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Preparing Teacher Candidates to Collaborate with Families and Communities: Standards, Research, and Practice

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Preparing teacher candidates to engage with family and community in ways that align with the reality of today's classroom is a critically important aspect of fostering student academic success and well-being. This paper examines how a set of professional preparation standards, the teacher preparation literature, and a qualitative inquiry into the practices and challenges of kindergarten teachers working with family and community converge to inform the work of teacher educators. Implications of these three sources of expert knowledge are instructive for teacher educator practice. Implications for the preparation of teacher candidates around family/community engagement include: the shaping of teacher candidate beliefs and dispositions, teaching candidates to build skill in fostering culturally responsive relationships, and preparing candidates to utilize engagement strategies that count.

Keywords: family engagement, teacher preparation, family partnerships, kindergarten, relationships

Introduction

There is broad agreement that partnering with families and communities is an essential feature of quality teaching, and, that teacher preparation programs have a crucial role to play in the development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to shape this aspect of teaching practice (Casper, 2011; Flanigan, 2007; Patte, 2011; Zeichner, Bowman, Guillen, & Napolitan, 2016). However, the literature persistently reports that teachers, both preservice and in-service, feel unprepared to do collaborative work with families (Casper, 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Markow & Martin, 2005; Patte, 2011; Sewell, 2012; Zeichner et al., 2016). To capitalize on the multitude of

student benefits when teachers and families collaborate, informed scholar-practitioners have frequently encouraged teacher preparation programs to give attention to family-community based knowledge (Beltran, 2012; Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017; Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd, 2013; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015).

Teacher preparation standards set by The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offer clear expectations related to working with families and community, and teacher educators have been urged to be deliberate in their effort to improve this aspect of teacher preparation (NAEYC, 2012). Mapp recently stated that, “Preservice is where we need to start” (Thiers, 2017, p. 43). Mahood (2013), however, cautions that preservice teacher education can be inadequate if it does not align with the needed work in the field and asserts that “The rhetoric regarding parent-teacher relationships should reflect the reality of practice” (p. 55). Teacher preparation programs must engage with in-service teachers in an effort to align teacher development with the real-life opportunities and challenges of parent-teacher collaboration.

In light of these mandates, challenges, and concerns, it is essential that teacher education professionals continue to transform this aspect of their work. In this article we take a careful look at three sources of expert knowledge:

- 1) The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) teacher preparation standards related to work with family and community;
- 2) Related scholarly literature, including recent propositions that conceptually organize work with families and community;
- 3) A new study that investigates the realities of kindergarten classroom practice.

We further explore how this expert knowledge converges to inform teacher educators, in renewed ways, on how to prepare emergent teachers to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support, empower, and involve all families in their children’s development and learning (NAEYC, 2012).

NAEYC Standards for Professional Preparation

Teacher preparation is shaped at the policy level by national, state, and specialty organization standards. These research-based standards drive the curriculum at universities and guide professional development for in-service teachers. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin with an examination of where the NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation

(2012) give us insight into the knowledge and skills needed for the teachers of young children (birth to age 8) to work effectively with families. NAEYC Standard 2, Building Family and Community Relationships, states:

Students prepared in early childhood degree programs understand that successful early childhood education depends on partnerships with children's families and communities. They know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children's families and communities. They use this understanding to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and to involve all families in their children's development and learning (2012, p. 30).

Standard 2 begins by addressing the need for candidates to build knowledge and understanding of the diverse attributes of the families with which they work and the context in which those families' function. The supporting explanation of the standard highlights the need for teacher candidates to gain an understanding of the learner's life by exploring characteristics such as the child's family structure, home language, socioeconomic conditions, and student special-needs. This knowledge is critical for teachers as they seek to help each student learn and grow.

The second element of the standard stresses the need for a relationship between the teacher and the family -- a respectful, reciprocal relationship. The supporting explanation details particular skills that well-prepared teacher candidates need to acquire. These include the ability to build positive relationships with families, the ability to use knowledge of family to impact the teaching they do with a child, and the ability to use a broad set of communication skills, both formal and informal, as well as technology that supports communication. The term "reciprocal relationship" in this standard is key in that it calls on teacher candidates to learn to build relationships where not only the teacher, but also the family, has much to offer in the education of the child. The contributions of both parties craft the work that will be done collaboratively on behalf of the growth and well-being of the child.

The third element of the standard requires teacher candidates to build skill in their ability to empower and involve families in the child's development and learning. The supporting explanation indicates that there is a dispositional element to this standard when it says, "They [teacher candidates] understand and value the role of parents and other important family members as children's primary teachers" (2012, p. 31). Additionally, the standard addresses a teacher candidate's ability to engage a family in the curriculum, instruction, and the developmental domains.

The NAEYC Standards articulate purposeful thinking about how teachers work with families and direct teacher candidate preparation to embrace this perspective in an effort to prepare candidates to do the work effectively. As will be seen below, these views strongly align with constructs and findings in the related scholarly literature.

Review of Related Literature

The second source of expert knowledge we explore is in the theoretical and research-based literature related to teachers' collaboration with families and community. We begin with the presentation of a solid theoretical foundation for this work.

Theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 2005) is a framework that can help us understand and explain the potential benefits of teacher and family interactions. The theory posits that the primary engine of human development is the interplay between an individual and the people and things in one's immediate environment. Furthermore, the qualities that characterize those people and things will impact the developing individual as interactions regularly occur over time.

Bronfenbrenner (2009) identifies a particular system of interactions (mesosystem) that occur when a developing person moves into a new setting, such as from home to school. While development, in this case, is likely shaped by the primary interaction between student and teacher, other influences are also indicated:

Besides this primary link, interconnections may take a number of additional forms: other persons who participate actively in both settings, intermediate links in a social network, formal and informal communications among settings, and, again clearly in the phenomenological domain, the extent and nature of knowledge and attitudes existing in one setting about the other" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25).

The proposition indicates that by giving proper attention to these environmental forces, teachers and families can have a positive impact on the healthy development of learners. By extension, the choices and actions made by teacher educators that support these efforts may also be a positive influence in the development of individuals.

Research literature. There is a robust research base regarding how teacher educators prepare candidates to work with family and community. The

authors begin by considering a broad view of what can be learned about teacher educators' preparation of teacher candidates for this work. We will conclude this section with a focused look at how one group of investigators have developed a useful typology describing the work of teacher educators with families and community.

Preservice teacher preparation for work with families/communities. Both faculty and teacher candidates indicate that working with families and community is an important part of effective teacher practice. Patte (2011) found that preservice teacher candidates recognize the value of family–school partnerships and Casper (2011) notes that teacher candidates express a belief that familiarity and ease with the family/community is an important aspect of teacher competence. According to Flanigan (2007), faculty also believe that instruction on teacher/parent/community partnerships is important to include in teacher preparation programs.

A lack of preparation can result in candidates' lack of skill and confidence when working with families. Casper (2011) reports on graduate teacher candidates' apprehensions about working with parents. Their primary concerns included:

- “Sounding incompetent, alienating parents, or doing something wrong”
- “Parents will be arrogant, not listen, etc...”
- “Language/culture communication issues”
- “Differences of opinion with families”
- “Communication issues in general, including not enough time”
- “Delivering negative developmental/behavioral-related news to parents about their child” (p. S14)

Candidates expressed the concern that they may lack the skills needed to communicate with families without offending, hurting feelings, and creating misunderstandings and misjudgments.

Research, however, indicates that teacher preparation programs may not currently be successfully facilitating the teacher candidate's ability to partner with families (Casper, 2011; Flanigan, 2007; Harvard Family Research Project, 2010; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013; Patte, 2011; Symeou, 2005; Zeichner et al, 2016). Furthermore, the demands of an extremely crowded preparation curriculum and pressure for preparation of high-stakes teacher education assessments have potential to bump this critically important content to a lower priority. Patte (2011) notes an example of a teacher education program where home/school partnership practices are given little time or resources in the curriculum.

Zeichner, Payne, and Brayko (2015) note that this teacher education deficiency is a particularly puzzling challenge, considering the expectation being

evident in teacher preparation standards. Faculty in Flanagan's study (2007) note the inadequacy of the traditional teacher preparation program to include clinical practice opportunities that allow candidates enough practice to build the skill needed to partner with parents and community. Additionally, faculty identify the challenge of negative attitudes about families that preservice candidates either bring to the classroom or acquire in their clinical practice settings. They also note a myriad of challenges working with diverse students and their differing family cultures (Flanagan, 2007).

While both teacher candidates and faculty experience challenges with the preparation to teach in this area, there are hopeful signs in the literature that improved teacher educator practice can make a difference. A study by Zygmunt-Fillwalk (2011) correlated the teaching practices of emergent early childhood and elementary teachers to participation in a course of study in family and community relations. Findings of this study indicate that intentional teacher preparation may have a positive impact on the understanding and attitudes toward how teachers work with families.

Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz (2013) indicate a shift in the way schools' partner with their families, stating "This shift involves a move from a traditional focus on parent involvement to a strategic emphasis on family partnering where educational success is viewed as a shared responsibility with families playing a critical role" (p. 150). In a comprehensive literature review on the preparation of teacher candidates to engage families and community, Evans (2013) reports that direct experience with families and community members is the common denominator across the studies that led to positive results. A research team, led by Zeichner (2016), conducted interviews with preservice candidates after they had direct contact with community and/or family members. The research team reported a change in the candidates' thinking about the role of the family in the educative process.

Researchers report two significant benefits for teacher candidates learning to employ an engagement approach with families and community. Evans' (2013) indicates that preservice candidates gained confidence in their ability and preparedness to work with families. Zeichner and his team share another benefit. Results from their work "...indicate that some teacher candidates translated their re-positioning of families and their re-positioning of their own vision of teaching into actions in their classroom and/or in their school" (2016, p. 284). Teacher candidates tend to take the knowledge gained from families and community and allow it to inform their instructional practices. This ultimately can result in stronger instruction and influence student achievement.

Zeichner et al. (2016) posits a three-tiered typology to assist teacher educators as they think about preparing candidates for differing aspects of their work with families and community. Because we find this structure of organizing

the work to hold promise for professional growth, we focus the remainder of this literature review on Zeichner's typology.

Zeichner's typology. In a compelling article, Zeichner et al. (2016) share a three-tiered typology that organizes the work in teacher education to prepare emergent teachers to work with families and community. The three classifications are a helpful framework for considering how teacher educators have positioned and delivered family-community curriculum. The three tiers are labeled: involvement, engagement, and solidarity.

Involvement. Teacher-family-community involvement denotes traditional modes of involving families and community-based organizations. This tier includes familiar practices like parent-teacher conferences, classroom newsletters, seeking parent volunteers, attending PTA meetings, and back-to-school nights. Zeichner et al. (2016) state "These involvement activities create opportunities for school staff to share their knowledge and expertise with families and community providers about school expectations, specific school curriculum, ways to support children's learning outside of the school, effective communication with teachers, and ways that families and community-based organizations can support teachers and the school as a whole" (p. 278).

Engagement. Teacher-family-community engagement approaches this work from an entirely different stance. Instead of focusing interactions on the experience and understanding offered by education professionals, this approach stresses the knowledge that families and other members of the community can impart to teachers (Zeichner et al., 2016). From this perspective teachers are hungry to learn from family and community partners, believing that the knowledge gained can be an essential contribution to instructional decisions and student growth. The family/community engagement approach requires a shift in thinking away from the traditional involvement perspective where the teacher is expert and their work with families is focused on the sharing of expert knowledge. In contrast, with an engagement approach the teacher takes on the posture of a learner.

Solidarity. A third tier is labeled teacher-family-community solidarity. These interactions acknowledge the complex issues impacting learner development. Zeichner et al. (2016) explain that "Underlying the solidarity approach is an understanding that educational inequalities (e.g., opportunity and achievement gaps) are part and parcel of broad, deep, and racialized structural inequalities in housing health, employment, and intergenerational transfers of wealth (p. 279). This level of interaction seems to depend on sustained engagement between educators, families and other members of the community. An example of the solidarity approach would be a neighborhood initiative where families, teacher educators, in-service teachers, and community activists joined together in efforts to create educational or social reform (Zeichner et al., 2016).

This brief literature review notes that teacher educators believe that preparing teacher candidates to work with the families and communities of their learners is important work. However, current preparation often falls short. The above literature points to a recent shift from an involvement paradigm to an engagement perspective. Professional standards and research literature hold keys to preparing candidates for the reality of engaging families and communities with today's classroom. We next turn our attention to the work of in-service kindergarten teachers.

Kindergarten Study

Mahood (2013) advises teacher educators to minimize the disconnect between the realities of classrooms and how we prepare candidates to lead those classrooms. The third part of our exploration into how we develop teachers who collaborate well with families and community is an investigation into the related practice of eight Northwest kindergarten teachers.

There is evidence that parents of younger learners tend to be more involved with schooling (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Oswald, Zaidi, Cheatham, & Diggs Brody, 2018; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1987) and particularly trusting and receptive to their child's classroom teacher (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gerke, & Higgins, 2001). In fact, teacher-family relationships are a fundamental aspect of teacher practice in early childhood education (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009; Goldstein, 2007). Thus, a reasonable place to begin, as we seek professional expertise regarding work with families and community, is with the teachers of young children. We chose to learn from kindergarten teachers.

Research aims. With an aspiration to strengthen practice in preservice teacher education and contribute to the literature, this study was interested in exploring the practices of kindergarten teachers who frequently partner with the families of learners. Research questions guiding this qualitative inquiry include:

- In what ways are kindergarten teachers engaging with families?
- How are digital technologies enhancing this work?

Participants and setting. The sample for this study was selective, and was theoretically based on the supposition that kindergarten teachers, as a group, are active, successful, and represent well the notion of teachers engaging with families in the educative process. Thirteen individuals currently teaching in public school kindergarten classrooms, near a major Northwest metropolitan area, were selected for participation. Eight of those individuals accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The result was a convenience sample of eight in-service,

licensed kindergarten teachers from three public school districts. Similarities and variations in the participants include:

- Participants were all female and held full-time positions in six different public schools across three Oregon school districts;
- All of the teachers were over 40 years of age, with four indicating an age range of 40-49, three indicating an age range of 50-59, and one indicating an age range of 60-69;
- Four of the teachers identified more than 20 years of teaching experience. Two of the teachers identified 16 to 20 years of experience, one identified 11 to 15 years of experience, and one participant was in her first year of licensed teaching;
- Four of the participants taught in full-day kindergartens and two in half-day kindergarten formats. The other two participants taught in a modified full-day schedule;
- Three of the eight participants taught in bilingual kindergarten classrooms where the majority of the instruction was in Spanish;
- The number of students in the kindergarten classrooms taught by these eight teachers range from 23 to 31, with a mean of 27.4;
- Only one participant belongs to a minority population. This participant speaks English as a second language.

Data collection. This qualitative field study honors an investigative approach suggested by Bailey (2007). Collection of data over six weeks included semi-structured interviews with the eight in-service kindergarten teachers. Each interview followed the same framework of guiding questions that were topically organized and shared by the researchers. As the investigators engaged the participants in dialog, the preconceived questions, while not in any particular order, gave shape to the interactions. Interviews were scheduled in advance to occur in the teacher's classroom setting, and ran from 30 to 45 minutes each. Interviews were recorded electronically and transcribed. The data from each interview was initially analyzed for meaningful constructs and themes; as such, each interview impacted the dialog and outcomes in subsequent interviews.

Analysis. This qualitative study included a systematic analysis process drawn from procedures recommended for grounded theory research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). During the initial pass of the data, an open coding process occurred; queries emerged that seemed to provide a meaningful framework for our thinking about participant answers to the initial guiding questions. We subsequently categorized and subcategorized constructs under four headings: 1) dispositions and beliefs; 2) collaborative partnerships; 3) multiple modes of

communication; and 4) barriers and challenges. Core principles were drawn from recurring data in each of these four major categories.

Results

Results from this study are discussed around the four constructs that emerged: dispositions and beliefs; collaborative partnerships; multiple modes of communication; and barriers and challenges. Each of these four constructs inform our initial aim: In what ways are kindergarten teachers engaging with families? Two of the four constructs include findings associated with our second aim: How are digital technologies enhancing this work?

Dispositions and beliefs. The kindergarten teachers interviewed held a passionate belief about the role of the family in the development of learners as well as their role in relation to the learner. Several teachers expressed this same sentiment: “I always tell parents, ‘You are your child’s first teacher, and your home is your child’s first classroom’.” and “Parents create possibilities in the classroom by their presence.”

The kindergarten teachers were clear about their important role in the success of students. They believe that they set the stage for the types of partnership that will benefit students. We heard many of the teachers express this notion: “With kindergarten families, I am the first impression of coming in the public-school system. I like to be the first one to introduce and lay the foundation and framework for elementary education.” It is powerful to hear a teacher articulate ownership of the responsibility to guide families and children into the world of formal schooling. The dispositions expressed by these teachers drive their collaborative work with families.

Collaborative partnerships. Kindergarten teachers in this study view collaboration with families as essential to positive learner development. The words that follow are illustrative of what we heard from participating teachers: “The family is my partner in education” and “We’re a team. I can’t survive without them... and probably vice versa.”

Teachers also spoke of the benefits of these collaborative relationships. We specifically heard that parents collaborative work impacts the way the child feels about themselves, as an individual and as a learner. This teacher’s words mirror the words we heard from other participants: “It makes the child feel worthy” and “Families being interested and involved in what kids are doing at school, validates the work of the school and causes kids to want to learn.” This group of teachers recognized the positive student outcomes of collaborative relationships with families.

Multiple modes of communication. The kindergarten teachers in our study use multiple modes of communication to meet the differing practices and preferences of families. They were intent on communication methods that would allow for two-way communication. Their voices illustrate this construct: “So my goal is to try to reach families in... many different... modes of communication; everyone receives that information and processes it differently;” “They’re going to pay more attention to emails than they are to paper, because that’s where the culture is geared;” “They come in holding their phone. They text me back a message. I have 10 families that I send paper copies to. I give them an option for paper.” This set of teachers seemed committed to using a variety of methods of communication with families in an effort to connect in ways that were accessible to each individual family.

Barriers and Challenges. These kindergarten teachers seemed to confront common obstacles as they partner with families on behalf of learners. The teachers cited the following barriers and challenges: lack of time, family availability, cultural challenges, and lack of technology support.

The teachers described *a lack of time* as being a major barrier for them. One teacher expressed it this way: “For me, it’s a lack of time on my part” and “Lack of time to really do it; to do it the way I’d like to.” This time issue was a great frustration, particularly for those participants who teach in half day sessions. Teachers in the half day kindergarten format were responsible for partnering with up to 60 families, compared to a teacher in a full day format who partnered with up to 30 families.

Additionally, teachers expressed that the number of working parents and the variation in work schedules of their families was challenging. One teacher stated, “There’s a lot of working parents out there, so it’s harder.” Teachers struggled to craft collaboration opportunities that would meet the needs of families with non-traditional work schedules.

Cultural challenges. Kindergarten teachers all noted that meeting the needs of diverse families was a monumental challenge, albeit a challenge that they deeply cared about. One teacher expressed it this way when asked about challenges of working with diversity: “Working around cultural differences; we work very hard at our school to bridge those differences... but sometimes language can be an issue.” A second kindergarten teacher, whose classroom was quite diverse shared these thoughts:

“... the way they perceive school, the way they perceive teachers is different. So we have to meet them where they are.... so to me the most important part is know a little bit about other cultures so that you can

reach them where they are, and make them part of the educational system. Some cultures, they think you drop the kid off at the door-- it's the schools' responsibility to do everything else. But if you can put it together, it makes a big difference."

This kindergarten teacher highlights the need for candidates to have knowledge of students' cultures so that they can craft strategies that makes sense for families.

Lack of Technology Support. Kindergarten teachers cited lack of technology support as a barrier to them using technology to engage students and families. While they expressed a desire to explore improvements in communication through technology, they also expressed concern, and sometimes frustration, at the lack of resources to address this need. Researchers heard this sentiment many times: "That person who was helping with technology-- that was really valuable. Then, their position was cut." Many had, at one time, some building support to help teachers learn and use new technology, but, frequently, those positions were some of the first eliminated due to budget cuts. Teachers indicated that the lack of support impacted the ways in which they could engage families.

Limitations. The data collected for this qualitative study was self-report data from eight kindergarten teachers near a major Northwest metropolitan area. The data is rich with the perceptions and beliefs of these instructors, each who appear to hold a personal commitment to the topic being explored. Guiding interview questions placed a particular emphasis on the surfacing constructs. The data lacks the objectivity of a distant observer and cannot be generalized to other populations; however, the outcomes have potential value for teacher educators as they seek to improve their preparation of preservice teachers.

Lessons for Teacher Educators

The investigation into three sources of expert knowledge, research literature, professional preparation standards, and kindergarten teacher practice, have implications for teacher educators as they seek to prepare preservice teachers to engage with families and community. Implications for discussion include teacher candidate dispositional considerations, strategies to equip teacher educators to foster culturally responsive relationships skills in their candidates, and shaping teacher candidate practice to maximize time and effort by investing in engagement strategies that are most closely tied to increases in student achievement.

Beliefs and Dispositional Considerations

Accomplished teacher practice comes from a deep set of beliefs that drive instructional decision-making (Vartuli, 2005). Teacher educators can facilitate the formation of beliefs and dispositional qualities in their candidates that are foundational to the professional decision-making that will occur around family engagement throughout their careers. Teacher educators can craft assignments that offer candidates the opportunity to explore and implement their beliefs about working with families. These assignments should involve reflection and candid group discussion that offers candidates the opportunity to challenge their currently held beliefs. In addition, a chance to reconsider and reflect about newly emerging beliefs and considerations can lead toward growth in this area (Vartuli, 2005). Additional opportunities to engage families based on newly emerging ideas can help root these dispositions and beliefs in teacher candidate practice.

Candidates need to see themselves as a key team member on behalf of student success and understand that families hold a key position as well. Parents are a child's first and most influential teacher. It is important for teacher candidates to learn how to voice their position and also appreciate the family's position on this collaborative team. Role playing, as an instructional strategy, can offer candidates the opportunity to use explicit language that honors and encourages collaboration. Faculty modeling can help candidates understand what this type of collaboration with a family both looks like and sounds like.

Preservice teachers, as key members of the partnership, need to develop passion for learning from families and take on the disposition of a "learner." The family knows their child better than anyone and has invaluable information to share about their child's unique characteristics, strengths, fears, family culture and family dynamics. This strength-based perspective honors what families bring and the funds of knowledge from their home settings (Dyches, Carter, & Prater, 2011). Skilled teachers access this kind of information and use it as they make individual plans for children as well as whole group instructional plans. Families also have hopes and dreams for their students. Preservice teachers need to learn how to invite families to share their hopes and dreams with their child's teacher. Teachers can be active participants in helping students reach a family's long-term goals for their child. Embracing the disposition of a "learner" is important in the formation of a teacher candidate.

Faculty can craft instructional assignments that help teacher candidates learn to access family knowledge. One such assignment, the *Family/Community Engagement Project*, provided occasion for candidates to interview family or community members with the express purpose of learning about who the family is, what the hopes and dreams the family or community members have for the learner and what resources the family and community might be able to offer in pursuits of this collaborative work. Hearing the voices of family and community

members appears to be powerful for teacher candidates. There is evidence that this type of instructional activity has potential to not only influence teacher candidate practice, but also to shape candidate dispositions (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2017).

While preservice teachers need to understand their positionality within the collaborative team and assume a learning posture regarding the child and family, they also need to commit to “take the lead” in these efforts. As families approach the classroom, they are often entering new territory. It is important for the classroom teacher to be the first to extend hospitality and welcome them into this new collaborative partnership. These attitudes drive actions as new teachers seek to initiate the process of building collaborative relationships.

Culturally Responsive Relationships

Kindergarten teachers were clear that working with the families of their diverse learners was a tremendous challenge for them; they reported that they felt unprepared to do this work. These feelings of unpreparedness align with findings in the literature (Casper, 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Markow & Martin, 2005; Patte, 2011; Sewell, 2012; Zeichner et al., 2016). Ramos says that “as the faces of parents change, then so should the ways in which we conceptualize parent involvement and home-school connections” (2007, p 33). Teacher educators talk a lot about culturally responsive teaching; perhaps building culturally responsive relationships may be an overlooked piece of the puzzle (Buchanan & Buchanan, 2016). Relationship building is skill-based. Teacher educators can provide candidates with the knowledge, skill, and opportunity to practice the skills needed to build expertise in this area. The heart of teacher candidate preparation for engagement with families and community is the creation of opportunities for candidates to gain knowledge of the child, family, and community through direct contact. The shift toward family engagement requires teacher educators to prepare candidates to engage all families in the educative process. Learning to engage all families will require more than a one size fits all approach. Candidates will need to work with families and community members in culturally responsive ways. They will need to understand, value and acquire the skill for the cultivation of respectful and collaborative relationships. Harris and Goodall (2008) say that: “parental engagement is going to be possible with certain groups only if major efforts are made to understand the local community, and if the relationship is perceived to be genuinely two-way” (p. 286).

It is often assumed that relationships will just naturally evolve overtime. However, Tran (2014) says that the current teaching force that mentors the majority of our teacher candidates, often crafts engagement strategies that tend to align with middle class, White and European-American values, assumptions, and experiences. Therefore, intentional efforts focused on fostering culturally

responsive relationship strategies are imperative. The building of culturally responsive relationships includes knowledge and skill, communication, and the opportunity to practice the newly acquired skills with formative feedback.

An extremely helpful tool, for teacher educators, is the *Flamboyant Classroom Family Engagement Rubric*. This rubric “has been developed based on an extensive research review, through conversations with national and local experts, and from lessons learned from DC schools and principals who do a great job of engaging families” (TTAC, 2019). The rubric includes four developmental stages for each element and contains three major sections:

- The teacher possesses the beliefs and mindsets to effectively engage families;
- Teachers and families have trusting relationships;
- Teachers engage families in supporting learning by effectively communicating academic information and progress.

The second section of the rubric is particularly helpful because it provides target actions and examples around the often, elusive concept of relationship building. The following elements make up section two (TTAC, 2019); Teachers and families have trusting relationships:

- 2.1 The teacher builds relationships with families and students and invites their engagement.
- 2.2 The teacher maintains positive relationships with families and is accessible to them through the year.
- 2.3 The teacher understands and honors families’ strengths, needs, and preferences

Examples associated with each element and developmental sequence of section two of the rubric can help teacher education faculty imagine the possibilities for crafting assignments that allow candidates to gain experience building relationships with families.

Engagement Strategies that Count

Schools today routinely engage in what Mapp has termed “random acts of parent involvement” (Thiers, 2017, p 40), meaning that the typical kinds of ways that schools have involved parents for the last half century, such as the traditional beginning of the year “open house”. As available time is scarce for both teachers and families, so it is important that the time that teachers do put toward engaging families is strategically used. Teacher educators lay the foundation for this kind of thinking and prioritizing with their teacher candidates.

As teacher educators prepare candidates for the demanding role of classroom teaching, it is important for them to help candidates think about how to make their work in the area of family engagement count. Engagement activities that are directly tied to student development and learning yield the greatest results

for students and thus should be priorities to teachers (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). First, helping families understand the types of learning goals that students will be working toward provides them with needed knowledge. Engaging parents in activities that they can use at home to aide in students' academic growth is invaluable. This type of shared knowledge and practices are powerful for learners and ultimately positively impact student achievement and personal well-being (Beltran, 2012; Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Epstein, 2011; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Van Voorhis, et al., 2013; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006).

Conclusion

Dr. Nancy Golden, Oregon's former Chief Education Officer, writes, "Authentic partnerships with families represent some of the greatest sources of untapped capacity for delivering on the promise of opportunity for each of our students" (2015, p.1). As teacher educators craft instruction that embraces expert knowledge from the professional standards, the research literature, and the reality of today's classroom, they respond to a persistent call to improve the preparation of candidates to engage with families and communities of their learners. These deliberate efforts to improve teacher candidate preparation around expert knowledge ultimately impact student success and well-being.

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