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Taisiia TSURKAN

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Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to the Parent-Teacher Partnerships

Taisiia TSURKAN¹

Abstract

A central theme in this research is the particular role of educators in engaging with parents in a genuine partnership built on mutual trust and respect with shared aspirations and responsibilities for student learning and wellbeing. This article will explore the process of preparing pre-service teachers to the forming positive partnerships with parents.

Keywords: parent-teacher partnerships, teacher education programs, teacher preparation.

Introduction

Children, families, and schools all benefit when families and teachers work together. However, many families do not know how to work with teachers, and while teachers need to know how to work with all families, most do not get enough training. It is not surprising then that many teachers and families don't know how to reach out to each other.

All parents and family members want to help their young children succeed in school. School success in promoting family involvement greatly depends on teachers and principals who possess the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to work with families. Teacher preparation programs, however, have often not kept pace with school efforts to increase family involvement. School efforts to promote family involvement in children's education will succeed only if teachers are adequately prepared to support these efforts. Teacher preparation in family involvement lags far behind school efforts to promote family involvement, however.

Research shows that greater parent involvement in children's learning positively affects the child's school performance, including higher academic achievement (McNeal, 1999; Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1998; Yan & Lin, 2002) and greater social and emotional development (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel,

¹Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Chernivtsi, Ukraine, taisiag@ukr.net.

Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Scribner, Young & Pedroza, 1999; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Trusty, 1999).

Existing research suggests that when teachers hold positive beliefs about families and view them as a child's first teacher, they are more likely to invite parents to become active participants in their children's education (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Although many studies highlight outcomes of family involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Family – School Partnerships Framework, 2008), teachers' role in family involvement and the processes of forming partnership with parents are less well studied. Recent studies and reviews of literature and practice indicate that most colleges and universities do little to prepare most teachers and administrators to understand and work with families and communities.

The preparation of pre-service teachers usually focuses on child development. Teacher candidates learn about what students know and are able to do. They learn about how to influence the development of the students they will teach. However, there is still a gap in the development of appropriate knowledge and dispositions to enable teachers to successfully work with families.

Because most educators have little or no training in family involvement in child learning process, the ***purpose*** in this article is to show the opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with parents to help them gain a fuller understanding of each of their roles and the need for partnerships. The ***aims*** of the review are to explore the various ways of training pre-services teachers to work with parents.

Positive teacher/parent partnerships built on mutual trust and respect and shared responsibility for student learning and wellbeing. One of the key professional relationships teachers will (and must) form throughout their careers is with parents. The capacity of teachers in inviting, welcoming and supporting these parents to engage more deeply in the education of their children and the life of the school is a significant factor in building partnership.

It is therefore crucial that professional teacher standards articulate the skills, knowledge and dispositions required for working in genuine partnership with parents and that teacher education programs adequately prepare graduate teachers for this essential professional relationship.

M. Elana Lopez, Associate Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, stated that family involvement should be integrated throughout all coursework and fieldwork in teacher education programs (Bradley, 1997).

The potential for strengthening teacher education programs in relation to preparing student teachers to work confidently and competently

in genuine partnership with parents must be based on the specific standards (Australian Parents Council Submission, 2010).

Standard 1: Program outcomes.

The setting high standards for the outcomes of pre-service teacher education programs goes to raising status of teaching as a valued profession and to attracting the brightest to consider the vocation of teaching as a career.

Standard 2: Program development.

We welcome the acknowledgement that community expectation is taken into account and that parent organisations have been included in the list of stakeholders to be consulted in the development of programs.

Standard 3: Program entry requirements.

We welcome entry requirements that go to ensuring those attracted to and entering pre service teacher education programs have the required competence in psychology and communicative skills.

Standard 4: Program structure and content.

Those teachers who value working with parents and do it effectively are mostly more able to do so due to inherent personal traits and dispositions rather than as a result of their professional formation. It is therefore imperative that teacher professional standards lay the foundation for teacher educators to be more focused on this important aspect of teacher formation.

However, there is still room for improvement. For example:

The inclusion of additional wording in a number of descriptors to indicate the relevance and importance of effective parent/teacher and family/school partnerships particularly in:

1: Know their students and how they learn.

2: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning and Standard.

3: Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning would reflect the knowledge, understanding parents would contribute as the primary educators of their children.

4: Create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments.

We can outline the *seven key dimensions of genuine partnership* (Eccles & Harold, 1996):

- effectively communicate with parents;
- connect learning at home and school;
- build community and identity;
- recognise the role of the families as the first and continuing educators of children;
- collaborate and consult effectively with parents;
- build collaborative partnerships within the local community;
- encourage and foster parent participation in the life of the school.

The framework of effective family school partnerships:

- sharing of power, responsibility and ownership, though with each party having different roles;
- a degree of mutuality, that begins with the process of listening to each other and that incorporates responsive dialogue;
- shared aims and goals based on a common understanding of the educational needs of children;
- commitment to joint action in which parents, students and teachers work together (Bastiani, 1993).

In the twenty-first century, educators need new and different knowledge and skills to meet today's challenges, including the understanding and competencies to work with diverse students and families. To succeed at building parent involvement, teachers need professional development experiences that prepare them for the task, just as they need preparation in subject matter and teaching skills.

In order to successfully work with parents, Howe and Simmons (1993) wrote, "teachers must not only desire good relationships, but must also be prepared to actively facilitate such interactions"

Teacher education can and should prepare teachers to build partnerships with families and communities.

Teachers must develop the competencies to engage families as partners in learning to improve student academic success. Thus, teachers need to develop skills and practices that include:

- welcoming partnerships with families;
- identifying and using family strengths to support positive student outcomes;
- communicating with families positively;
- sharing data about student progress and performance in an accessible, understandable, and actionable manner;
- providing families with strategies and activities to help their children learn inside and outside the classroom;

- demonstrating respect, especially in working with culturally and religiously diverse families and families of children with disabilities.

Preparing teachers to work with families has important benefits:

- Skilled and effective workforce. When teachers partner with families, they are able to enlist support for student learning in the home and in the community.
- Positive school climate. When teachers and other school staff show that they value parents and honor the different roles families play in children's lives, they contribute to a positive social climate that supports student learning.
- Teacher retention. Teachers are more likely to stay in schools where there are high levels of trust with parents, and where teachers feel that parents support their work and respect them (Allensworth, Ponisciak & Mazzeo, 2009).
- Family and student outcomes. When teachers invite families to engage with their children's education and communicate specific actions that family members can take, families are more likely to act. This positive action, in turn, contributes to student academic improvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Teacher Preparation Requirements

The specific preparation program for teachers of young children should include the following areas:

General Education

Teachers must be broadly and liberally education persons. A professional education for teachers might include (among many other possibilities) a particularly well-developed sense of the following: (1) an understanding of his or her professional freedom; (2) an understanding of the nature of knowledge and (3) an understanding of the intrinsic value of education in the teacher candidate's own life.

Foundations of Early Childhood Education and Child Development

Teachers should develop a personal philosophy and approach to the learning/teaching process consistent with current research and education theories. They should possess a broad synthesis of knowledge of child development principles. Teachers should study children in a variety of

situations to understand better the meaning and degree of variation and exceptionality among individuals.

Learning and Teaching Process

Today's educational system is highly complex. There is no single learning approach or style that works for everyone. That's why teachers working in the field of education are focused on identifying and studying learning methods to better understand how people absorb and retain new information.

Attitudes and Dispositions

Teachers should develop positive attitudes and dispositions towards family involvement. Teachers have a unique role in building positive working relationships with the families of the children with whom they work. Valuing the role of families, engaging in positive interactions, and helping families realize the importance of their role is crucial to building partnerships with families that will have positive influences on their children.

Developing Dispositions to working with families

It is important to develop a positive disposition towards families if teachers are to develop that reciprocal working relationship. It is well documented that pre-service teachers come into teacher preparation programs with a set of beliefs, values and experiences that will affect the way they teach (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

Teacher Dispositions towards working with Families

Emphasized that an essential disposition for teachers to possess is a positive attitude towards families and the family school relationship process. This can bring about a more successful interaction with families as they look for the potential, strengths and resilience of the family rather than deficits (Blasi, 2002).

Conclusion

The professional experience component of pre-service teacher education programs must adequately prepare graduate teachers for the range of professional interactions with parents and families that are central to deeply engaging parents into the educational process.

To have the situation where student teachers can graduate without ever preparing for or engaging in such interactions in their practicum experience is unacceptable.

Practicum experiences must promote the working relationship between teachers and parents as a core professional relationship in teaching and provide opportunities to develop and practice the skills required to nurture this key relationship.

Ideally, variety in the setting of practicum placements would enable student teachers to experience working with parents from a range of cultural, social and educational backgrounds.

A professional knowledge and skills base is essential for a teacher to practice their craft, the factor that will largely determine how successful a teacher remains in their career will be the quality of the relationships they can establish and nurture with their students, the parents of their students and their colleagues.

More research is needed on effective practices for preparing teachers to work with families and communities. Research is needed to examine the effects of teacher preparation on teachers' practices, relationships between teachers and families, and parents' perceptions of their relationships with teachers.

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