehensive review by Piller et al. (2025), faith communities should abandon

in-effective, single-action “tricks”, such as alternative seating or fidget spinners, which have been empirically proven to have an insubstantial or negative impact on focus and task productivity. Instead, leaders need to look at the whole space through a neuro-affirming lens and target multiple sensory systems at the same time to help keep kids' stress levels and energy regulated. Physical modifications could mean: cleaning up visual clutter and overstimulating decorations, getting rid of harsh fluorescent lights for soft natural light or indirect LEDs, and adding soundproofing or quiet zones. To support children who desire movement to stay calm during long services, churches can set up a sensory path, or a structured pathway with physical tasks that lets them burn off energy and regulate themselves, and for kids who get overwhelmed by noise, churches can provide noise-cancelling headphones. The mindset shift moves away from a one-accommodation-fits-all approach to finding specific meaningful changes that affect the present community at hand.

Another step to application of this model of mesosystemic communication and resources is laying out a clear, step-by-step wraparound plan to make the most of the volunteers and staff at the church. Following the research from VanDenBerg and Grealish (1996), it would be useful for churches to establish a Child and Family Team or committee, which is made up of regular volunteers, parents, and pastors. This team can conduct a collaborative experience to identify the child’s unique strengths, preferences, interests and needs while keeping in mind the families goals and desires for their child. To keep volunteers from burning out over time, the team focuses on simple everyday

support rather than expensive formal services. This helps build a natural network of real relationships which stay impactful long after the official program ends.

Finally, setting up an official peer buddy system brings everything together, using the 'school-within-a-school' (SWAS) model from Letsinger (2022). The SWAS model shows how private churches can handle small-group, specialized support while keeping the kids fully included in the main church services. With this setup, the church formally trains neurotypical youth volunteers to be 'Inclusion Buddies.' These buddies aren't there to be teachers or authority figures, but they are there to be intentional social models during faith formation experiences. By basing the volunteer training on Benton's (2025) 3E Program framework (Educate, Expose, Equip), churches systematically train their volunteers in proven cognitive-behavioral principles and basic trauma-informed care. This official training directly targets the deep, hidden culture of the community. It equips peers to actively break down social stigma, manage mild behavioral escalations, and provide a predictable, safe, and highly empathetic relational anchor for their buddies. By embedding these proven special education strategies into a structured, community-owned plan, churches can successfully activate a sustainable, collaborative mesosystem. This moves kids with disabilities out of isolated slots and into a culture where they truly belong to the community.

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