

## **Project Summary:**

The COMANI (Community of Support to Childhood, Comunidad de Apoyo a la Niñez) project proposes an international multi-disciplinary consortia designed to improve the provision of services for children in vulnerable conditions (biological, social and functional) with and without disabilities. The primary activities of the project will be accomplished through student and faculty mobility and the exchange and development of innovative approaches and technology directed to educate children from birth to 8 years of age. The project partners will provide coursework, field experiences, state of the art curriculum and technology to prepare participants in evidence-based approaches for the educational, social and emotional development and inclusion of these children into our communities. The intent of the consortia is to build curricula through international collaboration and provide pre-professional learning opportunities to students working with high risk children and families with and without disabilities.

The exchanged students and faculty among the three countries will focus on the development of three main goals:

- Goal 1. Prepare human resources in areas supporting inclusion for children from birth to 8 years of age.
- Goal 2: Develop and implement an innovative early childhood curriculum for undergraduate and master level students.
- Goal 3: Strengthen professional practices in formal and informal settings for young children with and without disabilities.

A key component of this project will provide students with various opportunities to learn a second language and to acquire a working knowledge of another culture. Students in their respective institutions will enrol in beginning and/or intermediate Spanish or English courses. Additional training will be provided to integrate cultural content and professional practices. Specialized workshops will be provided at each institution for exchange students to become familiar with the culture and local practices of the country where they study.

In first phase of the proposed project, the project collaborators will design guidelines for a Child Development Center incorporating international standards of quality. The Instituto Tecnológico de Sonora (ITSON), through the Centro Universitario de Enlace Comunitario (CUEC), financed the construction and infrastructure of the above mentioned centre which was completed in 2007. Universities from the three countries will collaborate to design curriculum, activities and training to support the functioning of such center. The model used in the design and development of this center will serve as an example for other communities with similar characteristics and needs.

The second phase of the proposal will develop projects related to inclusive practices in educational and recreational programs in schools, hospitals, educational clinics and parks. Students will participate in the development of these programs designed to provide developmental learning opportunities for high risk children from marginalized communities.

The final phase of the project will develop and disseminate curriculum that can be used in each of the participating Universities.

All of the participating institutions offer coursework relating to working with young at risk

children with or without disabilities. Our intent is to expand on these offerings and broaden the focus to foster a more inclusive environment. A North American curriculum responsive to our corresponding countries, cultures and educational needs will be developed, implemented and ultimately shared by the consortium partners. Common course materials will be adopted within the COMANI institutions and will be made available for broader adoption by the end of the project. The consortium will build an educational resource exchange network (websites and organizations) across the three countries to share learning opportunities, information and to build community capacity to foster inclusion.

The activities and results mentioned previously will be a product and made available through the establishment of a network of universities.

## **Project Description**

In September of 1990 the United Nations ratified a convention on the Rights of the Child and in December 2006 it ratified a Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In Canada, United States and Mexico, however, children and families with disabilities and other special needs remain the poorest of the poor and often are the most marginalized and socially excluded of minority groups. The COMANI Project is intended to foster knowledge development and exchange among the three participating countries. This will help to build the capacity of faculty, students and human service professionals to work with local communities in promoting the increased participation and social inclusion of children and families with disabilities and special needs. There is increasing evidence that the number of children with disabilities and other special needs is growing and there will be increased demand to provide health, education and social services at the community level to support children with disabilities and their families (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003, World Bank, 2002).

**Goal:** To create inclusive and supportive communities by building curriculum and providing international, intersectoral, collaborative pre-professional learning opportunities for teachers and human service workers who work with high risk children and families with disabilities in community based family resource centers.

### ***Scope, Objectives and Consequences***

Building on the preliminary collaborative partnerships that the University of Arizona at Tuscon and Red Deer College have established in Obregon Sonora Mexico, the consortium will provide opportunities for the exchange of students and teachers among the three countries and will be focused on the following three streams of activities. First, it will focus on the development of cross cultural curriculum and course content to be used by the educational institutions in each country. Secondly, it will provide exchange learning opportunities for students from each country including second language and cultural learning opportunities. Thirdly the consortium will assist in the development of teaching-learning community based family resource centres that will remain as a product after the project is completed. These centres are service centres that provide services to at risk children and families and also have a mandate for the preparation of professional in the process of providing service. These resource centres will serve as models for pre-professional education of human service workers and provide opportunities to provide services to children and families with disabilities in the community.

In addition, to implement its activities, the consortium will establish an international network of academics, professional and consumer groups which will oversee the implementation and direction of the work of the project. This academic network will continue after the project has ended to foster the ongoing exchange of information and resources on new approaches, issues, funding possibilities etc.

All of the participating institutions offer courses related to working with children with disabilities and special needs. Our intention is to expand on these offerings and focus them on a North American curriculum which would be developed, delivered and tested by the consortium partners. Common course materials will be adopted within COMANI institutions and will be made available for broader adoption by the end of the project. The consortium will build an education resource exchange network across the three countries to share learning opportunities, information and to build community capacity to foster the social inclusion of marginalized children in their communities. The resource exchange network will continue after the project is completed.

Students from a range of professional disciplines will be given practicum opportunities in locally based family resource centers that are focused on the building linkages and strengthening local community ties to foster the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The project will build on community-university collaborative partnerships in each country to identify community based teaching-learning service sites that will foster interdisciplinary and intersectoral partnerships at the community level. These teaching-learning service sites will provide opportunities for students to work on building community supports for children and families with disabilities.

## **References**

Department of International Development, (2005). *Reducing Poverty by Tackling Social Exclusion*. Monograph, British Government: London

Enns, H. & Neufeldt, A. (2003). *In Pursuit of Equal Participation: Canada and Disability at Home and Abroad*. Toronto: Captus Press.

Europe and Central Asia Human Development Department. (2005). *Dying too young: addressing premature mortality and ill health due to non-communicable diseases and injuries in the Russian Federation*. Washington: World Bank.

World Bank, (2002). *Transforming Growth, Neighbor, Nature and Future*. New York: Oxford University Press.