

Difference in Preservice Teachers' Perspective on Preparation for Family Engagement in Urban Schools During Residency

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INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, the United States Department of Education urged teachers to involve parents in the learning process stating, “The starting point of putting children on the road to excellence is parental involvement in their children’s education” (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). However, teacher preparation programs practices and current views on involving parents, especially those from diverse backgrounds as often found in urban environments, do not align (Miller, Lines, Sullivan & Hermanutz, 2013). A major theme across much of the literature reviewed is that most current teacher preparation programs must change their curriculum to produce teachers who can enhance student learning through parent partnerships. Most of the experts agree that transforming teacher education will not be easy.

While research informs on the importance of family involvement in teacher preparation programs, (Lawson, 2003; Tajani, 2017), programs need to evaluate their own graduates and their perspectives to understand their current landscape and then made adjustments to help preservice teachers gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to work with all families. One way to provide the necessary interactions to understand and engage families is attending a year-long field experiences as field-based experience has shown great promise in improving preservice teacher preparation (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017). This study examined the difference in perspectives of preservice teachers attending yearlong field experiences in a large urban university’s teacher preparation program to those attending one semester, concerning the preparations of urban teachers’ knowledge, skills, and understanding for family involvement in urban school settings.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several universal theories. The scope and backdrop of the research study is based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems theory, Epstein’s (2001) Home, School and Community topology, and Moll’s Funds of Knowledge theory (1990).

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory

Most of psychological and sociological research uses Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory to understand human development within the context of physical, social, and economic systems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), individuals are embedded in several environmental layers. Since human development occurs through multidirectional effects between the contextual layers in which an individual is embedded, a teacher-training program aimed at an individual also impacts the environment in which the

individual is nested. This leads to the belief that providing quality training to preservice teachers will impact the learning environment to provide better outcomes for children entrenched in that environment.

Additionally, building and embracing a relational, inclusive, and collaborative family engagement approach between schools, communities, and families may help educational institutions move from a limited microsystems position that only focuses on child interactions with parents and home to the integrated approach of Bronfenbrenner Ecological System (Mapp & Hong, 2010).

Epstein's (2001) Home, School and Community Topology

Epstein's (2001) Home, School and Community topology also forms the backdrop of this study. Epstein's topology consists of six types of family involvement practices for building a comprehensive home-school partnership.

Applying the Epstein framework will help programs teach preservice teachers the internal and external factors that affect the family, school, and community partnerships. The external factors are the family's socio-economic background and school policies. The internal factors are communication between families and schools and how social interaction between schools and families occurs (Epstein & Sanders, 1996).

Moll's Funds of Knowledge Theory

The funds of knowledge theory was also used to guide this study. The theory offers a unique approach to better understanding students by engaging teachers as researchers to develop a better understanding of students' knowledge and experiences (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). The approach sought for teachers to learn from the funds of knowledge in students' households, defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, et al., 1992, p. 133) to bridge school and community practices. While research on funds of knowledge has mainly focused on students and their households, this study seeks to understand how preservice teachers' funds of knowledge regarding family engagement through coursework, field experiences, assignments, and classroom discussion have influence their perspectives regarding involving families in student learning.

METHODS

Measures and Procedure

To accomplish the study's goals, a cross-sectional survey methodology was used to collect data from preservice teachers finishing their student teaching in early childhood (EC)- grade 6 education program at a large urban university.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants enrolled in the final semester of a teacher certification program. Students finishing student teaching in the fall of 2016 had one semester residency in an urban school whereas those finishing in spring 2018 had two semesters of residency. The survey was sent out via email link to all the students completing their student teaching residency in the fall 2016 and spring 2018 semesters. Over 400 students responded to the survey each semester, however the study only focused on students who were part of the EC-6 teacher certification program and who had completed their student teaching residency (N=134). Most participants were Hispanic (39% for 2016 participants and 48% for 2018 participants) or White (30% for 2016 and 28% for 2018).

Instrument

As part of an evaluation of the participating university's program, the Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Scale was sent to participants. This scale consists of 12 Likert-type items that measure teachers' attitudes towards and preparation for family engagement. According to Groff and Knorr (2010), the survey scale is based on the national Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) standards for Family-School Partnerships and best practices for family engagement. For purposes of this study, only questions on the scale regarding

perception were used and three additional open-ended were added to the survey to gather evidence of perception of acquisition in instructional strategies that promote knowledge, skills, and understanding of EC-6 preservice teachers for family engagement in student learning.

RESULTS

Students completing a one-year residency showed higher mean scores for their perceptions of their ability to work with diverse families in all twelve areas as shown in Table 1. The survey results showed that the highest mean item for perception for both the 2018 students ($M=3.70$, $SD=0.528$) and 2016 students ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .660$) was “Understanding the Value of Parent Involvement.” The lowest rated item on the Parent/Family and Teacher Survey Scale for both the 2018 students ($M=2.67$, $SD=1.11$) and the 2016 students ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.919$) stated, “I have the necessary skills to offer training that may enable parents to serve as representatives in decision-making bodies.” T-tests showed that in all categories, the 2018 students rated their skills statistically significantly higher than the 2016 students ($p<.001$).

TABLE 1
DIFFERENCE OF MEAN PERCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FOR WORKING
WITH DIVERSE FAMILIES OF YEAR-LONG STUDENT TEACHERS VERSUS ONE-
SEMESTER STUDENT TEACHERS

SKILL	One-Year Residency (N=64)		One-Semester Residency (N=77)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	
Ability to Work with Parents	3.22	0.88	2.62	0.87	<.001
Ability to Hold Effective Parent-Teacher Conferences	3.20	.91	2.50	.88	<.001
Ability to Affect School Policies Concerning Parent Involvement	2.89	.98	2.24	.91	<.001
Understanding of Available Parent Resources	3.03	.93	2.21	.88	<.001
Understanding of How to Build a Family Friendly School or Classroom	3.56	.82	2.97	.76	<.001
I have the necessary skills to offer training that may enable parents to serve as representatives in decision-making bodies	2.67	1.11	2.10	.92	<.001
Ability to Work with Diverse Families/Parents	3.37	.75	2.87	.88	<.001
Understanding of Parent Involvement in Title 1 NCLB	3.05	.99	2.20	.88	<.001
Understanding of Teacher Responsibility for Parent Involvement	3.36	.81	2.83	.80	<.001

Learned Strategies to work with Parents	3.14	.98	2.45	.93	<.001
Understanding the Value of Parent Involvement	3.70	.53	3.36	.66	<.001
Ability to determine if parents have sufficient knowledge about their child's educational needs to make major educational decisions for them	3.03	.95	2.54	.77	<.001

The survey results regarding overall preparedness indicated that students participating in the year-long residency felt more prepared than one-semester students. Table 2 presents the results showing the majority of the 2018 students rated feeling well prepared (43%) or somewhat *prepared* (50%) for the national standards whereas the 2016 students rated feeling well prepared (34%) or *somewhat prepared* (52%) lower and rated *not prepared* at a higher rate (14%) than the 2018 students (7%).

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF ONE-YEAR RESIDENCY PRESERVICE TEACHER RESPONSES VS. ONE-SEMESTER RESIDENCY PRESERVICE TEACHER RESPONSES ON PREPARATION FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Preservice Teachers Responses	Percentage	
	One-Year Residency (N=58)	One-Semester Residency (N=80)
Not Prepared	7%	14%
Somewhat Prepared	50%	52%
Prepared	43%	34%

One question was different on the 2018 survey asking students to share the skills they perceived their program was missing and suggestions for these skills. Table 3 summarizes skills and suggestions in category groups of coursework suggestions, fieldwork suggestions or suggestions relating to both coursework and fieldwork. The most common suggestion was having mentor teachers understand the importance of engaging the student teacher in family engagement activities and opportunities to engage with families.

TABLE 3
SUMMARY OF SKILLS AND SUGGESTIONS FROM ONE-YEAR STUDENT TEACHERS
FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT SKILLS (N=51)

Categories	Percentages
COURSEWORK	
Role Play/Mock Scenarios/Mock Email Responses to Parents	8%
Understanding of School's Legal and Ethical Policy on Dealing with Families	2%
Specific Strategies to Engage Parents/Workshop on how to Engage Families	14%
Separate Course on Family Involvement/Course on Ethics of Dealing with Parents/Section of the course	6%
FIELDWORK	
Field Experiences regarding the Family Engaging/Engage Mentor Teacher to provide Opportunities/Observation	21%
Invite Parents in the Classroom	2%
Opportunities to Volunteer for Community events/Fundraisers/PTO Meeting	12%
Opportunities to be More Involved in Communicating with Families	12%
COURSEWORK AND FIELDWORK	
Need More Help/Using APPs like DOJO	2%
Have Required Observation/Assignments Involving Families	12%

*Percentages do not add to 100% due to participants suggesting multiple skills

On the open-ended question regarding how the program helped prepare preservice teachers to work with various families, the responses for both groups are presented in Table 4. The most common way the 2018 year-long residency preservice teachers mentioned they were prepared was through fieldwork (68%). Classroom discussion (8%) and required coursework and assignments (13%) were mentioned, but at different rates than the 2016 students who stated the required coursework and assignments (37%) as the most common way and classroom discussion (23%) also as way the teacher preparation program prepared them for working with families of various ethnic backgrounds in urban schools. Furthermore, 24% of one semester students responded that observation and field experience helped prepared them to work with families which was much lower than the 2018 participants. However, 11% of the year-long student teachers and 16% of one-semester student teachers mentioned that they had not received any instructions on working with various families to help them with their children's learning.

TABLE 4
SUMMARY OF ONE-YEAR VERSUS ONE-SEMESTER PRESERVICE TEACHER
RESPONSES OF SPECIFIC WAYS TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM
PREPARED THEM TO WORK WITH FAMILIES OF VARIOUS ETHNIC
BACKGROUNDS IN AN URBAN SCHOOL SETTING

Specific Ways	One Year Residency (N=53)	One Semester (N=79)
Required Coursework and Assignments	13%	37%
Through Classroom Discussions	8%	23%
Observation and Field Experience	68%	24%
No Instruction Received	11%	16%

Regarding the knowledge, skills, and disposition about family engagement, the coding of surveys responses was based on the seven components of the preservice teacher preparation framework presented by Shartrand et al. (1997), and the results presented in Table 4. The most common knowledge and understanding that both one-semester and one-year residency preservice teachers reported to have gained throughout the preparation program pertained to *general family knowledge* (40% and 42%) and *family involvement* (57% and 44%) respectively. However, the survey indicated that preservice teachers may need more assistance in learning to implement how families can support schools (4% for one-semester students and 2% for one-year students), how schools can support families (9% for one-semester students and 7% for one-year students), and how to involve families in learning activities (12% for one-semester students and 5% for one-year students) to help their children's learning.

TABLE 5
SUMMARY OF ONE-YEAR VERSUS ONE SEMESTER PRESERVICE TEACHERS
PERCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND UNDERSTANDING OF
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT (FE) RECEIVED DURING TEACHER
PREPARATION COURSEWORK

Knowledge, Skills and Understanding about FE	Year Long Residency (%) (N=64)	One Semester Residency (%) (N=82)
General Family Involvement*	42%	40%
General Family Knowledge*	44%	57%
Home-School Communication*	35%	30%
Family Involvement in Learning Activities*	5%	12%
Families Supporting Schools*	2%	4%
Schools Supporting Families*	7%	9%
Families as Change Agent*	25%	23%

*Percentages total more than 100% due to participants suggesting multiple skills

Scholarly Significance

The study found that students participating in the year-long residency had statistically significantly higher perceptions of their skill and knowledge and higher perception of their preparedness to work with diverse families in an urban environment than students participating in a one-semester residency. These results support the research suggestion of year-long residency programs as a means to better prepare preservice teachers (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017). While year-long residency students had higher perceptions of their knowledge and skills, they, like the one-semester residency students, still rated the advocacy skill of offering parent training or affecting school policies as low which a new teacher may feel intimidated in engaging. The year-long residency students' suggestions for coursework and field work changes align with recommendations presented by the Harvard Family Research project and Burton (1992) to embed family engagement training throughout the teacher preparation curriculum using various methods. These students currently rated the fieldwork portion of the program as the specific way the teacher preparation program prepared them to work with families of various ethnic backgrounds, however still felt they lacked the knowledge to work with parents and suggested more coursework and activities allowing them to practice their skills first.

This current study shows that preservice teachers benefit from a year-long residency program. Teacher preparation programs should use the frameworks available which provide a comprehensive list of practices, knowledge and strategies practicing teachers need to implement (Epstein, 2001; Shartrand et al., 1997) and create checklists for incorporating the skills and knowledge within coursework and in fieldwork while also teaching students to identify the funds of knowledge of their future students and in extension those future students' parents (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Preservice teachers should be given these checklists to track their skills, knowledge and strategies learned. Further, teacher preparation programs should work closely with schools and mentor teachers to collaborate on the experience of preservice teachers in the school discussing expectations and ways preservice teachers can practice the skills or working with diverse families. As states required universities to reduce coursework hours, teacher preparation programs must make concerted effort and decisions to ensure that reducing courses does not mean eliminating important content such as family engagement but instead conscientious efforts toward including known research in multiple places throughout the curriculum. Teachers cannot educate alone, nor can parents; together, both can make a difference in children's lives. Teacher preparation programs are the link to this success.

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