



## Asking, listening, and learning: Toward a more thorough method of inquiry in home–school relations

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### ABSTRACT

The article provides a rationale and description of a constructivist parent–teacher approach used to support preservice teachers' understandings of relationships between home and school. Using a critical theoretical framing of policy, social science, and enacted curriculum, the authors ask readers to consider moving away from proscribed models of home–school relationships to a partnering lens which allows teachers to view their initial communications as a crucial teacher–learning endeavor. With this approach, preservice teachers are constructing their understanding of parents' views of children, uncovering resources and parents ideals, and empowering themselves to deconstruct/reconstruct images of families in a more just framework.

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### 1. Introduction

Within the last decade, an estimated 2.2 million new educators were expected to enter the teaching force in the United States (Casper, 2001). Given the many competencies that preservice teachers must acquire, it is disappointing that in the recent past, researchers in the United States indicated that the majority of states did not mention parent involvement in teacher certification requirements (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994). Often training exists as one-shot workshops rather than more organizational professional development (Weiss & Stephens, 2010). In teacher preparation programs with adequate course work on family relations and family involvement, preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competency levels on these topics increase (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Uludag, 2008).

Standards for the teaching profession have grown to integrate family and community relations as a professional competency across multiple professional associations. The Interstate New

Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, for example, has required that teachers understand how children's learning is influenced by individual experience, talents, prior learning, culture, and family and community values in order to connect instruction to students' experiences (INTASC, 2007). Clearly, the degree to which teachers understand parents and community life contributes to the making of a competent and well-prepared teacher (Hyson, 2003; Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008).

### 2. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, a theoretical overview of our assumptions helps us to illuminate how we see constructivist learning ideology as well as critical and postmodern theories operating in our understanding and delivery of preservice teacher education (Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner, & Yarnall, 2001). Secondly, we review current models of home–school relationship practices against the growing demographic of diversity in the U.S. and give a critical rationale to create alternative approaches. We then provide a brief overview of NCATE/NAEYC Standard 2 illuminating some of the inherent problems with teaching preservice teachers how to incorporate family engagement in schooling. Finally, we describe how we support teachers in their abilities to

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work with parents, presenting a research study of an inquiry-based project we utilize. This experience with preservice teachers is a suggested approach for working with parents as refined and taught by the authors.

### 2.1. Constructivist learners using critical and postmodern theories

In our teacher education program we understand social constructivism as a theory of learning that makes processes of teaching collaborative, purposeful, active, and personally transforming for both learning and teacher (Wells, 2002). Two key elements for the novice teacher professional competence are reflection and questioning (Pedro, 2006). Incorporating a questioning stance in relation to families and communities as part of daily practice helps facilitate reflective practice. Because constructivism as a learning theory does not fully lend well to conceptualizing power relationships between individuals (including teachers and parents), we use critical and postmodern lenses to situate our work of educating teachers.

Since the 1960s, debates in the social sciences in Europe and the U.S. have centered on the inadequacy of research paradigms that utilize scientific empirical approaches to explain social phenomena (Genishi et al., 2001; Vandembroeck, 2006). Utilizing holistic and critical lenses to conceptualize the early childhood preservice teacher education program at our university, in 2004, the early childhood faculty developed a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework positions the preservice teacher centrally as a critical educator/teacher learner; tenets of the critical educator/teacher learner include pedagogical experts, curriculum experts, democratically accountable leaders, committed professional, reflective thinkers, and teachers as co-decision makers.

The conceptual framework<sup>1</sup> features a critical lens and prods our preservice students “to question the patterns of knowledge and social conditions that maintain unequal social divisions (e.g., class, race, gender, sexuality), with an aim of orienting individuals toward actions that will lead to social change...” (Genishi et al., 2001, p. 1197). Such a framing draws upon early childhood reconceptualists as well as the work of critical curriculum theorists and feminists; additionally, many of these scholars draw upon the work of discourse theorists and the theorizations of power and knowledge gleaned from Michel Foucault (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006; Lather, 1991, 2004; Lubeck, 1996, 1998; McLaren, 2009; Pinar, 1975; Polakow, 1989; Swadener & Piekeilek, 1992).

A constructivist and critical framing by faculty allows us to collaborate with preservice teachers to self-evaluate and notice the ways in which many of our early education and social policies and practices reflect the values and actions of dominant groups of people, while marginalizing others (Genishi et al., 2001; Wells, 2002). During our course work (as an example for this paper) we critically examine national policies about family involvement, and with our students, come to interrogate common practices of parent involvement as a form of cultural “production” in which “different groups in either subordinate or dominant social relations realize their aspirations through unequal relations of power” (McLaren, 2009, p. 65).

When we are able to describe many parent–teacher communication opportunities in schools (such as conferences) as “discursive formations” in which parents and teachers are socially positioned in particular ways, we are more able to examine power relations within family–school partnerships with our preservice

teachers (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972). Teachers are more likely to see their own subjectivity and the subjectivity of parents within their practice against a backdrop of alternative literatures, which critique dominant notions of family involvement. Ultimately we hope our preservice teachers come to challenge dominant versions of truth (Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006) and instead position families, children and teachers as makers of collaborative meaning within the educational process.

Research in several international contexts such as that with Brunei children, parents, and teachers, feature listening to one another to help children transition to school (Kitson, 2004); early childhood educators working with families to develop sustainable living communities (Van Keulen, 2010); and educators in Ontario, Canada recognizing the need for a dynamic framework for working with non-dominant cultural and linguistic students (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Schecter, 2002). These global examples give evidence to the advantages of examining power relations in schools and furthering alternative ways of working with families in the US.

### 2.2. Common models of home–school involvement: implicit power relations

As we work with our preservice teachers we deliberate upon one common model of home–school participation that has gained prominence in the U.S. educational system that is Epstein's (1986, 1996) typology. Drawn from a series of sociological studies associating children's school success with frequency of parents' partnering activities, Epstein's typology illuminates roles that parents play in schools to support students' school success. Specifically the model calls for teachers to activate the potentials of parents in various forms of partnering activities including parents as teachers, supporters of school endeavors, advocates, decision makers, volunteers, homework guiders, and collaborators. Less clear in the model are what types of essential skills teachers have in order to be effective with parents or how teachers go about gaining partnering supports from parents.

Prior to being presented with alternative interpretations of Epstein's model found in the literature, preservice teachers seem to believe that parents who are able to perform the types of parent engagement she proposes are often seen as “good”, involved, and as the kind of parents who care the most about their children. Because many of our students have been raised with these mainstream practices that make up these models (Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003), they themselves take Epstein's typology as “natural” not recognizing the constitutive nature of discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1979).

We demonstrate to preservice teachers how the elements of parental roles from Epstein's typology are frequently cited as components for parent–teacher involvement and used by U.S. policymakers and in national organizations (e.g., National Educational Goals Panel (NGEP), 2000; National Parent Teacher Association; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005); however, we also reveal how the relationship literature from cultural studies, anthropology, and education (Igoa, 1995; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Valdes, 1996) as well as critical geographies of childhood and early childhood teacher education (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Rosier, 2000; Turner-Vorbeck & Miller-Marsh, 2008) counter theorize with cautions and caveats regarding what is taken for granted in parent–teacher relations.

Although we do not reject Epstein's model, we agree with much of the critical literature, in which Epstein's tenets of communication, advocacy, volunteerism, homework, parenting, and collaboration are not portrayed as neutral constructs but contain ideologies of dominant power relations paralleling that of the

<sup>1</sup> Contributing faculty included: Andrew Gilbert, Eunsook Hyun, Martha Lash, Sherri Leafgren.

larger society (Brantlinger, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Doucet, 2008; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Kroeger, 2005). Because schooling is a major force in transmitting the dominant culture, the notion of cultural capital creates wide disparities among parents depending on how school personnel respond to parent demands when parents attempt to advocate for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Miller-Marsh, 2008. Kroeger (2005) has argued that when large groups of parents with traditional forms of cultural capital act as volunteers and advocates in schools with diverse populations and wield decision-making power, their majority forms of cultural capital can translate to whole-school advantages conferred upon higher-income individuals and social and academic disadvantages to members of ethnic, racial, and linguistic minorities.

Critical theorists have argued that when teachers' models of practice do not sufficiently account for the life world resources of parents, teachers are likely to misinterpret or neglect to understand and take advantage of the resources parents and other community members may bring to the parent–teacher relationship (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Ginsberg, 2007; Street, 2005). Thus, language and cultural practices that differ from the school's, parents' and children's identity development, familial roles and structural differences in families, and resources of the community are not only underutilized but are also devalued and negated. School people and accrediting bodies may state they value family involvement, but how to actualize that value seems to escape many schools and teachers.

In proscribed models like Epstein's typology, implicit teacher knowledge or metaskill development, such as learning about and capitalizing upon what parents do on behalf of children outside school time, how teachers evaluate their own truth claims about families and children, or how teachers adapt for cultural variation, may still be largely unexamined. In addition, the roles parents and teachers play within this conceptual framework are routine endeavors in schools and often mirror the existing power structures within culture.

When we shift our views to examine conferencing and collaboration between parents and school people as a "discourse practice" we can more explicitly examine the power relationships implicit in communication and collaboration with parents in schools, and in turn we can begin to theorize this with our preservice teachers. Juxtaposed to mainstream practices like Epstein's typology, in university course work we examine ethnographic readings related to social class, race, language, sexual orientation, and culture with our preservice teachers (Casper & Schultz, 1999, Compton-Lilly, 2003; Igoa, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lareau, 2000; Rosier 2000; Turner-Vorbeck & Miller-Marsh, 2008; Valdes, 1996). When using such critical literature, social science research from a critical/post structural paradigm visibly demonstrates to students how common models of conferencing are experienced by people who are poor, less-well educated, of minority racial or language positions, or of sexual minority status. Unpacking policy directives and common school practices in a discursive manner begins to allow us to empower preservice teachers to recognize the political nature of power and how schools tend to work within dominant frames of understanding, alienating many. Such discourse work, common in scholarly contributions from Europe and Australia has raised the bar for U.S. contexts (Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006; Kitson, 2004; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Schecter, 2002; Penn, 2005).

As scholars we would like the field of teacher educators to become more aware of mainstream practices of parent–teacher partnerships as a visible set of "discourse practices that reproduce a set of power relations embodied in technical processes" with all

but the most elite parents commonly placed in a position to "listen to the authority" of teachers and schooling and teachers in a position to speak (Foucault, 1972, p. 200; McLaren, 2009, p. 65). Drawing upon Foucault's (1972) notion of power and knowledge, we examine with our preservice teachers how often conferencing and communication between parents and teacher comes to embody an implicit set of institutionalized rules that usually keeps parents positioned in particular ways: "Rules that govern what can be said and what must remain unsaid, who can speak with authority and who must listen. Social and political institutions, such as schools and penal institutions are governed by discursive practices (p. 72)."

Commonly, practicing and preservice teachers are not expected to deconstruct dominant frames of knowledge production like that found within the empirical rationale of family-school relationship policies. Indeed knowledge is "linked to particular interests and social relations but generally given little consideration in teacher education programs" (Giroux, 2009, p. 448). In our program, one of the first power dynamics we work to shift in school processes revolves around the opportunities that preservice teachers have to listen to parents.

When the parent is viewed by the teacher as one with knowledge and power with experiences and perspectives to offer rather than an individual to be coached or changed the power dynamic within the institutional relationship is shifted. In these moments, the kind of parent one is "recognized" to be by the teacher is open to opportunities that are created within an inquiry-based relationship (Gee, 2001).

### 2.3. *The problems with standards related to families and culture variation approaches*

Early childhood teacher education in the United States is currently guided by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Educators (NCATE) and the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) professional standards. Professional guidelines for practice articulated in NCATE/NAEYC Standard #2 focus on building family and community relationships with the following key elements: (a) knowing about and understanding family and community characteristics; (b) supporting and empowering families and communities through respectful, reciprocal relationships; and (c) involving families and communities in their children's development and learning (Hyson, 2003).

One of the most challenging issues that teacher educators may face while educating preservice teachers is that contemporary families represent tremendous variation in composition, activity, and contextual backdrop. Paradoxically, because families themselves "defy standardization", working effectively with many families requires a tremendous range of knowledge and procedural skill within the particulars of working with each. Teachers sometimes construct ways to think about families and parents based on commonly described cultural variations because educational research similarly describes family variation. The most common elements of variation in family influencing how a family supports children's learning may include socioeconomic class (e.g., wage, education level, employment, housing status); race (including biracial, interracial, and multiracial); ethnicity, culture, or religion and its expressions; marital status and family composition (e.g., divorced, single, blended, step, multigenerational or same sex); citizenship status, immigrant or refugee status; and variations in custodial relations (e.g., shared parenting, father or mother as single parent, biological parents as a couple, fostered and adoptive care families, and grandparents as parents).

Although such surface layers may be a starting place because parents may be like other families or parents of children we have

taught or perhaps read about in the literature, we may still have too little information to work with that child or involve the parent in the child's school experience. Unfortunately, without particular factual knowledge created by that child's family's versions of reality, Heilman (2008) argued, teachers unwittingly create curricula that mirror images of family life based on a hegemonic form instead of that which exists in the real lives of children.

When thinking about children, many theorists have turned to ecological systems to support preservice teachers in understanding how family, community, and school life influence children's relationships and learning (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005). Bronfenbrenner's (1986) original purpose was to help professionals "understand the external influences that affect the capacity of families to foster the healthy development of their children" (p. 1), but a critical understanding of ecological systems from any social group's perspective demands that teachers comprehend how individual access to the resources of culture are systematically constrained. The capacities of parents to support healthy development because of social, economic, and political influences are regulated by contextual factors, and their abilities to overcome barriers to their child's learning and growth are individually expressed. In our work, we argue that the experiences of particular groups of parents with their children's schooling are constrained in systemic ways; therefore, a teacher must be aware of how marginalized groups experience their values, beliefs, and actions in terms of dominant frames of understanding.

Despite the social complexities surrounding the work of garnering family involvement, we believe that teachers have efficacy as a primary and ongoing agent in the support of children. Therefore in order to support families, to be respectful, and to allow parents to have a voice in schools, a teacher must grow comfortable with becoming close to parents, and entering communities that fall beyond their common experience.

Our argument in this paper aims to help those in the field of education move beyond a model of parent involvement or a family needs-based approach toward an inquiry-driven method to support teachers working with families of young children. We believe there is a danger in categorical thinking about types of parents, children, and families because reading and knowing deeply differ from applying what is known and understood based on what is found. These complexities demand that teachers focus on both who families are and what motivates parents in their roles with their children. Indeed, in working effectively with families, teachers must expand on the information read, circumstances found, and issues discovered together with the family, based upon the discursive opportunities created along the way.

### 3. Context of study and research process

Our Early Childhood Education (ECED) program takes place at a teaching and research university with approximately 31,000 university students in a suburban setting near two urban areas and surrounded by small towns and rural communities. The program is nationally recognized by NCATE/NAEYC (most recently, January 2008) and faculty attempt to make assignment expectations consistent with an inquiry-based, constructivist teaching and learning approach that merges theory and practice to help preservice become effective critical educators and teacher leaders. The assignment described here is completed during preschool field experience and foundational to preservice teachers' learning about working with families as they move through the program and into primary-grade field experiences. We have a licensure program at both an undergraduate and graduate level and both programs use the assignment as an institutional assessment for NCATE accreditation.

The assignment we describe is an authentic investigation for preservice teachers into understanding parents' beliefs regarding their children and relationships with schools. Consistent with the literature on authentic assessment, this assignment aligns with constructivist teacher education practices to engage in ongoing examination, discussion, and modification (Rand, 1999; Wells, 2002). In addition, as an inquiry project it is congruent with action research articulated in the literature as well as constructivist theory (Hyland & Noffke, 2005; Wells, 2002).

The parent-child-teacher study assignment includes an examination of issues of shared power with parents and children, as well as the ability to trust in the process of developing, utilizing, and appreciating parent relationships to inform and invigorate classroom practice. Aspects of preservice teachers' work include: construction of knowledge, application of knowledge, and reflection of found knowledge as well as a focused self-evaluation of how one's identity and practice were changed as a result of the parent-child-teacher study. Through these processes of reflective practice preservice teachers demonstrate individual transformations. As we studied our university work, it became transformations in the thinking and practice of our preservice teachers that we were interested in for this paper (Kroeger, Lash & Barbour, 2004; Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1997; Pedro, 2006).

### 4. Research methods

As teacher educators, we have studied our own work on teaching this topic taking an action research approach (Kroeger et al., 2004; Kitson, 2004; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009; Stremmel, 2002; Van Keulen, 2010). In the fall of 2008, we invited a small group of preservice teachers ( $N = 11$ ) from a larger cohort of 50 undergraduates and 6 masters students enrolled in initial licensure program to study their work with us. We used the situations bound by our course content and share the resulting actions taken by preservice teachers—as a set of data that identifies the underlying hopes we have about changing the nature of preservice teachers' initial thinking about families.

In our research with this small group of initial licensure students, we asked them if they would be willing to allow us to collect their impressions, memories, learning and reflection about their assignment. More specifically we asked them how their views of children and parents came to change, how they modified classroom practice as a result of their participation in the parent-child-teacher study or what they learned about themselves, parents and children as a result of working in this way with families. Preservice teacher's reflective excerpts were video-taped and recorded or collected from their writing within project reflection(s) and used with permission. Preservice teachers knew that their willingness to participate would not affect their grades. The research project was approved by a Human Subjects Review Board at our institution and pseudonyms protect the anonymity of locations and persons. Most of the preservice teachers read what we have written here (or wrote it themselves) and agreed with our interpretations of their work.

As we systematically analyzed the collection of preservice teachers' written and spoken work from the two sections of our classes, we chose to include what we saw as "transformational" examples at each stage of the assignment to highlight situations and behaviors which demonstrate preservice teacher thinking (Stremmel, 2002; Wells, 2002). Excerpts were chosen to illuminate preservice teachers' learning about themselves, their assumptions, and their classroom practices as they use the parent-child-teacher study to better understand, teach, and respond to children and their families. Our rationale for this methodological choice was that it allowed us to feature the assignment, our teaching processes, and feature some of the kinds of results we've seen while leading the

project. In instances, with these types of data excerpts, we could also feature classrooms, child, or parent change through the eyes of preservice teachers.

### 5. Project description: the parent–child–teacher study

The parent–child–teacher study is an 8-week inquiry-based assignment that allows the preservice teachers to learn how to design and conduct a mutually beneficial relationship with families. The title reflects the importance of multiple perspectives in the care and education of young children, acknowledging parent, child and teacher as equally important.

In this overview of the assignment we describe aspects of the project and our work as professors to scaffold students' understanding. The project is designed to educate the preservice teacher in the nuanced, autobiographic, intimate encounters that reciprocal relations with parents bring (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Our approach to helping preservice teachers understand teacher relationships with families and family involvement moves beyond a typology of practice to a philosophical shift in thinking that teachers and parents can undergo when working together within a particular interpretive strategy that is systematic but not codified to be replicated in the same way with every parent (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Epstein, 1995).

The parent–child–teacher study involves a performed and learned process of working with parents in the form of an individually developed interview which positions the preservice teacher as learner and in which talk about children and parents contains the powerful emergence of “language of social justice” (Fennimore, 2008, p. 191). Four overarching discursively-enacted parts constitute the parent–child–teacher study: (a) a process and set of early actions forming relationships; (b) the development and refinement of interview questions and conducting the interview; (c) resulting actions in classroom or changes to curriculum that have impact on the child's experiences or learning; and (d) a written and shared reflection about all aspects of the parent–child–teacher study and the resulting changes for children, parents and the preservice teacher.

Below, we describe of the stages of the project, and the thinking of preservice student teachers as their projects unfolded within the semester. Excerpts of data document subtle adjustments that preservice teachers demonstrated as a result of their understanding.

#### 5.1. Getting started: seeing language as an action for social justice

While being guided through the parent–child–teacher study, preservice teachers examine language structures that they use and that they commonly hear in practice about parents and children for negative talk (Fennimore, 2008). Underlying assumptions and unchallenged beliefs about poor families, single parents, and ethnically diverse parents often structures the thinking of preservice teachers. Helping teachers to gain an awareness that their terminologies for children and parents often contain biased views is a first step in creating a power-equal understanding of reciprocal relationships with parents. Within this critical view, they are asked to practice basic communication, interview techniques, and rapport-building skills in the university classroom, prior to the actual parent interview. Examples of various abilities that preservice teachers need to integrate into their communication include learning the logistics of setting up an interview; active listening, and eye contact to create an accepting manner; practicing body language that is welcoming and assuming a nonjudgmental stance; and learning how to share and use classroom observations as a starting place to gain insight from parents. Developing professional maturity in learning how to ask, knowing when to pause, and

learning how to listen to parents, and “active interview” techniques takes on added meaning when the preservice teachers know they are preparing to conduct an actual private, confidential conversation in a school (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As the preservice teachers move into conducting their interviews with parents, they bring this self-critical and reflective assessment of their own interpersonal communication skills into the mix. As they reflect on their newly practiced and (partially) embedded skills of communication, they experience the advantage of moving from theory and classroom practice to real application.

Simultaneous with university classroom activities, our preservice teachers engage in a field site practicum in which they build relationships with children and mentor teachers. At this point they use documentation and observation to choose a child and family that pique their curiosity. They are encouraged to choose a child for whom such a project would prove advantageous. A drafted proposal including details of the preservice teacher's reasons to learn more about the child, a description of the child, and an overall intent for the parent–teacher interaction is shared and given critical supports by faculty. At this stage, the preservice teacher is asked to identify preconceptions she or he may hold about the child, the community, the parent and how those impressions have arisen. Preservice teachers create a list of potential questions that build rapport and inquire about various aspects of parents' knowledge that may influence or support their ability to understand the child. They are instructed to convey to parents, that this experience helps them learn to conduct themselves as a new professional and that interview information will be used to support the children in the classroom and treated with respect and confidentiality, even if it is unlike the process that commonly occurs in the classroom. Mentor teachers contribute ideas to the preservice teachers work, evaluate the questions, and give suggestions about how families might respond and other pertinent advice before faculty see proposals. Faculty then review proposals and provide feedback, helping to refine questions, reduce bias, and to order questions for rapport, priorities, and intentions, and with approval (from mentor teacher and faculty), the student is asked to schedule the conversational interview.

#### 5.2. Refining the proposal: planning and conducting the interview

After foregrounding metaskills of communication, the preservice teachers plan their interview. With acknowledged preconceptions they may have had about the child and or family each is able to create a question set for parents that embodies ethical professional language and opportunities for creating multiple openings for perspective sharing. The proposal serves as a blueprint, not a rigid plan, for the preservice teacher to proceed, given the rules of contact and meeting established by school sites. Then, according to what the preservice teacher learns about the parameters of the site for parent conversations (i.e., on-site only, home visits, or open), she or he asks the parent(s) where they would like to meet; and then the interview is conducted.

Preservice teachers frequently write about being very nervous, scared, and hesitant regarding parents' willingness to talk with them; at times they are concerned parents will not see them as a real teacher or trust them; however, their lived experiences are quite different. The preservice teachers report how eager families are to talk about their children and in many cases, how honored the parents are that they have been chosen for this learning experience.

### 6. Preservice teachers: voices from the field

The following excerpts from preservice teachers' written reflection illuminate how planning and conducting interviews

shape their image of parents and themselves. In the first scenario, the preservice teacher was placed at a school that served working class families with limited parent presence. The preservice teacher identified a child and family with whom she wanted to work, only to learn that the mentor teacher preferred she choose a mother who was more available.

My mentor teacher was very hesitant about the parent that I chose and cautioned me this mom probably wouldn't cooperate. However, when I asked the mother if she would be willing to talk with me, she immediately sat down and was ready to talk about her child right then. I explained that I needed to be with the children in the classroom and was hoping to set up a time to talk. We quickly arranged a time to meet, and in a few days when we did meet, she was eager to talk with me about her child and thanked me. I was glad I reached out to a parent that my mentor... thought was uncooperative. Now, we all view this parent differently. I learned that I need to be open and start the conversation.

Although preservice teachers are hesitant and fearful regarding their first interview or in-depth conversation with a parent, their written reflections after the fact are usually radiant with satisfaction. One preservice teacher summed it up: "The parent interview was my favorite part of the study because I could see the love the mother expressed for her daughter when answering the questions. It was very rewarding." The preservice teacher saw that a parent (not viewed as cooperative by program personnel) loved her child, regardless of school personnel views, and that the views held were worth reconstructing.

We include this example not as denigration to the mentor teacher, but as an example of how institutional practices can become routine endeavors that compete with parent's time, especially when work, transportation, and child care interfere. However, when specifically asked to speak about their child and help the teacher as an invitation to share a personal insight, at their convenience a parent may be more willing to engage.

Another preservice teacher wrote about her interview with a mother she had never met before and how extending herself to the mother changed her perception of the both the mother and the son. She shared:

Interviewing the parent was so meaningful. The child I picked rides the bus to school, so I seldom see his parents. It was AMAZING seeing him and his mother interact as I interviewed her. I did not know (until the interview) how close he is with his mother, and I did not know that he talks about school all the time at home.

As faculty we are often struck when the findings of the preservice teachers serve as reminders of how much we do not know about some basic information of the children in our care. For example, one preservice teacher noted: "I learned that my child's parents were actually the biological grandparents—my mentor teacher and site personnel didn't know this." It was interesting that such information was unknown by the people in the classroom but was an integral, not hidden, part of this child's family life that could have come to bear upon how teachers and sites provided support services and modified curriculum or experiences for the child and family. Personally developed interviews allow preservice teachers to get closer to home communities of practice, thereby reinterpreting and utilizing new sources of power and information.

Frequently school personnel in both rural and urban communities have difficulty relating with parents because of work schedules, school bus transport, and after-school arrangements. Our preservice teachers were constrained by these arrangements just as their

mentors were. While school philosophies often professed family involvement as a cornerstone of practice, enacting effective practice proves difficult. The preservice teacher's transformation is clear as she delves into an unfamiliar situation discovering insight to allow for communication and understanding (Recchia, Beck, Esposito, & Tarrant, 2009). She commented in her written work: "I have been here for 4 months and participated in class time, open houses, conferences and field trips. I have met the same three parents on each occasion." In her professional development planning, this teacher wanted to gain a better understanding of communication with the families and gain knowledge of family background to aid her planning. Instead of giving up on parent involvement or choosing a parent easy to reach, she rode the school bus to learn about the children's families on their own home turf. She continued:

Overall this has been an eye-opening experience in understanding the children and the community they come from. I realized that to really enter their world, I must go with them into the community. I decided to ride the bus home with the children in hopes that I could see home from their perspective.

Instead of seeing herself as an outsider to the community, she began to think of herself through the lens of an insider and strove to become a community member. She wrote of seeing her school and children's neighborhood from inside the windows of the bus:

The kids travel 40 minutes to and from Windfield each day. I have met more caregivers in 2 weeks than all of last semester. At first they (parents and grandparents) were shy, but I have already begun to open up and share.

Although this ambitious teacher was unable to have a sit-down interview with her child's guardian, she was able to hold a series of small conversations setting the stage for trust and understanding as children exited the school bus. She continued:

My conversations kind of went like this: "Hi, Mrs. Dalton. Connor had a rough day. He had a hard time playing with others and seemed really quiet." And Grandmother would answer: "Well his Momma came to visit last night; she just got out of jail. He always is bad when she pops back in like that."

This preservice teacher continued to describe in her written work how going out into the community allowed her to meet parents and caregivers in their comfort zone, thereby downplaying institutional arrangements of power and control in which parents are expected to come to schools instead being invited into home culture. She was pleased with their welcome and their willingness to share their lives. She commented:

It is much easier to understand why no one shows up to school functions when you see no cars in the driveway and four other small children in the house. It is easier now for me to understand negative behaviors when I see that it is a reaction to issues outside of the classroom and of Connor's control. Learning what the students have and do not have gives you a window onto what they may need, both academically and emotionally in the classroom.

In this instance, the preservice teacher's judgments of community disengagement were altered because of her active stance of asking questions about how poverty might interrupt face-to-face event experiences between parents and teachers. Actions in the classroom entailed smaller focused conversations helping the child adjust to social interactions with others. As importantly, the preservice teacher's framework for understanding one child's life was shifted to be empathetic and compassionate rather than judgemental and blaming.

### 6.1. *Adjusting classroom or curriculum to benefit children's experiences and learning*

During this phase of the parent–child–teacher study we ask the preservice teachers to deliberate and reflect on what they learned from the interview. They are asked to take action on newfound knowledge about the family and community and deconstruct their current modes of practice. The parent–child–teacher study stipulates that they adjust to become more useful as a teacher, alter or supplement their practices and curricular decisions, and conduct an honest self-appraisal of current approaches to instruction that are supplemented by what they have learned from parents.

As preservice teachers analyze their parent–child–teacher studies, they gain new information conveyed by parents that cover a wide variety of topics; yet the common element of these divergent findings are that new knowledge results in curricular adjustments for the child and peer group. Sometimes the information seems basic; however, acting upon parent expertise affirms the importance of asking and listening for the developing teacher. Because of newfound knowledge from parents, preservice teachers make fundamental classroom changes. Frequently the communications from home to school allow more consistent and beneficial strategies in the classroom; one student noted: “I was better able to understand where the child was coming from. I used the mother's system of discipline in the classroom, and the consistency between school and home helped.” Learning that the child thrived on a strict schedule at home, another preservice teacher followed up with this at school: “We had a schedule at school, but for my child, I really had to pay attention to the schedule in the classroom and explain any change. This helped my child a lot in the classroom.”

Another preservice teacher shared how she gained insight on how to work with a child who she described as bright and who often played alone. Utilizing insights from home broadened the teacher's perspectives and strategies:

I learned that the parent works with her child at home often, and he seems very bright. He is very social outside of school with children from church. He plays mostly with older children. I found out that he likes to help. In the classroom, I started to have him help with other children and to teach them things. This helped to challenge him more and helped him develop relationships with his peers. I was able to offer more opportunities for him to form peer relationships. I was able to see him make progress and build friendships.

All of these scenarios and insights are powerful for the preservice teachers' construction of parent relationships, developing respect for parents, and changing of curriculum and curricular methods in working with children; moreover, the habit of inquiry with parents is laid as a pattern to draw on for future work in classrooms. The power of valuing parent expertise provides a window for parent engagement that other routine methods of communication might not.

### 6.2. *Writing, reflecting, and in-class sharing*

The final phase of the parent–child–teacher study involves writing a synopsis of all that has been done. Preservice teachers address their own personal growth, changed images of family involvement, and future goals, giving evidence of actions, learning, new skills, and current demeanor toward children and parents. In their final synopsis, preservice teachers have reported learning that their preconceptions were frequently incorrect, that they are at last comfortable talking and working with parents, and that they wish they could do a parent–child–teacher study with all of the children in the classroom. Frequently, they recognize that a conversation

with a parent altered their classroom for the child selected, but modified teaching causing positive changes for the class as a whole.

Frequently cited in preservice teachers' projects are their acceptance of, and adjustment to, unexpected and sometimes non-conventional information a parent shares that goes beyond the dominant discourses pervasive in the preservice teachers' worlds. Preservice teachers note how their new skills allow them to interact calmly and take a positive stance toward the child and family; when the information teachers receive is contextualized, the knowledge of the lived experiences of children becomes more comfortable to the preservice teacher. One preservice teacher shared an instance in which the dominant discourse of what an ideal family should be (heterosexual married couple with two children) is upstaged by children's lived experience:

I learned how easily a parent can talk and think about children the same age by one father and two mothers as one family unit. Everyone (but me at first) seemed comfortable with same-age (half-) siblings and one father and two mothers interacting and knowing schedules of all the children, their likes and dislikes, and being at various houses (both moms' and the dad's). It clearly worked for them, and I had to learn to listen differently. I had trouble keeping it clear, but the mom I interviewed casually and comfortably shared the story of her child. After talking with this mom, I listen more closely and know that this is “their family.”

Although all of the experiences the preservice teachers have may not have been so challenging to personal belief systems, preservice teachers realize and find that they can overcome their uneasiness of working with parents whose identities fall outside of their mainstream experience.

The young adult preservice teachers are frequently at an age at which they ponder their own development and family history in relation to those they are learning to care for, in this case, very young children. As evidenced by this student, the parent–child–teacher study resembled a journey on a different level:

I chose my child because she was adopted, and I shared with the family that I was adopted. This helped to build rapport at the beginning and actually throughout the study. I was able to learn a lot about my chosen child and help her at school and to form a close bond with her. It also helped me to think about what I might have been like as a pre-schooler with adoptive parents who loved me.

By choosing children whose families were perhaps difficult to get to know, preservice teachers might gain not only new perspectives on the children in their care but also develop new teaching abilities and interests. A preservice teacher who chose a child new to America stated:

I learned how to best support Mai in the classroom through developing a strong understanding of her background, upbringing, and development as an English language (and culture) learner. I gained insight on the hopes and dreams of Mai's parents for her future. I also learned how to ask appropriate, relevant, and insightful questions that lead to answers to support my development and understanding, which in turn, can support the child's development. I learned a lot about myself as an interviewer. I learned what does and doesn't work during an interview; for example, I learned to be careful to give the parents time to answer the question, before rephrasing the question. I understand and saw firsthand the impact that building relationships with families can have on one's understanding of and ability to support the child, as well as the entire classroom. My understanding of Mae and her family's experiences as an ESL

family from China to the United States has greatly impacted my perspective, desire to do more, and I hope to work with more ESL or ELL children and families.

This preservice teacher's initial goals of reaching out to a parent who has a different first language than her own and limited command of the English language were worthy goals. Yet, through this process, these initial interests are far exceeded. She wrestled with how their reality and her own were different and took steps to merge the Chinese parents' dreams and goals for their child into the education program that primarily served mainstream American families. By doing so, the child was validated as an individual crossing culture, and parents were validated for their hopes and concerns as cultural newcomers. The preservice teacher reported a change in who she was and who she was yet to become as a future educator as a result of her interview and follow-up curricular changes (Wilcox-Herzog, 2004). She continued to seek out cross-cultural literature beyond her current course work and has also entered a study abroad program for her final student teaching to bolster her budding professionalism in a globally diversifying context.

## 7. Discussion and concluding remarks in support of inquiry in home–school relations

In the current climate of schooling in the US, teacher educators will be called to continuously modify the content of their courses to fit locally diversifying and continuously shifting populations of families. This call will extend to their preservice teachers to do the same with their strategies of working with families as they enter the field, grow, and change as classroom teachers. An inquiry-based process of working with parents and families is vital because what we think we know about the parents we serve cannot be assured or assumed. More productive approaches entail constructing together with families and communities ways of working, which are co-developed, ongoing, and negotiated (Adair & Tobin, 2008).

In this paper, we have highlighted how preservice teachers take the issue of parent interviews, family perspectives, and deliberative interaction with children professionally and seriously against a backdrop of demographic change, unpredictability, and recognition of their own limitations and situated views. The approach we take toward deconstructing the meaning of “typical” families and working with all families in a differentiated way resonates with our preservice teachers, we believe, in large part, due to the lived experience of the parent–child–teacher study. In the parent–child–teacher study project, preservice teacher insights are learned through the active process of inquiry.

The implications for an inquiry-based method of teacher–parent or –family relationship construction in university teacher education is more complex than simply reading a text book and understanding family life. The parent–child–teacher study involves ongoing questioning, learning and practice. We hope the inquiry process engages and solidifies a different type of mindset for teachers when working with families. These mindsets include a framing of not knowing and always being willing to alter direction based on found information. An approach based on inquiry helps preservice teachers move beyond their own knowledge to the knowledge that communities hold, thereby deconstructing and reconstructing power relations as they commonly occur in schools. Putting parents in discursive positions of power supports the teacher and allows for a reframing of authority to occur. Parent and teacher are on a more equal social footing, with teachers newly accountable to parents and children with the new information they have discovered.

The assignment of the parent–child–teacher study shares much in common with already existing perspectives for transforming

curriculum for cultural relevance, such as Ginsberg's work on home visiting which takes a “deficit dismantling” framework as teachers actively seek funds of knowledge found in interviews with immigrants (Ginsberg, 2007) and Hollings' (1996) work which starts with preservice teachers' self-knowledge, knowledge of students' homes and cultures, and works toward rethinking curriculum and initiating self-study within teacher study groups.

Unlike the prior approaches, however, transformations in the parent–child–teacher study are not just based on how teachers' and parents' views differ, nor are they merely useful to maintain relations among those who are culturally different from one another. An inquiry-based method moves teachers into the life realms of children and parents, altering power relationships in home–school relations. Insights and new learning about self and others directs curriculum and student experience. Transformations occur when preservice teachers see themselves as powerful and influential in the child's life: as an agent between school and home or home and school and often between school, even schools and the larger community.

We believe that an approach such as this is widely applicable and its impact is individual, institutional, and motivational. Parents begin to value their own roles with schools, as they see teachers alter classroom life to benefit their child. As the preservice teacher connects with her ability to tap into parental motivations and goals, she has the lived experience of altering the classroom for authentic reasons. Transformations in teacher thinking can also be about reconsidering prior held notions of powerlessness to change circumstances, or about understanding why some individuals are rarely seen by teachers but are very present in their children's experiences of education.

As the new teachers in our study built the professional attributes they also reported transformations in themselves. They seemed more willing to evaluate their prior preconceptions about families. They seemed to see that not just parental presence in schools but a variety of individual styles of parenting and family engagement can meet learning and school goals. As these preservice teachers shifted their views of children and families and instead bring themselves to ask how they can respond to what they have found and created in the relationship between home and school their onus of deficits shifted away from parents and community and toward new insights into themselves, and investment toward their responsibilities as teachers of diverse learners.

Learning from inquiry in home–school relationships seems an authentic interpretation and implementation of one critical constructivist parent–child–teacher study. The values of respecting families and understanding and caring for children practiced here go beyond the standard of any professional association into a working approach to transform power relationships between school people and parents and to set the stage for teaching careers in a global society.

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