

The Role of Teacher Preparation Programs in Fostering Preservice Teachers' Ability to Effectively Engage With Families

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Abstract

Reflecting decades of research documenting the essential role families play in the education of children, the standards published both by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) include a focus on the importance of the relationship with the family. Teacher preparation programs that integrate specific course instruction alongside field experiences requiring interaction with families are fairly limited, and as a result, new teachers may feel unprepared and unsure of their ability to foster relationships with parents. This report from the field outlines a college–family partnership (CFP) included as required content in a teacher certification program and intended to assist preservice teachers in the development of those skills necessary to build and sustain beneficial family relationships.

Key Words: preservice teachers, teacher preparation, family and community partnerships, engagement, report from the field, parents, interactions

Introduction

The standards regarding the education of young children published both by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and

Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) emphasize a number of elements considered essential to the professional development of teachers. These statements, designed to reflect the progression of preservice educators' development from "a theoretical knowledge base to a more complex understanding and the application of knowledge in professional practice" (NAEYC, 2009, p. 2), focus on many of the same issues including assessment, developmentally appropriate practices and instruction, and professional development.

Notably, both organizations include in their standards a focus on the importance of the relationship with the family. NAEYC notes that "successful early childhood education depends on partnership with children's families" and that candidates must "demonstrate a variety of communication skills" in order to "support and engage diverse families through respectful, reciprocal relationships" (NAEYC, 2009, p. 12). DEC recommends similar "family-centered practices," often described as "a way of thinking in which families or parents are considered central and the most important decision maker in the child's life" (Trivette & Dunst, 2005, p. 119). These practices "build relationships between families and professionals who work together to achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes and goals" (DEC, 2014, p. 10).

That both organizations recognize the important role of families in the education of children is no accident. Research over the last 20 years has determined that strong partnerships between school and family result in (a) higher academic achievement and grades (Henderson et al., 2007; Pomerantz et al., 2007); (b) increased student sense of well-being (Berger, 2008); (c) better school attendance (Henderson et al., 2007); (d) positive student and parent perceptions of both classroom and school climate (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005); (e) positive student attitudes and behaviors (Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2007); (f) increased student readiness to do homework (Henderson & Mapp, 2002); (g) increased student time spent with parents (Henderson et al., 2007); (h) higher educational aspirations (Grant & Ray, 2010); and (i) increased parental satisfaction with teachers (Grant & Ray, 2010). In addition, when relationships between parents and teachers are positive, children demonstrate "greater self-direction, self-control and social adjustment, increased self-esteem, better psychosomatic health, and more positive relationships with their peers" (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2018, p. 92). As these benefits are long-lasting, the future success of children—both academically and socially—is positively correlated to the relationship between school and family (Gill et al., 2013).

However, in spite of widespread agreement about the value of these relationships as well as research that documents their positive impact, the emphasis many teacher education programs place on developing school–family

partnerships is fairly limited (Denessen et al., 2009; Evans, 2013; Miller et al., 2013; Patte, 2011). Although teacher education programs may provide general information about communicating with parents and instruction on how to draft “Meet the Teacher” letters and class newsletters, preservice teachers are not often taught how to develop and foster effective relationships with parents. “Most preservice teacher candidates have little contact with parents until student teaching” (Patte, 2011, p. 154), and in this vacuum, preservice teachers may fall back on their own experiences, resulting in somewhat limited and traditional views concerning family–school partnerships.

That new teachers feel unprepared to develop essential relationships with parents is likely a direct result of the limited opportunities teacher candidates are provided within their certification programs to interact directly with parents (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Evans, 2013). In addition to specific content relevant to partnerships, teacher candidates need more specific kinds of experiences in preparation for working effectively with families. Clinical field experience, a long-established component of teacher education programs, provides teacher candidates with scaffolded classroom experience, but it does not typically include a focus on family interaction and relationship building. Preservice teacher candidates report that their perceptions about parent involvement were “most influenced by their experiences in the field” (Uludag, 2008, p. 813); therefore, authentic experiences provided during structured interactions with families may prove essential to preservice teachers’ ability to foster positive relationships.

Specific elements are necessary to build and sustain effective partnerships. Generally, partnership suggests “cooperation, sharing of ideas, and interaction” (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2018). Turnbull et al. (2011) proposed that these elements: communication, respect, commitment, equality, and trust, can serve as a framework for thinking about how to establish and maintain effective family–professional partnerships. These elements are tied to specific behavioral indicators, such as active listening and being friendly and nonjudgmental, which can be taught, practiced, and reinforced with teacher candidates if teacher education programs include field experience focusing specifically on the development of partnership relationships with families.

This report from the field describes a college–family partnership (CFP) program created to both support families within our community and build confidence and competence in our preservice teachers’ ability to work collaboratively with parents, thereby influencing the perceptions that preservice teachers may have about families and family partnerships. The authors are professors within the field of early elementary education and special education, with experiences working in urban, rural, and suburban school districts. Firmly believing that “coursework focusing on family–school partnerships has the

potential to positively influence preservice teacher candidates' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward engaging families" (Patte, 2011, p. 154), the authors developed a CFP program embedded into required field experience and designed to address an identified community need and provide scaffolded, supervised experiences for preservice teachers to practice those partnership elements of communication, respect, commitment, equality, and trust as proposed by Turnbull et al. (2011).

The Development of a Mutually Beneficial College–Family Partnership

The course "Professional and Family Partnerships" was developed following the competencies set by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, NAEYC, and DEC, and its title was purposefully chosen. The term "partnership" implies two or more people sharing rights and responsibilities and working together toward some agreed-on and mutually beneficial end (Epley & Kyzar, 2014, p. 129), and that concept was key throughout course design.

Two versions of this course were developed: one specifically for early elementary regular education preservice teachers, and a second for special education preservice teachers. Both courses followed similar objectives and assignments, focusing on developmentally appropriate practices, ethical standards, and collaboration with parents. All early elementary education majors and all special education majors are required to take the version of the course identified for their major, and the majority of those enrolled in the courses are sophomores. Additionally, at a later stage of their certification program, both sets of preservice teachers complete a content-specific course in literacy. That course, in which teacher candidates learn how to develop literacy stations, was also part of the partnership-focused field experience. As a result of course sequencing and major requirements, all early elementary education and special education majors participate in the partnership twice: once when enrolled in their respective "Professional and Family Partnerships" course as sophomores, and again as juniors or seniors when taking the literacy course during the later part of their program. It was important that the preservice teachers participated in the partnership twice during their undergraduate experience, as preservice teachers experience significant growth over time during their teacher preparation program related to their understanding of pedagogy and curriculum; the same growth is seen in the preservice teacher's experiences and interactions with parents and students.

A major challenge in first designing these parallel "Professional and Family Partnerships" courses was identifying a way to provide consistent, practical,

and applicable experiences for preservice teachers to interact with parents semester after semester. Because Miller et al. (2013) concluded that courses which explore family–school partnerships should include some form of field experiences which “might be best addressed within the community,” we partnered with a local nonprofit organization that serves the families of children with special needs. This organization, which meets monthly to provide participating families with supportive resources and programming, was interested in a collaboration with the college and the education department. The college agreed to host the organization on campus four times a year (two events per semester), providing educational enrichment for the children, both those with special needs and their siblings, while enabling the parents to attend meetings in another setting. The parent meetings generally addressed topics of concern related to parenting children with special needs, such as establishing a trust for future care, organizing fundraising campaigns, available opportunities for postsecondary education for children with disabilities, and financing needed adaptive equipment. The organization identified topics of interest for the parent meetings, scheduled their own speakers, and set their own agenda.

The typical schedule for these events, held in the evenings per the organization’s request, includes an informal light dinner followed by an hour of educational enrichment activities for the children while the parent meeting occurs elsewhere, and closes with the parents returning and debriefing with the preservice teachers. Table 1 provides an outline of the event agenda.

Table 1. College–Family Partnership Event Timeline

Time	Scheduled Event
5:45–6:00	Arrival and Family Check-in
6:00–6:45	Dinner
6:45–7:00	Parents Depart for Business Meeting/ Children Stay With Assigned Teacher Candidate
7:00–7:10	Read Aloud
7:10–7:40	Literacy Center Rotations
7:40–7:50	Read Aloud
7:50–8:00	Creative Movement and Dance
8:00–8:10	Read Aloud
8:10–8:30	Parent Debrief and Departure

Course Assignment Development

Preservice teachers enrolled in both of the partnership courses prepare for the CFP events during their course meetings throughout the semester. Developing meaningful course assignments related to the partnership event was critical in ensuring hands-on minds-on activities. At the sophomore level (see Table 2), each teacher candidate is assigned directly to a family and one of the children, and the focus is on engaging with the families through informal conversations. The preservice teachers often express the most reservations about what they should do while they are seated with the families during the dinner. To help them prepare, the course instructor provides instruction on effective communication with parents: conversation starters; etiquette; verbal and non-verbal communication cues; active listening strategies; questions about personal experiences, goals, and concerns; as well as techniques for balancing conversation between parent and child. The preservice teachers are not given a scripted list of conversation topics but do have to remain cognizant of the requirements of the reflection assignment they must complete following each CFP event. The course instructor also helps the student practice asking and answering questions related to the student, the evening, and themselves through role play scenarios. This scaffolded strategy for family interaction has proven to be highly effective in alleviating some of the preservice teachers' concerns in talking with parents. Additionally, students prepare a brief (one-page) family-oriented newsletter to share with the parents during the dinner. The newsletter includes an educational activity that a parent could do at home with the child, a tip column identifying healthy habits and relevant upcoming local events, and a short biography of the preservice teacher. The newsletter is tailored to the preservice teacher's assigned student's age level. The purpose of the newsletter is to provide preservice teachers with experience tailoring meaningful home-school connections as well as with additional "small talk" opportunities.

At the junior or senior level, it was important that the course connection included the content and pedagogical understandings the preservice teachers have been developing during their program of study. Therefore, those teacher candidates enrolled in the literacy content course create three to four stations focused on specific literacy skills and chose three related Read Alouds for the event. These students are responsible for sharing the Read Alouds and implementing the literacy stations on the evening of both events during the semester. The creation of these activities enabled the preservice teachers to implement their understandings of best practices in an authentic setting.

Table 2. College–Family Partnership Assignments and Roles

Preservice Education Course	CFP Assignment and Role
Professional and Family Partnerships: Early Elementary Education Majors (Sophomore Level Course)	Family Dinner: Engagement with family and assigned child during the meal Partnered with regular education sibling for center rotation, Read Aloud, and creative movement
Professional and Family Partnerships: Special Education Majors (Sophomore Level Course)	Family Dinner: Engagement with family and assigned child during the meal Partnered with a special needs child for center rotation, read aloud, and creative movement
Literacy Methods: Early Elementary Education Majors and Special Education Majors (Junior or Senior Level Course)	Literacy Center Rotation: Developing and implementing a series of thematic, make-it and take-it literacy centers Read Aloud: Delivering an engaging, thematic read aloud experience to the entire group of children Creative Movement: Leading the group of children in movement and dance videos

Near the close of the event, all of the children and all of the participating preservice teachers come together to engage in movement activities before winding down with a final Read Aloud. As the parents return from their separate meeting, the preservice teachers once again interact with the parent(s) of their assigned student as they debrief about the evening’s activities, the child’s level of engagement, and his or her behavior. This conversational cycle, engaging with parents at the beginning of the event and debriefing with the same parents at the end of the event, is practice of an essential skill that all teachers need to work effectively with families. Throughout the event, the faculty mentors supervise the preservice teachers, prompting, providing observational feedback, and modeling appropriate interactions with both the regular and special education students attending the event. In this way, the observation process is similar to a university supervisor visiting a field placement. The faculty mentors are also responsible for the overall coordination and execution of the event, ensuring that the preservice teacher-led activities keep pace with the schedule and time constraints of the evening and helping the preservice teachers manage transitions between activities and handle any behavioral issues that might arise.

After each event has ended, the preservice teachers enrolled in the Professional and Family Partnership courses complete reflection assignments, frequently commenting on their increased confidence in their ability to interact with parents and expressing a sense of relief that communicating with parents, although certainly a learned skill, was not as daunting as it initially appeared.

College–Family Partnership: A Look at Program Effectiveness

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this college-family partnership, there were multiple data collection points, as described below.

Community Partners Feedback

At the onset of the CFP, the program coordinators met with the community partner leadership team both prior to and following each event to reflect upon what worked well and what needed additional attention. Based on this feedback, minor modifications to the venue, meal choices, program set up, and instructional activities were implemented. At each CFP event, the program coordinators, course professors, and community partner leaders were available to troubleshoot immediate needs.

College Partners Feedback

The course professors met on a regular basis, particularly at the onset of the CFP, to reflect on the process and modify program delivery based on observations made during the events and identified areas of need. Some examples of the outcomes of these conversations included modifications to the course assignments:

- Implementation of full literacy centers was not feasible due to the event time constraints and the number of families who may arrive late to the event. As a modification, the literacy centers were adjusted to cover a theme related to the content skill but operated independently.
- Addition of an open station. Because this community organization provides support to families with children from birth to age 18, children attending the CFP events had a wide range of ages. Additionally, some of the participating children were unable to complete stations due to their young age or disabilities. To accommodate these children, an open station with sensory bins and other birth–two activities were added. The development of sensory bins became an embedded assignment for the preservice teachers enrolled in the partnership courses.

Preservice Teacher Feedback

Preservice teachers across all courses completed reflective journal entries using provided prompts as well as an in-class debriefing session following each community partnership event. These strategic reflective journal entries played an important role in helping preservice teachers process their experiences. The opportunity to reflect independently prior to the guided in-class discussions ensured that all students had an opportunity to thoughtfully reflect on their experiences. The in-class debriefing session lead by the course professor fostered conversation between the preservice teachers who were able to relate to each other's experiences, as well as offering an opportunity to dive deeper on a topic and to explore questions. The following prompts are examples of the questions utilized in the reflections:

- What was your greatest takeaway from the CFP event?
- How do you feel about your conversation with the parents?
- What were you most apprehensive about going into the evening?
- Thinking about the next CFA event, what did you learn about your family that you can connect with during the next event?
- What did you learn about the experience of being a parent of a child with a disability?
- How might these lessons apply to your future practice as a classroom teacher?

These journal reflections documented a significant overall decrease in the preservice teachers' anxiety about meeting and engaging with parents after the first event, as evidenced by their feedback about their own professional growth:

I came into this event more confident than last time. I remember how easy the other family was to talk to. I knew I did not have the same family, but I hoped that the new family I was assigned to would also be very friendly. (Participant 1)

The idea of returning to a CFP event with the same family again left me somewhat flustered. The first event was a lot harder than I imagined, and I underestimated exactly how difficult the task would be. I made sure to better prepare myself and make sure I was ready for what I was facing....I would say I was way too quick to judge everything last time. I was unsure how to handle the situation and lacked confidence in my abilities to handle it. (Participant 4)

The CFP event ties into class because we were just talking about family engagement. The CFP event really helps us get a sense for talking to parents and families in order to gain their trust to spend just a few hours with their children. I really enjoyed having two different experiences at

the CFP events because it allowed me to compare what I did from the first one and the last, but also seeing the differences in every family and how they communicate. I think CFP is a great event. (Participant 25)

I think these events should continue if possible. I think that the first event is nerve-racking for some, but come the second event, I think we are even more equipped with knowledge and skills to make the night even better. I am excited to see if I will be a part of another class that will be included with this event. (Participant 14)

Parent Feedback

One sign of the effectiveness of this partnership is noted by the strong and consistent support from the family organization. Attendance data over the past four years confirms that 36 families have attended at least one event of the past 15 held. Of those families, 11 have attended 10 or more events, while another eight families have attended between five and nine events. One family has attended all 15 events. Additionally, parents provide us with specific feedback following the executed events. Comments from these parents include:

The event was very well done...All the students we met were absolutely wonderful!! (Partner 1)

Thank you very much for being involved with CFP!! (Partner 14)

E. had a great night. She talked ALL the way home about everything she did, and when we got home, she showed me everything. It was nice to know that there was adequate supervision for the children while the parents met in a separate space for the meeting/speaker. Adequate supervision is something we've struggled with in the past since there are so many children with such a wide range of abilities. Thank you for this opportunity. Looking forward to a continued partnership. (Partner 3)

It was great. Food was good, space wonderful. The students were terrific, very friendly. (Partner 6)

For the first meeting, I think it went well. D. had lots of fun and enjoyed showing me the things he made! (Partner 11)

College–Family Partnership: Important Considerations

Although the rationale behind this partnership has been sound since its inception, there have been some important considerations. One critical element to the creation of a successful partnership event was the need for reciprocity (Hands, 2005). All participating stakeholders had something to gain from the

partnership, but in order to maximize the benefits for each stakeholder, flexibility and communication were essential. Without a give-and-take negotiation process, the likelihood of creating a long-term and sustainable partnership significantly increases (Hands, 2005). In this instance, another key element that allowed the college to support this family-focused organization and use available space on campus was the organization's nonprofit status. That status allows us to hold events in campus spaces and not charge for their use, an important factor since we use two nearby but separate spaces for each event, and each of those campus spaces must be accessible to individuals with disabilities. The organization does pay for the speaker they bring in to the parent meeting as well as the dinner for all attendees at each event, while the college contributes a small amount of money for the execution of the event while also assuming the cost of necessary supplies for the centers and other miscellaneous materials needed.

The community organization also needed to make some adjustments in order to enable us to execute the events. For instance, families who plan to attend the event must R.S.V.P. approximately two weeks ahead of time. This allows us to track attendance and pair each student enrolled in the Professional and Family Partnerships class with either a child with special needs or a participating sibling. It also provides the information needed to purchase supplies. As part of that R.S.V.P. process, we request the families provide information about their children's age and grade, identify which child has a disability and any who do not, and note if there is any specific information that might help us better prepare our preservice teachers for the event (such as whether elopement is a concern). Parents often use that opportunity to tell us about specific behavior issues or concerns.

These CFP events also force us to be more flexible than what is typical for a clinical field experience. Because these events occur outside of the classroom on an evening in a social format, it is necessary to determine how to address some "nontypical" situations: families that have confirmed attendance that are not able to attend because of illness, families that attend without having R.S.V.P.d, or small children who become overtired as the evening wears on. For matters such as these, we rely heavily on the strong relationship built between the college program coordinators and the leadership of the community organization. We maintain frequent contact leading up to and during the events to address issues as they arise. Additionally, we often recruit additional preservice teachers with event experience to volunteer, and we make sure that we have an appropriate number of faculty at each event to provide additional supervision.

Summary

The value of strong relationships with parents is echoed in current research (Turnbull et al., 2011) and emphasized in the standards of many professional education organizations. Yet, teacher preparation programs often do not consistently provide scaffolded experiences embedded within preparation programs to reinforce the development of necessary interpersonal skills. This report from the field of a successful implementation of a college–family partnership should be considered as a model for developing professional partnerships with the community. This model provides an excellent framework for fostering positive parent–teacher interactions and collaborations. This college–family partnership provided structured experiences and scaffolded opportunities for direct parent–student teacher interaction, in addition to opportunities for reflection and support from mentor faculty, resulting in meaningful experiences working with families and the community for preservice teachers. Future research should be conducted to more formally evaluate the positive outcomes of the college–family partnership, including possible long-term impacts on preservice teacher’s self-efficacy related to fostering positive parent–teacher interactions and collaborations.

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