

It Takes a Village: A Clinical Approach to Training Teacher Candidates for Collaboration

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ABSTRACT: As classrooms become increasingly more diverse in terms of culture, linguistics, and student need, teacher education programs must evolve to develop teachers who are not only specialized in their field or content, but who are effective collaborators with colleagues and families. However, it is not enough for teacher candidates to have knowledge of best practice for collaboration, they must have opportunities to practice in structured and safe situations to develop these skills (Ball, Sleep, Boerst, & Bass, 2009). This paper provides recommendations and guidance for implementing a clinical approach to prepare early childhood teacher candidates who are skilled in collaboration to meet a wide range of student needs across diverse instructional settings within a professional development school (PDS) model. Through a series of practice-based assignments and carefully selected field experiences, teacher candidates have opportunities to practice and apply skills related to collaborating with families and colleagues.

This manuscript addresses PDS essential number seven as it applies “a structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration”.

Teachers today, more than ever, are expected to meet a wide range of language, learning, and behavioral needs in the general education setting. In addition, due to a growing immigrant population, classrooms in the United States are becoming more culturally diverse (United States Census Bureau, 2017). As classrooms become increasingly more diverse in terms of culture, linguistics, and student need, it has never been more important for teachers to partner with families and other educational professionals with varied expertise. Therefore, teacher education programs must evolve to develop teachers who are not only specialized in their field or content, but who are effective collaborators with colleagues and families. Teacher education programs have long recognized the importance of collaboration, but this has not translated to consistent integration of practice across institutions (Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2012). It is not enough for teacher candidates to have knowledge of best practice for collaboration, they must have opportunities to practice their skills and apply their knowledge in structured and safe situations to develop these skills (Ball, Sleep, Boerst, & Bass, 2009). This paper describes how one early childhood teacher education program has responded to the obligation to develop teacher candidates who are skilled in collaboration to meet a wide range of student needs across diverse instructional settings within a Professional Development School (PDS) model. A discussion about collaboration with the university, specialists, and families is presented with specific clinical examples in PDS schools. While the activities described can be applied to most teacher education programs, this paper describes experiences within the context of an early childhood teacher preparation

program and standards set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

University Collaboration

The PDS model offers great potential to foster teacher candidates' collaboration by supporting the “active engagement of teacher candidates in the school community” which is an essential area of PDS work (NAPDS, 2008, p. 7). Strong PDS partnerships are ideal since collaboration is already occurring between the school, university, and community; and the mission to translate theory into practice is openly supported (Henry, Tryjankowski, DeCamillo, & Bailey, 2010). The PDS model allows teacher candidates to gain skills and knowledge in the university classroom, with opportunities to practice, and then receive a consistent message from their mentor teachers and university supervisors. These intensive field experiences occur when teacher candidates are accepted into the Early Childhood program. These candidates begin their teacher preparation experiences by taking methodology courses, as well as participating in internship experiences prior to their student teaching/full-time internship. Through a series of practice-based assignments and carefully selected field experiences, teacher candidates have opportunities to practice and apply skills related to collaborating with specialists, colleagues, and families.

PDS partners, including school administrators, mentor teachers, and PDS coordinators, collaborate to develop a strategic plan for each year to identify strengths and needs of the school-university partnership and to establish actionable goals and outcomes. Furthermore, university supervisors

facilitate this process by conducting mentor trainings at the beginning of each semester, so that mentors understand the expectations and procedures of assignments and can provide input regarding implementation within the context of the PDS sites. University supervisors and mentors provide support and guidance to teacher candidates through the implementation of all assignments completed with PDS partners. Mentor teachers also provide ongoing input regarding assignments and teacher candidates' progress through written feedback and face-to-face conferencing.

Collaborating with Colleagues and Specialists

Teachers today, more than ever, are expected to meet a wide range of language, learning, and behavioral needs in the general education setting. As a result, it takes the expertise of a variety of professionals to ensure these needs are sufficiently met. These professionals can include special educators, related service providers (ie., speech therapist, occupational therapist, school psychologist), teachers of English as a Second Language (ESOL), paraprofessionals, and social workers. Therefore, teacher candidates must develop the knowledge and skills to collaborate effectively with other professionals to meet their students' diverse needs. Evidence supports increased student achievement in schools where professionals collaborate to identify student needs and problem solve ways in which teams can address those needs (Strahan, 2003).

Teacher candidates have an opportunity to explore the role of the mentor teacher and specialist in their first term in the program. By having these opportunities early in the program, teacher candidates begin to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to collaborate with others. Teacher candidates often lack the confidence and experience to build partnerships with their mentors and other specialists to collaborate effectively. Therefore, interviews with the mentor teacher and specialists serve as ideal clinical assignments to begin the collaboration process by focusing on mutual goals.

Clinical Examples

Mentor teacher interview. The PDS mentor teacher interview is an initial assignment for all teacher candidates in the program. As part of an in-depth developmental screening project, teacher candidates are expected to conduct an interview with the mentor teacher to gather useful information about a student during the assessment process. This activity is aligned with NAEYC Standards 3d, knowing about assessment partnerships with families and professional colleagues; and 6c: Engaging in continuous collaborative learning to inform practice. Teacher candidates engage in discussion in the university classroom and receive model, open-ended questions intended to elicit responses related to the child's strengths, interests, school readiness skills, and general progress toward standards. Specific emphasis is placed on framing questions using strength-based language. This

Table 1. Checklist for Acceptable Teacher Interview Questions

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- ✓ The question is open-ended.
 - ✓ The question is relevant to the assessment process.
 - ✓ The question uses respectful language regarding the student and their family.
 - ✓ The question is strength-based.
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means that the candidate should pose questions to find out what the child can do, what situations help the student to be successful, and avoid using labels (Gleason, 2007). The purpose of this activity is not only to gain information about the student for the project, but to provide the candidate with additional opportunities to practice collaboration skills with a colleague while receiving ongoing support and feedback. Teacher candidates then draft their own questions based on what they already know about the student and the classroom setting. They are provided with a checklist to guide the development of their questions, and then they participate in peer-review during a university class session to ensure that all questions meet the stated criteria in Table 1.

The most challenging aspect for teacher candidates is writing strength-based questions. For example, teacher candidates may write, "Does the student interact well with others?" Instead, they are encouraged to rephrase to ask, "How does the student interact with others?" These misconceptions are addressed through a cycle of practice, discussion, and feedback. Once the teacher candidate practices a simulated interview in the university classroom with a peer and instructor support and feedback, the teacher candidate conducts the interview with the mentor teacher at the PDS placement site. Lastly, the teacher candidate synthesizes information from the teacher interview and family interview in a well-written background report. By doing this, teacher candidates engage in a collaborative learning process to inform their practice aligned with NAEYC standards.

Specialist interview. Teacher candidates also have an opportunity to interview a specialist in the field. The focus of this assignment is to gain a better understanding of the role a specialist in the early childhood classroom. Teacher candidates are tasked to interview and observe a specialist at their PDS site, such as behavior specialist, special educator, or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teacher to understand their professional responsibilities and how they support student learning. The assignment allows teacher candidates to take responsibility for collaborating with school professionals to support children's learning.

Teacher candidates have an option to identify which specialist they would like to interview and observe based on the context of their classroom at their PDS site. By selecting such specialist, the teacher candidate may gain an understanding of how the specialist works with students as well as how they can collaborate with the specialist in the future. Similar to the mentor teacher interview, it is important that teacher candidates write questions that are open ended and relevant to the specialist's area. Teacher candidates are encouraged to ask about

the professional preparation of the specialist, experiences in the classroom, strategies for collaboration with the general educator, and strategies to support children.

After the interview and observation, teacher candidates are tasked to write a reflective narrative of their experience. They must include the interview questions and the lessons learned from the experience. Teacher candidates are encouraged to use the information gained for other projects, assignments they have during that term, and professional development activities sponsored by university partners. For example, the findings from these interviews can assist teacher candidates in developing their family learning project or differentiating lesson plans. In addition, the information gained from professional development activities can allow teacher candidates to understand innovative and reflective practices (NAPDS, 2008) and how specialists and mentor teachers are using the information learned to integrate these practices in their classroom at the PDS site (Cruzado-Guerrero, Martinez-Alba, & Mogge, 2017; Mogge, Martinez-Alba, & Cruzado-Guerrero, 2017).

Collaborating with Families

Family involvement is an essential component of early childhood education and intervention, and engaging families is mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). Empirical evidence supports this importance since high ratings of family involvement during a child's early education are associated with improved short- and long-term academic and social outcomes (Barnard, 2004). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC's) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice places specific emphasis on the reciprocal nature of relationships between teachers and families (Cople & Bredekamp, 2009). Despite evidence of the importance of family engagement, teachers report feeling unprepared to effectively collaborate with families (Markow & Pieteres, 2009). Based on a synthesis of studies conducted with preservice teachers and family/community involvement, Epstein (2007) suggested that professional development to promote effective school, family, and community partnerships begins with preservice coursework and continues with ongoing support and practice. The following clinical examples apply these recommendations to support teacher candidates in their skills and knowledge related to collaborating with families.

Clinical Examples

There are three assignments within the first term that teacher candidates are required to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on building family and community relationships (NAEYC Standard 2). The assignments are the Family Interview, Family Learning Project, and In-Class Simulated Role Play to Communicate Assessment Findings. These assignments allow teacher candidates to learn how to begin to build family and community relationships and practice these skills in supportive situations. They also allow teacher candidates to explore

Epstein's model (2002) on family engagement and identify how the six different types of parent involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community) discussed in class can help families become involved at school and/or home.

Family interview. During their coursework, teacher candidates learn and discuss the importance of building and sustaining relationships with families and the ways in which teachers can involve families to support their child's development and learning (Tran, 2014). However, evidence supports that it is not enough to have knowledge of such practices, and teacher candidates need opportunities to practice and apply their skills and knowledge related to working with children and families from diverse backgrounds (Banerjee & Luckner, 2014). The family interview experience consists of two parts and is designed to provide a mechanism for teacher candidates to apply these concepts to engage families in the assessment process. Teacher candidates collaborate with their mentor teachers at their PDS placement to select a student and their family to take a family-centered approach to the assessment process aligning with NAEYC Standard 2: Building Family and Community Relationships. The family interview involves the key elements of standard 2 which are "knowing about and understanding diverse family and community characteristics; supporting and engaging families and communities through respectful, reciprocal relationships, and involving families and communities in their children's development and learning" (NAEYC, 2011, p. 30).

The first part of this clinical experience allows teacher candidates to initiate a respectful, reciprocal relationship with a student's family by writing a letter of introduction that includes information about the teacher candidate and their role in the classroom, a brief description of the assessment/screening process, and request for permission to conduct the screening assessment and involve the family in the screening process. Once the letter is approved by the course instructor and mentor teacher, the letter is sent to the intended family, which supports recommendations for teacher candidates to have opportunities to foster effective two-way communication with families (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

The second part of the experience occurs after families return the consent to participate in the family interview and developmental screening. Teacher candidates develop questions to interview the family member regarding their child's history as it is relevant to their overall development and school readiness. For example, appropriate questions might elicit responses related to prior preschool experiences, interests in reading, and/or opportunities to interact with peers outside of school which will provide useful insight regarding the student's overall development (Schonwald, Huntington, Chan, Risko, & Bridgemohan, 2009). Teacher candidates are provided with sample questions and engage in in-class discussion about using a strength-based approach to questioning (Jones, Bryant, Snyder, & Malone, 2012) and then submit their questions for feedback from the instructor and PDS mentor. Once the instructor and PDS mentor have approved the questions, teacher candidates may

Table 2. Checklist for Gathering and Interpreting Information about Children and Families

<i>Gathering Information</i>	<i>Understanding Information</i>
Teacher candidates use tools such as student profile summary (age, ethnicity, language, interest, needs), student interest questionnaire (likes/dislikes), community survey (housing, community centers, library) and/or family questionnaire (sharing about their child, culture)	1. Teacher candidates ask mentor teachers and specialist relevant questions about information gathered with tools (cultural and linguistic background, strengths and needs, community resources)
Teacher candidates create opportunities or participate in school community events to learn and gather information about children and families in the classroom.	1. Teacher candidates converse with families and children through class routines, activities, or school community events (i.e. morning meeting, field trips, science fair).
	2. Teacher candidates ask children and families culturally appropriate questions about their interest, strengths, and needs.
	3. Teacher candidates observe children in the classroom.

send the questions to the family to respond in writing or conduct a phone interview under the supervision of the mentor teacher.

Challenges associated with the family interview questions include instances when families do not consent to participation or do not return the consent form. In this situation, the teacher candidate must consult with the mentor teacher to select a different student and family. Other challenges teacher candidates encounter is when the interview questions are partially answered or not returned and finding time for the mentor teacher to supervise a phone interview. Despite these challenges, this experience allows teacher candidates to thoughtfully consider how to build relationships with families and to involve families in the assessment process. Teacher candidates also have the opportunity to practice posing questions from a strength-based approach versus a deficit based approach (Schonwald et al., 2009). For example, asking the family to tell about their child's motor development from infancy instead of asking if the child achieved motor milestones according to what is expected. This assignment allows teacher candidates to learn effective ways to communicate with families to enhance collaboration.

Family learning project. The Family Learning Project is another powerful assignment that focuses on relationships and collaboration. Teacher candidates begin to learn about how to build relationships with children and families at the classroom and school levels when they take their pre-primary curriculum course. Teacher candidates are tasked to learn about the children and families in their internship placement and then plan and implement a family learning project at their PDS. The family learning project takes the entire semester to complete due to the collaboration needed with the school community. At different points in the semester, teacher candidates are required to (1) provide an overview of their school community and classroom; (2) describe their project; and (3) reflect about their experiences. The different parts of this project allow teacher candidates to practice and apply the skills they are learning in the course to their field experiences. Mainly, teacher candidates learn strategies to (1) get to know the children and families in their classroom; (2) initiate relationships with them; and (3) engage

and support families in their children's education. Teacher candidates collaborate with their mentor teachers at their field placement to plan and implement the project at their PDS site.

In phase one of this project, the context, teacher candidates actively learn about the students and families in their classrooms and the school community in order to design the family learning project. In the course, the teacher educator provides information about the importance of developing knowledge about students' backgrounds to be culturally responsive and strengthen school-family partnerships (Ladson-Billing, 2014). The teacher educator begins this conversation by posing questions such as, "Who are the students in your classroom, and what are the characteristics of the students in your classroom and the school community?" To begin the process, the teacher educator demonstrates how to locate different resources to learn about the school community and how to use different tools to gather information about the cultural and linguistic background, strengths, interests, and needs of children and families. Teacher candidates have opportunities to explore these tools and learn how to interpret the findings during the first phase of the course through interactive activities such as case scenarios (Hindin & Mueller, 2016). Case scenarios allow students to discuss how to interpret the data and brainstorm ideas for projects.

The instructor also teaches skills for establishing respectful and positive relationships with children and families in the classroom when using these tools. For example, teacher candidates learn and practice developmentally appropriate strategies to engage in conversations with students and families to learn about their families' cultural resources (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). These course activities allow teacher candidates to practice these skills and get immediate feedback from the teacher educator. Once the teacher candidates receive instruction and practice, they begin to gather the information in their placements. Table 2 includes examples of how teacher candidates gather information about children and families and how they begin to understand the information with the guidance of their mentor teacher and specialist. After gathering this information, teacher candidates write a comprehensive overview of the children, families, and school-community background

Table 3. Bilingual Spanish-English Read Aloud Night

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Content</i>
All participants (20 minutes)	Introduction Conduct and model read aloud strategies
Section for Parents - Facilitated by teacher candidates, ESOL and community liaison	Workshop about read aloud questions and activities
Section for Children - Facilitated by teacher candidates and mentors (20 minutes)	Literacy activities
Parent-Children - All participants (20 minutes)	Read aloud practice
Conclusion - All participants (15 minutes)	Resources, parent evaluation, and pizza

information to plan a meaningful, relevant, and respectful family learning experience project.

In phase two of this project, teacher candidates plan and implement a project using the information from phase one. Teacher candidates have the opportunity to analyze the information from their tools, conversations, and observations to design the project. They have the option of designing the project within an already planned school event, planning an event within their grade or classroom level, and/or planning a take-home child-family project. The teacher candidate must develop and implement appropriate activities with meaningful materials when holding the event and/or sending the activities home if it is a home child-family project. Teacher candidates must also gather information from families about their opinion and perceived benefit of the implementation of the event.

Teacher candidates use knowledge gained from children, families, and courses to integrate in their family learning project, allowing them to plan and implement activities appropriately. For example, a group of teacher candidates designed a family learning project to promote interactive read alouds (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007) at home and to share strategies with families to use before, during, and after reading to their children. These teacher candidates decided to design this project after gathering information from the families in which they shared they wanted to know what to do while reading aloud to their children. The teacher candidates also used information about their children's needs related to concepts of print and their children's interest of books to design the project. The population of this particular school was predominantly Spanish speakers from Central America. Therefore, the interns integrated this information and designed a Bilingual English-Spanish Read Aloud Night. Three teacher candidates, three mentor teachers, the ESOL specialist and the community liaison collaborated to make this event a success. Materials were translated in Spanish such as flyers, handouts, letters, and evaluations. Books were also selected in English and Spanish. Table 3 includes the format of

the Bilingual Spanish-English Read Aloud Family Learning Project.

Phase three of the project is the teacher candidate's reflection. After implementing this project, teacher candidates must reflect about how the project assisted them in learning and understanding children and families. In their reflections, they must also share their view on families, the process of establishing positive relationships with them, and the goals they have for teaching and communicating with families in the future. They reflect about the implementation of project and feedback provided by families. Specifically, they must describe how they will use feedback to modify the family learning project; extend learning through other future projects; and establish positive and respectful relationship with families taking into consideration their strengths, values, and cultural backgrounds. They should also reflect about areas they should further explore in their next internship to learn, support, and empower families (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Finally, they must justify their reflection using research and/or developmental theories learned in class.

Role-play. In-class Simulated Role Play is an effective strategy to consider in teacher preparation programs (Dotger, 2015). Simulated role-play is one way to practice a skill in a supportive, low-risk environment and has been implemented in other fields such as nursing for interns to practice their skills (Shearer & Davidhizar, 2003). Simulated role-playing has recently gained momentum in teacher preparation as programs move toward a clinical curriculum that recognizes the complexities of teaching (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009). This activity allows teacher candidates to apply knowledge of best practices for communicating assessment findings by practicing via role-play with peers in a structured and supportive setting. Various forms of simulation during preservice coursework have been shown to bridge what teacher candidates know to what they can do (Dotger, 2011).

As part of a signature assignment in a pre-primary course on assessment, teacher candidates must conduct an in-depth developmental screening of a student in their PDS setting. The candidates select from formal and informal developmental screening tools and write a report on their findings, interpretations, and recommendations to promote continued development or intervention. The teacher candidates submit reports at three different points in time during the semester. On the date that each submission is due, teacher candidates report the assessment findings with a peer in a simulated role-play experience. The procedures for the role-play experience includes checklist of best practices for communicating assessment information with families (see Figure 1) to serve as a visual cue. Teacher candidates are placed in groups of three. The triad rotates roles with one candidate participating as the teacher, one as a family member, and one as an observer to check off each best practice that is observed by the teacher candidate who is acting as the teacher. Teacher candidates have the opportunity to practice at three different points in time during a semester and to receive feedback from peers and the instructor using the checklist (see Figure 1). For the first opportunity, teacher

Best Practice Checklist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Introductions ✓ Make a personal connection ✓ State the purpose of the meeting or conference ✓ Discuss student strengths before needs ✓ Use a strengths-based approach to discussing needs ✓ Provide and refer to specific evidence from multiple sources of information (student work or documented observations over time) ✓ Make comparisons to what is expected for a child at this age/stage using standards or developmental milestones ✓ Ask questions to gain family perspectives ✓ Pause frequently to allow for questions ✓ End with a positive statement about the student and family ✓ Thank the family for their continued support of their child's education ✓ Avoid the following: Assumptions, Jargon, Acronyms, Labels, and Talking too much

Figure 1. Best Practice Checklist for Communicating Assessment Findings with Families

candidates report findings of the background report. For the second and third role play opportunity, teacher candidates report findings from developmental domains after conducting an in-depth screening/assessment of the student. Teacher candidates practice reporting findings, making interpretations, and recommendations in a respectful, sensitive, and collaborative way with ongoing feedback from the instructor. The series of role-play activities provide teacher candidates with multiple opportunities to practice communicating assessment findings to families using best-practices to foster collaboration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teacher education programs must respond to the need to develop teacher candidates who are skilled in collaborating with a variety of professionals and all families to better serve young children (Christenson, Daniels, Cruzado-Guerrero, Schroth, Dudiak, & Watson-Thompson, 2017). This is possible when universities and strong PDS partners work together to bridge theory and practice through clinical

experiences both in- and outside of the university classroom. Collaboration begins with the modeling of effective partnerships that convey a consistent message to teacher candidates and support the practice of emerging skills. Based on recommendations from Epstein (2007), professional development to increase collaborative school, family, and community partnerships should be infused in university course work and sustained by ongoing support during their preservice preparation. Emerging evidence supports practice-based approaches in university classrooms to bridge teacher candidates' pedagogical knowledge and skills (Grossman et al., 2009). Furthermore, various forms of simulation for teacher candidates to practice collaboration with families has shown promise in university settings (Dotger, 2015). More work is needed in this area to determine the most effective and efficient methods for teacher candidates to acquire knowledge, practice skills, and apply their skills in authentic settings. The continuation of this work will move the field forward by preparing teachers who are more skilled and have greater confidence collaborating with a variety of professionals and families to meet all students' unique needs. ^{SUP}

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