

Preparing Special Education Teachers to Collaborate With Families

Margo Collier, Elizabeth B. Keefe, and Laura A. Hirrel

Abstract

Positive family–school–community relationships are associated with student success. Creating successful relationships with parents is an important but difficult task for teachers to master. Therefore, teacher candidates need opportunities to learn how to develop collaborative relationships with parents of all children, including children with disabilities. This paper describes the implementation of the Families as Faculty Program (FAF), jointly developed by a parent center and a special education program at a southwestern university. The purpose of this program is to prepare teachers and other professionals in the community to work collaboratively with parents in an effort to improve services, develop partnerships, and to increase positive outcomes for students across the full range of disabilities. This program provides teacher candidates with a unique opportunity to learn firsthand from parents who agree to share their experiences and stories about the strengths, differences, and challenges of raising a child with disabilities. This article describes the way in which FAF was integrated into a graduate-level course in a special education master’s degree program. Information is given on how other teacher preparation programs can access materials created through FAF for their own programs.

Key Words: teacher preparation program, special education, parent–teacher partnership, school–community collaboration, parents, involvement, engagement, students with disabilities, families, home visits, virtual learning

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe a program that explicitly prepares teachers to develop the disposition and skills they need to implement successful school–family collaboration. Studies have shown a strong association between the degree of parent involvement and children’s positive social, emotional, and academic growth (Boethel, 2003; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Fan & Chen, 2001; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003). Epstein (1995) emphasizes that, through parent involvement, “schools, families, and communities create caring educational environments” (p. 703). We use Epstein’s concept of the term “parent involvement” throughout our article. This concept entails parent communication with their children about education, parent participation in school-related decision-making, parent engagement with schools and teachers, and parent collaboration within the school community. Throughout this article, the terms *parent involvement* and *parent engagement* are used synonymously. In a similar fashion, the words *parent* and *family* will be used interchangeably, each signifying the adults who play significant roles in caring for their children.

Teachers play a significant role in parents’ decisions to become involved in their children’s education (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Research has shown that teachers who reach out to parents and encourage participation are more likely to motivate parents to become involved in their children’s education (Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Teachers who encourage parent involvement and establish positive relationships with parents of children with disabilities are in a better position to provide the support needed for these parents to constructively engage in their children’s education (Colarusso & O’Rourke, 2007; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006). Teacher preparation programs that have provided opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in meaningful interactions with parents of children with disabilities, while rare, have been shown to result in positive outcomes (Baker & Murray, 2011; Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Espe-Sherwindt, 2001; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008).

Given the significance of the connection between parent involvement and successful student outcomes, it is important that school employees, especially teachers, develop skills in establishing positive relationships. Cultivating supportive relationships is central to forging parent–teacher collaboration (Dinnebeil, Hale, & Rule, 2000). Despite the recognition of its importance, collaboration between teachers and parents continues to be difficult to achieve. Due to the frequent complexity that parents face in raising a child with a

disability, teachers may find it particularly difficult to know how to best initiate positive collaboration with these parents (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006).

Teacher preparation programs are in a primary position to promote professional learning opportunities that prepare teacher candidates to learn how to partner with parents. All too often, graduating teacher candidates lack the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and confidence necessary for building collaborative relationships with parents (Murray et al., 2008). Although many teacher preparation programs acknowledge the importance of parent involvement, frequently the preparation and training that teacher candidates receive in these programs falls short of what is needed to actually foster collaboration and partnership with parents (Casper, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Flanigan, 2005; Giallourakis, Pretti-Frontczak, & Cook, 2005; Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009).

Federal mandates have recognized the importance of parental involvement as a strategy to improve the education of children. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) initiative calls for the increase of parental involvement. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2005) mandates parent participation in the education of their children with disabilities (see IDEA, 20 U.S.C. Sect 300, Appendix A). The importance of parents as key participants in educational decisions for their children has been reinforced by the emphasis that IDEA places on collaboration between parents and teachers. Cook and Friend (2010) define *collaboration* as “the *style* professionals select to employ based on mutual goals; shared responsibility for key decisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and a sense of community” (p. 3). Emphasis has traditionally been placed on parent and teacher collaboration and partnership. However, increasing attention is given to communities for their role in the social, emotional, and academic achievements of students (Sanders, 2006). Epstein’s (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence reinforces the shared responsibility that schools, families, and communities have in socializing youth and ensuring students’ success. School–community partnerships can be defined as connections linking schools, families, and communities in the mutual goal of promoting students’ social, emotional, and academic development (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Collaboration and communication between parents and educators have been shown to be critical factors for predicting successful student outcomes (McCoach et al., 2010). Research suggests that teachers’ efforts to collaborate with parents promote parent involvement, which in turn contributes to student success (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). Crisman (2008) found that listening to

parents and actively seeking their input makes all the difference for developing positive relationships with parents. Tolan and Woo (2009) outlined several principles for promoting educational practices that encourage school–family partnerships, including the principle that partnerships with families demand engagement across home and school, shared responsibility and decision making, and two-way communication.

Parents of children with disabilities face unique challenges. Dunst and Dempsey (2007) point out that “the role of parents with a child with a disability shows a level of complexity and intensity not generally found in the general population” (p. 305). Some parents who feel helpless when trying to adequately plan for their children’s education can also feel hopeless and overwhelmed (Huang, Kellett, & St. John, 2010). For parents, learning how to provide the education and supports that their children need is an ongoing and frequently frustrating process (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Given the multifaceted role that parents face, learning how to support, encourage, and empower parents of children with disabilities is a complex task for teacher candidates. Forming partnerships between educators and these parents continues to be difficult to achieve and successfully sustain (Murray et al., 2013; Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010).

Teacher preparation programs can potentially impact the nature of home–school collaboration. Ritchhart and Perkins (2000) demonstrated that teacher training programs that included reflective and intentional teaching practices enhanced teachers’ willingness to develop school–community collaboration. Collary (2013) suggested that overcoming obstacles when creating a collaborative environment includes developing teacher leadership skills and encouraging teachers to recognize that effective teaching is leadership. Through efforts to promote collaboration, teachers can create opportunities for learning among students, families, and colleagues. Through communication with parents, teachers are provided insight into students’ lives, both in and outside of the classroom. McCloskey (2011) reminds educators that as we “engage parents in conversations about supporting the whole child, we may need to do less talking and more listening to make sure that we are speaking the same language” (p. 81). Crais et al. (2004) found that graduates from teacher preparation programs that provided explicit school–community collaboration and partnership experiences were better prepared to communicate with parents and families with disabilities.

Despite a significant amount of literature about the importance of home–school collaboration, we found few teacher preparation programs that provided teacher candidates with adequate preparation for forming effective partnerships between parents and teachers (Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Murray et al.,

2008). Additionally, Hedges and Gibbs (2005) reported that even fewer programs provided teacher candidates direct interaction with families/parents.

This article describes a program called Families as Faculty (FAF) in which direct interaction with families of children who have disabilities is provided for teacher candidates. In particular, this article details how FAF was implemented in a graduate level special education program at a southwestern university. The article also describes a change in the implementation of this program that was prompted by funding cuts made by the public education department, which occurred during the preparation of this manuscript. An unintended consequence of these funding cuts challenged the FAF program organizers to find a way to make the FAF experience sustainable and replicable in a modified format. Information on how other teacher preparation programs can access materials created through FAF for their own programs is also provided.

Previous research on FAF has explored its impact on undergraduate students and parent participants. Schmitz (2004) questioned whether the positive responses to FAF reported by undergraduate teacher preparation students in their reflection papers had an impact on their teaching practices after graduation. In her study, she found that teacher candidates who had been teaching for a year continued to feel the impact of their FAF experience. Jarry (2009) investigated the impact of FAF on the family faculty and host families. Results from the study indicated that parents wanted to be heard, acknowledged as the expert of their child, and treated with respect by educators. Research also indicated that parents believed improved communication between educators and parents was critical to the success of their children's educational experiences. Results from these two studies demonstrated that both teacher candidates and host families benefitted from participating in the FAF program.

Families as Faculty

A southwestern nonprofit parent center was established for the purpose of uniting and empowering families with children with disabilities by providing them with information, support, and education. The parent center's mission is to "enhance positive outcomes for families and children throughout the state." One of the ways the parent center has accomplished its mission is through the FAF program initiative, which was developed in 1995 in collaboration with a southwestern university. The FAF program was originally conceived to complement a family-centered curriculum designed for medical students and founded on the philosophy that families should be at the center of all decisions about their children. In 1996, the program was expanded as an innovative component in the coursework of undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation

programs in special education, elementary education, and secondary education (Keefe, Rossi, de Valenzuela, & Howarth, 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of FAF was to prepare teacher candidates and other professionals to work in partnership with families in an effort to improve services, relationships, and outcomes for children with disabilities. This educational program provided teacher candidates the unique opportunity of meeting families and learning firsthand from the stories that the parents shared about the unique strengths, differences, and challenges of living with a child with disabilities. FAF also provided teacher candidates with the experiences needed to meet the state teacher competency requirements regarding family communication and collaboration. Providing teacher candidates with the experience of meeting families with children who have a disability helped address FAF's five central goals:

1. To increase educators' understanding of home–school relationships.
2. To expand educators' understanding of Least Restrictive Environment and its possibilities.
3. To help educators recognize and acknowledge their own personal beliefs, values, and attitudes.
4. To provide an opportunity for educators to view families as teachers from whom they can learn.
5. To prepare educators to better understand that all children and families are different, with unique strengths, values, beliefs, and each facing unique challenges.

In addition to the primary FAF goals for the educators, a long-term objective of the FAF experience was to provide parents the forum for their voices to be heard and their perspectives to be valued. In sharing their stories, the parents had the potential to impact future teachers by encouraging them to develop collaborative partnerships with families.

Components of the FAF Experience

Just as FAF was conceived as a program initiative that was collaboratively developed between the parent center and the university, university faculty and family faculty collaboratively planned each FAF experience. The title "Family Faculty" referred to families who had prior experience sharing their family's narrative with teacher candidates who participated in the FAF program. The title reflected parity with the university faculty; just as university faculty were experts in their fields of study, so too were parents experts regarding their children. The major components of the FAF program included: (a) recruitment and

training of host families; (b) matching families with pairs of teacher candidates; (c) an orientation session led by family faculty; (d) family visits conducted by teacher candidates; and (e) a wrap-up session led by family faculty. The teacher candidates were required to complete a reflection paper based on their experiences and pre- and post-questionnaires to evaluate their experience with FAF.

FAF in the Special Education Graduate Program

The FAF experience was included in an assessment course titled “Assessment for Diverse Learners with Learning and Behavioral Exceptionalities.” The students enrolled in this course were all university graduate students in the Special Education MA with Alternative Licensure Program in the College of Education. Everyone enrolled in the assessment course participated in the FAF experience. In this article, the term *teacher candidates* is used in place of *graduate students* to more accurately characterize the graduate students in the course, who were at various stages of the teacher licensing process, including licensed teachers and students completing alternative licensure. Most of the teacher candidates were already teaching in their own classrooms.

The assessment course is a requirement for all teacher candidates in the master’s program. Therefore, embedding the FAF experience in this course provided outreach to the broadest cross-section of teacher candidates in the program. Although lessons learned through the FAF experience were within the context of the assessment course, the intent behind offering this opportunity was to prepare teacher candidates to develop an overall understanding of the importance of engaging with families with children with disabilities.

In the required assessment class, teacher candidates acquire knowledge and skills necessary for interpreting and applying formal assessment data and designing and monitoring instruction of diverse students with disabilities. However, learning about assessment cannot happen without an understanding of how the process of assessing children can affect families. The results of assessments can have considerable impact on the lives of both children and their families. Results from assessments administered to children have significant weight in determining children’s eligibility for special education and their potential for receiving special services that they may need. Assessment scores and their resulting interpretation can elicit a wide spectrum of responses that include a range from grief to relief from the families receiving the information about their children. For the reasons listed above, an assessment course seemed to provide an appropriate context for implementing FAF at the graduate level and giving teacher candidates the opportunity to develop empathy, compassion, and understanding for the families of children with disabilities. The following sections describe how FAF was integrated in the assessment course.

Implementation of FAF Components

For the semester described here, the parent center recruited and trained the parents of 14 host families who had children with a variety of disabilities, including learning disabilities, autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, physical disabilities, and other health impairments. These parents were provided an initial two-hour orientation conducted at the parent center called “Host Family 101,” during which they learned about the FAF program goals and were coached in the art of telling their family stories in relationship to FAF’s program goals. The parents also attended a second two-hour workshop, “Host Family 201.” In this workshop, the parents learned ways to improve their public speaking skills, including techniques for sharing their family’s stories with others, as well as techniques for ensuring positive visits with the teacher candidates. Upon completion, these experienced hosts become Adjunct Family Faculty. Host families received a stipend of \$50 for each home visit in which they participated.

The 28 teacher candidates taking the “Assessment for Diverse Learners with Learning and Behavioral Exceptionalities” class were paired with the 14 host families. The majority of the teacher candidates in this class were female (82%) and Caucasian (61%). A variety of other ethnicities were represented in the class, including Hispanic (18%) and African American (11%), and Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American were each also represented (10%). Descriptively speaking, a greater percentage of teacher candidates reported living in urban communities (79%) than rural communities.

The teacher candidates attended a two-hour in-class orientation co-taught by an Adjunct Family Faculty and a parent center staff member. The course instructor, a university faculty member and the first author of this paper, was also present in the class. During this orientation, teacher candidates learned about the FAF program goals and philosophy, the dynamics of family visits, and received instructions on the reflection paper assignment they were required to complete after the home visit (see description below). Additionally, the Adjunct Family Faculty who helped facilitate the orientation shared her family’s story. Although the host families were not present at the orientation, they also received packets containing information about FAF goals and strategies to meet the needs of the program as well as evaluation and stipend forms.

FAF randomly matched a host family with two teacher candidates. Each teacher candidate dyad was instructed to make one home visit to their assigned host family. The dyads received invitation packets supplied by the parent center with their assigned match. They also received information about the family and children, their names and ages, some of the family’s favorite activity interests, and contact information. The teacher candidates did not receive any

information about the child's disability prior to the meeting with their assigned families. Although the responsibility to contact the family was left to the teacher candidates, the families determined when and where they would meet with the teacher candidates. Typically, the visits happened at the home of the host family.

The host families consisted of 23 parents: 61% mothers, and 39% fathers. Regarding ethnicity, 74% of the parents were Caucasian ($n = 17$), 22% were Hispanic/Latino ($n = 5$), and 4% were African American ($n = 1$). The majority of the parents had a college education (65%). Sixty-four percent of the host families were composed of a two-parent household. The annual household income of the 14 host families ranged from less than \$25,000 to over \$150,000, with most of incomes between \$80,000–\$150,000. The largest percentage of children in the host families (32%) had a disability listed as “other health impairment.” The other 68% of children had disabilities that included learning disabilities (16%), autism (16%), physical disability (16%), intellectual disability (10%), and multiple disability (10%).

The teacher candidates were encouraged to view the meeting with their assigned families not as an interview but rather an opportunity to listen to the parents' narratives and to learn about the families' experiences with the assessment of their children and with the children's special education services. In addition to giving teacher candidates the opportunity to listen to parents share their stories, this particular semester, both the university and FAF faculty were interested in capturing the parents' narratives on film. Filming of the parent and student meetings received the university's Institutional Review Board approval. Additionally, each family and teacher candidate was asked to sign a consent form in order to participate in the filming. Filming was prearranged, and a film crew recorded each of the meetings. The home visits between families and teacher candidates usually lasted two to three hours. Teacher candidates' home visits coincided with a variety of everyday activities for families, such as eating dinner, playing cards or board games, sharing a snack, or observing a behavior therapy session.

Pre- and Post-Questionnaires

Before the family visits, teacher candidates filled out a Likert-scaled questionnaire that assessed perceptions of their communication and listening skills, their level of understanding of the impact that a child's disability can have on family dynamics, and their capacity to empathize with both families and children with disabilities. Following the family visits, teacher candidates completed an identical post-questionnaire. Examples of questions included in the pre- and post-questionnaires are as follows: How much do you feel that the

opportunity to listen to parents' narratives will influence your role as teacher and your future relationship with families? How difficult was it for you to put yourself in the parents' shoes? Following the FAF experience, do you feel more comfortable about initiating, contacting, and encouraging parent participation in school? At the end of the semester, a wrap-up session was held at the parent center with teacher candidates, staff from the parent center, and the course instructor, during which the teacher candidates shared highlights of their home visits. At the wrap-up session, all teacher candidates learned about the diversity of all 14 families, each with their unique story and different family dynamics. Additionally, teacher candidates agreed to be contacted and to complete a follow-up survey three years after completing the program.

Student Reflections

Each teacher candidate wrote a reflection paper on their experiences in the family visits during which the families discussed their experiences with the special education system, including the assessment process, the determination of a child's eligibility, and the delivery of services. The five goals of FAF provided the teacher candidates with a framework for their reflective papers and were the basis for their evaluation. The reflection papers provided feedback on the effectiveness of the FAF program in meeting its goals. Table 1 provides examples of comments made by teacher candidates after their family visits and relates comments to each of the five FAF program goals. The course instructor evaluated the reflection papers using a rubric that corresponded to the description of the assignment given to the teacher candidates. The reflection papers were also read by parent center staff and the university faculty but not shared with the families. In their reflection papers, teacher candidates discussed how they thought the experience would impact their teaching practices and change their attitudes toward initiating partnership with families in the future. Every teacher candidate described the FAF program as a positive experience. As an example, one of the teacher candidates summed up the experience as follows, "The experience was not only the best part of the class, but also maybe even the best part of the entire semester." Because this article aims to provide a description of the program, the authors plan to share results of the analysis of the teacher candidate comments in a subsequent article.

Table 1. Examples of Student Responses Across Purposes of FAF

FAF Purpose	Example of Student Response from Reflection Papers
<p>1. To increase educators' understanding of the home-school relationship.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The parents said that they felt like the teachers knew everything about their son based on his diagnosis. The parents explained that what the teachers see at school is very different from what they deal with at home. - We must always keep the parents involved in their child's learning process. I think the better the bond between the parents and the educators, the more successful students will be. - The main purpose of assessment is to better understand the child. It's not just about what is wrong with the student or what the student is doing wrong. Parents want to find solutions for their children with special needs, not just scores, grade levels, statistics, or interpersonal comparisons.
<p>2. To expand educators' understanding of Least Restrictive Environment and its possibilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When they [the parents] came to [our state], they found attitudes about inclusion of children with disabilities quite different from the community where they used to live. They spent three years fighting for their child's right to be educated alongside her developing peers. They won their case, but they realized that it is difficult to change people's opinion so they decided to homeschool their child. - The family has been let down by their school because the son has not received the support he needs. - Support can come in all shapes and sizes. It can be someone who takes care of a student's basic needs, or it can be a piece of technology that allows a student to move around their environment, or it can allow a student to communicate. It is often not one type of support that allows a student to experience success, but a combination of support and services. - The child and her family did not seem to want pity or special attention. They wanted the service that would allow their child to get on with the task of learning, growing, and being included.
<p>3. To help educators' recognize and acknowledge their own personal beliefs, values, and attitudes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As an educator, I learned from the child and his family that we all have strengths and weaknesses. I did not learn what to do, but rather, more of what not to do. I will not underestimate, assume, or generalize about any student. - After listening to the family talk about how teachers fill more than one role, I will never look at myself as "only" a teacher again. They have forever changed the way that I will look at my job as a professional. I know that they have changed me for the better. I now understand that I may fill many different roles for all of my students, and I need to be aware and sensitive to that fact. - I have learned that caring is of great significance to students with disabilities and their families.

<p>4. To provide an opportunity for educators to view families as teachers from whom they can learn.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The family stressed the importance of giving parents power and a chance to voice their expertise about their child. Parents know more about their children than anyone, so it is common sense that they be viewed as an authority on their child. Making decisions for any child, but especially one with special needs, requires collaboration, communication, and respect between every adult involved in the process. - These interactions show me that the parent is a valuable team player and that I can learn from her. A parent knows their children's needs and abilities far better than others and can point out ways that work best for their child in relationship to their child's strengths and weaknesses. It is encouraging to know that with parents' input and creative problem solving, we can remove roadblocks that interfere with a child's success in school. Everyone benefits when we listen to the parents. - My job is to listen because no one knows a student better than a child's parents. This project taught me the value of listening.
<p>5. To prepare educators to better understand that all children and families are different, with unique strengths, values, beliefs, and challenges.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The opportunity of listening to the family's story was an amazing experience. It truly gave me a completely different perspective from which to better understand a child. - As teachers, it is easy to point the finger at parents and lay blame on them for their child's problems. Unless we take the time to know what the family is dealing with at home, we cannot explain or better understand the needs of students when they are at school. - Several times I was moved to tears because I realized that the parents had sacrificed so much, and yet they maintained an optimistic view of their daughter's ability to achieve a decent quality of life. - Parents of students with disabilities have a lot on their plates. Taking the time to see things from the parents' perspectives is crucial to being an effective educator.

Follow-Up Survey

Three years after the FAF experience was completed, the teacher candidates—many of whom had become special education teachers after graduating—were contacted and asked to complete an open-ended survey. Twelve (43%) of these former teacher candidates responded to the follow-up survey. The survey asked about their current teaching status and their long-term perspectives of the impact that the FAF experience had on their classroom teaching practices. Examples of some of the questions included in the follow-up survey are as follows: How did the FAF experience impact your classroom teaching practices? Has the FAF experience affected your efforts to encourage parents to participate in their children's education and in decisions involving their children? Has the FAF experience influenced the ways in which you communicate with parents?

All of the respondents reported that the FAF experience had a positive impact on their classroom practices and interactions with parents. A second article scheduled to follow this one will describe the research study in more depth.

The Power of Listening to Parents

The teacher candidates' positive responses to their experiences with FAF suggest that listening to families can potentially provide lessons that cannot be easily learned from a lecture or textbook. The power of listening to stories told by families cannot be underestimated. The stories that families told about their lives revealed how they thought about themselves as families, how they interpreted and gave meaning to events that had happened in their lives, and how their perspectives were shared and passed on within their families. For teacher candidates, the opportunity to meet and listen to families allowed them to learn about the lives of students like those they teach and provided the potential for a transformational experience through which to reflect on and adjust their own perceptions. At a critical time in their teacher preparation program, teacher candidates were provided the opportunity to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the joys as well as the challenges of raising a child with a disability. The FAF experience provided teacher candidates with a view into the value of initiating, developing, and sustaining collaboration with parents.

The Challenge of Replicating and Sustaining FAF

FAF is a program that has been implemented at the undergraduate level in special education courses at this southwestern university study site since 1996 until the present. The inclusion of the FAF program in the MA in Special Education (graduate level) first occurred in 2011. FAF has also been replicated at seven other state universities. The southwest parent center has relied on funding from the state's public education department to continue to offer FAF.

The current economic challenges in state funding for educational programs resulted in the discontinuation of funding for FAF in July 2012. Fortunately, during the implementation of FAF in the assessment course described in this article, the first author received permission from both the families as well as the university's Institutional Review Board to videotape the family visits. The filming and creation of a video record of each teacher candidate dyad's home visit was part of a larger research project on teacher collaboration with families by the authors of this paper. The original intention behind filming the FAF experience was to capture the dynamics of teacher candidates' and parents' interactions to better understand how teacher preparation programs could provide opportunities for teacher candidates to learn about establishing and maintaining home-school collaboration. An unanticipated benefit arising

from the existence of the video material has been the ability to continue the FAF experience in subsequent semesters as described in the next section.

Future Directions: Creating a Virtual FAF Experience

An unintended outcome of filming the home visits emerged in response to the elimination of funding and discontinuation of the statewide FAF program. Access to the videos of the family visits has served as a vehicle to sustain the opportunity to learn from the stories that these families told. The 14 videos of the home visits have been made accessible to families and school districts throughout the state as well as to students and faculty members within special education programs in seven higher education institutions within the state through a password protected website.

Presently, the first author is in the process of working with the parent center and faculty at other universities to explore other possible uses of the FAF videos. In an era of limited funding sources and decreased grant opportunities, an alternative means of providing the FAF experience as a virtual experience makes good economic sense. Given the increased demand for online education, a virtual experience of the FAF program could complement distance learning opportunities. A complementary virtual curriculum (Collier, 2012) has been developed around the 14 videos of parents with children with disabilities sharing their family stories with teacher candidates.

Additionally, positive feedback about the video website led to the creation of a documentary based on the stories of six of the 14 families entitled *Embracing the Challenge: Living with Children with Disabilities* (Collier et al., 2012). A local school district has proposed the use of the documentary as a way of sharing the FAF experience with all of their teachers in small study groups. The documentary has been posted on the college website and is available for use for educational purposes. In the spirit of school–community collaboration, the parent center, the university, and several school districts continue to partner in designing professional development opportunities using the virtual FAF experience as well as the documentary (Collier, 2013).

Conclusion

We have found that providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to listen to parents' stories gives them personal experiences through which they can better understand both the negative and positive impact that teachers and the educational system can have on children and their families. Teacher candidates gain insights into the home lives of families who have children with

disabilities and the powerful knowledge that parents can share with educators. Seeing children in their homes amid their families affords teacher candidates a more complete view of these children who are loved and have interests, needs, and conflicts just like any other children.

The process of building school–community partnerships is dynamic. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) pointed out that partnering involves parents and teachers sharing resources, responsibilities, and decision-making roles in an effort to comprehensively address the needs of the whole child. The benefits of forming school–community partnerships are wide ranging and influence the achievement and long-term success of students with disabilities in a number of positive ways. Partnerships with parents enhance the planning and implementation of the goals and objectives of students' Individualized Education Programs (Squires, 2001) when the opinions and preferences of children with disabilities and their parents are respected. The likelihood that students will be appropriately placed in their least restrictive environment is increased when parents have a say in the decision-making process (Garrick Duhaney, 2000).

We agree with Broussard (2000) that it is essential that teacher preparation programs offer teacher candidates opportunities for expanding their awareness, understanding, and knowledge of the process of building and maintaining partnerships with parents and families. Through structured and varied experiences with families, teacher candidates can learn more about students they will teach. By building different experiences with families into course work, teacher preparation programs can help their teacher candidates develop skills, knowledge, and positive attitudes about parent involvement, which will enable them to implement family–school–community partnerships that will be useful for their teaching practice.

One of the comments we heard most frequently from our teacher candidates in their FAF reflection papers is that *all* teachers should experience FAF (not just those in special education). Ironically, it may be through the challenge of the loss of funding for FAF that we have found creative ways to open up greater overall access to the FAF experience through virtual means. While we hope that funding will be restored so that the original FAF experience can be reinstated at the university, we are grateful for our continued partnership with the parent center in our efforts to provide transformational experiences to our teacher candidates and to prepare more teachers who want to work as true partners with families and to form successful and sustainable family–school–community partnerships.

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Authors' Note: This research was supported in part by grants from the University of New Mexico and the Albuquerque Community Foundation.

Margo Collier is an assistant professor in special education at the University of New Mexico and currently serves as the coordinator of the Educational Diagnostician Certificate Program. Dr. Collier's primary research interests include home-school collaboration and meaningful assessment for all students, with a focus on transition assessment and assessment design and development. She demonstrates a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to both her research and teaching. She has co-taught numerous classes and has had extensive experience in designing and implementing partnerships that include individuals in community programs, agencies, and university students within her research projects. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Margo Collier, PhD, Special Education Program, MSC05 3040, I University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, or email collierm@unm.edu

Elizabeth B. Keefe is a professor in the special education program at the University of New Mexico. Liz is committed to working with schools, school districts, community agencies, self-advocates, and families to implement effective, inclusive practices for all students. She prepares undergraduate and graduate students at UNM to teach and be leaders in inclusive classroom and school environments. Her research interests center on inclusive practices, literacy, differentiated instruction, modifications, collaboration, and how system change occurs and is sustained in schools.

Laura Hirrel is a PhD candidate in linguistics at the University of New Mexico. Laura's dissertation research focuses on the multimodal nature of language use, specifically examining cross linguistic patterns in the distribution of functions and linguistic construction types in which a particular gesture type occurs. Her other primary research interests focus on the application of linguistics in promoting social justice. One of the projects with which Laura is most actively involved is a language revitalization project for an endangered language spoken in the southwestern region of the United States. Under the guidance of native speakers of the endangered language and other community stakeholders, Laura and other group members assist on projects aimed at increasing language use and making language materials accessible to the entire community.

