Learning from Families: Pre-Service Teachers' First Interactions with Parents

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A young White female walks into a second grade classroom for the first time. She is twenty years old and lives at home with her family. She is a junior in an Elementary Education program at the local college and hopes to eventually get a teaching job in a middle class neighborhood like she grew up in. As she looks around the classroom of the school she has been assigned to, she is surprised by what she sees. Many of the students do not look like her. Some of the students seem to have very limited English skills and others seem to be struggling with basic skills that she assumed they would have already mastered. Suddenly she feels a sense of panic. What has she gotten herself into?

This scenario is not unusual for pre-service teachers today. The face of the American classroom continues to change. However, the face of the American teacher remains the same. According to The Condition of Education 2010, a report on today's schools produced by the U.S. Department of Education, 83% of classroom teachers are White, while only 55% of classroom students are White. The increase in non-White students coincides with a dramatic increase in the number of school-aged children who speak a language other than English in the home. This number has risen from 3.8 to 10.9 million in the past 30 years (Aud, Hussar, Planty, Snyder, Bianco, Fox, Frohlich, Kemp, & Drake, 2010). Although today's classrooms have a large number of English Language Learning (ELL) students, many pre-service teachers have limited experience working with these populations. Therefore, the reality of today's schools is dramatically different than the experiences of most pre-service teachers (Darling Hammond, 2006).

Field experiences are practical ways for pre-service teacher education programs to provide their students experiences and exposure to schools, students, and communities similar to and different from ones that they have attended. The use of field experiences is commonplace in teacher preparation. These experiences provide hands-on application and practical experiences that cannot be replaced or matched by even the best education methods courses (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2007). As Dodds (1989) explains, "Field experiences represent the closest juncture between formal teacher training in universities and on-the-job training in schools" (p. 81).

Field experiences have been found to make significant contributions to pre-service teachers' learning (Ben-Peretz, 1995). These experiences are important for both applying what was learned in the college classroom and learning new things from the process of application and interaction in the field. Early authentic field experiences provided in courses that focus more on authentic experiences than lecture can positively influence pre-service teachers' efficacy levels and teaching skills (Clift & Brady, 2005). Early field experiences provide pre-service teachers many benefits including: (a) bridging the gap between theory and practice, (b) making coursework more meaningful, (c), providing insights into child development, (d), learning about the role of the teacher, (e), developing teaching skills, and (f) helping them to understand the complexities of teaching (Paese, 1989). These authentic field experiences are supported by research as a "best practice" in teacher preparation (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

When writing about designing educative practicum experiences for prospective teachers, Zeichner (1996) recommends field experiences move beyond classroom-only placements to include a larger picture of teachers' complex roles within schools and communities. These well-planned experiences are especially needed with low-income and minority students. These experiences can help pre-service teachers recognize diverse students' strengths instead of viewing them from a deficit perspective (Morton & Bennett, 2010). Graybill explains that pre-service teachers need to experience more of the world their children live to help them understand their students and encourage their students' learning (1997).

Just as practical diverse field experiences are essential for pre-service teachers, parent involvement is essential for children. Parent involvement is key to children's school success. Involved parents have children who have higher grades, better school attendance, increased graduation rates, and higher test scores (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

Parent involvement provides benefits for children, teachers, and the community. Schools with actively engaged parents enjoy increased parent support, improved teacher morale, and a better reputation in the community (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). This results in an increased sense of community between parents and teachers (Belenardo, 2001). Getting parents involved in their children's education is not only good practice, it is also mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). No Child Left Behind requires regular, two-way, and meaningful communication between parents and schools to ensure that parents are full partners in their children's educational experience.

Although parent involvement is key to student success, most education programs provide few experiences for pre-service teachers to interact with parents of the students they serve (de Acosta, 1996; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). This is of great concern. Providing pre-service teachers interactions with diverse parents can increase both confidence and competence (Foster & Loven, 1992). The lack of parent involvement experiences for pre-service teachers is an example of the disconnect between

what is taught in the classroom and what is seen or experienced in the field by pre-service teachers (Zeichner, 2010). This lack of interaction with parents often makes pre-service teachers fear the unknown. Many pre-service teachers express concerns about the quality of the teacher–family relationship and the role of parents in education (Baum & McMurray- Schwarz, 2004). The language and cultural barriers that often exist only intensify pre-service teachers' reservations.

Baum & Swick (2008) argue for the merger of authentic field experiences and interactions with parents and families. They suggest that these experiences should be imbedded across the teacher education curriculum to help teachers be prepared to work not only with children, but also with the families they live. The current study was designed to be a first step towards this integration of field experience, parent involvement, and college coursework.

Method

Elementary Education pre-service teachers participating in an introductory literacy course organized family nights for children and their families. Because the introductory course is one of the first methods courses pre-service teachers take in the Elementary Education program, they had limited interactions in schools outside of their own experiences as students. The family nights were designed to provide an initial parent involvement experience and a vehicle for discussion about issues related to parent involvement during the literacy course.

The family nights were held for families of preschool children at an elementary school located in a suburban school district in Illinois with a large population of English Language Learning (ELL) families. The children involved in the pre-school were classified as "at risk" based on screening results related to at least one of the following areas: expressive and receptive language, fine and gross motor skills, social / emotional development, and intellectual processing. The preschool is part of a school district that is the highest performing majority Hispanic school district in the state. The district serves the second most severe Limited English Proficient population in the county. The

school population is 52 % low-income and has 71% limited-English proficiency.

The study design was meant to address dual purposes: to provide pre-service teachers with experiences with parents, caregivers, and families they would not usually come in contact with, and to provide parents and caregivers an opportunity to learn additional literacy strategies they could use with their young children. Pre-service teachers were asked to reflect upon their experiences at the end the family night. They were asked to share what their expectations were for working with ELL families with children classified "at risk", if the families were what they had expected, and what they learned.

Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) data analysis concentrated on students' reflections completed after planning and implementing the family night. The reflections were designed to see what effect interacting with parents and children learning English as a second language (ELL) would have on pre-service teachers' beliefs about parent involvement and students and families learning English as a second language. Students' reflections were analyzed to identify common themes regarding students' beliefs and feelings regarding parent involvement and ELL families. Each entry was coded according to themes identified from the responses (Merriam, 1988).

This project was designed to see if including a parent involvement experience in an introductory education class would impact students' beliefs about parent involvement. The field experience was also used to provide meaningful content for collegiate class discussions regarding children's literacy development, ELL children, and parent involvement. This form of teacher research was chosen to help the college students' become more reflective and provide the researcher insights into her students' attitudes about parent involvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999). Therefore, this study allowed the researcher to learn about the perspectives of her pre-service teachers as they interacted with families in a school setting (Meier & Henderson 2007) allowing the researcher to link theory and "real world" practice in the college classroom (Bullough & Gitlin 2001).

There were 22 students enrolled in the Introduction to Literacy course. Each student participated in 1 family literacy night. Therefore, each family night was lead by a group of 6-7 pre-service teachers. This was the first opportunity for any of the students to interact with parents in a public school environment. It was also the first opportunity for many of the students to work with children who spoke little to no English. A majority of the children and families involved in the pre-school program were native Spanish speakers. Only 7 of the pre-service teachers had taken any Spanish in high school and none described themselves as fluent.

The family nights lasted for 2 hours each. Each family night focused on teaching parents literacy skills they could use with their pre-school aged children. Focusing on helping Hispanic parents understand the importance of daily literacy interactions with their children is extremely important. Research shows that Hispanic parents report reading aloud to their young children 30% less often than White or Asian families (Child Trends, 2010). This statistic, however, should not be interpreted as Hispanic parents' disinterest in helping with their children's literacy development. Parents of ELL students are a vital component to the education of their children. Parents bring funds of knowledge and skills that are beneficial to both their children and their children's teachers (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2001).

Many ELL parents have overcome great obstacles to come to America in search of the "American dream". Their cultural experiences, motivation, and desire for their children to have a better life make them wonderful partners just waiting for opportunities and information about the difference they can make in their children's education (Waterman & Harry, 2008). When studying the home literacy environment of Hispanic families, Perry, Kay, & Brown (2008) found that Hispanic parents had a strong desire to help their children. The family nights were designed to build upon parents' desire to help by providing them materials and ideas that would help them do so.

Family Nights

The family nights lasted two hours and were held in the school's gym. Pizza and juice were served for

the first 20 minutes. Then, parents listened to a 10-minute presentation about the literacy skill being focused on that evening. The brief presentation was conducted in both English and Spanish. Children were taken to the side of the gym and introduced to literacy centers they would be working at while their parents listened to the presentation, received materials, and worked through stations. At the stations, parents made simple literacy materials they could use at home with their children. Parents worked at the stations for about an hour and 15 minutes. The last 15 minutes of the evening was time for parents to practice with their children the literacy skill taught that evening using the materials made at the stations.

Each family night revolved around a literacy theme and provided an opportunity for parents to make literacy materials to be used with their children. For example, the Everyday Literacy Materials family night included 4 stations. Parents made playdough, flashcards, puzzles, and a matching game. Children worked at literacy centers on skills corresponding to what their parents were learning about. The children used alphabet stamps at the playdough center, practiced ABC flashcards with partners at the flashcard center, completed alphabet puzzles at the puzzle center, and matched letters at the matching center. At the conclusion of each event, children and parents took home the materials they had made to help reinforce what was learned and to encourage families to continue working together at home.

Results

Apprehension to Appreciation

Many of the students expressed apprehension and anxiety about the family night experience before the event. Students were concerned both about the language barrier and working with parents. However, the experience resulted in building students' confidence and helping them to address some unnecessary fears and possible stereotypes:

> *My expectations of working with high-needs ELL families before this experience were pretty shaky. I was nervous to work with a group of people that I did not have very much in common with and who I would not be able to communicate with. I knew there was a lot that*

could be learned from this experience, but I was still nervous.

I expected the parents to maybe be a bit stand-offish or offended that we were there telling them about what they should be doing with their children. We are not even teachers, most of us don't have children, but we are there telling them what they need to be working on with their children. This is not how I felt while doing it, however. I thought the parents were appreciative of what we were telling them and seemed to enjoy having the opportunity to partake in these activities with their children.

I have to admit that before this experience, my expectations for working with high needs and ELL families were not very great. I was nervous that needing to have everything translated would make my interactions with the families seem awkward and impersonal. Once the evening got started, however, I quickly realized that this wasn't the case at all. Even those parents who spoke Spanish exclusively paid attention to me when I was speaking.

Communication

As you would expect, one of biggest concerns students discussed was figuring out how to interact with parents and their children when language was a barrier. Two to three translators were available each night. However, the translators' primary responsibility was translating during the presentation and helping parents understand procedures such as rotating through the stations.

> Non-verbal communication was successfully utilized by many of the students: *After a couple of minutes, I figured out ways in which I could get my point across without verbally speaking to them. This took place by modeling what they should be doing and by giving them signs of a job well done, such as a high five or a thumbs up.*

They were very willing to communicate in any way that they could. They were very happy to be working alongside their young children. I really learned the importance of non-verbal communication. As long as both parties are

willing to communicate, you can always find a way. The parents were very willing to communicate with me and it was a great experience. It even made me consider taking a basic Spanish course, because chances are I will benefit greatly from the experience.

Students felt they were able to successfully communicate with parents and their children using non-verbal communication, their limited Spanish abilities, and the use of the translators. However, several students expressed a desire to learn how to communicate with parents more effectively. This provided for a rich in-class discussion of ways in which language barriers can be overcome. It also lead to an assignment for students to research and post ideas for effectively communicating with ELL parents and children on our classroom electronic Blackboard page as a shared resource for everyone.

Benefits of Parent Involvement

Students were able to observe the benefits of parent involvement first hand during the family nights. This experience provided deeper insight, understanding, and a much more meaningful experience for our students than any classroom discussion about parent involvement could have provided alone. Students identified many of the benefits of parent involvement in their reflections.

Parent involvement encourages achievement: *I noticed the students who had support from their parents finished the puzzles faster than those who did not. In addition, parents who strategically asked their children questions such as "What are we missing on Arthur?" helped students find the answers on their own.*

Parent involvement encourages excitement and provides opportunities for learning: *Parent involvement encourages children to learn and be excited about learning. I noticed that the children loved working with their parents, and were excited to move on to new stations with them. Teachers must utilize this relationship to encourage children to enjoy learning.*

Parent involvement helps build relationships: *I learned a lot about parent involvement through carrying out the family night process. Not only does parent involvement help students build their literacy skills, it also helps bring parents and children closer together.*

Parent involvement benefits everyone: *On the student side, it means a lot because your parent is taking the time to be excited and learn, just like the student is. On the parent side, it is good because you get to see and help your child grow and learn. On the teacher side, it is good to know that what you are teaching is getting practiced at home.*

Parent involvement at school provides teachers opportunities for insights about families that they would not usually have: *I leaned a lot watching the parents work with their children on the puzzles. I noticed different styles of parenting, ranging from parents who did not give much support to their children and those who gave heaps of help to their children. This gave me a view into different parenting styles, as well as allowed me to have an experience working with parents. I got ideas about how I could help different parents.*

Conclusion

Parent involvement is essential to student success. However, it is also often a struggle for even the most experienced teacher to get parents involved. There are many barriers to parent involvement including issues related to parents finding the time, understanding its importance, and speaking a different language in the home. That is the reality of teaching. However, early and frequent field experiences for pre-service teachers involving parents can provide an opportunity for pre-service teachers to learn to identify issues, appreciate the importance of parents in the education of their children, and help pre-service teachers commit to the practice of parent involvement (Baum & Swick, 2008).

We learned many things in the process of this study. Adequate and repeated communication with parents is essential to ensure attendance. Providing food and helping parents make arrangements for transportation if needed is a necessity. And, asking for and responding to parent feedback is a great asset. Although parents enjoyed the evenings, they

provided great suggestions for improvement such as providing take home extension activities in writing, offering events at different times during the day for parents who work, and including opportunities for families to meet and learn from one another in addition to the "teachers".

This study offered an initial experience for pre-service teachers that provided them valuable insights about parent involvement and added an important dimension to our class discussions about working with families. An example of this can be seen in the following student's comments:

> *I expected there may not be a lot of families who would show up for family night. However, I was really impressed with the turnout of how many families attended. I have never worked with high-needs or ELL families before, but they are no different then working with families of other socio-economic statuses. They have the same goals for their child as any other family would have. And, as we have talked about in class, parents becoming involved in their child's learning is a key ingredient for children to develop a positive attitude and succeed in school.*

The family nights also helped students address the Ben-reality that communicating with families that speak limited or no English can be extremely challenging. As on student shared:

> *I couldn't really get to know the parents because I didn't know their language. I was frustrated that the translator could speak with them and I couldn't.*

Although this experience was a positive one for the pre-service teachers, parents, and children, a single interaction with parents cannot hope to make lasting changes in pre-service teachers' attitudes and behaviors regarding parent involvement. However, it did provide a rich context for classroom discussions, opportunities for personal reflection, and helped to introduce some of the realities of working with diverse families. Most importantly, the family nights helped the pre-service teachers begin to understand their role as not only teachers, but also learners (Donahue, Bowyer, & Rosenberg, 2003).

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