Preservice Teachers' Experiences for Engaging Diverse Families for Student Learning During Fieldwork

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The study focused on examining how preservice teachers reflect and understand family engagement practices during fieldwork. The pre-service teachers submitted survey responses to further understand developing teachers' experiences within a culturally, ethnically, linguistically and economically diverse setting. The study found that programs should carefully consider the field placements of students to ensure schools provide examples of appropriate interaction for family engagement. Placement within a diverse district does not ensure exposure to appropriate interaction with diverse families. Additionally, teacher education programs should determine and set an acceptable rate of understanding for all concepts and frequently check student learning at a program level to ensure students meet this standard.

Keywords: family engagement, field experience, teacher education, preservice teachers

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Funds of knowledge within the context of school and home interactions is defined as a combination of families accumulated cultural awareness and specific life experiences, utilized by teachers to positively impact students' achievements (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti 2005; Sebolt,2018). Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence links the impact of these interactions between the three milieus of home, school, and community to students' behavior and academic success (Michael, Dittus, & Epstein, 2007). Therefore, based on this theory, the definition of family involvement in an educational setting is expanded by placing an emphasis on the fluid nature of students' experiences in all three environments (Michael et al., 2007). In addition, Epstein (2005) also considers educators' engagement with the home environment as an effective method for facilitating communication with families from diverse cultural backgrounds. As described by Gonzalez et al. (2005), the transfer of knowledge from families to the learning environment is achieved through communication methods that are initiated by teachers such as information collected through home visits. However, in recent years, home visits are not considered common methods for engaging families and as a result, higher education and field experience environments have become the main learning grounds for educators (Gonzalez et al.,2005).

When addressing the topic of family engagement, it is important to consider that funds of knowledge as it is described in Gonzalez et al. (2005) is not solely associated with families. Teachers also process the information and acquire additional knowledge through conversations and small teacher study group discussions based on family engagement topics (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Hence, the knowledge gained via these encounters is utilized to systematically improve family communication strategies within the school environment (Gonzalez et al., 2005). As discussed in Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), teacher

perception of students' abilities and performance that is solely achieved through classroom interactions with students and observations may lead to a deficit view of overall students' experiences and abilities acquired at home. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on student teachers' acquiring parental engagement skills through observation and direct interactions as part of their field experiences within the classroom settings (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

Our study incorporates Epstein's Sphere of influences theory to depict the impact of proper engagement methods between educators and families by focusing on the significance of developing teachers' funds of knowledge concerning this topic. Additionally, Moll's concept of funds of knowledge as stated in Gonzalez et al. (2005) provides bases for improving developing teachers' skills to effectively implement family involvement strategies through a process of transfer of information that takes place as part of the classroom field experiences.

For this study, interaction with diverse families and communication to inform students' progress are two mediums for describing family engagement strategies. Developing teachers are asked to provide evidence of observing and/or being involved in such practices as part of their learning process of specific skills required by the state teacher education standards.

METHOD

This study was guided by a survey research method approach to understand how preservice teachers reflect and understand family engagement practices witnessed in their fieldwork. This approach allows for the student voice and knowledge shared and for the researchers to quantify instances of students' collective voices. This study combines student responses over a two-semester period during one academic year.

Participants

A total of 272 pre-service teachers submitted survey responses as part of a family engagement research project conducted to further understand developing teachers' experiences within a culturally, ethnically, linguistically and economically diverse urban setting located in a large city in the southeastern part of the United States. Most student teachers were female (88%) with varied certification areas as seen in Table 1.

A convenient sampling method was used to select participants from a pool of undergraduate teacher education students who took classes within the education department. All students in the study were within the "developing teacher" program level within their preparatory program and participated in a mandatory 10-hour-per-week field experience as a preparation requirement of the program. The sample consisted of students who have taken at least an introductory and a mid-level course which cover all components of the state's required educational standards corresponding to their certification areas. The participating students were from spring and fall semesters within the same year.

DATA SOURCES/INSTRUMENT

For fieldwork, the participants were placed in classrooms within 15 school districts following their certification area. All students were asked to complete the *Developing Teacher Survey* created as a required course assignment to collect evidence of student learning of various components of the Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR) state standards. The assignment goal was to collect evidence of student's ability to recognize and demonstrate skills within the framework of these standards and measure teachers' readiness to acquire state certification through a standardized assessment. The survey was provided to students using an online format. Based on their observations within their assigned field experience and in a short response written format, students were asked to provide three examples of each standard witnessed being executed by the classroom teacher. For this study, only the responses to the indicators 4.1s and 4.3s were coded and analyzed to better understand students' body of knowledge and their level of demonstration of the following skills. These standards covered in this specific study are skill-based and address teachers' appropriate interaction with families with diverse characteristics (4.1s) as well

as teachers' ability to respond appropriately to families' concerns and communicate with families regularly to share information about students' progress (4.3s).

Data Analysis

Student responses to 4.1s and 4.3s were coded in two ways. First, written examples provided for each indicator were coded for the example's accuracy in matching the indicator's intent. Therefore, responses were coded as a true example or an incorrect example. All responses were coded by three coders and compared for agreement, resulting in coder agreement percentages of 83% for 4.1s and 92% for 4.3s. While these agreement percentages were high, responses were further reviewed by a fourth coder when issues of disagreement occurred. Basic statistical analysis was performed on the coding results with frequency tallies.

Further analysis occurred on 4.3s determining the frequency of correct responses by theme of type of engagement strategy used. The initial true responses in 4.3s were further coded for the theme of response by two coders with discrepancies discussed with a third coder.

RESULTS

The overall participant responses by percentage for 4.1s and 4.3s based on true responses versus incorrect responses is provided in Table 2. Student responses for 4.1s showed that 70% of the student responses submitted were true, much lower than those submitted for 4.3s, which were 96% true. Table 3 looks at the response results by certification level.

The true responses by certification area varied greatly for 4.1s and ranged from 62% to82%, with students in the 4-8 certification levels providing fewer true responses and students in the EC-6 Bilingual certification level providing a higher percentage of true responses for 4.1s. However, the differences between groups were not statistically significant. There was less variability for 4.3s by certification level as shown in Table 4.

Students in all certification levels provided high levels of true responses ranging from92% to 99%, indicating that almost all responses provided by students at this point in the program were able to provide true responses of appropriate communication with parents during their field experience.

A further review of the 615 true responses for 4.3s was conducted to investigate themes for types of communication students observed and in which they were involved during fieldwork. Table 5 provides the frequency percentages of themes for the responses. Reported communication appeared to occur most often through written communication in the form of individual letters home, texts, or emails and with individual phone calls. While home visits are a common theme mentioned by Epstein (2005), no student responses referred to this form of communication. Communication themes by specialization were further investigated and results are provided in Table 6.

Folders with standardized letters and Apps/Social Media were the least frequently used form of communication for the certification levels with older school children. Similarly, phone Apps/Social Media was the least frequently used communication for the EC-6 Bilingual certification group. Written communication forms were the most frequently cited form of communication used for all certification levels except the EC-6 Bilingual group, which cited observing and using face-to-face communication most often with parents.

SIGNIFICANCE

Overall, these data show the practice of communication is being observed and understood by students regardless of certification area. Appropriate interaction with families with diverse characteristics was the standard for which students provided the fewest true examples. This could be due to the skills-based standards being more difficult to observe within the limited time constraints students spend within the classrooms during the semester. Further, it is unclear based on the data collected if the students were all placed within school with diverse families, although the districts of placements were all considered diverse. Finally, the concept of "appropriate interaction" is complex and the coursework of students may be

inadequately covering the concept in depth in all specialization introductory courses and providing students with the complexity of families and multiple possible ways to interact.

Programs should carefully consider the district and school field placements of students to ensure schools provide examples of appropriate interaction for family engagement. Placement within a diverse district does not ensure exposure to appropriate interaction with diverse families, however. Teacher preparation programs should go further in their partnerships with schools to discuss family engagement strategies and involvement for their students. Schools may be lacking in family engagement understanding and strategies, and through the university and school partnership, a professional development program focusing on family engagement could occur. What is important is a clear discussion between the teacher preparation program and placement school on expectations for their student teachers regarding family engagement.

Further, teacher education programs should evaluate their coursework for all certification areas to ensure students are given knowledge and skills of engagement with diverse families. Additionally, teacher education programs should determine and set an acceptable rate of understanding for all concepts and frequently check student learning as a whole program at each level to ensure students meet this program standard. This is especially true of programs employing adjuncts teaching only occasionally who may not be versed in the program's standards, such as family engagement learning. Another consideration is reviewing the skills and knowledge understanding of preservice teachers early in a teacher education program and providing additional learning opportunities for students with low understanding which could affect the success rate of students engaging diverse parents during their student teaching. Finally, teacher education programs should consider evaluating the understanding and strategy knowledge regarding family engagement with diverse families of their faculty. Faculty bring their funds of knowledge to teaching and may have different ideas and strategies. The more often students observe true examples of appropriate interaction and communication, the more likely they will incorporate these skills into their practice.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS BY CERTIFICATION LEVEL/AREA

Certification Level/Area	N
4-8 Specializations (Math, Science, Social Studies, English/LA)	42
7-12 or EC-12 Specializations (Math, Science, Social Studies/History, English/LA, SPED, Art/Music/Dance)	41
EC-6 Bilingual	20
EC-6 Generalist	169

TABLE 2
PARTICIPANT TRUE VERSUS INCORRECT RESPONSES BY PERCENT AND BY QUESTION

Responses by Question		
Question 4.1s (N=560)		
	N	%
True responses	395	70
Incorrect responses	165	30
Question 4.3s (N=615)		
	N	%
True responses	590	96
Incorrect responses	25	4

TABLE 3
OVERALL PARTICIPANT RESPONSES BY CERTIFICATION AREA TO 4.1S

	True Response	Incorrect Response
4-8 Specialization	62%	38%
EC-12, 7-12 Specialization	77%	23%
EC-6 Bilingual	82%	18%
EC-6 Generalist	70%	30%

TABLE 4
OVERALL PARTICIPANT RESPONSES BY CERTIFICATION AREA TO 4.3S

	True Response	Incorrect Response
4-8 Specialization	92%	8%
EC-12, 7-12 Specialization	99%	1%
EC-6 Bilingual	95%	5%
EC-6 Generalist	98%	2%

TABLE 5
OVERALL FREQUENCY PERCENTAGES OF TRUE RESPONSES FOR 4.3 BY COMMUNICATION THEMES

Type of Communication	Frequency	Percentage
Face-to-Face	117	17%
Written (Letter, text, email)	206	29%
Phone call	142	20%
Folders	104	15%
Apps/Social Media	81	11%
Other	58	8%

TABLE 6
FREQUENCY PERCENTAGE OF TRUE RESPONSES FOR 4.3S BY TYPES OF COMMUNICATION AND SPECIALIZATION LEVEL

Type of Communication	Specialization Level/Area			
	4-8	EC-12, 7-12	EC-6 Bilingual	EC-6 Generalist
Face-to-Face	21%	19%	32%	19%
Written (Letter, text, email)	36%	42%	27%	35%
Phone call	28%	27%	32%	23%
Folders	10%	14%	25%	20%
Apps/Social Media	14%	10%	7%	15%
Other	15%	16%	2%	8%