

Integrating Interprofessional Service-Learning into Teacher Education Programs: Preparing the Next Generation of Teachers

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Abstract

This article describes an interprofessional service-learning initiative to address the educational and psychosocial needs of grandparent-headed families. This qualitative study explores the perceptions and experiences of the preservice teacher education students involved in implementing this project. Findings suggest that there are numerous benefits for teacher education students when service-learning is integrated into required coursework. The potential benefits for teacher education students that come from participating in service-learning include a broader understanding of the unique strengths and needs of nontraditional families, new insights into reflective practice, and an increased awareness of the benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Introduction

There is a growing emphasis in higher education around the importance of developing active citizens (Markham, 2013). As a result, the numbers of community-university initiatives that center on civic engagement are increasingly prominent. These collaborative initiatives involve partnerships for research and service designed to capitalize on the university's goals of civic engagement and applied research (Anderson-Butcher & Ashton, 2004; Benson, Harkavy, Johaneck, & Puckett, 2009).

In part because of its long history of field education as a central component for learning, teacher education has been actively involved at the interface of the university and the

community for many years. Although fieldwork requirements vary across programs, opportunities for field-based learning have long been considered an important component of teacher education programs (Bernadowski, Perry, & Del Greco, 2013). Just as more engaged universities are seeking to transform universities and communities, more engaged teacher education programs are seeking to transform preservice teachers' field experiences through greater involvement with community members (e.g. vulnerable students and families) and in partnership with school districts as they work to help solve problems (Kronick & Cunningham, 2013).

Among the more pressing problems currently facing many elementary schools is how to more effectively address non-academic barriers to children's learning such as emotional issues, behavioral challenges, living in poverty, and family problems that can impede their ability to be successful in school (Anderson-Butcher et al, 2008; Mellin, 2009). Addressing these challenges becomes even more vital in communities where teachers are increasingly struggling to meet the needs of students from nontraditional families, such as grandparent-headed families, many of whom are exposed to significant family and environmental stressors and trauma (Wadsworth & Santiago, 2008). This study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of preservice teacher education students participating in an interprofessional service-learning initiative designed to address the educational and psychosocial needs of grandparent-headed families.

Interprofessional Education and Collaboration

In recognition that no one profession can address the increasingly complex needs of today's students, including those from nontraditional families, teachers are increasingly asking for help from social workers to better support children's healthy social and emotional development and more effectively intervene with those children already experiencing difficulties (Adelman & Taylor, 1999). In fact, effective collaboration between teachers and social workers is now considered critical for providing adequate academic and psycho-social services for children in a range of educational settings (Berzin et al, 2011). Such collaboration may best be presented along a continuum along which interdisciplinary collaboration can be distinguished as the "integration of the knowledge and expertise of professional to reach a common goal through shared decision-making and practice" (Mellin, 2009, p. 5).

In an effort to strengthen the effectiveness of interdisciplinary collaboration in educational settings and better meet the increasingly complex learning and behavioral needs of today's students, greater attention is now being given to the potential role that preservice interprofessional education and collaboration can play in strengthening the foundation for teachers during professional preparation. The need for preservice interprofessional education, defined as occasions when two or more professions learn with, from, and about each other to improve collaboration and the quality of care, is now considered as inevitable as the need for collaborative services, yet opportunities for preservice interprofessional education and collaboration continue to be available primarily on an ad hoc basis (Allen-Meares, 1998).

Some of the challenges to preservice interprofessional education and collaboration

in teacher education come from a tradition of educating university students by immersing them into one chosen profession; the proliferation of "silo" models within curricula; and a structure created by discipline-specific professional codes and credentialing/licensing bodies that often further constrain collaborative efforts (Bluteau & Jackson, 2009). According to Friend and Cook (2010), collaboration is a style of interaction that can only occur when people engage in a specific process, task or activity. Therefore, in order to effectively cultivate collaboration between teachers and social workers, it is essential that there be opportunities that bring them together during their professional preparation programs to participate in interprofessional tasks or activities.

Service-Learning

In order to better support preservice teachers in developing the content knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions to become highly effective teachers, they must have opportunities to engage in activities that foster increased understandings of nontraditional families, strengthen their knowledge of Common Core Standards, and encourage them to work across disciplines. Nutefall (2011) defines service-learning as pedagogy that is experiential and balances the needs of both students and community members, links service and learning using reflection, and fosters positive student development as individuals, citizens, and pre-professionals. Accordingly, a primary purpose of service-learning is to extend the university classroom into the community by providing opportunities for students to reach their professional preparation goals (Nutefall, 2011). Therefore, it is vitally important for teacher educators to explore avenues for preservice teachers to participate in as many service-learning opportunities as possible during their professional preparation as a way

to deepen their understandings of diversity, social justice, and themselves (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007).

Working with Nontraditional Families in the School Context: Grandparent-Headed Families

One way to support preservice teacher education students in deepening their understandings of diversity, social justice, and themselves is by engaging them in service-learning initiatives with non-traditional families, particularly those that have been exposed to significant environmental stressors and trauma, such as grandparent-headed families.

Among such families are the 2.7 million grandparents that are solely responsible for the care of their grandchildren in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Grandparents who raise their grandchildren are part of the backbone of healthy child development, maintaining family cohesiveness and providing love and security (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Their caregiving helps grandchildren overcome experiences of early abuse and domestic violence, which occurs in disproportionate numbers of these families (Bullock, 2004). Despite their significant contributions, many grandparents share that their needs as custodial caregivers and their grandchildren's educational needs are often unmet (Shakya, Usita, Eisenberg, Weston, & Liles, 2012). Moreover, custodial grandparents face multiple challenges that include inadequate access to legal, financial, community, and educational resources (Baker & Silverstein, 2008; Carr, Gray, & Hayslip, 2012; Yancura, 2013) and a lack of understanding from their grandchildren's schools about their unique family dynamics (Shakya et al., 2012).

The lack of understanding of custodial grandparents' experiences is especially concerning given that children raised in kinship foster care tend to exhibit more

behavioral, emotional, and academic difficulties than children who live with their parents (Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2011; Smith & Palmieri, 2007). Children raised by their grandparents face significant educational challenges that include truancy, suspension, and a lack of motivation to graduate (Musil, Warner, McNamara, Rokoff, & Turek, 2008), and these multiple risk factors hinder a range of positive school outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In Edwards' (2009) study, teachers reported that children being raised by their grandparents demonstrate "somatic complaints, anxious/depressed, social, attention, and aggressive behavior problems" (p.140) compared to the children living with their parents. Many of these children also present increased borderline clinical or clinically significant scores on the scales of social problems and aggressive behaviors (Edwards, 2009). These findings highlight the need for teachers and other school personnel to better understand the unique challenges that children raised by their grandparents may face.

The Current Project

In an effort to better identify the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren in Central New York State, a community needs assessment was conducted in 2012. Twelve interviews and two focus groups with custodial grandparents found the importance of school and family engagement in working with grandparent-headed families in the school context (Lee & Blitz, 2014). This needs assessment also revealed a lack of understanding by school personnel about the unique strengths and needs of grandparent-headed families. Findings indicated that this lack of understanding significantly contributed to the prevalence of strained home-school partnerships with their grandchildren's school, especially in regard to communication. Lastly, the grandparents expressed a strong desire to establish

networks among grandparents raising grandchildren in this community.

Based on the findings of this needs assessment, and in the spirit of Harkavy and Puckett's (1994) view of universities as "mission driven" and helping to promote "civic consciousness," this initiative pursued a community-university model that engaged preservice teacher education students in an interprofessional service-learning initiative through which we collectively learned from and with the community, did research collaboratively with and not on people, and contributed to the solution of significant community problems.

This study aimed to explore the experiences of preservice teacher education students engaged in an interprofessional service-learning project as well as their perceptions of the benefits and challenges. The overall goals of this initiative were: 1) to provide opportunities for preservice teacher education students to extend what they are learning in the university classroom into the community through service-learning to reach professional preparation goals; and, 2) to provide opportunities for preservice teacher education students to engage in interprofessional education and collaboration through service-learning.

In order to accomplish these goals, we developed, implemented, and evaluated a semester-long math and science education program, and family counseling services for grandparent-headed families. The families participating in this project were part of a support group that had been formed by a faculty member from the university's Department of Social Work the previous year. The monthly math education program, which was led by the teacher education students, took place in a local school district's administrative conference room. The science education and family counseling, which were led by physics and social work interns respectively, were provided in a university

classroom. Families participated in the interdisciplinary activities as a group. Graduate students from the University's Department of Education participated in this service-learning initiative as part of their teacher education program.

This initiative was conducted during the spring of 2014. During an initial meeting with grandparent-headed families, physics interns, social work interns, and teacher education students in January, families requested help with math education so that they could better understand new school curricula based on the recently adopted Common Core Standards. During this same time period, local school district administrators described the need to better prepare teachers to collaborate with non-traditional families, particularly around recently adopted Common Core Standards and curriculum modules. Additionally, the preservice teacher education students participating in this service-learning initiative expressed an interest in gaining more experience with the Common Core Standards for elementary math as well as collaborating more effectively with nontraditional families.

In response to the conversations that occurred during this initial meeting, teacher education students developed and implemented monthly math education for the grandparent-headed families as part of a service-learning initiative conducted in collaboration with university faculty and interns from across disciplines. During the spring semester, teacher education students and social work interns participated in ongoing discussions with grandparent-headed families around a range of topics that included home-school communication and Common Core Standards. Each month after the families left for the evening, the teacher education students and social work interns engaged in lengthy discussions about a range of topics such as working with nontraditional

families, discipline-specific roles and responsibilities, and interdisciplinary collaboration in schools.

Methods

Participants

Twelve teacher education students participated in this study that aimed to explore their experiences and perceptions during an interprofessional service-learning initiative. All of the participants were female, White, and between 21–26 years old. All of the participants were enrolled in a two-year special education master's program. Although some of the students had initial state teaching certification, none of the graduate students were employed as classroom teachers at the time of this study. This interprofessional service-learning initiative was conducted as part of the teacher education students' required course on *Collaboration with Families and Staff*. During this same time period, the teacher education students were also participating in either fieldwork or student teaching in Preschool-Grade 6 settings.

Data Collection and Sample

This study utilized reflective essays and a focus group with teacher education students to explore the following research questions: 1) What are the experiences of preservice teacher education students engaged in interprofessional service-learning? and 2) What do preservice teacher education students perceive as some of the benefits and challenges of integrating interprofessional service-learning into teacher education programs? A research assistant conducted a focus group with the teacher education students in a university classroom in May 2014 after the completion of the project. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The reflective essays were submitted by the teacher education students at the end of the spring semester.

The following questions were used to investigate the teacher education students' experiences and perceptions during this interprofessional service-learning initiative:

1. What were your experiences during the interprofessional service-learning initiative?
2. Based on your experiences, are there areas for improvement? If so, where?
3. What do you perceive as some of the benefits of integrating interprofessional service-learning into teacher education programs?
4. What do you perceive as some of the challenges of integrating interprofessional service-learning into teacher education programs?

Data Analysis

One education researcher and one social work researcher conducted the data analysis of the reflective essays and focus group transcript. An inductive and data driven thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was adopted for this study. Using an inductive approach, data analysis was conducted in five steps: 1) researchers' independent reviewing of the original transcript of the focus group and reflective papers to reduce persuasion or bias between researchers (Padgett, 1998); 2) identifying themes within the focus group transcript and reflective papers; 3) comparing themes across respondents; 4) generating codes from the comparison process; and 5) determining the reliability of the codes by selectively reviewing the focus group transcript and reflective papers for examples representing themes and codes. In the final review process of the synthesis of themes, the researchers engaged in extensive conversation, reviewed and discussed their individual findings, so they could then document and finalize agreed-upon themes and quotations. This process continued until a point of "theoretical saturation," at which point additional data no longer increased

understanding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The collaborative discussions increased the internal integrity of the findings as the separate researchers identified common, overlapping, and frequently occurring themes.

Findings

Based on focus group and reflective essay data from an interprofessional service-learning initiative with twelve teacher education students, three primary themes emerged.

Theme 1: Integrating Interprofessional Service-Learning into Teacher Education Programs Deepens Students' Understandings of Diversity

Data across teacher education students affirmed the value of integrating interprofessional service-learning into teacher education programs as a way to deepen preservice students' understandings of diverse families, including nontraditional families such as grandparent-headed families. As one teacher education student, Carly, described:

Although I have witnessed a variety of home lives for students, I have never had the opportunity to work hand-in-hand within a set of circumstances. I have often heard of students living with their grandparents and wondered how that situation played out. Working on this project truly opened my eyes.

Her classmate, Megan, shared:

This experience taught me to be mindful that not all children live with a mother and father. It's not like I thought that all children come from a household of a mother and father, but I guess I never really thought about the barriers and challenges these grandparents and other guardians could be facing.

For other teacher education students, participating in interprofessional service-learning also increased their awareness of the challenges facing today's families, particularly the unique struggles of nontraditional families. A teacher education student, Kelly, noted:

Each family shared their perceptions of the [curriculum] changes, feelings about communication with teachers and schools, and concerns about the homework being assigned. I found this experience meaningful because we were able to better understand each other's perspective. I was also able to gain a deeper understanding of how "regular" school policies and practices can serve to marginalize certain groups.

An increased awareness of the unique challenges facing many of today's families was also shared by Dana, "I learned that sometimes it's not that they [families] don't care, it's that they don't know what help is available or how to access that information." This deeper understanding of the family perspective was echoed by Lisa.

This project taught me many things about working in the community and insights into the feelings and struggles of multi-generational families. The first thing I learned was about some of the difficult lives that these students and families have had. One of the grandmothers spoke to me about how she ended up with custody of her grandchildren and the difficulties they were still having several years later. I was reminded that we cannot know the hardships of others or relate to their situations unless we take the time to listen to their stories.

For other participants, this deeper understanding included an increased

knowledge of the challenges today's families face as the result of recently adopted of the Common Core Standards. A teacher education student, Tonya, described the following:

I got to witness firsthand the anger many families feel about the Common Core Standards. It quickly became clear to me that schools are not doing a great job of communicating with families about the Common Core, how they [families] can be involved, and why we are even using new learning standards.

Across interviews, participants also noted the ways in which participating in interprofessional service-learning as part of their teacher education program resulted in an increased awareness that non-traditional families, including grandparent-headed families, also have unique strengths. A student, Shari, described: "I learned that every guardian wants what is best for their child and hopes that they will someday make it to college or wherever they wish to go with their lives." Another student, Jenna, noted how this project allowed her to see firsthand the ways in which custodial grandparents want to better support their grandchildren's education. She described it as follows:

We were able to communicate with families and provide them with the tools to understand what happens in classrooms. Creating math activities families can do together helped them gain a better understanding of what happens during the school day, what their grandchildren are learning, and how they can successfully help them at home.

This sentiment was echoed by her classmate, Karen, when she shared:

It was a wonderful feeling to see how grateful families were to have teacher education students and social work interns sit and talk to them about their anxieties around having to use the Common Core Standards and modules with their grandchildren.

Theme 2: Integrating Interprofessional Service-Learning into Teacher Education Programs Supports Reflective Practice

The participants in this study shared that engaging in an interprofessional service-learning initiative with grandparent-headed families supported reflective practice. For some participants, with this reflective practice came an increased awareness of the importance of effective communication with families. Shari, a teacher education student, described:

One of the things I learned is that families do care but sometimes they are just afraid that the teacher doesn't want to take time to listen to them. As a teacher, I need to try to make every family feel comfortable coming and talking to me about anything they feel they need to.

Another student, Dana, shared her thoughts:

As teachers, it is important to make sure that school events reach the intended audience. If I am familiar with my student's home life, I can be a liaison for communicating appropriate and helpful services that families might need.

Another teacher education student shared an increased awareness of the power of words. She noted:

I learned that when teachers aren't aware that the language they use is exclusionary, they fail to create an environment that welcomes all families. This can be seen when schools send parent letters or hold

parent nights. Oversights like not knowing with whom certain students live can affect the quality of the teacher-student relationship.

This sentiment was echoed by another teacher education student, Erin, when she described some of the ways in which ineffective communication skills can negatively impact home-school partnerships.

As we discussed, there can be many barriers to communication between home and school. When we worked with the grandparents raising grandchildren, we could see those barriers. It was obvious that the grandparents we talked to were very frustrated with the way their grandchildren's teachers were dealing with communication around the Common Core. It felt good to help clear up some of the confusion.

The ways in which participating in interprofessional service-learning fostered new insights into strengthening home-school communication was shared by Kelly.

The importance of home-school communication is the biggest take away from the experience. Families want more information and they want more input. Providing multiple ways of communicating is so important when seeking to get families involved or improve home-school relations. Also, maintaining positive, non-judgmental relationships with families is a key when promoting collaboration. Teachers need to be willing to extend multiple efforts and go above and beyond to reach families where they are. They need to know what type of families their students come from and be sensitive to the fact that families come in different forms.

For other teacher education students, participating in interprofessional service-learning with nontraditional families encouraged them to make stronger and more personal connections between the university classroom and their firsthand experiences as Megan described below.

A connection I made between the course and this project was how we were taught to be mindful of how we speak to others and even how to address notes home as "dear families." One of the grandparents told us that her grandchild's previous teacher would only address things to parents, and even had an assignment to write about their parents. This grandparent seemed very upset by this because it upset her grandchild. This particular grandchild's parents aren't even in the picture. In that moment I saw how important it was that these little adjustments were made by teachers, because they may seem like little things, but they matter and are very important.

Jenna also highlighted the ways in which university faculty helped deepen students' understandings through modeling as follows.

We discussed the importance of trust in building relationships. It was clear that the families were comfortable with the faculty and open to expressing ideas. The faculty had to work very hard to earn the trust of these families and create an open and honest atmosphere. I learned ways to create an inviting atmosphere in which to welcome families like offering snacks and being respectful of all opinions and questions. When someone expressed an opinion she (Social Work faculty) allowed that person to know they were heard and their idea would be taken into

consideration. This atmosphere helped participants feel welcome, respected, and appreciated—all of which improves collaboration.

The notion that teacher education students gain new insights when university faculty members model effective practices was also echoed by another education student, Karen.

I learned the importance of persistence. It would be very easy at times for the Social Work faculty member and the Education faculty member to get discouraged by the low attendance of families at some meetings. They never got discouraged because they feel so strongly about what they are doing and confident that in the long run everyone will benefit [from interprofessional education and collaboration], especially the grandchildren. I saw a group of educated, passionate women who truly care about families and children. I also saw families that love their children and want as much information as they can to help them.

For other students like Shari, participating in this service-learning initiative strengthened connections between course-work and fieldwork.

I made connections back to the collaboration course from working with the grandparent-headed families. One thing I learned is that every person, whether it is a family or a co-worker, wants to be listened to. They want to know that they are being heard and understood and that someone is willing to do something about what they are saying.

This sentiment was also shared by Karen.

We talked in class at length about ways for teachers to collaborate and communicate with families. I was

able to make some important connections during this project to course content, especially when we had a discussion about the Common Core Standards and the importance of providing families with more information so they can better help their children.

For other participants, new insights into teaching practices also brought a greater awareness of the importance of teachers taking a more proactive role in creating effective collaborative efforts with today's families, especially non-traditional families. Megan described her view:

I was able to connect to the time spent collaborating with the families. We had done several readings and discussed the importance of building relationships with others. In order to do so you must show respect for one another, be compassionate, and work at building relationships because they don't happen overnight. I saw this firsthand. One of the grandparents told me that she never really had an interest in our project until the Social Work faculty member personally came to her house and showed a true interest in helping her, and her grandson. This touched my heart and I was so happy she shared this with me. In that moment, I was able to connect what we had been learning about to a real life example of what happens when collaboration is done correctly.

Another teacher education student, Lisa, learned new strategies for helping all families feel more welcome in schools. She revealed:

This project will inform my future collaboration with families by helping me remember the simple things. During this project, it was sometimes frustrating how few

families actually came to our meetings. Our instructor frequently reminded us of the importance of having meetings where families can walk to them, providing food, placing many signs on the doors to direct people to the meeting, and having activities for the children. Whether I am trying to lead a program for families or having a family night at school it is important to remember that the more accessible I make things, the more likely it is families will come.

Another teacher education student, Erin, shared:

In class, we read articles about diverse families. My experiences with the [grandparent-headed] families taught me the importance of getting to know not only your students, but their guardians. By doing so, you will develop a trusting relationship and understand each family's unique diversity.

Important connections between theory and practice were also made by Dana when she shared the following:

We learned in class that interpersonal collaboration is a style of direct interaction between two co-equal parties engaged in shared decision making toward a common goal. In this project, I saw the importance of possessing adequate communication skills. Organizing the math activities took a lot of back and forth communication. This was needed to coordinate the event, secure a venue, organize food and materials, and invite everyone. In the future when I am a teacher on a school committee, it will be beneficial to begin by collectively coming up with a focus goal agreed upon like we did here.

Theme 3: Participating in Inter-professional Service-Learning Presents Mostly Benefits and a Few Challenges to Preservice Teacher Education Students

Data from across participants highlighted what teacher education students perceive as mostly benefits and a few challenges to participating in interprofessional service-learning as part of their professional preparation.

For the vast majority of participants, a primary benefit was the ways in which this service-learning initiative filled a gap in their graduate studies by providing opportunities to work across disciplines as preservice teacher education students. As one student, Jenna, described:

I think teacher education programs lack an emphasis on interprofessional education. If we understand the duties and expertise of other professionals in schools then we can better support our objectives as teachers. Furthermore, having a better understanding of how to work with other professionals in schools benefits the children we work with. Incorporating projects like this into teacher education is difficult. Time and administrative support is needed to support them.

Another teacher education student, Jordan, shared the following:

This [interprofessional service-learning] really broadens teacher education students' exposure to other professions as well as helps them gain a better understanding of the multiple roles to collaboration. Teacher education students can learn the interpersonal skills necessary for problem-solving and decision-making as well as working in a group. By including different professionals, teacher education students are able to

see and hear a different perspective, rather than just a teacher's point of view.

The opportunity to work across disciplines as a preservice teacher was described by many participants as also important for gaining a better understanding of each discipline's strengths as teacher education student, Kelly, remarked:

Through our collaboration with social workers and families, I came to realize all of the ways in which these individuals, with their unique knowledge base and strengths, could benefit me as a teacher. Without collaborative experience, it is difficult to recognize how different people's strengths can come together to create a perfect fit.

Another student, Megan, shared her perspective:

I learned from this experience how important it is to collaborate with others, like social workers. They played such an important role in this collaborative experience and showed me as the saying goes, 'it takes a village'.

Her classmate, Erin, stated:

This is the first instance I have experienced any sort of interprofessional education in my teacher education program and I benefitted greatly. I think it is important to expose teachers to as many outside resources as possible while showing them different people in the school they can collaborate with. I think by exposing students in teacher education programs to the realities of working with other professionals, they will be more comfortable going to these individuals for help and resources

when needed. Many teacher education programs may not include interprofessional education because they may not have the cooperation from other departments.

Some participants felt the benefits were so great that interprofessional service-learning should become a requirement for all teacher education programs. Carly remarked:

I believe interprofessional education should be a requirement for teacher education programs. This opportunity taught me a variety of things that I would not have seen in my practicum experiences. During interprofessional education, teacher education students learn from students from other professions. This allows teacher education students to see a variety of perspectives, improve collaboration among professions, and promotes teamwork.

The value of preservice interprofessional education and collaboration was echoed by Tonya.

I think that if you collaborate with others within other professions, you might find ideas that you may not think of because people in different professions have different experiences. If you can learn it [interprofessional collaboration] now, once you are in a school it makes it so much more natural.

Lisa highlighted the benefits of gaining "real life" experience through interprofessional service-learning during professional preparation. She shared:

One of the most important benefits is gaining real life experience. Often teacher education seems very disconnected from the real world. What we learn in our classes can seem extremely disconnected from what

we see in our practicum and it can be very frustrating when these gaps are never addressed. This project really provided me with the opportunity to discuss and see with my own eyes the benefits and challenges in collaboration with families and other professionals.

In spite of the benefits, however, several participants, including Lisa, also noted challenges.

There were some problems that arose. Flexibility was necessary for this class. Barriers included low attendance, miscommunication, changes in syllabus, changes in assignments, and changes in meeting locations.

Her classmate, Carly, remarked, “Some of the challenges were defining roles, group dynamics, communication, classroom space, time and weather.”

Discussion

While data from a qualitative study with a small sample at one university are not generalizable, participants did highlight themes echoed in the research and their remarks shed light on some of the experiences of teacher education students during an interprofessional service-learning initiative, including potential benefits and challenges. The preservice teacher education students in this study positively characterized their experiences as part of an interprofessional service-learning initiative. Across the reflective papers and focus group, participants expressed a strong desire to participate in additional interprofessional service-learning experiences so that their teacher education program could be better connected to the “real world.”

The findings suggest that teacher education students benefit from participating in interprofessional service-learning

experiences that specifically include nontraditional families. Participants noted the ways in which their service-learning experiences deepened understandings of the unique strengths and struggles of nontraditional families, including grandparent-headed families. Through their participation in this interprofessional service-learning initiative, teacher education students became more aware of the increasing numbers of today’s students living in nontraditional families, how much families actually do care about education, and some of the barriers they may face. Participants also gained important insights into the ways in which a teacher’s choice of words can further marginalize nontraditional families.

This study also suggests that when teacher education students participate in interprofessional service-learning with nontraditional families, such as grandparent-headed families, they are better able to acknowledge the multifaceted needs of such families. In order to more effectively support students being raised in nontraditional families, it is critical for teachers to be able to identify each families’ social and mental health support needs, level of access to local resources, and develop ways to help them navigate these various systems. Considering the challenging life events and lack of resources with which nontraditional families, including grandparent-headed families, may face, teachers and other school personnel play an increasingly critical role in connecting them with appropriate community resources, especially those that foster family resiliency. For many teacher education students, with new insights into the multifaceted needs of nontraditional families also came a greater sense of self-efficacy around building effective home-school partnerships.

The findings show that the integration of interprofessional service-learning into teacher education programs also helps

students to be more reflective practitioners. This reflective practice increased the education students' awareness of the significance of positive and supportive communication with families. The students noted their observations of the education and social work faculty's strength-based family engagement and how this supported their engagement in reflective practice with grandparent-headed families. As the findings present, creating effective collaborative efforts that also encourage reflective practice is critically important when working with nontraditional families, especially considering that they may have limited resources and lack access to the K-12 educational system.

The findings of the study also suggest that despite a strong personal orientation toward interprofessional service-learning by university faculty, there can be challenges. Prior research (Bronstein, 2003; Anderson & Bronstein, 2012; Bronstein, Anderson, Terwilliger & Sager, 2012) highlights some of the challenges to interdisciplinary collaboration that were in evidence here. These include the need for teachers and social workers to better understand one another's professional background and the initial difficulties that can occur while attempting to maximize each other's strengths. Usually, students receive their professional preparation at universities where professional programs are organized in a traditional, discipline-specific fashion. Although certification and licensure requirements (fitting in interprofessional service-learning while still covering required course content) can be challenging, traditional models of teacher preparation continue to pose significant challenges to adequately preparing students to create strong home-school partnerships and work effectively across disciplines.

Another programmatic challenge to integrating preservice interprofessional

service-learning into teacher education programs is that it is still in the early stages of development. This challenge can be exaggerated in programs where it may also be perceived as an "add on" rather than an integral part of the plan of study or where organizational structures such as full time equivalent (FTE) guidelines for faculty, course scheduling protocols, and assigned classroom space may not fully support it. In spite of embracing an interdisciplinary orientation, the teacher education students and faculty members involved in this study also faced several challenges, in this case primarily due to scheduling issues.

In order to address the long-standing challenges to interprofessional education and collaboration, creating opportunities for preservice teacher education students to engage in such initiatives through service-learning is essential. The earlier in their professional programs that teachers and social workers can become familiar with the unique needs of diverse families and each other's roles and terminology, the more likely they are to develop a clearer understanding prior to working in schools. The clearer this understanding of the unique needs of diverse families and each other's roles and terminology, the more likely it is that they will be able to work effectively across disciplines to support optimal student outcomes.

Despite the challenges noted, the findings highlight the many benefits that come from teacher education students experiencing interprofessional education and collaboration firsthand. As one student shared, "Participating in this project as part of my collaboration course was very rewarding. I always feel as a student that being in the field and getting into the trenches of what you are learning is so much more effective than sitting in a classroom having someone tell you about it."

Lastly, some of the themes that emerged

from this study are consistent with other findings in the interprofessional collaboration and service-learning literature (Bronstein, 2003; Friend & Cook, 2010). The perception that opportunities for interprofessional collaboration in teacher education are limited due to lack of time is now widely accepted. However with increased emphasis on school-based intervention teams such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the need to create opportunities for preservice teachers to participate in interprofessional service-learning opportunities in order to develop the content knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions to become highly effective teachers is increasingly important.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is social desirability bias. The sample relied on students who have known the researcher as their instructor. The bias could impact responses to the questions on the effectiveness of the experience; therefore, the findings need to be interpreted with caution. Also, only female students participated in this study which limits generalizability of the findings to general education student population. It is recommended to include more diverse student samples in future research.

Conclusion

In recognition that universities must extend classroom learning even further into the community by providing opportunities for students to reach their professional preparation goals (Nutefall, 2011) and that no

one profession can address the complex needs of today's children, interprofessional service-learning must become an integral part of teacher education programs. This study suggests that opportunities for preservice interprofessional service-learning as part of professional preparation will play an important role in preparing the next generation of teachers to effectively collaborate with diverse families, such as grandparent-headed families, and work across disciplines.

This study also supports earlier findings that engaging preservice teachers in interprofessional service-learning projects can be instrumental in preparing them to work as qualified professionals with social workers, and colleagues from other disciplines, to positively impact the delivery of services in educational programs (Pollard, Miers, & Ricjaby, 2012). If we are to achieve positive student outcomes through interdisciplinary collaborative efforts, interprofessional service-learning for preservice teacher education students must become the rule, not the exception.

Opportunities for preservice interprofessional service-learning can also have positive ripple effects within teacher education programs. These "ripples" come from initiating community-university service-learning opportunities. When teacher education faculty and students engage in service-learning with colleagues from another discipline such as social work, they are also modeling this powerful tool for other faculty and students as well as for the community members-families, teachers, and other school personnel, with whom they will soon collaborate as the next generation of teachers.

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