

Understanding Family Engagement Through the Focus of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships: Secondary Preservice Teachers’ Perspectives

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Abstract

Presently, over 40 states in the U.S. have legislation in place to promote professional development in family engagement in school districts. Some of these states also have a mandate in place that preservice teachers are required to take a course in family engagement to obtain teacher licensure. This has spurred an interest in how various assignments that are part of a course in family engagement influence preservice teachers’ development of an understanding of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012). The purpose of this study was to provide a summary of outcomes from two sections of a secondary preservice teacher course on family engagement. A pretest posttest design was used to explore changes in preservice teacher perceptions. The National Standards were used as the outline for the curriculum of the online course entitled Parent Involvement and Family Engagement (7–12 Perspective). Working with diverse families and helping families help their children with content were themes interwoven into the assignments and readings for the course. The results of the study help support the importance of gathering data not only at the beginning and end of two sections of a course on family engagement but also the importance of looking closely at assignments during the course through the lens of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships.

Key Words: preservice teachers, family engagement, National Standards for

Family–School Partnerships, perceptions, secondary education preparation, online course, middle, high schools, teacher candidates

Background of the Problem

State legislation and licensure requirements have created interest in how best to prepare future teachers to engage families. This study focuses on various assignments that are part of a course in family engagement to determine how they influence preservice teachers' development of an understanding of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012).

In the past, the term “parent involvement” (as used by some authors and practitioners) implied a one-way connection between parents and their children's education. The connection was visualized as a “flow of information from school to parent” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 2). Parents in this early model were seen as someone who helps with homework, checks on grades, and communicates with teachers only when problems arise (Olmstead, 2013). More recently, the concept of “family engagement” has emerged. This concept involves support from multiple providers—the family, the school, and the community. Family engagement centers on learning and self-discipline (Amatea, 2009; Ferlazzo, 2009). A cadre of researchers in recent years (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Jeynes, 2007) have helped bring a clearer distinction between parent involvement and family engagement and the roles that are addressed through each of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012).

These National Standards are based on the framework of six types of family involvement (Epstein, 2001) necessary for successful family–school partnerships. The work of Epstein brought together the work of Bronfenbrenner (1986), Moll et al. (1992), and Dunst (2002), along with other theorists, to develop a framework of six types of family involvement necessary for successful family–school partnership programs. The first National PTA standard, *Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class*, sets up a frame of openness for including families as “active participants in the life of the school.” The standard moves beyond simply welcoming families and adds the idea that families are to be valued and connected to the school community. In addition, this first standard includes others beyond the family and the home. Including others such as the school staff brings a focus on what is important in the welcome—an understanding of what students are learning and doing in the classroom. The second standard, *Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning*,

explains how communication needs to be effective and then brings out important features of the communication: “engaging,” “regular,” “two-way,” and “meaningful.” The third standard is more broadly stated and, interestingly, is one that is typically further broken down in school districts to align with district mission statements: *Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students’ learning and healthy development both at home and at school and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.* The fourth standard is more direct and is stated as *Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.* This standard is intended to bring family voice into the classroom, school, and district. *Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs,* the fifth standard, is intended to bring families and school partners into a state of harmony in making decisions that affect students and the entire school community. The final standard, *Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation,* moves the focus to the broader community.

The National PTA standards are not enough in preparing professional development for preservice and in-service teachers. The complexity of families must also be considered. Variables such as culture, race, language, beliefs, academic success, and privilege must also be contemplated when addressing the individual needs of families. Teachers often indicate they are underprepared to work with parents, especially families from differing cultures (Evans, 2013). Curriculum design for a course on family engagement is a challenging and complex task. It is important to make use of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships, but these standards alone are not sufficient. Other resources addressing complex issues such as those related to diversity must be included (Mattingly, Prislin, McKinzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002).

Studies (e.g., Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005) have shown that secondary teachers often have limited skills in fostering family engagement. This may be partly due to the fact that teacher preparation programs often do not emphasize family involvement practices. Instead, teacher preparation programs often focus on content courses, pedagogy courses, and practicum experiences as highly relevant in secondary certification coursework. Important issues like working with diverse families and helping families support their children with content are often omitted from secondary teacher preparation curricula (Ferrara 2011a, 2011b, 2015; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). A review of the literature on the impact of specific courses on parent involvement and family engagement

demonstrates that the typical focus is on preservice teachers in early childhood and elementary settings (e.g., Morris & Taylor, 1988; Tichenor, 1997; Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). Graue and Brown's (2003) research includes both elementary and secondary preservice teachers who were enrolled in a course on families and schooling. Their findings suggested that theoretical knowledge on family engagement as part of a teacher preparation course expanded preservice teachers' understanding of strategies for working with families. A limited survey completed with 20 secondary teachers in a small Midwestern town found that over half of the participants reported that parent involvement could increase student success (Ramirez, 2000). However, only three teachers indicated that they had the time to involve parents. Additionally, at least 50% of the teachers reported that parental involvement was critical to support high school programs, but the majority (75%) stated that they were unwilling to participate in in-service training to increase parental involvement (Ramirez, 2000).

The neglect of family engagement as a common practice is reflected in the dearth of research studies on family engagement at the secondary level (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2010). What has been found is that secondary teachers report that they have a sense of disconnection from families (e.g., Brooks, 2009; Ferrara, 2009; Feuerstein, 2000) and a lack of communication between the classroom and the home setting (Brooks, 2009; Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007). Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues (2001) report that for some families in secondary settings, a school is an intimidating place. Secondary school is also a time when families are trying to understand their role as children become more independent, and their level of confidence in helping their children learn may decrease.

The lack of emphasis on family involvement is unfortunate, since studies have shown that secondary students tend to earn higher grades, set higher career goals, and have fewer discipline problems when families are involved as school partners during the middle and high school years (e.g., Lee & Burkam, 2002; Trusty, 1996). Family members report that they need more guidance on how to involve themselves effectively in their children's education, especially during the secondary years (Gould, 2011). This, however, is not always possible for teachers who have limited time and lack of expertise in working with families of secondary students (Kelly, 2014). It follows that helping teachers reach an understanding that the family unit should have an active role in secondary schools is essential. Teacher preparation is the obvious place to help teachers gain an understanding of the importance of the role of families regarding achievement and behavior support (Graue, & Brown, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide a summary of two sections of a secondary preservice teacher course on family engagement that used a pretest and posttest survey to explore changes in preservice teacher perceptions. The curriculum for the online course was outlined by the six National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012). Essential issues that are present in today’s classroom—namely, working with diverse families and assisting families to help their children with content—were interwoven in the course assignments and readings for the course. The analysis of the two sections of the course was guided by three questions:

1. Does the length of the course make a difference in the perceptions that preservice teachers form about parent involvement and family engagement?
2. What changes in preservice teachers’ perceptions of family involvement emerged from the pretest and posttest based on the PTA Standards and Preservice Teacher Beliefs About Family Involvement Scale?
3. What changes in preservice teachers’ perceptions of family involvement emerged from the pretest to the posttest based on the Preservice Teacher Beliefs About the Importance of Family Involvement Practices Scale?

Methodology

Participants

This study involved preservice teachers who were enrolled in a teacher preparation program in a college of education in a midsized Western city. In total, 42 male and 48 female preservice teachers completed the online course during one of the two sessions in the 2014 academic year—winter session or summer session. The course was newly designed to support secondary preservice teachers who were completing their teacher certification program.

The demographics and number of participants in each of the sessions were similar. Each session hosted 45 secondary preservice teachers from multiple content areas (e.g., mathematics, science, art). Preservice teachers represented a range of content area certifications: science (23), mathematics (18), social studies (22), English/language arts (19), career and technical education (3), and music or art (5). Over 80% of the preservice teachers were either completing their teacher preparation program and poised to student teach or in a practicum experience in the large district in the same midsized city. The district where the preservice teachers completed their internship or practica has a student population that is over 50% Hispanic. Over 48% of the students in the district receive free and reduced lunch.

Course Design

The course aimed to address the mandate of the state legislation that all teachers who had not earned their teacher licensure in the state needed to complete a three-credit course in family involvement to obtain their teaching credential. The state criteria stated that the approved course needed to be aligned with the six National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012) and to reflect a focus on diversity/multiculturalism.

The online course examined for this study was designed based on feedback from school district teachers and administrators, family advocacy groups, regional district professional development consultants, and extensive research on comparable courses in the United States. Preservice teachers completed a consent form at the beginning of their course of study to agree to have their data analyzed. The researcher received approval by the university's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study.

Preservice teachers in the course were encouraged to look at models beyond Epstein's (2001) six levels of involvement; namely, to consider models and theories such as those of Bronfenbrenner (1986), Dunst (2002), Coleman (1988), Comer et al. (1996), Moll and Greenberg(1990), and Weiss and Stephen (2009). The assignments for the course aligned with six National Standards for Family–School Partnerships and included student examples, a grading rubric, and a writing outline. Each assignment—including the Socratic discussions (Ward, 2012), communication projects, toolkits, workshops, and program final essays—was developmentally designed to build preservice teacher capacity to gain an understanding of how the standards apply the assignment to what was also taking place in the practicum or internship experience.

Both sessions were web-delivered with two full-day classroom meetings, one each at the beginning and end of the course. The three-week session began during the winter semester (December 29–January 15). The second session was a five-week session during the summer (June 10–July 15). The sessions were scheduled to align with preservice teachers' availability.

Data Instruments

The survey (see Appendix) was made available in two ways, and preservice teachers had an option on how and when they chose to complete it: in an online format submitted before the start of class, or a paper-generated survey completed at the large session meeting on the first day of class. These two options were also available at the end of the course.

Demographic items. The first set of questions was designed to gain demographic information (gender, student generated identification number, content major, and program).

Quantitative Scales. Two scales were used as part of the pretest and posttest for each separate class. The first pretest/posttest scale was a set of six researcher-designed items, titled the PTA Standards and Preservice Teacher Beliefs About Family Involvement Scale, hereafter referred to in this article as the PTA Standards Scale. The six items closely aligned with the PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012). The PTA's National Standards are framed around six specific types of involvement considered beneficial to a child's academic success:

- Welcoming all families into the school community;
- Communicating effectively,
- Supporting student success,
- Speaking up for every child,
- Sharing power, and
- Collaborating with the community.

The questions for the first part of the survey were written by the researcher who received feedback from the district family resource center on the use of precise phrases that helped capture the intent of each of the six PTA standards.

The second scale used in this study was the 17-item Preservice Teacher Beliefs About the Importance of Family Involvement Practices Scale, hereafter referred to as the Importance of Practices Scale. These are items drawn from Feuerstein's (2000) survey items selected from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study, which examined eighth grade students' and schools' practices related to parent involvement and overall completion rate in high school. Feuerstein's study explored the benefits of parental involvement based on elevated levels of educational expectations, consistent encouragement, and families who provide positive influence on the educational achievements of their children (Catsambis, 1988). Each of the surveys was constructed with a six-point, Likert-type scale with "1" meaning "very strongly disagree" and "6" meaning "very strongly agree."

Findings: Quantitative Survey Analysis

In order to investigate internal reliability of these instruments, Cronbach's Alpha was run for all administrations of the two scales. Cronbach's Alphas for the two scales were acceptable for both instruments with only one exception for winter. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alphas for PTA Standards and Preservice Teacher Beliefs About Family Involvement

Term	Administration	Instrument	Cronbach's Alpha
Winter	pre	PTA	.42
	post	PTA	.44
Summer	pre	PTA	.61
	post	PTA	.71
Winter	pre	Practices	.91
	post	Practices	.92
Summer	pre	Practices	.94
	post	Practices	.93

Differences in pretest/posttest total scores for both winter and summer were tested with paired samples *t*-tests on the PTA Standards Scale and the Importance of Practices Scale. Total scores were calculated by adding responses across all items. Although total scores are most important in reporting results, the following analysis by individual items were also conducted to provide some indication on how preservice teachers reported on specific issues. Table 2 shows paired samples *t*-test results for all six individual items for the winter session, while Table 3 presents results for the summer session.

Three of the six independent items showed significant levels of improvement from the pretest to the posttest in the winter session. In addition, mean total scores showed a significant level of improvement. Only one of the independent items showed a significant level of improvement for the summer; however, total mean scores did not show a significant level of improvement.

Total posttest scores for winter were then compared to total posttest scores for summer using an independent samples *t*-test. There were no significant differences (winter total means = 29.51, *SD* 2.63; summer total means = 29.54, *SD* 3.70, $t(88) = .492$, $p = .62$, $d = .10$).

Next, pretest/posttest scores on the Importance of Practices Scale instrument were analyzed. Table 4 presents results of paired samples *t*-tests on each item for the winter session (tables can be found on the pages that follow).

Eleven of the 17 items showed a significant level of improvement (items 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17). A paired samples *t*-test on total scores showed significant gains. Table 5 presents the same analyses and statistical procedure for the summer session. Twelve of the 17 items showed a significant level of improvement (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17). A paired samples *t*-test on total scores also showed significant gains.

Table 2. PTA Standards and Preservice Teacher Beliefs About Family Involvement Scale (Winter Session)

Standard	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>D</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
1. Families help – schoolwork	3.18	1.11	3.36	1.19	.96	44	.10	.20
2. Families’ – school success	4.38	.86	4.87	.92	2.9	44	.006**	.61
3. Families can help if shown	5.29	.66	5.49	.76	1.5	44	.14	.32
4. Help teachers to be effective	5.36	.61	5.56	.62	1.6	44	.12	.34
5. Families want to help	4.02	.99	4.64	.91	3.7	44	.001**	.79
6. Families help students be successful	5.29	.61	5.60	.58	3.0	44	.005**	.63
Total	27.51	2.55	29.51	2.63	5.02	44	<.001**	1.06

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Table 3. PTA Standards and Preservice Teacher Beliefs About Family Involvement Scale (Summer Session)

Standard	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
1. Families help – schoolwork	2.87	.67	3.09	1.28	1.15	44	.26	.24
2. Families – school success	5.16	1.01	5.04	1.01	1.40	44	.17	.29
3. Families can help if shown	5.02	1.01	5.49	.70	2.85	44	.007*	.60
4. Help teachers become effective	5.47	.79	5.71	.85	1.48	44	.18	.31
5. Families want to help	4.31	.93	4.64	1.83	1.83	44	.08	.39
6. Families help students be successful	5.42	.81	5.51	.50	.50	44	.62	.11
Total	28.24	3.26	29.84	3.69	2.60	44	.013*	.55

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Table 4. Preservice Teacher Beliefs About the Importance of Family Involvement Practices Scale (Winter Session)

Standard	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
1. Conferences	5.16	.90	5.42	.84	1.81	44	.08	.29
2. Contact problems	5.38	.61	5.58	.69	1.77	44	.08	.26
3. Positive contacts	5.40	.62	5.47	.76	.60	44	.55	.09
4. Volunteers	4.47	.99	4.78	1.00	1.70	44	.10	.25
5. Skills/Learn	4.89	.78	5.18	.78	2.38	44	.02*	.35
6. Specific activities	4.87	.79	5.16	.90	2.38	44	.02*	.35
7. Families – ideas	4.33	.95	4.80	1.08	2.75	44	.009**	.41
8. Assign homework	4.02	1.01	4.69	1.21	3.71	44	.001**	.55
9. Ask help reading	4.84	1.02	5.02	1.03	1.09	44	.28	.16
10. Help homework	4.47	.92	5.07	.78	4.29	44	<.001**	.64
11. How was school day	5.20	.82	5.49	.70	2.11	44	.04*	.46
12. Invite into classroom	5.04	.93	5.40	.81	2.19	44	.03*	.32
13. Library or com. event	4.60	1.01	5.18	.86	3.47	44	.001*	.51
14. Give family advocacy	5.18	.72	5.62	.61	3.55	44	.001**	.53
15. Send informative letters	5.24	.73	5.40	.72	1.19	44	.24	.17
16. Provide workshops on careers	4.67	1.0	5.16	.98	3.10	44	.003**	.46
17. Encourages governance	4.29	.97	5.00	1.00	4.04	44	<.001**	.72
Total	82.04	9.44	88.40	9.85	4.82	44	<.001**	.72

p* < .05, *p* < .001

Table 5. Preservice Teacher Beliefs About the Importance of Family Involvement Practices Scale (Summer Session)

Standard	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
1. Conferences	5.27	.96	5.58	.81	2.39	44	.02*	.50
2. Contact problems	5.33	.83	5.56	.66	1.88	44	.07	.40
3. Positive contacts	5.40	.81	5.71	.55	3.12	44	.003*	.66
4. Volunteers	4.58	1.06	5.09	.76	3.70	44	.001**	.79
5. Skill/Learn	4.98	.73	5.40	.81	2.69	44	.01*	.57
6. Specific activities	4.96	.93	5.44	.73	3.67	44	.000**	.97
7. Families – ideas	4.50	1.27	5.25	.89	4.69	44	<.000**	.97
8. Assign homework	4.27	1.27	5.07	.93	5.08	44	<.001**	1.07
9. Ask help reading	4.76	1.26	5.22	1.20	3.09	44	.003*	.65
10. Help homework	4.58	1.22	4.98	1.22	2.09	44	.04*	.44
11. How was school day	5.22	1.06	5.53	.73	2.39	44	.02*	.50
12. Invite into class-room	5.20	1.01	5.44	.69	1.48	44	.15	.31
13. Library or com. event	4.91	1.01	5.18	.86	1.36	44	.18	.28
14. Give family advocacy	5.40	1.15	5.60	1.11	1.54	44	.13	.33
15. Send informative letters	5.11	1.07	5.50	.62	3.23	44	.002*	.68
16. Provide workshops on careers	4.42	1.47	5.09	1.10	2.30	44	.004**	.65
17. Encourage governance	4.56	1.06	5.18	.94	3.61	44	<.001**	.76
Total	83.42	12.8	90.78	10.00	5.40	44	<.001**	.81

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Total posttest scores for winter session were then compared to total posttest scores for summer session using an independent samples t-test. There were no significant differences (winter total mean 88.40, SD 9.85; summer total mean 90.78, SD 10.0, $t(88) = 1.14$, $p = .26$, $d = .24$).

The Cronbach Alpha shows acceptable internal reliability in three of the four instances. The PTA Standards Scale, a researcher-designed item scale, was low when administered for the first section of the course (winter; .42 pre and .44 post). In the second section of the course, the PTA Standards Scale score for the Cronbach Alpha in the spring was acceptable (.61 pre and .71 post). One possible explanation for this outcome was that in the first course offering, there were more undergraduate preservice teachers in the course than in the second course offering; in the summer course, there were more graduate preservice teachers. Graduate preservice teachers reported that the course was relevant to their recent spring experience as student teachers, as compared to winter course preservice teachers who had limited experience in the classroom.

The Importance of Practices Scale contained researcher-designed items constructed for the purpose of the present study. In contrast to the PTA Standards Scale, the Importance of Practices Scale demonstrated a high Cronbach Alpha in both course offerings. The first section of the course (winter) was high (.91 pre and .94 post) as was the second section of the course (summer; .92 pre and .93 post). This may be attributed to the fact that the items were selected from an instrument based on a longitudinal study that had undergone several testing quality analysis.

The Importance of Practices Scale total level of mean scores in both the winter and summer session demonstrated an overall significant level of improvement. Three of the five individual items for the Importance of Practices Scale in winter showed significant levels of improvement: *every family has some strengths that can be helpful to increase student success in school*; *families want to be involved more than they are at school*; and *family involvement is important for student success in school*. In contrast, in the outcome of the test for summer, only one item showed a significant level of improvement. This was a standard that was different from the winter set of significant identified standards: *All families could learn ways to help their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how*.

In the Importance of Practices Scale, the overall total mean scores for the winter and summer sessions demonstrated a significant level of improvement in preservice teachers' beliefs in the various roles of teachers to support families with student learning. In both the winter and summer sessions, preservice teachers also reported significant improvement in their perceptions of beliefs in the importance of family involvement on 75% of the items. In the winter session, 11 items showed significant improvement from the pretest to the post-

test. In the summer session, 13 items show significant improvement from the pretest to the posttest. In a comparison of the items, seven items showed a significant level of improvement in both the winter and summer sessions: *telling families about the skills their child needs to learn in the course/program; providing specific activities for families to do with their children to improve academic learning; giving families ideas about discussing specific TV shows and other media sources with their child; assigning homework that requires families to interact with their child; asking families to help their child with homework; providing workshops for families to help them guide their children in career decisions; and encouraging families to take an active role in school governance.*

In the winter session, there were three significant items identified that were not significant in the summer session: *asking student's families to ask their child about their school day; inviting student's family to visit my classroom; and asking the student's family to take the child to the library or community events.* In contrast, in the summer session, there were five significant items identified that were not significant in the winter session: *having a conference with each student's family at least once a year; contacting families when their child does something well or improves; inviting families as volunteers into the classroom; asking families to listen to their child read; and sending home letters telling families what the children have been learning and doing in class.* Two items did not show significant improvement in either section of the course: *contacting families about their child's problem or failures; and giving families ideas to help them become effective advocates for their children.*

Discussion

The intent of the study was to “drill down” into how preservice secondary teachers distinguish between family engagement and parent involvement in a fixed time that is guided by a set of assignments in an online course. Preservice teacher perceptions are compared through a set of pretest responses as compared to posttest responses. The question that is explored is to what degree an online course can increase secondary preservice teachers’ understanding of the importance of fostering family engagement using the framework of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (National PTA, 2012). The first question explored was “Does the length of the course make a difference in perceptions that preservice teachers form about parent involvement and family engagement?” The first section of the course was three weeks long, and the second section of the course was five weeks. The research design was consistent in the winter and summer sessions. The assignments were the same, and the only factor that was affected was the length of the Socratic seminars; those in

the winter course were three days and in the summer course, four days. When preservice teachers' change in perceptions (as measured by the PTA Standards Scale) from the summer course were compared to those measured in the winter course, there was no significant difference. This helps support the conclusion that the overall outcomes of the two courses were not impacted by the length of the course (3 weeks as compared to 5 weeks) or the format of the course (on-line delivery) based on the two-pretest/posttest measures.

A second question explored in the study was what changes in preservice teachers' perceptions of family involvement emerged from the pretest and posttest based on the PTA Standards Scale. In the winter session, there were three significant findings based on the PTA Standards: Standard Two (*Every family has some strengths that can be helpful to increase student success in school*); Standard Five (*Families want to be more involved at school*); and Standard Six (*Families involvement is important for student success in school*). In contrast, in the summer session, there was only one shift—Standard Three (*All families could learn ways to help their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how*). In each instance, the overall sum of the means showed a significant level of improvement. A possible explanation for the difference in which standards improved more from the winter session to the summer session may be the timeline for certification that was mandated. Preservice teachers in secondary education, unlike preservice teachers in early childhood or elementary education, were not required to take a course on family involvement framed by the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships before the recent legislation was enacted. The preservice teachers in the winter course needed the course immediately for certification. In addition, until this time, attention to parent involvement and family engagement was minimally addressed in secondary teacher preparation courses. In spring, the faculty, especially those in the content areas, introduced family engagement strategies to some degree in their course activities. In addition, preservice teachers' practicum experiences in the spring were more intentionally placed in classrooms where mentoring teachers were engaged in home visits, family conferences, and family nights. Together, the integration of focused curriculum, practicum placements with teachers who served as role models of effective family engagement practices, and the preservice teachers' impetus to be successful in the summer course provided an awareness of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships and their implications for being prepared as a certified teacher in the imminent future.

A third area of comparison and contrast was based on the survey of the preservice teachers' consideration of the importance of family engagement practices, and this analysis was guided by the question: What changes in preservice teachers' perceptions of family involvement emerged from the pretest

to the posttest based on the Importance of Practices Scale? The second set of pretest/posttest findings showed an interesting contrast in outcomes based on each of the sessions. In the winter session, there were shifts in 11 beliefs about the importance of family involvement practices. In comparison, there were 13 shifts in the summer session. What perhaps is interesting in a comparison/contrast is that seven items showed significant levels of improvement in both the winter and summer sessions, as mentioned above in the findings. These are areas that were used as focused assignments in the course, namely in Socratic discussion, a scripted family role play, a family toolkit, and a family weebly.

It is also important to look more closely at items that did not demonstrate a significant level of improvement in either session—winter or summer. One item tends to be common practice that is already in place in schools: *contacting parents when there is a problem*. It is hypothesized that preservice teachers were already familiar with this practice, one that was in place when they attended secondary schools. Even so, it is important to discuss this traditional practice that teachers have in place and develop more family-friendly ways to enhance these practices. The other item, *giving families ideas to help them become effective advocates for their children*, is typically not addressed in secondary school preparation. The teacher's role is more focused on content coverage than on the teacher serving as a partner in helping families become empowered in the school setting. This finding supports the need to develop curriculum not only in a course on family engagement but in multiple courses—multicultural education, educational psychology, content methodology, and general pedagogy—to bring a realization that educators have a role to engage all families in empowering relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The findings from the surveys support the hope that preservice teachers are moving in that direction, and with more curriculum development paired with sound practicum and internship experiences, secondary preservice teachers will have tools to recognize the importance of and have skills to help families in being effective advocates for their children.

Limitations

One limitation is that this study involved a number of consecutive statistical analyses on the same participants' scores. This increased the possibility of spurious findings. The research findings would have been enhanced with a clearly designed qualitative set of questions that supported the quantitative analysis, namely a closer look at the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships and aspects of family engagement practices outlined by Feuerstein (2000). Moreover, with a final focus on theory into practice, future research needs to bring into account more than one family engagement model. In the

school district where this study took place, a rubric to evaluate the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships was in place in each of the schools. Listed among the references of the rubric are two citations for the Flamboyant Foundation’s approach to family engagement. Despite these two entries, it is not possible to discern the ways in which the Flamboyant Foundation influenced the school district’s school–home partnership model, as there are no related standards or criteria that were found. In the future, it is hoped that the inclusion of the Flamboyant Foundation with the National Standards will serve as an indicator that the best model for family engagement might be a combination of several existing models and approaches.

Another point of limitation is that this study was fixed in time, that is, the courses were not a typical length of 12–15 weeks nor was it delivered in a face-to-face format. A future comparative study using the same instruments for different course formats, studied over time, would help determine the effect of time and course delivery on the perceptions of preservice teachers.

Finally, the results from the study cannot be used to make far-reaching predictions. At this time, there is no evidence that what the preservice teachers reported during the study would be carried over into their internship and beyond. While these points above are noteworthy, the study has provided a framework for future studies on these complex, important research questions.

An interesting finding, not one that guided this study but is currently being evaluated for a follow up study, was in response to the culminating essay for the course. The questions explored who was responsible in addressing each of the six PTA standards: *Which of the six standards do you as a teacher see as your role? How would you support the identified standard? Who else plays an essential role in addressing the selected standard or standards?* The two standards most frequently selected by the preservice teachers were standard one (welcoming all families into the school community) and standard four (speaking up for every child). Preservice teachers also concluded that the building administrator was responsible in addressing all of the standards. A deeper analysis of these findings will help bring more attention to the assertion that family involvement is everyone’s role, a point that is clearly brought out through the National PTA standards framework.

Recommendations

Preparing in-service teachers and preservice teachers needs to be a team event. The school district alone cannot provide all the needed professional development for teachers, staff, and administrators. Colleges of education cannot use a one-shot course, even one that is thoughtful and well researched. There

are too many complex issues and strategies in an ever-changing lens of what constitutes parent involvement and family engagement. The key is for all to collaborate—the local school district, the local community, and the teacher preparation programs. More importantly, this approach needs to be centered at school sites that include all: the students, families, teachers, school administrators, preservice teachers, teacher educators, regional directors, and even state directors or personnel.

Together, these essential players need to set manageable goals and objectives that foster family engagement. One way is for the school district professional development team to look more closely at how family engagement strategies are presented to their teachers and consider using more teacher-centered engagement approaches, like a teacher's web-based family communication site. At this time, communication is done largely with district programs such as Infinite Campus, take-home letters, or school newspapers.

Secondly, in this time of funding uncertainty, there needs to be a money source that helps enhance the change process through professional development in which teachers have more “buy-in,” compared to programs that are currently in place but do not necessarily include teachers' voices. Finally, there needs to be a clearly established understanding that this is a process that involves community building which has a richer, more involved sense of “our” rather than “me,” allowing teachers' voices to inform which programs might be more relevant for working with students' families and to what degree teachers can utilize such training.

The limitations in this study point out that it is difficult to demonstrate the benefits of parent involvement, especially in today's family structures with a range of differences that involve racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic diversity (Nathans & Revelle, 2013). The curriculum in this study helped provide preservice teachers with the realization that diversity and poverty play a critical role in family engagement but was limited to raising awareness. What is needed is more attention brought out in other teacher preparation courses at all levels—from prekindergarten through high school and beyond. The course, too, brings this critical point forward with an important follow-up team during a critical time in teacher preparation—the internship. As such, this study has been shared with university supervisors who will be supporting the interns (student teachers) during the upcoming school year. These are essential data points that will be taken into account in future professional development workshops as well as portfolio entries assigned during the internship or student teaching experience.

More importantly, course design for all—preservice teachers, teachers, and even administrators—needs to keep a focus on creating a rich perspective of

family engagement, namely with a strong focus on building relationships, having knowledge of tools in the school and community for families, and developing an appreciation and understanding of families from diverse backgrounds. Peering into a course online helps provide insight and hindsight—and a vision of what else can enhance the complex understanding of family engagement for our teachers of the future.

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Appendix. Pretest Survey/Posttest Surveys

Your initials and NSHE number

Level (preservice, intern, teacher)

Gender: Male Female

Content Area(s):

PTA Standards and Preservice Teacher Beliefs About Family Involvement Scale

Directions to preservice teachers: In this section, please indicate **HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE** with each of the statements.

	Dis-agree very strongly	Dis-agree	Dis-agree just a little	Agree just a little	Agree	Agree very strongly
1. Most families know how to help their children with schoolwork at home.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Every family has some strengths that can be helpful to increase student success in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. All families could learn ways to help their children with schoolwork at home, if shown how.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Family involvement can help teachers be more effective with students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Families of children at school want to be involved more than they are.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Family involvement is important for student success in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Preservice Teacher Beliefs About the Importance of Family Involvement Practices Survey

Directions to preservice teachers: In this section, please indicate **HOW IMPORTANT** you believe each of the following is in your future teaching and family involvement practices.

	Disagree very strongly	Dis-agree	Disagree just a little	Agree just a little	Agree	Agree very strongly
1. Having a conference with each student's family at least once a year.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Contacting families about their child's problems or failures.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Contacting families when their child does something well or improves.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Involving families as volunteers in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5	6

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5. Telling families about the skills their child needs to learn in the course/program	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Providing specific activities for families to do with their child to improve academic learning	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Giving families ideas about discussing specific TV shows and other media sources with their child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Assigning homework that requires families to interact with their child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Asking families to listen to their children read.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. Asking families to help their child with homework.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. Asking families to ask their child about the school day.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. Inviting families to visit the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. Asking families to take their children to the library or community events.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. Giving families ideas to help them become effective advocates for their children	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. Sending home information telling families what the children have been learning and doing in class.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. Providing workshops for families to help them guide their children in career decisions	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. Encouraging families to take an active role in school governance	1	2	3	4	5	6