

# Listening to Parents' Narratives: The Value of Authentic Experiences With Children With Disabilities and Their Families

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## Abstract

A serious gap exists within special education preparation programs; many neglect to adequately prepare teacher candidates to engage with parents of children with disabilities to create effective family–school–community collaboration. The following article describes the impact on the practices and dispositions of teacher candidates resulting from the implementation of a program called Families as Faculty (FAF), which was collaboratively designed and implemented by a university in the southwestern United States and the statewide Parent Training and Information Center. Teacher preparation programs providing students with authentic experiences to work collaboratively with parents can influence perceptions teacher candidates have toward parent involvement and collaboration. The present study was designed to examine the impact that the implementation of FAF in a graduate teacher preparation course had on teacher candidates' dispositions toward home–school collaboration. Data were collected during the course through teacher candidates' reflection papers and pre- and post-questionnaires. Additionally, the teacher candidates were administered a follow-up survey three years after they completed the course. Teacher candidates reported an increase in their understanding and appreciation of home–school collaboration following their experiences in FAF. Participants in the follow-up survey also indicated that these experiences continued to have long-lasting, positive impacts on their teaching practices and the school–family relationships they have formed with parents of children with disabilities.

Key Words: parent involvement, family–school–community collaboration, authentic engagement, home visits, teacher preparation programs, preservice candidates, families’ narratives, reflection

## Introduction

Teacher preparation programs face significant challenges in providing teacher candidates with authentic experiences that emphasize the importance of family–school–community collaboration. Few teacher preparation programs provide strategies for encouraging parents’ involvement in the education of their children or for initiating a sense of collaboration with families and the communities in which they live (Casper, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Curran & Murray, 2008; Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009). Epstein’s (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence emphasizes that student academic success is best achieved through collaborative interaction among schools, families, and communities. Working together, these stakeholders are invested in socializing and educating children. Schools, families, and communities have the potential to promote more successful student outcomes (Sanders, 2006).

Cook and Friend (2010) refer to *collaboration* as the style professionals use to interact with individuals that is based on mutual goals and parity, shared responsibility for primary decisions and accountability for outcomes, the creation of trust and respect, and a sense of community. The term *family–school–community collaboration* connotes the multidimensional nature of teacher, parent, and community interactions.

This article describes the impact on the practice and disposition of teacher candidates resulting from the implementation of a program called Families as Faculty (FAF), which was collaboratively designed and implemented by a university in the southwestern U.S. and the statewide Parent Training and Information Center to address this gap. The FAF program stressed the importance of parent involvement in school settings using a pedagogical approach in which teacher candidates visited the homes of parents who had children with disabilities, listened to family narratives, and later reflected upon these visits. The FAF program provided teacher candidates authentic experiences with families and offered strategies for incorporating family engagement into teaching practices while placing parents and families in leadership roles. Such opportunities have the capacity to influence teacher candidates’ perceptions toward parent involvement and to increase the value they place on collaboration (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003).

Supportive relationships between schools and families have long been considered vital in providing effective educational services and supports for children with disabilities (Colarusso & O'Rourke, 2007). Numerous studies have documented that positive relationships between schools and parents are associated with enhanced academic achievement and overall student success for children, including children with disabilities (Cook & Friend, 2010; Dallmer, 2004; McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009). Research has also shown that teacher-initiated encouragement of parent participation is a critical factor in developing and sustaining collaborative home-school relationships (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In education, there are numerous definitions of parent involvement. In this article, we refer to parent involvement as "parent interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success" as defined by Hill et al. (2004, p. 1491). Please note that the terms *parent involvement*, *parent participation*, and *parent engagement* are used somewhat interchangeably throughout this article to connote equivalency in meaning.

The importance of collaborative home-school relationships for parents of children with disabilities was recognized in 1975 with the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2005). Over the course of four decades, the U.S. Congress has continued to mandate an emphasis on parent participation and family engagement in meeting the educational needs of every child, including children with disabilities.

Despite federal mandates and national efforts to increase parent participation in schools, research suggests that collaborative relationships continue to be difficult for parents and teachers to achieve (Epstein, 2005; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008). The lack of research on determining best practices for training teachers in effective ways of reaching out and encouraging parent participation has contributed to poor outcomes (Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). Although school districts may have good intentions about providing parent involvement, many fall short in knowing how to engage parents at school or at home. School leaders nationwide continue to be unsure of how to create a supportive climate in which teachers are encouraged to initiate collaboration with parents (Stover, 2012). Additionally, few teachers are provided in-service professional development aimed at cultivating skills to foster relationships with parents (Stover, 2012).

In higher education institutions, few teacher preparation programs provide teacher candidates with adequate training in school, family, and community partnership or strategies for initiating parent involvement (Ferrara & Ferrara,

2005; Graue, 2005; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005). Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs offer minimal direct interaction with parents (Hedges & Gibbs, 2005), leaving preservice teachers unprepared to initiate and cultivate collaborative relationships with parents. If teacher candidates are not given opportunities to learn to collaborate with parents while in college, how can they be expected to collaborate with parents once they begin to teach? Teacher preparation programs need to include multiple opportunities for teacher candidates to interact with parents so that they are able to gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary to effectively collaborate with their students' families.

Some research studies have examined the impact of delivering coursework that includes field experiences in parent engagement embedded in the training that teacher candidates receive (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Curran & Murray, 2008; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Mahmood, 2013; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2013; Schmitz, 2004). The findings from these studies support the critical importance of providing teacher candidates the opportunity to engage in interactions with parents. Typically, the programs described in the literature that have included parent engagement opportunities have involved one parent speaking to and engaging with a class of teacher candidates. In the current study, rather than listening to the perspective of just one parent, teacher candidates were first given the opportunity to learn about engaging with parents at an orientation that was lead by a parent of a child with a disability. In addition to the orientation, teacher candidate dyads in the program each visited the home of a different family to listen to parents' narratives about the joys and challenges of raising a child with a disability. Following their individual family visits, teacher candidate dyads shared with their peers about their experiences of listening to distinct families' narratives. The design of the program allowed teacher candidates the chance to hear about and learn from the experiences of a greater number of parents. The development of the FAF program is described in more detail in Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This present study was designed to examine the impact the FAF program had on teacher candidates' dispositions toward and practices of home-school collaboration. In order to measure the impact that listening to parents' narratives had on teacher candidates completing the FAF program in a course within their master's degree in special education, the following research questions were addressed: (1) In what ways did teacher candidates make theory-to-practice connections when reflecting on their experience of listening to parents' stories about raising a child with a disability? (2) Following the FAF experience, did

teacher candidates report any change in their understanding and appreciation of school–family partnerships? (3) Did the FAF experience have a long-lasting impact on teacher candidates' dispositions and teaching practices related to parent involvement and family–school–community collaboration?

## Method

This study was conducted over the course of a one-semester assessment class (16 weeks) entitled *Assessment of Diverse Learners with Learning & Behavioral Exceptionalities*. In this required course, teacher candidates are provided exposure to a variety of assessment methods appropriate for individuals with disabilities, including a wide range of instruments, which provide direction for instruction as well as diagnosis. The focus of the course was to present an overview of issues related to assessment for individuals with disabilities and to develop more sensitivity toward parents when discussing the child's assessments and their involvement in their child's education. The course was required for the teacher candidates' completion of the master's program in special education. Although the importance of family involvement is addressed throughout the entire program, the decision to include the FAF experience in a required assessment course ensured that the vast majority of teacher candidates would have this experience because it was one of the graduate courses mandated for the alternative license. This study was conducted with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

### Participants

Participants in this study included 28 graduate-level students enrolled in the graduate special education assessment course and 14 volunteer host families affiliated with FAF (student demographic characteristics provided in Table 1; family demographics provided in Table 2). Pseudonyms are used for all participants throughout this article. Because the graduate students were at various stages in the teacher licensing process, the term *teacher candidates* is used throughout this article. Many teacher candidates were already teaching in their own classrooms, either as licensed teachers or as students completing alternative licensure.

The 28 teacher candidates were assigned to pairs creating 14 dyads. Teacher candidate dyads were then paired with a host family resulting in 14 matches. The FAF organizers from the parent center randomly assigned the matches. Families were recruited by FAF to participate in this research study. All parents who participated in this study met the criteria of having at least one child living within the family who had been diagnosed with a disability and having

attended the FAF training, which included practice and feedback in the process of learning to tell their families' stories.

The first author of this study (henceforth, primary researcher) served as the instructor for the graduate assessment course. The authors of this article, also the researchers of the study, have expertise in two fields: two of the authors have a background in special education, and the other author in linguistics.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Candidates

Demographic Characteristics	<i>n</i> (28)	%
Gender		
Male	5	17.9
Female	23	82.1
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	17	60.7
Hispanic	5	17.8
African American	3	10.7
Other (Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American)	3	10.8
Participants Who Are Parents	16	57.2
Parent of a child with a disability	3	10.7
Parent of a child without a disability	13	46.5
Participant's Community		
Urban	22	78.5
Rural	6	21.5

## Settings

In addition to the instruction of concepts customarily taught in the assessment course, the primary researcher incorporated several FAF-related activities into the course. These activities that encouraged student reflections about learning from families were designed collaboratively by university faculty and parents involved in the FAF program through the parent center. These activities are outlined below; for a more in-depth description of the collaboration that was developed between the university and the parent center, see Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015).

The teacher candidates were given a two-hour in-class orientation session co-taught by one adjunct family faculty and a parent center staff member with support from the primary researcher. The parents who served as instructors at the orientation each semester were called "family faculty" to reflect parity of title with the university faculty. During the studied semester's orientation, the

adjunct family faculty and parent center staff member discussed FAF program goals and philosophy, addressed topics pertaining to the dynamics of family visits, and outlined the requirements for a reflection paper assignment. During the initial in-class orientation, the family faculty member also shared her family story. Students were given opportunities to ask questions and discuss issues with the family faculty.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Participating Families

Parent Demographic Characteristics	<i>n</i> (23)	%
Fathers	9	39.1
Mothers	14	60.8
Parent's Ethnicity		
Caucasian	17	73.9
Hispanic	5	21.7
Black	1	4.4
Parents With College Education	15	65.2
Single Parent Households	5	35.7
Annual Household Income Levels	<i>n</i> (14)	%
< \$25,000	2	14
\$50,000–\$80,000	2	14
\$80,000–\$150,000	9	65
>\$150,000	1	7
Children's Disability Categories	<i>n</i> (19)	%
Learning Disability	3	16
Autism	3	16
Intellectual Disability	2	10
Other Health Impaired	6	32
Multiple Disability	2	10
Physical Disability	3	16

For the home visits, each host family was paired with a teacher candidate dyad. The teacher candidates were instructed to view a meeting with a family not as an interview but rather an opportunity to listen more broadly to the parents' narratives about raising a child with a disability. Teacher candidates were permitted views into how the evaluation and determination of eligibility process impacted parents and their children. The families and dyads arranged a meeting with the family at a mutually agreeable time and location, with most occurring in the family home. Due to the busy schedules of both the families and

the teacher candidates, meetings were scheduled at a variety of times throughout weekends as well as during evenings. Each home visit lasted approximately two hours, with a few visits going as long as three hours. Sometimes the families shared their narratives without their children in the room. Other families shared their narratives with the entire set of family members present over the course of eating dinner with the teacher candidates or while the family played a board game as a way to engage the children. Each visit was unique, and teacher candidates were asked not to hold preconceived ideas of how the visit would unfold but to appreciate and learn from their own experience.

Following the meeting with their assigned family, each teacher candidate wrote a reflection paper responding to the experience they had with their host family. At the end of the semester, a wrap-up session was conducted with all of the teacher candidates, the professor, the director of FAF, and FAF staff at the parent center; no families were present. Each teacher candidate shared aspects of their home visit with the group and discussed how the experience had impacted them. Teacher candidates were encouraged to discuss ways in which they anticipated that their experiences might impact their current and future teaching practices.

### **Data Collection**

Three types of data were collected for this study: reflection papers, pre- and post-questionnaire responses completed while taking the class, and follow-up surveys taken three years after the completion of the class.

#### *Reflection Papers*

Following their home visits, each teacher candidate wrote reflections about the narratives which families shared with them. In reflecting on their FAF visits, the teacher candidates responded to their experiences and discussed how they anticipated it might influence their future teaching practices.

#### *Pre- and Post-Questionnaires*

During the first week of class, teacher candidates were invited to fill out a pre-questionnaire, and on the last day of the class, they were asked to complete a post-questionnaire. These questionnaires were designed to assess students' self-perceptions of their communication and listening skills, their level of understanding of the impact that a child's disabilities can have on family dynamics, and their capacity to empathize with both parents and their children with disabilities. The pre- and post-questions were written to include the same content; however, a slight variation in the wording was made with regard to tense for some of the questions. The tense difference was necessary because in the pre-questionnaire, the teacher candidates were asked about their expectations prior

to the FAF experience, as opposed to the post-questionnaire, in which they were asked to reflect back on their experiences during the semester (see Table 3).

### *Follow-Up Survey*

Additionally, three years following the completion of the course, participants were contacted through email with a follow-up survey. Only those participants whose email contact information had changed and who could no longer be contacted were excluded from participating in the follow-up survey. The survey asked about the participants' current teaching status and their long-term perspectives of the impact that the FAF experience had on their classroom teaching practices (see Table 4).

### **Data Analysis**

#### *Reflection Papers*

The constant comparative method, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), was used to analyze the data in the reflection papers. The researchers read through the reflection papers several times, identifying phrases and sentences that shared key words and common ideas. These units of thought were cut and pasted from the transcripts onto index cards for thematic coding. The primary researcher and second author of this study independently analyzed the units of thought to identify preliminary themes. The two researchers compared their thematic analyses, looking for agreement on important ideas and for potential discrepancies. When discrepancies occurred, the researchers discussed their perspectives, negotiated agreement, and sought consensus. To further assess the trustworthiness of themes, a third researcher sorted a sample of the units of thought into the negotiated themes. This led to further negotiations and, ultimately, an agreement on the final themes and subthemes evident in the reflection papers.

#### *Pre- and Post-Questionnaire*

Data were collected from student responses to items on the questionnaires, and a database was compiled in an Excel spreadsheet. Means were calculated from each of the Likert scale questions and graphs.

#### *Follow-Up Survey*

The responses from the follow-up survey provided data from which percentages were calculated. The follow-up survey served as triangulation with the pre- and post-questionnaires and the teacher candidates' reflections papers.

## Results

### Reflection Papers

In their reflection papers, each teacher candidate shared unique experiences and thoughts about the visit to the home of their assigned family. Despite each family sharing different life events and individual experiences with their visiting teacher candidate dyads, and despite the differences in the experiences and backgrounds of the visiting teacher candidates, common thematic ideas emerged in the student reflection papers. Three major themes were identified: (a) parent perspectives on school–family interactions; (b) understanding the complexities of families’ lives; and (c) teacher candidate realizations and impact.

#### *Theme 1: Parent Perspectives on School–Family Interactions*

In their reflection papers, all of the teacher candidates emphasized the importance of effective communication between families and schools by retelling experiences that the parents shared during their visits. Some of the teacher candidates discussed parents’ negative experiences related to communication between the home and schools. As an example, one of the teacher candidates, Alicia, shared a mother’s frustration by writing, “She is unsatisfied with their (teacher’s) lack of communication...there are periods when she hears nothing from them. She often doesn’t hear about student events until after they have happened.”

Teacher candidates also shared parents’ positive perspectives and experiences resulting from successful communication with schools. Abigail described the benefits that the child from her home visit, John, had experienced as a result of educators listening to his mother. Abigail wrote, “John is in a full inclusion classroom with an educational assistant because the occupational therapist listened to the mother and found data to support John’s placement in the least restrictive environment, and, subsequently, the school listened.” Abigail later shared what she had learned from the mother’s experiences: “I could see at once how valuable a habit of developing and maintaining good relationships and communication can be.”

Many teacher candidates reported on parent experiences with communication about Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Teacher candidates shared parents’ feelings concerning the language used in IEP meetings. For example, David described the requests that Kelly, the mother from the home visit he attended, had made of the school. He shared, “[Kelly] has a few modest requests...for the IEP process, she requests more friendly and common language amongst the participants.” Another teacher candidate, Steven, described

positive experiences that a mother, Jane, had shared about the IEP process. Steven wrote, "Jane is very grateful for their experience with the IEPs. She discussed the camaraderie between her and the school...She feels empowered, relevant, and respected." By sharing this information in his reflection paper, Steven acknowledged the impact that effective communication and positive relationships between parents and schools can have on a parent's perception of IEP experiences.

*Theme 2: Understanding the Complexities of Families' Lives*

As with all families, the stressors that parents experience concerning the education of their children may intensify the stress of daily life; this was something almost every teacher candidate in the study described. The two teacher candidates who went to visit a girl named Bernice and her family both discussed the daily challenges of home life. Denise described the stress that Kami (the mother) faced in getting Bernice ready every morning: "Kami's day starts at about five in the morning and runs about 14 hours. Bathing, dressing, and feeding are about a two-hour process. Kami (mom) confides that the morning routine is full of both stress and needed structure." Melinda reported more generally on the challenges both of Bernice's parents confront every day:

The mother is a full-time assistant to her daughter. The father works to support his family. They constantly face huge hurdles. Everyday tasks can become complicated and require assistance....It's not easy being the parent of a child with a severe disability.

Many other teacher candidates also acknowledged the complexity and stress families face in their home lives and the need for schools to be cognizant of the challenges that families face outside of the classroom. Sandra wrote, "We [educators] often forget the impact that having a disability can have on children emotionally." Henry asserted that it is the educator's responsibility to gain "a broader view and perspective on where the family is coming from and how they experience life on a daily basis once their child leaves the classroom." Alexa wrote, "I enjoyed listening to Sarah's story....As a teacher, it's easy to forget that students have dynamic histories and home lives that need to be considered when planning the best course of instruction."

Ann wrote, "Teachers and other professionals tend to forget that the parents are enduring this process long after the last bell rings; [professionals' responsibilities end while] the role and responsibilities of the parent are never-ending." Similarly, Pam wrote, "unless we [educators] take the time to know what the family is dealing with at home, we cannot explain or better understand the needs of the students when they are at school."

Despite families of children with disabilities often facing difficult challenges in their daily lives, after explaining the challenges one family faced, Drake concluded, “The child and her family did not seem to want pity or special attention. They wanted the services that would allow their child to get on with the task of learning, growing, and being included.” Such comments as these suggest that the teacher candidates gained an appreciation and empathy for the complexities involved in raising a child with a disability. Furthermore, they recognized the importance of educators making an effort to understand each family’s unique situation.

### *Theme 3: Teacher Candidate Realizations and Impact*

All of the teacher candidates connected reactions to the home visits and related experiences from the family visit directly to their identities as current educators or future educators. In these realizations and the descriptions of the impact of the FAF experience, teacher candidates were explicitly subjective, often using both singular and plural first person pronouns (i.e., “I” and “we”). Frequently, the teacher candidates’ mentioned a change of perspective after listening to the families’ narratives.

Several of the teacher candidates reported that the family visit had led them to newly discovered insights about their own role as a teacher and the impact that they can have on families. Rose reflected, “Listening to this parent really made me think about my own role as a teacher and how I can make life easier for parents of students with disabilities.” Steven reported a similar reaction to the family visit, specifying a source of stress on parents:

I thought about the many long IEP meetings that Ms. Druh has had to attend and sit through; some of them were very stressful and emotionally draining. Ms. Druh inspires me to be an advocate for the students with disabilities and a support to parents.

Almost all of the teacher candidates specifically reported experiencing empathy for families of children with disabilities due to their experiences with the home visit. As George described, “I empathized with everything the mother shared, and it made me realize how difficult the world is, particularly for students with disabilities.” Jenny wrote that the experience helped her “to be more empathetic to those who are caring for a child with a disability.”

Teacher candidates also recognized parents’ expertise and acknowledged the importance of parent knowledge in decision-making processes. Anna reported that the family visit had shown her that “the parent is a valuable team player that I can learn from.” She went on to assert that “parents know their children’s needs far better than others do.” Shirley wrote, “We [educators] must take into account what information parents can provide in the IEP process” and

expressed her intention and hope that “in future situations, I will let the parents have a voice and feel comfortable.” Nat reported, “The strongest advocate for a student with special needs ought to be the person who is the most familiar with the child who has special needs (i.e., the parents).”

Many of the teacher candidates reported that they had positive feelings about the FAF experience, particularly emphasizing the impact of the family visit. Lena said the experience was “not only the best part of the class, but may even be the best part of the entire semester.” Nancy expressed that she had acquired new knowledge from the home visit leading to improved communication skills. She wrote, “This experience not only opened my eyes, but also really helped me to understand how to communicate better with families.”

Table 3. Comparison of Teacher Candidates' Responses to Questions on Pre- and Post-Questionnaires.

Questions (Using a Likert Scale 1–7, 7 indicating maximum increase of rating)	Pre			Post			<i>p</i> -value
	<i>n</i>	M	SD	<i>n</i>	M	SD	
1. How much do you feel that this experience will influence your role as teacher and your future relationships with families?	25	5.13	1.428	25	5.89	1.192	0.0468*
2. How difficult was it for you to put yourself in the parent's shoes?	25	3.01	1.343	26	3.32	1.926	0.4635
3. Following the FAF experience, do you feel more comfortable about initiating, contacting, and encouraging parent participation in school?	24	4.63	1.879	25	6.21	1.371	0.0018**
4. What is the extent to which you feel a sense of trust was established between you and the parent?	28	4.59	1.794	28	5.54	1.753	0.0502

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

### Pre- and Post-Questionnaires

A comparison of data collected from the teacher candidates' responses to the pre- and post-questionnaires are provided in Table 3. The results showed that following the FAF experience, teacher candidates reported that they expected the experience of listening to parents' narratives to have a higher level

of influence on their teaching practices than they had reported prior to the experience (see question #1). Providing opportunities for educators to increase their understanding of school–family relationships is one of the central goals of the FAF program.

Following the FAF program, teacher candidates stated that they felt comfortable in initiating, contacting, and encouraging parent participation, showing a highly significant increase in their reported level of comfort from prior to the experience (see question #3). In addition to feeling more comfortable about initiating parent participation, most teacher candidates reported that they felt they had established a stronger sense of trust with the parents than they had anticipated prior to the FAF experience (see question #4).

### **Follow-Up Survey**

Responses to the follow-up survey sent to all 28 of the teacher candidates three years after the completion of the study suggested a continued appreciation for parent involvement. Forty-three percent ( $n = 12$ ) of the teacher candidates responded to the follow-up survey, and all indicated that the FAF experience had a positive impact on their classroom practices and interactions with parents. Four of these teacher candidates reported that as a result of the FAF experience, they had developed a more conscious effort to encourage parents to participate at IEP meetings. For example, one teacher candidate reported having developed better listening skills, while another reported becoming mindful about the importance of building caring relationships with parents of students. Another teacher candidate noted the importance of using multiple modes of communication to reach out to parents. After the FAF experiences, three teacher candidates mentioned that having a better understanding of the complexities of families' home lives had enriched their interactions with parents. For examples of teacher candidates' responses, see Table 4.

### **Limitations**

Limitations should be noted when interpreting the findings of this study. This study was limited by its small size and demographics. Teacher candidate participants ( $n = 28$ ) were mostly Caucasian (60%) and female (83%). The parent participants ( $n = 23$ ) were potentially more active and involved in support groups, advocacy initiatives, and engaged with their children's school activities than other parents. The majority of parent participants were mothers (61%), Caucasian (74%), with a college education (65%), and having an annual household income above \$80,000 (65%), making them potentially less typical than most parents. Participants were drawn from a group of parents active in the parent center and who self-selected for this study. Although it might

Table 4. Examples of Teacher Candidate Responses to the Follow-Up Survey

Follow-Up Survey Questions	Examples of Student Response
1. How did the FAF experience impact your classroom teaching practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ In an effort to encourage parents to participate in my classroom, at the start of this school year, I asked parents to fill out an interest survey so that I learn something about their interests and gain a better idea of how I can invite them to participate in activities that are meaningful for them and their children.</li> <li>◆ Since the FAF experience, I have been able to recommend the parent center as a valuable resource for several parents who have recently moved here.</li> </ul>
2. Has the FAF experience affected your efforts to encourage parents to participate in their children's education and decision involving their children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ I encourage the parents of my students to share their ideas and to speak up at the IEP meeting so that they are more involved in decision making and goal setting for their children.</li> <li>◆ I go out of my way to encourage parents to participate in conferences and meetings that involve their children. I try to make parents feel welcomed and comfortable when they attend their child's IEP meeting.</li> </ul>
3. Has your interest in listening to parents' voices changed since your FAF experience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ I've come to realize the power of listening. I make a point of letting the parent talk before I speak. In some ways this slows the conversation down, but I think that by doing this they get that I'm purposefully listening to what they have to say.</li> <li>◆ I think it is extremely important that parents know their rights, especially as it relates children with disabilities. I offer parents information that pertains to theirs and their child's legal rights.</li> </ul>
4. Has the FAF experience influenced the ways in which you practice active communication?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Not all forms of communication are equal. I initiate communication with parents in multiple ways, including informal person-to-person meetings, phone contact, email, letter, and even texting. Although I haven't ever gone to the home of the parent, I have met a couple of my students' parents for coffee at a nearby coffee shop.</li> </ul>
5. Has the FAF experience impacted your understanding of family dynamics and the relationship between students' school experiences and their academic success?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ I have been making more of a concerted effort to be less judgmental when interacting with parents, even with those parents with whom I find it less easy to interact. I figure that their lives are definitely tough and that they are doing the best that they can.</li> <li>◆ Some the parents of students in my class face serious economic and personal hardships. I try to remember that when parents are not as actively involved in their children's education as I would like them to be.</li> </ul>

be difficult to generalize from the parents' demographics, there was a wide range of diversity in the children's types of disabilities. Finally, the findings in this study were based on self-report data and therefore could not be confirmed directly through observations of the events mentioned by parents or teacher candidates. However, this self-report data provided valuable insights into the perceptions of the participants.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The first research question addressed in this study was whether the teacher candidates made theory-to-practice connections when reflecting on their experience of listening to parents' stories about raising a child with a disability. In their reflection papers, the teacher candidates emphasized the importance of effective communication and building relationships with families. Some of the teacher candidates went beyond simply stating the importance of good communication between schools and families to actually linking specific parents' experiences with positive outcomes. One student, Abigail, showed an even greater depth of understanding by connecting a specific parent's experiences to an increase in her own personal value for practicing communication and maintaining positive home-school relationships. Establishing positive, proactive, and effective communication between parents and educators has been shown to increase parent participation in children's learning activities (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005).

In their reflections, teacher candidates also described the complexities and challenges families face in their daily lives. Several of the teacher candidates internalized the parents' narratives by discussing how understanding of the complex lives of families had impacted them in their role as a teacher. Reflections that connected the parents' experiences to the teacher candidates' own values and role as educators suggested an increase in their understanding and appreciation of parent perspectives. The importance of teachers taking the time to better understand the complexities of their students' home lives is supported by other studies (Cook & Friend, 2010; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Lea, 2006).

The second research question asked whether teacher candidates reported an increase in their understanding and appreciation of school-family collaboration following the Families as Faculty experience. This question was addressed by examining participants' reflection papers and their responses to the questionnaire that they completed at the beginning and end of the course. The subjective realizations and impacts that the teacher candidates reported in their reflection papers showed that many of them had a newfound understanding of their role as educators following the FAF experience. Teacher candidates

described experiencing empathy for the families after hearing parent stories and recognizing the value of parent knowledge and voice. The ability to empathize has long been recognized as an important component in viewing the world through the eyes of another person. In order to develop empathy for someone else, one must first value another person's position, which can be achieved through listening (Cook & Friend, 2013; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Participants' reflection papers clearly indicated that the FAF experience did increase their understanding and appreciation of home-school collaboration.

The comparison of the pre- and post-questionnaires were consistent with the reflection papers and showed a significant increase in teacher candidates' perceptions of the anticipated impact that the FAF experience would have on them in their role as teachers and in their future relationships with families. These findings support previous literature showing the importance of teacher preparation programs providing courses that offer teacher candidates opportunities for involvement with parents of children with disabilities (Baker & Murray, 2011; Curran & Murray, 2008; Giallourakis, Pretti-Frontczak, & Cook, 2005; Patte, 2011; Schmitz, 2004; Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). The teacher candidates also reported a significant increase in their level of comfort in initiating, contacting, and encouraging parent participation in school. This is consistent with findings from earlier studies (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Garcia, 2004; Pang & Watkins, 2000) which have shown that teachers with higher perceptions of efficacy and competency for initiating contact with parents were more likely to encourage parent participation. Although this article describes the FAF experience that was provided in a master's program, such an opportunity for undergraduate students to engage with parents has also been shown to be valuable (Schmitz, 2004).

As was found in Adams and Christenson's study (2000), trust between parents and teachers is critical for the development of positive home-school relationships. When comparing teacher candidates' perceptions before and after their FAF experiences, they reported an increased sense of trust between themselves and parents. This finding supports research done by Watkins (2001) on teacher communication, which showed that by having more direct contact with parents, school professionals were able to create a more trusting and positive relationship with them.

The third research question in this study asked whether the FAF experience would have a long-lasting impact on teaching practices. The follow-up survey completed three years after the FAF experience addressed this question. Eighty-six percent of the teacher candidates who responded to the follow-up survey reported that they still felt the FAF experience had made a significant impact on them and was an experience that had transformed them. These participants

reported continued appreciation for complex family dynamics, and, as a result, these realizations have impacted their approach to building and sustaining relations with parents of the students they teach. They also reported initiating and encouraging collaboration with parents of the students in their classrooms. Such steps can lead to positive outcomes of parent involvement, as reported in a study conducted by Seitsinger et al. (2008) which found that the teacher's efforts to reach out to parents served as a motivation for the parent to become more engaged with the school.

Participants in the current study continued to recognize the power of listening and implemented classroom practices that included multiple ways of practicing active communication with parents. These findings complement an earlier study conducted by Pruitt, Wandry, and Hollums (1998) in which parents stated that they wanted educators to listen to them. Parents are still asking that their voice be heard in the process of making educational decisions related to their children (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006). In this current study, teacher candidates were given the opportunity to learn the value of listening; in turn, as teachers, they took that practice into the classroom and gave parents the opportunity to be heard.

The results of this study suggest that a program such as FAF that incorporates multiple opportunities for teacher candidates to have authentic interactions directly with families of children with disabilities can positively impact their attitudes toward home-school collaboration. These findings are in agreement with previous studies that have examined teacher candidates' perceptions after participating in coursework and field experiences that emphasize parent involvement (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Murray et al., 2008; Schmitz, 2004). Although the focus of this study was on families of children with special needs, a program such as FAF might benefit general education teacher candidates' perceptions of students' families as well. Implementation and evaluation of such a program could be a valuable future study.

This study is unique in that teacher candidates interacted directly with families in settings chosen by parents and in which parents were given leadership roles. Unlike previous studies where all teacher candidates in a course heard the same parent's story as a class presentation (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006) or where collaboration with parents was emphasized in the course without direct interaction with parents and their families (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007), each of the teacher candidate dyads in this study heard different experiences in their assigned home visits. At the wrap-up session at the end of the semester, teacher candidates shared highlights from their home visits and learned about the diversity of the 14 families, each with their unique story and different family dynamics. This additional step in sharing gave each teacher candidate the

opportunity to learn about the experiences of the other families who participated in the FAF program and to gain further understanding from the reflections shared by their peers.

While most teacher preparation programs in special education instruct teacher candidates on their role in IEP meetings and the paperwork process associated with the many requirements for special education teachers, teacher candidates have been found to be lacking confidence and unprepared to engage with parents (Murray et al., 2008), especially those of children with disabilities (Turner, 2000). It is critical that teacher candidates are provided with multiple opportunities to interact with parents and learn through their experiences. This study highlights the benefits of providing coursework and field experiences that can enhance teacher candidates' confidence in working with parents and can help them develop skills to initiate parent involvement and develop strong home-school relationships.

The findings of this study suggest that the experiences and insights that teacher candidates gain from listening to parent narratives can have a lasting impact on their classroom practices over time, which underscores the importance of authentic interactions in the preparation of teachers. Family-school-community collaboration is strengthened when teacher candidates are given the opportunity to acquire and nurture practices that comprehensively include families and communities in promoting the social, educational, and intellectual development of students.

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