

## Learning Together: Teachers and Families as Learning Communities

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### Abstract

This summative research study examined the findings from four studies previously conducted by the authors, which explored a teacher preparation collaborative model focusing on parent/professional partnerships. Parents of children with disabilities were taught together with pre-service teachers during four academic years (2006-2010). The study was designed to determine if attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions of the participants changed as a result of their participation in the course. Data was initially collected through focus groups conducted before the course began and at the course completion. Pre-service teacher responses and parent responses were reported in separate previous articles. This summative study compared all response themes from the previous pre-service teacher studies with parents' themes to explore differences and similarities across these groups. Findings indicated striking similarities among the responses of both groups with the salient feature in the data being the notion of change. Specifically, both groups were particularly vocal about the change in their perceptions of each other, their preconceived negative notions, and change in knowledge of collaborative partnerships. As a result of these changes, we learned that this model of teacher preparation is effective for changing parent and teacher attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions about working together as a team.

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**Keywords:** teacher preparation, collaboration, parent/professional partnership.

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### INTRODUCTION

Family and caregiver's involvement has shown to have a positive effect on a child's education (Brorson, 2005; Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; Woods, Kashinath, & Goldstein, 2004;). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2004) recognize and support the roles that families play in the education process. This legislature holds teachers and school professionals accountable to meet the expectations of the law to establish effective parent/teacher partnerships leading to positive outcomes for children.

Unfortunately, many pre-service teachers lack the experience necessary to build the skills and knowledge necessary to address the wide variety of differences in language, socio-economic circumstances, and disabilities in their classrooms (Hedges & Lee, 2010). Teachers without cultural sensitivity and/or disability training may not understand parents' behaviors and misconstrue their lack of involvement as a lack of interest (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Fortunately, some schools and teacher preparation programs are making attempts to facilitate parent professional partnerships by providing panels of parents or a mentor system in order to teach students about parent partnership (Curran & Murray, 2008).

Patterson, Webb, and Krudwig (2009) looked at the use of parent panels called *Family as Faculty* model and found common themes among pre-service teachers' reports, including a change in how pre-service teachers viewed the parents. For example, pre-service teachers participating in this study reported to perceive parents as "caring," and as important contributors to IEP planning. While parent panels give pre-service teachers a brief look into the life of a parent and family structure, these types of opportunities cannot offer pre-service a comprehensive conceptualization of the child's family and culture due to time restrictions in courses.

Therefore, teacher preparation programs should focus on providing their candidates with meaningful opportunities to learn about and practice developing partnerships with families who have children with or without disabilities. However, one might question how effectively students are able to learn to build partnerships by secondhand information without actually receiving the opportunity to build firsthand knowledge through experiences based on the courses taken.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Benefits of Parental Engagement

When classroom teachers begin to engage parents in their classrooms, the possibilities are endless. Crais,

Roy & Free, 2006 suggest that family input should be the deciding factor when determining practices. In the beginning stages of the academic year, educators have new students entering their learning environments and the ways in which these environments are functioning tend to be somewhat of a mystery for both teachers and families. Research indicates that parents can aid professionals in gaining knowledge (Greene, 1999), so that they are better equipped to help their students and meet their unique needs. At the beginning, teachers have to rely on family expertise as they learn important information about the child and the home environment, and developmental history, so they can better serve families. Open communication could then lead toward mutual understanding between parents and professionals and a myriad of other benefits including positive attitudes, higher aspirations for the student, additional parental education, and more effective programs and schools (Friend & Cook, 2010).

Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak and Shogren (2011) defined partnership as one where families and professionals come to a reciprocal understanding of each other's knowledge and judgment. Specifically, they place an emphasis on parental engagement, which results in a sense of shared planning, parity and decision-making (Keen, 2007). Encouraging parents to have a shared sense of power over their child's education will lead to optimistic outcomes, including an effective parent-professional partnership.

### **Cultural Barriers of Parent Professional Partnerships**

As culturally and linguistically diverse numbers of people in the United States continue to increase (US Census Bureau, 2010), it is imperative that educators learn to become cultural learners when attempting to form relationships with parents of the students in their classroom. Unfortunately, clearly distinguishing between language/culture differences and learning differences often pose difficulties to educators due to the fact that the skills required to become fluent in English could take as long as 5-8 years to properly develop (Cummins, 2005; Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, & Roach-Scott 2009). In addition, cultural variations between families and professionals and the need for professional cultural competence to understand these differences may lead to failure in acknowledging parents' intentions/desire to participate. Swick (1991) also notes that not fully understanding families' cultural identity and situational or social factors (e.g., SES, length of residence in the United States, resources/family support systems) (Lynch & Hanson, 2004) can lead to wrongly stereotyping students and families. Adjusting teacher strategies on a regular basis can positively effect families for better interaction and building effective parent-professional partnerships.

Partnerships between teacher candidates and family members has not been a significant component of teacher-preparation programs (Epstein, 2005; Kochhar-Bryant, 2002; Patterson, Webb, & Krugwig, 2009; Tichenor, 1997), and the lack of professional training has been found to be immediate barriers towards parent-professional partnerships. The key to effective family-centered assistance is for both professionals and families to collaborate on determining what services are best for the child and their family (Crais, Roy & Free, 2006). Therefore, this research examined if a collaborative model for parent/professional partnerships involving embedded parents of children with disabilities, influences attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions of those participants.

### **METHODS**

#### **Data Collection**

This study is a comparison of four studies previously conducted by Murray, Curran, and Zellers, (2008), Murray & Curran (2008), Curran and Murray (2008), and Murray, Dimling, Straka, and Titus, (in-press). These previous studies all involved a collaborative approach to parent professional partnership preparation at a medium sized mid-western university, where parents of children with special needs were embedded within the classroom in order to facilitate better communication and understanding between parents and pre-service teachers, and took place over a four academic years (2006-2010). In a 400-level undergraduate class, parents were recruited to participate in an egalitarian parent professional partnership with pre-service teachers for 16 weeks. Parents were asked to attend each class, participate in class discussions, do assigned reading for the course, and play an active role in the small group student projects (Curran & Murray, 2008). Pre-service teachers were able to interact with parents, worked collaboratively with parents, and meet with parents both inside and outside of class. Pre-service teachers were also required to spend an additional ten hours outside of class with parents and their child with special needs. The objective was to experience the inner workings of a child with an exceptionality and his/her family situation.

Pre-service teachers were also assigned a major project that required pre-service teachers collaborate with embedded parents on a culmination project of their knowledge gained and reflection in an effort to form a solid foundation of the necessary steps to forming relationships with parents. Three projects included the *Virtual Family* project, *Family Mural* and the *Final Project*. The *Virtual Family* project, required pre-service teachers to research and respond to specific issues that can arise when being the parent of a child with special needs (Curran & Murray, 2008). In some cases the embedded parents would, unbeknownst to pre-service teachers, use real life

experiences and examples that pre-service teachers would have to respond to (Curran & Murray, 2008). Each of parents also prepared a presentation regarding their “*Family Story*” to present examples of a viable option for use when the pre-service teachers reach the schools, as well as to help the young teachers get a sense of where their comments/thoughts in the shared environment were coming from. Pre-service teachers were also assigned to design their own *Family Mural* as the first assignment in order to start developing the premise for the class discussions and to get an understanding of the discussion participants’ background in the area of families. Speakers were asked to come in and verbally distribute information to both parties (pre-service teachers/parents) and valuable discussions ensued with parents being able to hear what the pre-service teachers had to say and vice versa on a myriad of subjects.

The class culminated in a *Final Project*, which consisted of a PowerPoint presentation concerning the principles and foundations of an effective parent-professional partnership in the case of the family observed. Secondly, the pre-service teachers were instructed to compile a movie, with interviews and questions about their experiences. The final piece consisted of a visual aid describing the family’s surface characteristics. The purpose being for the pre-service teachers to apply the knowledge learned from the text to a real-life situation in order to make the connections necessary to form a solid foundation for future parent-professional partnerships.

Data was collected for each of the four studies in the same manner. All four studies involved focus group discussions with each of the participants (i.e., student participants and parent participants) and were collected during the first and last weeks of classes. Separate focus groups were held for parents and pre-service teachers, which took place in classrooms or conference rooms and were audio recorded. Focus group discussions lasted between one to two hours (Murray, Dimling, Straka & Titus, in-press; Curran & Murray, 2008) with questions inquiring about the parents and pre-service teachers opinions of the parent professional partnership.

#### **Student Participants**

A total of 82 students participated in the three studies during the academic years 2006-2010, and consisted of pre-service intervention teachers of a majority homogeneous group, mostly female and between 18-25 years of age. Students were also almost all Caucasian, juniors or seniors in college, and majoring in either Intervention Services (mild/moderate) or Early Childhood Education. Most of the participants possess an end goal of learning the necessary skills to become equipped to take the required Praxis Tests for Special Education Licensure.

#### **Parent Participants**

Seventy-one parents also participated during the 2006-2010 academic years and all had children with disabilities. The participants were chosen specifically to provide an accurate representation of the possible spectrum of exceptionalities educators would come in contact with in the schools. These parents were primarily female, Caucasian, and between the ages of 31 and 46. Parents also had diverse characteristics including single parent families, two parent families, families with low, medium, and high socioeconomic status, racially diverse, and individuals with a diverse sexual orientation and their families. Their children possessed a wide range of exceptionalities including hearing loss, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, developmental disabilities, down syndrome, etc.

#### **RESULTS**

Results from each of the four studies were originally reported using themes generated from the focus group discussions. For this comparison, we reviewed and analyzed the themes from student responses (Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Curran & Zellers, 2008; Novak, Murray, Scheuermann, & Curran, 2009) to the parent responses Murray et al., in press).

#### **Students’ Responses**

Murray and Curran (2008) first reported data with two themes describing the students’ responses (1) Parent presence serves as disorienting dilemma, and (2) cooperative projects facilitate transformational change. Students indicated that they initially felt intimidated and scared by the mere presence of parents of children with disabilities in their class. For students, having the parents in class was an unexpected event that appeared to “disorient” their thinking and currently held beliefs about parents and children with disabilities. Their experiences in class, while disorienting, also appeared to change those perceptions, which were frequently unfounded. Within theme two, students reported that the projects provided a way for them to work closely together and collaborate with parents. These projects helped students and parents to learn how to develop collaborative relationships, trust, and change perceptions. Hearing family stories also helped students to begin to understand what it’s like raising a child with a disability and the challenges they experienced in the education system.

Murray, Curran & Zellers, (2008) reported four themes from the students’ responses: (1) from unprepared and experienced to prepared and experienced; (2) from perceptions that parents are not caring to understanding that parents face barriers in participation; (3) from perceptions of parents not understanding to parents as knowledgeable; (4) from parents who care do what the teacher tells them to

parents are partners. All four themes represented a change in students' perceptions, be it of their own skills, as in theme one where the students reported that they felt they had limited experience working with parents of children with disabilities and didn't feel prepared for this aspect of teaching. Yet at the conclusion of the class, students felt much more confident in their abilities and preparedness, even stating that the course gave them new and better skills compared to other teachers who had not been involved in the class. Changes in perceptions were also found in what the students assumed about parents of children with disabilities. For instance, many of the students' perceptions were negative in nature, such as themes two, three, and four, where students regularly believed that parents' lack of involvement was related to their lack of knowledge, caring, and unrealistic expectations either about the educational system or their child and his/her abilities. At the conclusion of the course, these perceptions were changed dramatically. Students felt a new understanding of the challenges that parents face, as well as a new found respect for the knowledge that comes with being a parent of a child with a disability. In addition, students also learned to view parents in a new light as partners and relationship builders.

Two themes were reported by Novak, Murray, and Scheuermann & Curran, (2009): (1) from judgment to empathy and (2) from service recipients to partners. As with Murray and Curran (2008) and Murray, Curran & Zellers, (2008) students were found to change their negative perceptions in a way that transformed their ideas to more empathetic and understanding of parental roles and responsibilities and reported a shift in their thinking regarding parent involvement. Changes were also found in students' perceptions of parents' roles in the parent/professional partnership. For instance, students initially viewed parents' roles as being recipients of services, rather than contributing members. After the course, perceptions were changed to see parents as contributing and competent members of the partnership, who now welcome the relationship.

#### **Parents' Responses**

Most recently, Murray, Dimling, Straka & Titus, (in press) reported an analysis of the parents' focus group responses from the course. Four themes described the parents' experiences before and after being embedded in the course: (1) from judgmental and impersonal to caring professionals; (2) from intimidation to confidence; (3) from defensiveness to trust; and (4) from despair to hope. Parents reported a shift in overall perceptions of professionals (i.e., pre-service teachers), stating their initial negative feelings were judgmental and often based on prior negative experiences with other professionals. For instance, parents stated that they wished that teachers saw themselves and their children as "people," rather than

as a task or only by their label. Another parent suggested that when teachers only see the child or parent by their disability there might be long term implications for the parent/professional relationship and even more importantly for the child's educational future. As such, many parents felt defensive and needed to make sure that the pre-service teacher's were aware of this possibility. Parents also reported feeling intimidated by teachers and other professionals, by superior attitudes and assuming that professionals had more knowledge and information, thus parents lacked confidence and felt they needed to defer decision making to the professionals. The need to have pre-service teachers understand their perspective and emphasize with their experiences was also a sentiment felt strongly by parents prior to the course. During post-course focus group discussions, parents who participated in the study felt a sense of deep change. For instance, once negative perceptions appeared to transform into positive attitudes about parent/professional working relationships, confidence in their own knowledge, confidence in the pre-service teachers as future professionals, self-assurance as a learner, emotional investments, and hope that both parents and professionals can influence positive change and education for children with disabilities.

#### **DISCUSSION**

One of the most salient findings across all four studies was the existence of change, specifically, change of preconceived notions and perceptions, which were often negative in nature. Both pre-service teachers and parents alike came into the course with their own perceptions of the parent/professional partnership. Many of these perceptions were rooted in negative past experiences. For example, several parents recounted experiences with their child's teacher, administrators, or other professionals (e.g., school psychologists) that were fraught with animosity, anger, and misunderstandings. Students' perceptions were sometimes based on lack of experience, second-hand/heard stories, or simply fear. What blossomed from a course where pre-service teachers and parents were educated together was a change in perceptions. At the end of the semester, those negative perceptions were transformed into positive insights, new knowledge, and skills. Both parents and pre-service teachers reported a shift in their beliefs from misjudging and fear of being judged by one another to a trusting collaborative parent professional partnership (Murray, Curran & Zellers, 2008; Murray, Dimling, Straka & Titus, in press). Often these pre-course misplaced beliefs and perceptions were formed by stereotypes and misunderstandings of cultural differences. As noted by Swick (1991), a misunderstanding of cultural practices often results in stereotyped images and false representations of families. The diversity of families and children with disabilities participating in this study was reflected by the variety of their

characteristics in size, structure, cultural background. For example, parents participating in the studies leading to this summative research represented single parent families, families with low, medium, and high socioeconomic status, racially diverse and individuals with a diverse sexual orientation and their families. The pre-service teachers discussed at length how being exposed to the challenges of families with unique characteristics allowed them to reflect upon their own preconceived notions and on the barriers preventing these families access to educational and support services. As the diversity of children and their families continues to increase, it is crucial that teacher education programs create authentic and meaningful opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn about and exercise culturally sensitive practices.

A consistent outcome throughout the four studies indicated that parents also felt encouraged to voice their opinions, thoughts, and preconceived notions about envisioning the next generation of teachers and the many qualities they should possess before entering the profession. Parents embedded in the class shared how learning about the concerns and questions with which teachers are struggling as they learn how to work with families helped them to change their perceptions on the collaboration process with educators. Both pre-service teachers and parents reported a better understanding of each other's roles and were able to form collaborative working relationships through multiple opportunities during the course and assignments to gain knowledge from each other.

By comparing the themes of pre-service teachers and parents involved in this innovative course where both are educated together, we can influence the reciprocal understanding and learning of both partners. Ultimately, we found that when teachers and parents learn together, and from each other, we get the same outcomes for partnering. Thus, parents will better understand how pre-service teachers are educated, their experiences, hopes, fears, and knowledge. In turn, pre-service teachers will better understand the challenges and joys of raising a child with a disability, and how parents' experiences can affect their mind-set. Together, both will learn how to collaborate and partner together, to communicate effectively, to problem solve, and to ultimately work for the betterment of the child. What we found in these studies were increased communication, empathy, and true partnerships. This research which emphasized the philosophy of parent/professional collaboration and partnership, can be replicated with other teacher preparation programs or during in-service trainings for practicing teachers, which will lead to greater understanding and learning, and decreased due process and mediation. Ultimately, we hope other professionals will continue this research and provide learning experiences for both parents and

professional to learn about, practice and create new partnerships.

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