

Teacher Educators' Perspective on Preservice Teacher Preparation/ Coursework Provided to Engage Diverse Families for Student Learning

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Research shows that most teachers require more experience-based training in developing collaborative, relational, and reciprocal practices to build family partnerships. This study examines the preservice teacher preparation for working with diverse families in urban settings from an EC-6 teacher preparation program at a large urban university in the southwestern United States. The paper presents the faculty perspectives of kind of activities and experiences regarding engaging diverse families for student learning is provided to preservice teachers. The results showed that preservice teachers learned about family engagement primarily in early childhood courses taken in the beginning of the program and through the integration of related knowledge into existing courses, which were most commonly presented through assignments and classroom discussion. The study also found that the program incorporates the national standards on family engagement, but limited best practices are included in the coursework.

Keywords: preservice teachers, teacher educators, family engagement, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

There is no one-way to prepare teachers to experience and embrace all levels of family partnership for student learning and achievement. Each classroom, school, and community is unique in its strengths, learning needs, cultural aspects, and challenges. However, knowing and recognizing that uniqueness is itself a challenge, as teachers' beliefs, attitudes and personal characteristics influence their involvement with families (Baum & King, 2006). Research clearly shows that most teachers hold positive attitudes about involving families in students' education but require more training in how to develop collaborative, relational, and linked-to-learning practices that build partnerships with families and schools (Evans, 2013).

After years of research, it is evident that family engagement is related to student success in school, better social and emotional development, and increased chances to graduate (Harvard Family Research Project, 2014; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Uludag, 2008). More research and evaluation is needed to examine the specific areas teachers need help in, as well as identifying promising strategies and their impact on student outcomes (Casper, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). For this reason, it is important to understand the current landscape of teacher education and faculty perspective for family engagement. This study examined the perspectives of faculty from a large urban university in the Southwestern United States in regards to the kind of activities or experiences for family involvement preservice teachers receive during the program.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The scope and backdrop of the research study is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Most of psychological and sociological research uses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to understand human development within the context of physical, social, and economic systems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), individuals are embedded in several environmental layers. The first level consists of microsystems that they directly experience for example, home and school. The mesosystem is the next level of the Ecological Systems Theory and involves interactions and relationships with and between individuals that includes parents, teachers, childcare centers, and schools. The exosystem affects development indirectly through other individuals for example, the parent's workplace. The macrosystem operates at the higher level and is made up of political systems, society's attitudes, and ideologies such as beliefs regarding early childhood care and development in the United States. Since human development occurs through multidirectional effects between the contextual layers in which an individual is embedded, a teacher-training program aimed at an individual also impacts the environment in which the individual is nested. This leads to believe that providing quality training to preservice teachers will impact the learning environment to provide better outcomes for children entrenched in that environment.

Additionally, building and embracing a relational, inclusive, and collaborative family engagement approach between schools, communities and families may help educational institutions move from a limited microsystems position that only focuses on child interactions with parents and home to the integrated approach of Bronfenbrenner Ecological System (Mapp & Hong, 2010).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main goal of this study was to examine the preservice teacher preparation at a large urban university in the Southwestern part of the United States. In the study, detailed analysis of coursework was followed by interviews with the faculty who created and was authorized to make changes in the curriculum. This study provided insights into the curriculum for teacher preparation at a large urban university by comparing what preservice teachers learn with what coursework and what the program faculty/supervisor says the curriculum it is supposed to teach. Interviews with the faculty and program supervisor and looking at the coursework for best practices as discussed in the literature review added valuable information on how standards are incorporated in teacher education programs, especially those that are preparing the preservice teachers for the early childhood field and elementary classrooms.

METHOD OR TECHNIQUE OF DATA COLLECTION

The university professors teaching the coursework and the program administrator were identified and interviewed to attain in-depth knowledge about the course content of the entire program related to the integration of the family engagement component. A purposive sample of university professors who created and taught the EC-6 program curriculum and have authority to amend the syllabus was identified. The Teacher Education Program director at this tier one research university was also interviewed to understand the program requirements and curriculum. Additionally, the field experience coordinator was interviewed to understand the preservice teacher placement for student teaching and criteria used in the selection of public schools for student teaching. Of this group (faculty, program administrator, field experience coordinator), 87% were white women and 13% were Hispanic. All faculty participants were teaching full time in the program, representing early childhood, math, English language arts, and social education courses. On average, faculty participants had been part of the teacher education program for more than seven years.

INTERVIEWS WITH THE PROGRAM SUPERVISOR AND EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSORS

Initially, five separate face-to-face interviews, one with the EC-6 Teacher certification Program supervisor, one with the field experience coordinator, and with a subsample of three professors who teach the early childhood coursework and have authority over the curriculum, were conducted. However, after analyzing the preservice teachers' survey responses regarding the coursework that prepared them for family engagement for student learning, two more faculty interviews were added. The interviews were semi-structured with predetermined questions. The focus was on how parental involvement strategies have been integrated into the curriculum. Also, the purpose of these interviews was to understand the content used to prepare preservice teachers enrolled in the EC-6 teacher certification program to engage with families of diverse cultures in their classrooms.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Collected interview data was analyzed descriptively using a thematic analysis protocol. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and reporting themes in the data that emerge as important in interpreting various aspects of research topics (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected and utilized in this study because it is one of the most flexible and appropriate methods to analyze verbal semi-structured interviews (Joffe, 2012). Phases of thematic analysis were used to familiarize the researcher with the data, and in generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and presenting the research findings. Codes were created for key themes where themes captured something important in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Collected data was then categorized by themes, which emerged from the conversations. To assure inter-rater reliability, the researcher and a colleague independently categorized the data from the transcripts of the interview tapes. These categorizations were then compared and discrepancies in analysis were discussed.

RESULTS

Some of the common categories for current practices in teaching family engagement found in interviewing the faculty were: (1) classroom discussion, (2) course assignments, and (3) observation and field experience.

Classroom Discussion

The Math methods course faculty reported that at least five out of thirteen class sessions were used to engage preservice teachers in discussions about various benefits and strategies for involving parents in promoting learning at home such as sending home newsletters explaining what children were working on, sharing examples of homework assignments and common approaches to solving math problems. Another strategy discussed in the methods courses was using events like Family Math/Reading Nights to "Educate, Inform and Involve" parents by sharing practices that are used in the classroom which might be different from the way parents learned. The purpose was "not to imply that parents were not educated or incapable," but to inform them on how these approaches may better help their children. Classroom discussions brought forward the idea of preservice teachers not being judgmental and, instead, developing an understanding of the barriers to parental involvement. However, the methods courses did not provide any reading materials specifically for giving preservice teachers strategies to engage parents.

The importance and impact of a child's family, culture, and community was taught by a required course called *Social Education*. The purpose of the course was to help preservice teachers to understand themselves and their surroundings. Many of the discussions focused on issues faced by children, families, and communities, such as race, racism, media, equity, access, and privilege. The course instructor explained that these discussions initially made preservice teachers uncomfortable, but after a few classes, they were more engaged and reflective of their thinking.

Course Assignments

Throughout the coursework, various projects and work^{SEP} were assigned to help preservice teachers become culturally competent, practice^{SEP} strategies to engage with families in student learning, and understand their own biases. These assignments included writing reflective journals on topics from classroom readings, conducting child case studies, and investigating communities. The purpose of child case studies was to engage with families to learn more about a child's home life, culture, and surroundings. Additionally, to promote understanding of the ethnic, religious, and culture diversity in the communities where they will teach, preservice teachers visited different places of worship in the neighborhood. The purpose was to "have the growing experience of the life their students live, which is mostly very different than their own." Other activities in the personal community investigation assignment were visiting the county^{SEP} fair and attend a community concert.

Additionally, in the Prekindergarten curriculum course, candidates were assigned to create a newsletter informing parents about school events, classroom activities, and learning. The assignment product was created in the preservice teachers' technology class. Another of the Prekindergarten curriculum course assignments was to be "modeling for parents how to read to kids."

Observation and Field Experiences

During the pre-teaching level, preservice teachers took part in classroom observations one day a week in at least six different schools. The goal was to varied experiences in schools with diverse demographics and in different grade levels as well.

In response to a question, the university faculty mentioned that, Parental involvement is very important and that is something we want our students to be exposed to and good at. I do not think they do a lot in pre-teaching necessarily because they are just observing. They see more happening in developing teaching when students are in the classroom more, they seeing their cooperating teacher interact with parents and send newsletters, and in student teaching, there is more.

It was reported that during field experience, preservice teachers were required to complete at least 10 out of a 15-item task list. Of these, three tasks directly involved exposure to or participation with the families: preservice teachers participate in a parent teacher conference, attend an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meeting, and perform bus duty. During student teaching, preservice teachers also completed an in- depth child case study assignment. The purpose was to investigate the child holistically from the perspective of social emotional, community, culture, and academic development. This assignment encouraged preservice teacher to engage with families to understand the child's home environment, culture, and development. However, student teachers were not assessed heavily on their ability to engage with families' due to a variety of school environments, student and family demographics, and school districts requirements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION

The teacher preparation program evaluated by the researcher demonstrated unique strengths in that it was located in an urban city and prepared future teachers for urban environments. In the program, there was no separate course offered to teach family engagement, not because the program did not want to include coursework regarding engaging families but because restrained due to state requirements and a cap of 120 hours for the degree. As reported in the findings, family engagement pedagogy courses were some of the first courses cut in order to meet state and accreditation requirements. However, including required courses like for *Social Education* and *Development of Contemporary Families* is a big step toward understanding the diverse culture and social environment of 21st century urban children and their families. These courses, along with the early childhood curriculum courses, appear to be the best places to enhance the curriculum with readings and assignments designed to develop preservice teachers' deeper understanding and knowledge of family engagement.

Based on the findings, another recommendation is the methods and foundational course faculty continue being more specific and deliberate in highlighting the objectives and strategies for preservice

teachers to learn to engage, inform and educate parents in their child's learning. Interviews with university faculty indicated several areas of the current curriculum that could easily be enhanced to include more meaningful and deliberate ways to prepare preservice teachers to work with all families for their child's learning. In the methods courses, for example, intentionally highlighting lesson objectives related to families and providing preservice teachers with strategies to engage all families were mentioned several times by participants. Another way of improving the program could be to ask that preservice teachers think of various ways the families could be engaged in any particular lesson plan. This would help preservice teachers develop the practice of thinking about engaging families in student learning while preparing the lesson plans. Furthermore, since there is no current program assessment to evaluate preservice teachers' knowledge in family engagement, the program could incorporate a system to assess preservice teachers' knowledge and skills in engaging families. The teacher preparation program might also benefit from parents as guest speakers or panelists in the class to give a parent's perspective to preservice teacher. Lastly, the curricular knowledge and understanding regarding family engagement should be more sufficiently evident in the course description, objectives, and syllabi.

CONCLUSION

It is vital to continue to prepare our future teachers with knowledge, skills, and understanding to be able to work effectively with all families. Certainly, teacher preparation programs enhance their current coursework and field experiences to reflect the future needs of preservice teachers. Similarly, state agencies like TEA require evidence of assessing and performing evaluations of preservice teachers for their knowledge and understanding building relationships and with working with families for child's learning.

The recommendations outlined above are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather a step toward identifying enhancements to improving the knowledge content and skills that teachers ought to possess to be prepared to work with diverse families. It is strongly believed that all teachers may benefit from a more comprehensive teacher preparation program for preparing preservice teachers for family engagement through coursework, field experiences, and assigned activities during student teaching to build meaningful relationships with families and better learning outcomes for children.

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