

PRESERVICE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR PREPARATION FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Neelofer Tajani, Ph.D.
University of Houston

Abstract

Family engagement in children's education is one of the key factors for student success in school, yet little attention has been paid in teacher preparation programs to enhance the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of preservice teachers to involve families in their children's learning. Using a survey research design, the study aims to examine preservice teachers' perspectives and knowledge on their preparation in learning family engagement strategies and practices during the third and fourth year of the teacher preparation program. The results of the study indicated that preservice teachers feel fairly well prepared in understanding the importance of family engagement for student learning; however, they feel somewhat prepared to encourage parents to partner with schools to take decision making roles to enhance student learning.

Keywords: preservice teachers, family engagement, teacher preparation, field experiences

Parental involvement has been positively associated with student gains in social competence, cognitive development, communication skills, literacy development, vocabulary growth, expressive language comprehension skills, and positive engagement with peers, adults, and learning. Despite the strong evidence that strongly suggests the importance of family engagement in student learning, how to effectively engage parents, particularly in urban environment, is still a challenge.

Various local, state, and national policies emphasize the importance of the family's role in children's learning. The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* requires Title I schools receiving aid to set aside some portion for family engagement programs and activities. Additionally, education was one of the main topics for the Texas 84th legislative session where House Bill (HB) 4 passed, which provided funding to school districts that meet state standards on curriculum, teacher certification, and parent engagement for high quality prekindergarten programs for qualifying students. One of the major requirements to receive state funding for qualifying students is that districts must develop and implement a family engagement plan to maintain high levels of family involvement, together with strategies based on empirical research on positive family engagement and student outcomes (Texas Education Today, 2015). Consequently, any university offering teacher preparation programs should be ready to emphasize the importance of family engagement and to educate their students regarding the promotion of family engagement. Institutions have a responsibility to make sure our teachers are trained and ready to incorporate the new requirements in their teaching.

In recent years, research has identified the need for teacher education programs to support early childhood preservice teachers in developing dispositions and strategies to implement for effective engagement with families (Baum & Swick, 2008). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accentuated the importance of empowering families to be involved in their children's learning and development by creating family and community relationships as one of the standards for early childhood teacher preparation programs (NAEYC, 2009). According to the NAEYC standards, teachers prepared in early childhood degree programs must know and understand the characteristics of

diverse families and communities. Furthermore, teachers should use this knowledge to create respectful and reciprocal relationships to support and involve families in their children's learning.

Need for the Study

The classrooms of the twenty-first century are continuously changing and are becoming increasingly multicultural; one-third of students in kindergarten to the 12th grade in United States come from minority groups consisting of diverse cultures and languages (The Center for Public Education, 2012). The U.S. Bureau of Census (2009), projects that by 2028, one-half of school age children will be minority students. What does this mean for parents, educators, and schools in terms of student learning and success? Educators have a growing and important responsibility to educate and meet the needs of diverse families and students. Schools and teachers serving these families must develop ways to understand parents' perspectives and engage them to support student learning. Teacher education in family engagement and partnership is a highly effective and significant method for increasing student achievement and reducing the barriers for home-school partnership (Chavkin, 2005).

According to Weiss (2005), educators must understand the cultural, structural, and historical basis for family involvement, rather than concluding that certain parents are simply uninterested in their children's learning. To be able to teach and prepare future students effectively, educators need to employ concrete skills in understanding and working with families. To accomplish this task, teachers should be exposed to more experiential and hands-on methods of problem solving, communicating, and collaborating with students and families during preservice student teaching (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Because of the trend in changing demographics of schools in the many urban areas, it is vital for teacher preparation programs to have strategies to prepare preservice teachers to meet the needs of diverse students and families.

Epstein's (2001) Home, School and Community Topology

Epstein's (2001) Home, School and Community topology also forms the backdrop of this study. Epstein's topology consists of six types of family involvement practices for building a comprehensive home-school partnership: 1) Parenting: assisting families with parenting skills; 2) Communications: communicating with families about school programs and student progress; 3) Volunteering: improving recruitment, training, activities and schedules to involve families as volunteers; 4) Learning at Home: involving families with their children in academic learning activities at home; 5) Decision Making: including families in school decisions, governance and advocacy activities; 6) Collaborating with the Community: coordinating the work and resources of community business, agencies, culture and civic organizations.

Applying the above framework will help educator preparation programs teach preservice teachers the internal and external factors that affect the family, school, and community partnerships. Some of the external factors are the family's socio-economic background and school policies. The internal factors are communication between families and schools and how social interaction between schools and families occurs (Epstein & Sanders, 1996). This framework will help answer the research question concerning the teacher's attitude regarding family engagement practices and how it changes during the teacher preparation program.

Purpose Statement

Despite the empirical research that supports family engagement, teacher education programs are not always successful in preparing preservice and novice teachers to engage effectively in activities to support families (Abel, 2014; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Sanders, Jones, & Abel, 2002). Current literature suggests that teachers know that family involvement matters (Lawson, 2003); however, they do not receive adequate hands-on training and experience to understand parents, build partnerships and engage families in trusting relationships that benefit parents and teachers as well as schools. It is important to know the current landscape of preservice teacher preparation for family and community engagement in teacher preparation programs. This study will look at the perspective of preservice teachers on their preparation for working

with parents in the largest urban university in the Southwestern United States. Teacher education programs, university professors, and school districts may benefit by further enhancing their programs for family engagement.

Methods and Procedure

Research Design

This study employs a group comparison and non-experimental survey research design with quantitative data collection methods. To accomplish the goals of this study, cross-sectional survey methodology was used to collect data from 3rd and 4th year preservice teachers in an Early Childhood (EC) - 6 elementary education program at a large urban university. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), cross-sectional survey methodology is a time efficient design, as data are collected at one point in time from predetermined population. In this study, quantitative data were collected from two groups of preservice teachers at one point in time.

Sample and Data Collection

Participants. Participants for the study were all the students enrolled in the 3rd and 4th year of EC-6 teacher preparation program at a large urban university. This teacher education program prepares teachers for EC-6, 4-8, 8-12, and EC-12 certification levels and is organized into four phases: pre-teaching, developing teaching, student teaching 1, and student teaching 2. Demographic information about the participants was gathered and shared in the final paper.

Participant Selection. Purposive sampling was used in this study. According to Krathwohl (1998), purposive sampling is used when certain groups are likely to provide rich information. All the preservice teachers in their third and fourth year of EC-6 teacher education program at a large research university were selected to participate in the study as they completed their required coursework for pre-teaching and had the opportunity to observe and student teach in the public school classrooms. The third and fourth year preservice teachers provided rich information regarding their experiences in the program.

Instruments

Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Form. The Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Scale consists of 12 Likert-type items that measure teachers' attitudes towards and preparation for family engagement. This instrument was first developed by Teagarden and Knorr (2010) and utilizes a four-point scale ranging from one (not prepared) to four (well prepared). According to Groff and Knorr (2010), the survey scale is designed based on the national standards of Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) for Family-School Partnerships and best practices for family engagement.

Additionally, four open-ended questions were added to the survey to gather evidence of instructional strategies that promote knowledge, skills, and understanding of EC-6 preservice teachers for family engagement in student learning. Further in the survey, there were four demographic questions about: 1) studying year, 2) gender, 3) ethnicity, and 4) teaching field.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection began at the beginning of the fall semester 2016 and continued until the early part of November. An online survey along with the consent form was distributed via email to all the students enrolled in their third and fourth year of teacher preparations program using the listserve database. The response rate was over 80%, and no face-to-face surveys were administered. A reminder was sent out after one week and again after two weeks in the form of the initial letter and invitation. The data were entered into a statistical software program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis.

Results

Demographics

A total of 439 students responded to the survey link sent in the email to all the junior and seniors enrolled in the fall semester of teacher education program in the large urban university. Twelve percent (12%) of students who responded the survey were male and eighty-eight (88%) were female. Table 1 presents the demographic information for preservice teachers (N=430).

Table 1
Demographic Information (N=430)

Ethnicity	Number of Responses	Percentage
American Indian Alaskan Native	*	*
Asian or Pacific Islander	63	15%
Black or African American	34	8%
Hispanic or Latino	167	39%
White / Caucasian	142	33%
Mixed Race	23	5%

*This category was omitted due to low number

The Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Scale was used to measure the preservice teacher's preparation for family engagement during the program; the Cronbach's Alpha for the survey items, $n=12$, was also calculated to test the reliability of the instrument of teachers' perspectives. According to reliability statistics, Cronbach's Alpha was reported as .940, which is interpreted as a highly reliable set of questions for this section of the instrument. The highest rated item ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .775$) was "Understanding the Value of Parent Involvement." The lowest rated item on the Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Scale ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.952$) stated, "I have the necessary skills to offer training that may enable parents to serve as representatives in decision-making bodies". Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of survey items and subscales (N=360).

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Items and Subscales (N=360)

	Items	M	SD
1.	Ability to Work with Parents	2.63	.897
2.	Ability to Hold Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences	2.43	.973
3.	Ability to Affect School Policies Concerning Parent Involvement	2.25	.936
4.	Understanding of Available Parent Resources	2.37	.975
5.	Understanding of How to Build a Family Friendly School or Classroom	2.98	.863
6.	I have the necessary skills to offer training that may enable parents to serve as representatives in decision-making bodies	2.09	.952
7.	Ability to Work with Diverse Families/Parents	2.97	.877
8.	Understanding of Parent Involvement in Title I NCLB	2.26	.992
9.	Understanding of Teacher Responsibility for Parent Involvement	2.78	.870
10.	Learned Strategies to work with Parents	2.48	.947
11.	Understanding the Value of Parent Involvement	3.33	.775
12.	Ability to determine if parents have sufficient knowledge about their child's educational needs to make major educational decisions for them	2.52	.897

To understand specific ways the preparation program is helping teachers learn to engage with diverse families, this open-ended item was included: "List the specific ways your teacher preparation program prepared you to work with families of various ethnic backgrounds in an urban school settings". Preservice teachers reported that the most common way was through classroom discussion (27%). Another twenty one percent of the preservice teachers responded that observation and field experience helped them prepared to work with families. Another, twenty five percent reported that required coursework and assigned readings help them learn to engage with diverse families. Moreover, eight percent of preservice teachers mentioned that specific assignments and class projects also helped preparing them for working with families. However, nineteen percent of the respondent mentioned that they had not received any instructions regarding how to work with various families to help them with their children's learning. Table 3 provides the summary of preservice teachers' responses (N=360) of specific ways the program prepared them to work with families.

Table 3

Summary of Preservice Teacher Responses of Specific Ways Teacher Preparation Program Prepared them to Work with Families (N=360)

Specific Ways	Number of Responses	Percentage
Through Classroom Discussions	96	27%
Observation and Field Experience	76	21%
Required Coursework and Readings	91	25%
Specific Assignments and Projects	29	8%
No Instruction Received	68	19%

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the preservice teachers' attitudes towards their preparation for involving families from diverse ethnic backgrounds in children's learning in urban school setting. Years of research have provided evidence of greater academic achievement and positive learning outcomes as a result of family's involvement and home-school partnership. The five core elements that should be part of preservice teacher preparation for family engagement include incorporating the national standards, advanced curriculum, collaborations among various stakeholders, continuous professional development, and evaluation of learning (Caspé, Lopez, Chu & Weiss, 2011).

The results of the study encourage understanding of the current evaluation of learning and make suggestions for further advancing the curriculum and/or professional development for the teachers. The findings of this study are consistent with the past studies where preservice teachers understand and value the importance of partnering with families for the child's learnings. However, teacher preparation programs need greater efforts to teach preservice teachers how to promote and encourage parents to take decision-making and advocacy roles to impact the school policies concerning parental involvement in their child education. The study results also indicated a need to have more classroom discussions regarding the state and national policies/programs involving students' learning to empower preservice teachers with the knowledge to support child and their families' educational needs. Likewise, the need for instruction and experience working with diverse parents was highlighted not only for novice teachers but also for experienced teachers by their school principals (Swain & Lewis, 2016).

This study highlighted that teacher preparation programs are incorporating the knowledge and experience regarding working with families at various levels of the program. The open-ended question revealed that preservice teachers are learning through classroom discussions, required coursework, readings, various class assignments, classroom observation, and field experiences. One unexpected finding was that percentage of the specific ways of learning to engage with families through field experiences was not the highest response received from the preservice teachers.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study is limited to examining preservice teacher's field experiences during a teacher preparation program at only one of the large research university in southwestern part of United States and may not be representative of most teacher education programs. Further research will be needed to incorporate findings from other teacher education programs. Additionally, future studies might want to include interviews with preservice teachers to authenticate the responses received in the questionnaire, as there is no way of telling how much respondents had to understand the full context of the situation before answering the questions.

References

- Abel, Y. (2014). Process into products: Supporting teachers to engage parents. *Education and Urban Society, 46*(2), 181-191.
- Baum, A. C., & Swick, K. J. (2008). Dispositions toward families and family involvement: Supporting preservice teacher development. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 35*(6), 579-584.
- Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., Chu, A., & Weiss, H. B. (2011). Teaching the teachers: Preparing educators to engage families for student achievement. *Harvard Family Research Project*.
- Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., & Wolos, C. (2007). Family involvement in elementary school children's education. Family involvement makes a difference: Evidence that family involvement promotes school success for every child of every age. Number 2, Winter 2006/2007. *Harvard Family Research Project*.
- Chavkin, N. F. (2005). Strategies for preparing educators to enhance the involvement of diverse families in their children's education. *Multicultural Education, 13*(2), 16-20.
- Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sanders, M. G. (1996). School, family, community partnerships: Overview and new directions. *Education and sociology: An encyclopedia*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sanders, M. G. (2006). Prospects for change: Preparing educators for school, family, and community partnerships. *Peabody Journal of Education, 81*(2), 81-120.
- Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2003). Observation and interviewing. *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education, 5*, 455-463.
- Groff, J., & Knorr, S. (2010). *IHE quasi-experiment 2010 progress report*. Unpublished manuscript, Kansas Parent Information Resource Center.
- Krathwohl, D. R. (1998). *Methods of educational and social science research: An integrated approach*. (Second ed.). New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Lawson, M. A. (2003). School-family relations in context parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement. *Urban Education, 38*(1), 77-133.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009). *Standards for early childhood professional preparation programs*. Position statement. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children
- Sanders, M. G., Jones, G. A., & Abel, Y. (2002). Involving families and communities in the education of children and youth placed at-risk. *Yearbook of the National Society of the Study of Education, 101*(2), 171-188.
- Shartrand, A. M., Weiss, H. B., Kreider, H. M., & Lopez, M. E. (1997). *New skills for new schools: Preparing teachers in family involvement*. Harvard Family Research Project. Cambridge: MA.
- Swain, C., & Lewis, M. (2016). Using Texas principals' perceptions of novice and experienced teacher needs to inform program development. *The Texas Forum of Teacher Education 6*(1), 93-108.
- Texas Education Agency (2015). *Texas education today*. Retrieved from <http://tea.texas.gov/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=25769822391>
- The Center for Public Education. (2012). *The changing demographics: at a glance*. Retrieved on April 2, 2013 from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). *Population growth*. Retrieved on April 2, 2013 from <https://www.census.gov/>
- Weiss, H. B. (2005). *Preparing educators to involve families: From theory to practice*. Sage.