

# Preparing Preservice Teachers to Partner with Parents and Communities: An Analysis of College of Education Faculty Focus Groups

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## Abstract

At both state and federal levels, partnerships of schools, parents, and communities have become an educational priority. Are teacher education programs adequately preparing preservice teachers for these partnerships? Focus groups of College of Education (COE) faculty from five Illinois Professional Learner's Partnership universities were conducted to answer this question. This study is organized around key themes that emerged from the discussions: importance of including the topic in teacher preparation programs; difficulties with the topic regarding cultural issues; negative preservice teacher attitudes about parents; differences in parent involvement at elementary and secondary levels; mixed messages given to preservice teachers by experienced teachers; inadequacy of the traditional teacher preparation program and student teaching experience to provide students with enough parent and community partnering opportunities; and the necessity of stressing collaboration and communication in teacher education. The theme selections were based on how frequently they were mentioned by different participants. The focus group discussions generated rich data and offered participants the opportunity to share their concerns about the topic.

Key Words: family-school-community partnerships, preservice teacher preparation, parent involvement, teacher attitudes toward parent involvement, focus groups, teacher education programs

## Introduction

In order for teacher education programs to meet state goals of the Illinois Professional Standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2002), federal objectives of the federal Goals 2000 (United States Department of Education, 1994), and accreditation standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teachers (NCATE, 2002), the topic of schools partnering with parents and communities must be incorporated into the required curriculum of teacher education programs. But even with these state, federal, and accreditation directives, the topic is given limited attention in most teacher education programs (de Acosta, 1994; Epstein, 2001; Epstein, Sanders, & Clark, 1999; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005).

The Academic Development Institute (ADI) contracted with the Illinois Professional Learners' Partnership (IPLP) to determine what Colleges of Education at IPLP universities are doing to prepare preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities. Five Illinois universities are partners in IPLP: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), Roosevelt University (RU), Loyola University-Chicago (LU), Illinois State University (ISU), and Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU).

Surveys of teacher education programs are often directed toward administrators such as department chairs or deans. This research was directed toward College of Education (COE) faculty at the five IPLP universities. In addition to reviews of course descriptions and syllabi on the university web sites, COE faculty were surveyed by e-mail in 2000 and 2001. Because faculty in special education, early childhood education, and elementary education are most likely to address partnerships with parents and communities in their courses, survey recipients were selected from university website faculty lists for those departments. Syllabi reviews and course schedules were also helpful indicators of faculty interest in the topic. Other survey recipient criteria included: (a) IPLP members; (b) those listed in the COE faculty directory for Departments of Curriculum and Instruction; and (c) recommendations of COE administrators and faculty.

The 2000 survey was e-mailed to 20 education faculty at each IPLP university and consisted of two questions: (1) "What courses will you teach in academic year 2000-2001?" and (2) "How do you prepare the preservice teachers in your classes to work with parents and communities?" A more detailed survey was e-mailed to 134 education faculty in 2001 (see Flanigan, 2004; Flanigan, 2005 for summaries of survey results). To enhance the survey data, survey recipients were recruited for faculty focus groups which were conducted on each IPLP university campus.

## Focus Group Participants

A focus group study is one of the best methods of collecting information about a topic from a group of people with common characteristics (Krueger & Casey, 2000). These focus group participants shared in common their faculty positions as teacher educators and their interest in and commitment to preparing preservice teachers for parent and community partnerships.

Recruitment of focus group participants began with personalized e-mail invitations to faculty based on these criteria: (a) respondents to one or both of the 2000 and 2001 e-mail surveys; (b) non-responders to both surveys; and (c) recommendations from faculty who were directly involved in one or more IPLP activities at their universities. Several e-mail exchanges took place with invitation responders to determine convenient dates and times. Once the date, time, and location were confirmed, follow-up e-mails were sent to everyone, including the invitation non-responders. Confirmed participants and those who were unsure they would be able to attend received reminder e-mails near the meeting dates. Noon was the best time for the majority of faculty to meet. Incentives for participation included a provided lunch and the promise of no longer than an hour commitment.

A total of 33 faculty members participated in the focus groups. Table 1 shows that 22 of the 33 participants were responders to the 2000 e-mail survey, the 2001 e-mail survey, or both surveys. The “New” category refers to potential participants who were recommended by either IPLP members or other faculty but did not receive or respond to the 2000 and 2001 surveys. Because IPLP members overlapped other responder categories, such as 2002 survey responders who were also IPLP members, invitation totals for each university and overall are not provided in this table.

Table 1. Focus Group Invitation Criteria

	2000 Survey Responders	2001 Survey Responders	2000 and 2001 Survey Responders	No Response 2001	IPLP Members	New
ISU	0	8(3)	3(2)	0	3(2)	0
NEIU	3(0)	3(3)	0	0	6(3)	5(2)
UIUC	3(1)	7(3)	1(1)	0	1(1)	2(1)
LU	1(1)	2(1)	0	6(3)	6(2)	4(2)
RU	2(1)	4(1)	5(5)	1(0)	8(6)	2(2)

Note: The number of focus group participants from each category is in parentheses.

Between 11 and 14 focus group invitations were sent to members of the COE faculty at each university, and 52% of those invited attended a focus group. The focus group attendance at each site ranged from four to seven participants with an overall focus group participation total of 33 faculty. Roosevelt University’s attendance was split between the Chicago and Schaumburg campuses for the convenience of the faculty (see Table 2).

Table 2. IPLP University Faculty Focus Group Participation

	E-mail Invitations	Responses	Commitments to Attend	Attendance
ISU	11	11	9	5
NEIU	12	10	9	6
UIUC	13	12	9	6
LU	13	10	8	7
RU	14	11	10	5 Schaumburg 4 Chicago
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>33</b>

The title of participants varied from Lecturer/Instructor (5) to Professor (6) with the majority being either Assistant Professor (11) or Associate Professor (11). Several university departments were represented in the focus groups. Table 3 shows representation was highest from Curriculum and Instruction (C & I; 10) followed by Special Education (7). The “Other” category included Research Methodology, Psychology, Educational Leadership, Speech, and Video Documentation. Title and departmental affiliation were the only demographic data collected from participants.

Table 3. Departments Represented in Focus Groups

	C & I	Special Education	Elementary Education	Early Childhood	Secondary Education	Other
ISU	3	2	0	0	0	0
NEIU	0	2	0	2	0	2
UIUC	5	1	0	0	0	0
LU	2	1	1	0	2	1
RU	0	1	2	1	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

## Methodology

The goal of most group interactions is to reach a consensus, give recommendations, make decisions from several alternatives, and reach a conclusion at the end of the discussion. But focus groups, usually made up of five to ten people, differ from most groups because the goal is not to reach a consensus,

but to find the range of opinions from several groups with similar characteristics. These opinions are then compared and contrasted without drawing conclusions. Focus groups work well in situations that involve investigating the attitudes, concerns, and experiences of a homogeneous group of people regarding a specific issue (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Therefore, focus groups provided an excellent qualitative methodology to use for this study of the attitudes, concerns, and experiences of COE faculty regarding preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities.

All of the faculty groups met at a campus location that was convenient for them. The arrangement of the meeting rooms was determined by room size, the number of participants, and the available tables and chairs. For some groups long tables were arranged in a rectangle around a space in the middle, so participants were sitting on only one side of the table. For other groups the tables were wide enough for participants to sit on both sides of the table. In all cases group members could easily see and hear each other. A tape recorder was used with the permission of the participants.

Because focus group participants represented several College of Education departments in some cases, especially at the large universities, most did not know one another. In order to facilitate the discussion for the participants as well as the moderator, each participant was given a name tent with their name already on it to place on the table in front of them. In the introduction to each group discussion the moderator included a brief background of IPLP; an explanation of ADI and the role of ADI in IPLP; a reference to the surveys that led to the organization of focus groups; the objectives of the focus group; the reason the faculty were invited to participate; and assurance that the meeting would wrap up after one hour.

According to Krueger and Casey (2000), focus group questions must be carefully thought out before the meeting and arranged from general to specific. Questions were prepared prior to the first scheduled focus group. The first question was introductory and general. Participants were asked to give their name, department, and attitudes about preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities. Questions that followed were more specific:

1. What classroom and clinical activities involving working with parents and communities do you offer your preservice students?
2. What changes and improvements can you make in your classes to improve teacher preparation in this area?
3. How do you think the College of Education can improve teacher preparation in this area?
4. Of the issues we've discussed relating to preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities, which issue concerns you the most or is the most important?

The first three questions often were addressed out of order because participants discussed the topic addressed in the question before it was asked, but the final question was asked last in all of the focus groups, and every participant in each focus group contributed a response.

### **Focus Group Objectives**

Objectives of the COE faculty focus groups were to: (a) clarify participants' attitudes about preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities; (b) exchange ideas for classroom activities and field experiences; (c) discuss how the preparation of preservice teachers can be improved in this area; and (d) identify main concerns about the topic.

### **Analysis**

Unlike quantitative analysis which begins when data collection stops, qualitative analysis of focus groups begins during the process of information gathering, because each focus group is different and responds differently to the prepared questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). As a result, although the questions were basically the same for all groups, the order of questions for this analysis was adapted during each focus group discussion. The amount of time groups spent on each question also varied depending on the extent of discussion triggered by a question. A constant for all of the groups was the final question. The moderator went around the table of every group and asked each participant to respond individually to the last question: *Of the issues we've discussed relating to preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities, which issue concerns you the most or is the most important?*

Focus group analysis continues through the process of organizing and categorizing the data from all of the groups. The current focus group analysis was transcript-based. Seven one-hour audio tapes were transcribed and printed on different colored paper to color code each individual focus group and keep the quote source intact. Then, one question or category was written at the top of each page of a flip chart. Individual quotes were cut from the transcripts and taped under the appropriate question or category on a flip chart page. This process of cutting and sorting organized the responses and revealed new categories. The sorting and organizing involves constantly comparing and making decisions about where to place quotes. Often, one participant quotation was cut in many pieces because parts of it fit under several categories. After categories were added and rearranged, the organized flip chart responses were written and summarized. The summaries provided an opportunity to look for themes.

This study is organized around key themes that emerged from the focus groups. Theme selections were based on how frequently each was mentioned by different people. The analysis is structured around the themes; the summaries describe what was said about each theme; and participant quotes illustrate what was said. Participants were not involved in any aspect of the analysis.

## **Key Themes of Faculty Focus Groups**

Key themes of faculty focus groups included: (a) importance of the topic; (b) difficulties with the topic; (c) classroom and clinical activities involving parents and communities; (d) ways to improve preservice teacher preparation in this area; and (e) main concerns about the topic.

### **Importance of the Topic**

Participants considered partnering with parents and communities such an important part of preservice teacher preparation that one stated, “It is the thread that runs through everything I teach.” Another added, “It’s almost an ethical thing for us to try to impart this information to students.” Several other participants also stressed the importance of the concept of parents and communities as partners.

One participant believed that emphasis on raising test scores has put so much pressure on teachers that “the importance of the parent-community connection is lost. It’s up to the College of Education to help students see the importance of the topic.” Another professor tackled this concern by starting a project “to help our candidates focus more on attitudes so they build relationships where parents are their partners rather than constituencies that they have to answer to negatively.” With regards to the importance of the community, a participant believes that faculty must “help them [students] get to know the community and become an integral part of the community. And help them get the mindset that they can do something to change it.”

### **Difficulties with the Topic**

#### *Cultural Issues*

The faculty expressed concern about preservice students exhibiting judgmental attitudes regarding parents. One participant stated, “Students come to our classes, at least in their senior year, being very judgmental.” Another concluded that students often find communication with parents difficult because of class or cultural issues. Others questioned whether socioeconomic differences affect teacher attitudes more than racial differences. An African American participant

commented, “[even though] it was an African American community...the African American teachers were from a totally different kind of community, so they often were as unfamiliar with the dynamics of a very low socioeconomic, very mobile community as were people from other racial groups.”

Faculty also face the challenge of broadening the cultural scope of preservice teachers who have led isolated suburban lives and haven’t been exposed to other cultures. A concern that combines communication and culture is involving parents who don’t speak English. According to one participant, “They’re [students] not quite understanding how to deal with parents whose language is not English.” What a preservice teacher may think is lack of parental concern may be that teacher’s lack of cultural understanding. One faculty member noted, “They [parents] may not show that caring aspect in the same way our preservice teachers think they should because they’ve been socialized differently.”

These faculty not only feel they must challenge the inappropriate comments on a regular basis, but as one stated, “I believe it’s crucial that we do something to help them [students] realize that people have different values and time commitments and priorities and abilities.” To combat the attitude of parent-blaming, one professor acknowledged, “It takes a lot of talking and experiencing to get them to stop blaming parents for whatever they see as difficulties with student learning.”

### *Preservice Teacher Attitudes About Parents*

Several faculty believe that preservice teachers have difficulty seeing situations from the perspective of parents because they have not had the experience of parenting. Since the majority of preservice teachers are in their early twenties, one participant concluded, “We’re working with students at a point where parental influence is very weak and the culture of college is anti-parents.” Given this mindset, preservice teachers have difficulty transferring their need for independence from their parents to the need for involvement with the parents of their students. This negative attitude about parents isn’t restricted to preservice teachers. A participant who teaches a graduate course of experienced teachers stated, “It astonishes me every time I teach that course the amount of resistance they have to parents. We need to, in my opinion, do a great deal more work, particularly at the preservice level, of helping teachers find ways of encouraging and inviting the participation of parents without blaming those students whose parents are not involved.”

Some participants felt that developing communication skills to use in conversing with parents is crucial. Communication with other teachers is also important. Improved communication among teachers would carry over into better communication with parents. Technology could also be used to improve communication with parents. One faculty member asked, “How do we make

parents partners in the schools? I think we always think that it has to be the mom who comes who will Xerox and do all of those clerical tasks for you. But I think, especially with technology, we can make a lot more connections with parents than we do. We don't think that a parent can be involved."

### *Parent Involvement Differences at Elementary and Secondary Levels*

There was much discussion about the differences in parent involvement between elementary and secondary levels. Some faculty felt that the problem lies in the attitude of schools about parents. One participant explained, "What I see in elementary schools is that we perceive parents as being able to play an academic role in addition to sort of a regulatory role with their kids. At the high school level we don't have that assumption." Some elementary schools even help parents learn parts of the curriculum. But, as bluntly stated by a participant, "Even in successful high schools, the reality is that for most parents their role is primarily to assist. I think that most of that is us, as school people. I don't think it's so much the parents." Other differences in the levels is related to the fact that high schools are much larger than elementary schools, so they are less personal, and high school students are perceived as not wanting their parents around.

### *Mixed Messages Given to Preservice Teachers*

Several participants commented that even though they promote the message of parental involvement in their classes they find that "it's very difficult for our students to be given one message when they're in our classes and receive a different message played out on a regular basis even in these so-called successful schools." Another participant concluded, "The message they're getting in schools is it's nice to have parents do bake sales and raise money but don't mess around with the real stuff that we do."

### *Restrictions of Teacher Education*

"Teacher education," according to one participant, "still focuses on standing up in front of a classroom delivering a lesson...and as long as it's defined that way anything else will be seen as peripheral." This concept of teacher education could explain the lack of attention to parents and communities, especially at the secondary level. Another participant commented, "We do not have special course work that specifically deals with teachers and families and involves families and being part of communities. As a result, our students do encounter problems in student teaching when they have to contact parents." Classroom management, which can lead to conflicts with parents, is considered another weak teacher preparation area.

Even though these faculty include the topic of parents and communities in their courses, they are limited by university regulations, especially in clinical

experiences. One stated, "Right now students aren't even allowed to take pictures in the classroom, and I really see this as one big issue of getting them to work with the families." Even if a separate course on the topic were offered, there is the issue of students' time constraints. As noted by a participant, "I don't know how much time they have to actually pick up more requirements."

### **Classroom and Clinical Activities Involving Parents**

Communicating with parents is the focus of many activities of these COE faculty. According to one participant, "We talk about the role of the communicator collaborator, and I actually teach them communication skills." Many faculty require parent conferences during clinical experiences and especially during student teaching. The seating arrangement during a conference is addressed, as are reasons parents don't show up for conferences. One participant said, "We have a whole session set up of instruction to deal with when a parent comes in and about parent-teacher conferences. We do a lot of role playing and preparation for that." Preservice students are also required to attend PTO/PTA meetings and all of the things that the teacher does outside the school.

Many preservice teacher parent involvement activities were discussed. One faculty participant cited three examples: (a) helping children communicate to parents about their homework; (b) communicating an open door policy to parents which resulted in fewer confrontations later; and (c) involving parents from the beginning of the year through a social studies/language arts unit that required students to talk to their parents about classroom activities and then getting feedback from the parents. In order to give preservice teachers the opportunity to see how families interact away from school and also to provide a valuable resource for classroom discussions, some faculty recruit resource families. Students visit these families in their homes, observe family dynamics, and share their observations in class discussion. A faculty participant found these resource family discussions to be the most beneficial thing that students experienced in her class.

According to one participant, because "the media misrepresents a lot of groups and a lot of people, like single moms," she has students watch different kinds of TV shows and movies and read nonfiction and fiction books to look for ways families, minorities, single parents, or lesbian and gay families are portrayed in the media. Another participant shared how his students use the Internet to engage parents. One preservice teacher designed a web site for parents after she interviewed them to find out what they wanted on a web site. Others designed interactive web sites for parents. Additional parental involvement activities included interviewing parents; making the first contact with parents during practicum experiences a positive one; sending out newsletters to

parents; and bringing in guest speakers who can have a strong impact on pre-service teachers, such as teachers, administrators, or parents of gifted children.

### **Classroom and Clinical Activities Involving Communities**

Several participants discussed preservice teacher activities that involve the community. One stated, "I bring the community aspect up quite often because I'm trying to get them to understand if you use a culturally relevant approach, the community can be part of your curriculum." Another professor requires seminar students to "choose a project that has to do with civic participation where they're involved in some way." Project examples included: (a) volunteering in a community center to improve the condition of the place, (b) attending school board meetings, and (c) writing a letter to the editor of the newspaper. An additional focus group participant asks students to "interview someone who's ethnically or culturally different from them in some way: religion, age, ethnicity, etc." They also "have to attend some type of civic organization meeting such as a court procedure, a town meeting, or a PTO meeting."

Using the community as a resource is stressed in a field experience class as a way to counteract the student teaching message that most activities are restricted to the classroom. The professor explains, "They become very locked into the culture of thinking that the classroom is the only place where learning takes place." A community resource bank was suggested as another way to include the community and make it part of the curriculum. One participant tells students that if their school does not have a community resource bank, then it is their job to start one. Teachers can start a bank with parents in their classrooms who are experts in various areas and are willing to make presentations to the class. They can build up the bank by inviting business owners, professionals, and people from the community who have interesting stories to come into the classroom and teach certain skills or share experiences. Other teachers have access to the community resource bank and can also contribute resource people, so it develops into a school-wide community involvement project.

One participant requires students to find out something about the community before they do their clinical experience: "I prefer that they walk the community so that they see the people, the housing, and the businesses and get a feel for the nature of how the community operates." Before student teaching, another participant requires students to go in teams and get to know their communities, then share that information with each other.

## Ways to Improve Preservice Teacher Preparation in This Area

### *Change Curriculum*

Some participants mentioned curriculum change as a way to improve teacher preparation in this area. One commented, "We're in the process of changing all of our special education curriculum...because of the new certification for teachers in special ed." These changes involve more of an emphasis on collaboration with family and community agencies, doing cyber-mentoring, and getting the students out in the field more frequently.

Other participants suggested replacing an existing course with a parent-community course. According to one participant, "We had talked at one point about maybe doing away with one of the reading courses in the graduate elementary ed. program to make space for a parent course, since we have so many language arts reading courses." Another elementary education program dropped speech as a general requirement so "in lieu of speech, [we could] have something like that [Parents and Communities] as a basic requirement for anybody going into teacher preparation." Finding a place to insert the topic into the curriculum is a problem, so an alternative to providing a course is offering workshops or seminars.

Using technology was suggested as a way to improve the curriculum and connect people. For example, videos of parents speaking to classes or school people talking about working with parents can be stored in department and college video/DVD libraries so both students and faculty have access to them. A department or college web page with links to parent and community related documents and other resources such as speakers, videos, DVDs, and the specific research interests of professors and graduate students is a student project that would continue to be accessible and others could add to it. The web page provides a necessary communication link within and between departments. It can also be used by students and faculty from other universities as a resource and provide supportive information to new teachers.

Whether parent and community partnering is included depends on who is teaching the course, their interest in it, and whether they want to spend time on it. There was a consensus that NCATE standards are forcing Colleges of Education to review the curriculum and address the attention given to the topic of parents and communities. One participant commented, "I think NCATE, aligning our curriculum or our syllabi with NCATE standards, is pushing people to broaden their scope."

### *More Cross Disciplines and Collaboration*

Some participants suggested doing more crossing of disciplines: "We need to work more in helping our preservice teachers from the different disciplines

connect and collaborate more.” A special education professor believes that students should be exposed to social work and criminal justice. An elementary education professor added that her students “need more exposure to special ed. to learn how they can effectively work with the children.” The comment was made that if the College of Education offered a required course on communicating with parents and community resources, the disciplines would be forced to cross, “And then they’d all be in there together mixed up: special ed., curriculum and instruction, elementary, and secondary ed.” The main problem with students taking classes out of their major is not having enough classes or space to accommodate them: “It’s a matter of setting up the institution to do it, though, because there are only so many seats available and then the class is maxed out.”

Collaboration among College of Education faculty regarding the topic was also addressed, “Sometimes faculty don’t see that the more we share, it does enhance the quality of the product we’re trying to produce.” In order to restructure the program to make parents and community a priority at one university, one participant stated, “Somehow as a faculty group, to get the programmatic things in place, we probably need to go that next step and get more people on the same page and somehow have this heightened priority which I don’t feel that we have as an institution or as a college.”

### *Insights From Faculty Personal Experiences*

Faculty members’ personal experiences as parents offer insights into changes participants would make in teacher preparation. Their comments ranged from concerns about material sent home by the teacher to parent-teacher conferences. One stated, “Almost every day I get about three or four pages of things from both of my kids’ teachers. It makes it overwhelming. And I allegedly know a little about what’s going on.” Some encountered nervous teachers at conferences, “Even these very accomplished, long-term teachers are incredibly nervous during parent-teacher conferences.” Or the teacher talks too much, “I think I’ll tell them [preservice teachers] to start listening rather than just talking.” The length of conferences was mentioned, “All of a sudden we hit the traditional school [after early education], even in kindergarten, and that contact is limited to a 15-minute conference. And then it just kind of dwindles on the way up.” Several pointed out lack of communication at the secondary level, “I have a 15-year-old who’s a freshman in high school and I run into this regularly where there’s no communication. Even when I try to initiate communication, the teachers are so reluctant to partner in any way. We really need to do something about this in teacher education.” Another made the point, “If it’s a problem for us, who are higher educated and who are not afraid of the system, think what it’s like for high risk kids’ parents.”

## Summary: Main Concerns

The final focus group question asked participants to identify their main concerns about the topic. This question gave them the opportunity to reflect on comments shared in the discussion and to identify the issue that concerned them the most or the issue they felt was most important. Unlike the open discussion of the other focus group questions, each person in each of the groups was asked to answer this question individually. Because the faculty responses summarize the key themes that emerged from the general questions and focus on what each participant believes is the most important concern regarding preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities, this category will serve as a summary of the focus groups. Participant quotes illustrate each theme; responses from this question were not included in the previous categories.

### Parent Involvement

- Initiating parent involvement is the key, so teachers must take the initiative and tap into the help that parents are willing to give:

The really key thing that teachers should recognize is it's their responsibility to do the initiating, to establish a welcoming atmosphere and to encourage parents to get involved.

From my perspective, the toughest challenge for teachers is to reach every single one of them [parents]. Who knows their kid better than the parent? I think it's important to find ways to do this.

- Showing parents the ways they can be involved goes along with initiating parent involvement:

I'd like to help them [students] help their parents figure out different ways that they can support their child's education. And it doesn't always mean being physically at the school. There are also ways that they can be supportive at home and lots of things they can do.

- At the heart of parent involvement is mutual respect and communication between the teacher and the parent:

What does that parent bring to the table? What is their contribution to our doing the best we can do for a child? Just understanding and respecting that contribution to the partnership seems to me to be the biggest hole.

- The basis of communication is connecting with parents by talking with them:

It's like a conversation. It's a community conversation that's going on. And that community consists of not only the students in your room but also those parents. We need to get preservice students to start attending to the need of how to make a connection with parents.

### **Community Involvement**

- Community includes not only the community of the school, but also the parents and the community outside the school:

One of the things I'm struck by in here is how a lot of the people sitting around this table are thinking about helping preservice teachers think about themselves as part of the community that they're teaching in.

- Helping preservice teachers understand and utilize the networking system within the school and outside the school with parents and community is important:

They will have to devise ways of reaching their parents and working with people from the community.... They have to understand the concept of "I can't do it alone."

### **Collaboration**

- Collaboration at this level involves teachers, parents, and all other professionals who are working with the child:

It's important that preservice teachers understand that...education of children is a collaborative experience.

- Teachers who are trained to be collaborators become leaders in their school. And parents who become involved in collaborative projects become leaders with the parent community and serve as liaisons between the school and the parents:

There's something about all of these techniques of collaboration that is intertwined with leadership development. I think leadership development is really critical because it helps weave fabrics of communication within a school that are very far reaching.

- Collaboration across disciplines can enrich the curriculum of the preservice teachers and make them better teachers:

I'm really concerned about how do we cross those disciplinary boundaries and access the enrichment that would offer. Not doing it so impoverishes the process and shortchanges our graduates so hugely.

### Attitudes of Preservice Teachers About Parents

- The negative attitudes of preservice teachers about parents must be addressed:

My concern is when I get students in their final year, they already have such entrenched viewpoints of parents. What that tells me is there needs to be some ongoing discussion of parents in a more positive light.

- Negative viewpoints concerning parents extends to preservice teachers assuming parents aren't going to participate in their child's education before they even have their first teaching position:

Our students go from here with that predisposed idea that it's not going to work. That's a big problem.

- The bias of preservice teachers concerning parents is evident:

There's a general bias that I've encountered with my students that says parents don't care, and if children don't succeed it's because their parents don't care. If the parents are Latino or African American or Asian, teachers need to find a way to talk with, not to or at, those particular parents and to get past prejudices and biases. The two things that concern me are the biases that come from myopia as well as just unfamiliarity with other groups of folks.

- The preservice teacher may feel inadequate about dealing with parents:

I think there's a fear level where the preservice teacher typically has not been a parent with a school age child, doesn't necessarily see it from the perspective of the parents, and has some fear about their own inadequacy...I would say it's the inter- and intra-personal piece that's the most significant.

- Because preservice teachers want to avoid exposing their feelings of inadequacy to parents, they don't think becoming involved with parents is in their best interest:

The teacher is threatened: "I'm in charge. It's risky for me. I have to make sure I seem like I know what I'm doing"...How is it in the teacher's best interest to work with the parent?

- A participant who had been a principal approached preservice teacher attitudes about parents from the perspective of an administrator:

I also advocate to my students to never presume an adversarial relationship with a parent. And never presume a supportive relationship with an administrator. Don't always presume the parents are on your side, either. The best thing to do is to go in seeking partnership and trying to find

ways of problem solving together, recognizing that you're strangers until you find this touchstone.

- Experiences of preservice teachers impact their attitudes about parents:  
My biggest concern is finding a way to help students see beyond their own experience....Their parents were not necessarily involved, so why do they have to involve the parents of their students?
- The way preservice students were raised can influence their attitudes about students and parents:  
How do we make our teachers sensitive to everyone's home life and not judgmental so they understand that if a house runs in a different way than the way they were brought up that's still okay?
- The best way to change attitudes is to help them see past their biases:  
I think it's really hard to change attitudes but we can, at least, plant the seed. We can help them see it a little bit differently....People get all kinds of ideas that are just not based on facts. They don't see the diversity, the range of behavior, within a group.
- Misinformation is another factor to consider:  
War stories are passed down from others, so before new teachers are even given a chance to change it or do something differently they are already programmed with the "Why bother?" attitude.

### Classroom and Clinical Activities

- Students must come in contact with real parents:  
Somehow we've got to get real parents doing real things with our students...[because] the biggest challenge is just to have preservice teachers come in contact with parent voices in such a way that they take in what they're hearing.
- The key issue is not how to do a parent conference or newsletter but how to have meaningful communication:  
The key issue is how you communicate with other people who might be different from you. And that has to be learned by having access to different people.
- The message experienced teachers give students about working with parents is often different than what preservice teachers have been taught at the university:  
We always end up with that cross talk about lesson planning, for example. Yeah, we're having them do lesson plans and they tell me, "My

teacher says she hasn't done lesson plans for 23 years and you've got to be stupid for making us do them." And the same thing with "parents are our allies." The teacher says, "I have yet to meet a parent who's my ally. Every [darn] one of them is trying to cause trouble."

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

The focus group method of research has drawbacks, such as the initial difficulty of organizing groups and the lack of specific results at the end. But the value is in the richness of the data produced and the forum provided for members of a group with a common interest to share their ideas and experiences.

Examining preservice teacher preparation for parent and community involvement from the perspectives of College of Education faculty through focus groups provides a comprehensive look into what some faculty at five universities are doing to prepare preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities. The comments and concerns of the participants are significant because the information was gathered directly from faculty who teach preservice teachers and have a strong interest in the topic of partnering with parents and communities. Based on informal, post-focus group feedback, this research activity was immediately useful to IPLP university faculty participants. The focus groups offered participants the unique experience of meeting with others who share their interest in and commitment to the topic, provided a forum to voice their opinions and concerns, and served as a spark for them to make changes in their courses and within their departments.

Faculty focus group participants concluded that because the traditional teacher preparation program does not effectively provide preservice teachers with enough parent and community involvement experiences, students are not adequately prepared to partner with parents and communities. Participants expressed concern about the impact on preservice teachers of the negative parent involvement attitudes of experienced teachers. They were aware of students encountering this problem during clinical and student teaching experiences. Universities should take advantage of the partnerships they have with public schools by looking into the reasons for the negative parent involvement attitudes of experienced teachers and determining ways to solve the problem at the school level, because those negative attitudes are undoing everything faculty have tried to do with preservice teachers at the university level.

This research is useful for a variety of stakeholders. The focus groups generated themes and data that included participant difficulties and concerns, their classroom and clinical activities, and suggestions for improving teacher education in this area. This information can be used by other teacher educators to

improve their courses, help them understand and counteract the prejudices of preservice teachers, and give them insight into the difficulties other faculty face. Faculty and administrators can use the data to present a valid argument for change to those who are facilitators of change. In addition to providing information from faculty, this focus group analysis has the potential to serve as a trigger for collaboration, communication, and change in the area of school-parent-community partnerships within COE departments, universities, and K-12 school districts.

Future research in this area should include COE administrators, who will provide insight into the attitude of the administration toward the importance of the topic in the curriculum, and other COE faculty who may not be as concerned about teacher preparation in this area as the faculty who participated in these focus groups. Focus groups comprised of preservice and new teachers would provide a rich source of data and allow for comparison of their teacher education experiences with faculty comments and opinions. Other excellent sources of information on this topic are school district personnel, principals, experienced teachers, and parents.

This study raises several research questions on the topic of preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities:

- What are the concerns of COE administrators and other COE faculty regarding this topic, and how do they compare to the participants in these groups?
- How do preservice and new teachers assess their preparation in this area?
- In what ways are Professional Development School-prepared teachers better prepared for partnering than teachers from traditional programs?
- How do school district personnel and principals evaluate the preparation of new teachers?
- What improvements would parents make in teacher preparation for school-parent partnering?

Collaboration and communication were themes that ran through all of the focus groups. Some participants considered collaboration the most important issue or concern regarding this topic. They mentioned different types of collaboration: (a) collaboration of preservice teachers with parents and other educators; (b) collaboration entwined with leadership development; (c) collaboration across disciplines at the university level; and (d) collaboration across K-16 levels. Collaboration starts within the College of Education where faculty who are dedicated to the importance of preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities include the topic in their courses and

make sure parent and community involvement are part of students' clinical experiences. These faculty also work within their departments and the COE to exchange ideas for activities, make the topic a priority, and gather momentum for changes in the curriculum. Then they branch out to collaborate across disciplines at the university level.

The focus groups were a starting point for faculty who believe strongly enough in the importance of preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities that they agreed to share those beliefs and concerns with others who are like-minded. In addition to providing a rich source of data from faculty and new teachers, the focus groups have the potential to serve as a trigger for collaboration and communication within COE departments, universities, and schools. Collaboration and communication are keys to preparing preservice teachers to partner with parents and communities, because the successful education of children requires the collaboration of teachers, parents, and all other professionals who are working with children.

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