Training School Professionals to Engage Families: A Pilot University/State Department of Education Partnership

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Abstract

Federal and professional mandates call for increased family involvement in education, yet most teacher preparation programs do not teach skills necessary to engage families in a thorough or systematic manner. The current project addressed this training deficit by offering a program that included a sequence of three graduate courses to a cohort of school professionals in a high-need school district. Courses were taught at a school within that district and included projects designed to address the needs of the community in which the participants were employed. Qualitative analysis suggests that following completion of the courses, school professionals enhanced their ability to engage families and experienced positive changes in attitude toward family–professional collaboration. Importantly, participants were able to articulate specific ways in which they planned to utilize new skills in the school setting. A unique aspect of this study was investigation of continued use of new knowledge and skills and implementation of action plans six months post-training.

Key words: family, collaboration, professionals, development, involvement, schools, engagement, families, university, partnerships, education, courses

Introduction

Survey data collected from the 1980s through the present suggest that, in spite of federal and professional organization mandates calling for increased

family involvement in education, teacher preparation programs have not been able to incorporate more than minimal attention to this critical area into an already ambitious curricula (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hiatt-Michael, 2006). In a comprehensive overview of current practices related to teacher preparation, Hiatt-Michael (2006) states that "(t)he major emphasis in teacher preparation programs is on the technical aspects of professional performance, not the deeply interpersonal aspects of their work" (p. 12). Yet knowledge about families and how to work effectively with them is not inherent; one does not become an expert in facilitating family–professional collaboration merely because one has been part of a family. Professionals who work with families need to be familiar with the empirical knowledge underlying the collaborative process and, with guidance, directly apply this knowledge base in authentic situations. This paper describes a pilot university/state department of education partnership designed to improve school-based professionals' skills in and attitudes toward collaboration with families. The project relied on both direct instruction and field experiences that explored and addressed the needs of participants' school communities.

The most recent exploration of the extent to which teacher preparation programs address family involvement was conducted by Epstein and Sanders (2006) who collected survey data from administrators in 161 teacher education programs. While the purpose of the survey was broad, most relevant to the current project was data obtained on the nature and extent of coursework that addressed family involvement. Results were encouraging. Approximately 60% of institutions responding to the survey reported offering an entire course related to family involvement, with about two-thirds of those institutions reporting that the course was required, not optional. Over 90% reported that family involvement was covered as a topic in at least one course. Individuals enrolled in programs emphasizing early childhood and special education were most likely to report the availability of coursework related to family engagement.

In spite of this positive trend, Epstein and Sanders (2006) report that "most [school, college, and department of education] leaders reported that their recent graduates were not well prepared to conduct programs and practices of school, family, and community partnerships" (p. 95). This is consistent with survey data collected as part of Harvard's Education Schools Project (Levine, 2006). Levine evaluated perceptions of principals, college deans and faculty, and teacher education program alumni regarding the degree to which they felt teachers were adequately trained in 11 "key" areas. In regard to "the capacity to work with parents," only 21% of principals reported that teachers are "very well" or "moderately well" prepared, and only 43% of alumni felt at least "moderately well prepared."

Given that family involvement has been credited with enhancing school success (Barnard, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) and that school-based administrators recognize the minimal preparation of their teachers in this fundamental area, one might expect school systems to provide training not obtained at a preservice level. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that "on-the-job" training in family–professional collaboration is not occurring to any great extent. Using survey data from 5,253 public school educators from across the United States, Parsad, Lewis, and Farris (2000) explored the content of formal professional development available for teachers. Results indicated that approximately 75% of teachers had participated in professional development focused on implementing state or district curricula, using technology and other new methodologies, and studying their content areas in depth. In contrast, less than half of the teachers surveyed indicated that they had received professional development training in the area of fostering family involvement.

Howland, Anderson, Smiley, and Abbott (2006) attempted to address the lack of concerted efforts by school systems to engage families by creating a school liaison program in the Indianapolis (Indiana) Public Schools System. The program utilized two family liaisons trained to support family members so that they might become more engaged in their children's education. School personnel were asked to refer families to regional special education supervisors, who in turn made referrals to the appropriate school liaison. Liaisons then made personal contact with families to explain and offer direct and indirect services. Preliminary outcome data was collected one year after project initiation via focus groups conducted with 19 participants from the 150 families who received support through the School Liaison project. Data indicated that parents reported an increased sense of self-efficacy and acknowledgment of the need for involvement in their child's education and shared their appreciation of the support provided by liaisons. The authors suggested that the success of the two family liaisons lay in their "previous life experiences and backgrounds similar to the families they served in terms of SES and urban community engagement" (p. 63). While this is consistent with literature describing the formation of effective working relationships, it is not always possible to ensure that school-based personnel will share characteristics with the families of their students (e.g., having a child of their own receiving special education services or sharing cultural identification). In fact, it is incumbent upon school systems to train personnel to collaborate effectively in *spite* of differences.

The lack of training in collaboration is significant given the powerful role of educators in creating climates that foster family involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Among a sample of over 2,000 families of elementary and middle school students living in economically disadvantaged areas, Dauber

and Epstein found that "the strongest and most consistent predictor of parent involvement at school and at home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement" (p. 61). In their investigation of school system policies and programs related to family involvement, Kessler-Sklar and Baker (2000) conceptualized involvement across six dimensions, including the degree to which teachers were trained to work with families. Based on survey data from 196 superintendents across the United States, Kessler-Sklar and Baker found that, of the six dimensions of family involvement activities, superintendents were least likely to report that their systems offered specific programs to train teachers to work with parents (38.7%). While the authors acknowledge that their questionnaire provided "little information…on the nature of the training programs for teachers" (p. 115), of those who did offer training, the vast majority (67.9%) offered in-service training by school staff. Off-site training and in-service provided by specialists were offered by only 3.6% and 7.1%, respectively.

While one might be encouraged that close to 40% of superintendents reported providing in-service activities that address working with parents, traditional in-service training may have minimal impact on changing skills, attitudes, and behaviors of participants. In fact, surveys of teachers regarding traditional in-service workshops suggest that such workshops are ineffective (Barnett, 2004) and that teachers "tend to forget 90% of what they learn" (Miller, 1998, as cited in Sandholtz, 2002, p. 815). Traditional in-service workshops are typically offered within a single session or day, consist of didactic lecture, and demand little more from the participants than passive attention. In contrast, professional development that leads to improved practices is more likely to be based on theories of adult learning (Lawler, 2003). Characteristics of training provided to adults generally posited as effective include opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, meaningful practice, recognition of participants' expertise, and self-reflection (Sandholtz, 2002).

The Current Pilot Project

Overview

In an effort to enhance school-based professionals' attitudes toward and skills in family–professional collaboration, a sequence of three graduate courses were offered in a high-need school system. For the purpose of this study, the term "high-need school system" meant schools that, based on data for the time period during which the study was conducted, had more than 25% of students who met eligibility for the federal free or reduced price school lunch program. In those schools in which our participants were employed, the mean

percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch was 33%. However, this was skewed as one of the 11 schools had a very low rate of 12%, while the mean percentage for the remaining 10 schools was 54%. School-based professionals included classroom teachers, special educators, school administrators, and related service providers (e.g., physical therapists, school counselors, school nurses). The intention was to offer effective training consistent with best practices in adult education. Four specific project goals were to: (1) improve participants' attitude toward family–professional collaboration, (2) foster participants' acquisition of new knowledge and skills, (3) enhance participants' intention to apply new knowledge or skills in the work setting, and (4) transfer learning from the training room to the work setting.

Thus, the pilot project consisted of a sequence of three graduate courses offered over one academic year to a cohort of school-based professionals who worked at six schools in a high-need school district in suburban Maryland. All three courses were taught at a school within that system and included projects and activities designed to address the needs of the community in which the participants were employed. Courses were taught by university faculty and, when feasible, were co-taught with school-based professionals. An additional value of the project was the interdisciplinary backgrounds of project participants, allowing them to enhance interprofessional collaboration skills concurrent with the development of family–professional collaboration skills.

The graduate coursework that constituted the project had at its foundation the concept that professionals must listen to and understand families as a prerequisite to engaging them in their children's education. Engagement was defined broadly, as a narrow definition might actually interfere with recognizing engagement when it occurs (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). For example, traditional family involvement activities that require attendance at school functions might be unavailable to family members who lack transportation, childcare, or the ability to take time off from a job. These parents might be considered no less "involved" if the definition of involvement included talking about school at home and having high expectations for educational attainment. An equally important premise of the pilot project was that skills attained via professional development were more likely to be transferred to the work setting if the training extended beyond the classroom and into the actual environments in which the skills were to be used. Finally, the use of a three-course sequence of graduate courses is consistent with results from Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon's (2001) exploration of factors that enhance professional development training. Based on their large-scale study, one significant factor that emerged was that "sustained and intensive professional development is more likely to have an impact, as reported by teachers, than is shorter professional development" (p. 937).

Description of Professional Development Coursework

The three graduate courses that comprised the professional development training were offered across one academic year and are described briefly in Table 1. Courses were developmental in nature. Content that was introduced in the first course was revisited in the next two courses at deeper levels and with more opportunities for authentic application. Within each course, there was attention given to both theory and skill development consistent with empirical evidence that grounding skill development in theory fosters more effective application in real-life situations than teaching skills alone (Brazil, Ozer, Cloutier, Levine, & Stryer, 2005). Implementing interventions without understanding theory may allow school-based professionals to apply solutions to problems that resemble those in the training session, but not to modify solutions in novel situations or when confronting varying contextual variables. It was the project developers' intention to increase the ability of school-based practitioners to apply skills with sensitivity to the particular situation in which they were attempting to improve relationships with and engage families.

Table 1. Description of Courses Comprising the Professional Development Coursework

Course	Description
Applied Family Relationships (3 credits)	Applied Family Relationships introduces the student to theories of family development and function. Students explore diversity and relationship dynamics through analysis of their family stories. They utilize foundational communication skills and empirical-based tools and techniques to understand effective family processes.
Family–Professional Collaboration (3 credits)	Family-Professional Collaboration moves the student beyond understanding and applying family-based theories to a focus on the development of collaborative relationships with school-affiliated families and other school personnel. Students learn and practice advanced communication including conflict resolution, problem solving, and reframing techniques in the classroom and in the field. They work with colleagues to interview families about their life experiences and worldviews.
Project in Family-Focused Program Development (3 credits)	Project in Family-Focused Program Development takes the student to the next level of involvement: the community. Students use action research and focus group methods to understand the perspectives of families and professionals in a particular school or community setting. This information is used to develop interventions to enhance family–professional relationships.

Theoretical topics addressed in the graduate coursework included: understanding family systems and complex family relationships, exploring family strengths and resiliency, and developing understanding of and sensitivity to issues of diversity. These topics were addressed initially in the first course, Applied Family Relationships. This course emphasized understanding family diversity and culture, as well as context, as a foundation for understanding a family's story. When families feel that their values, culture, and efforts in regard to parenting are respected, collaboration is more likely to occur (Minke, 2000). Barriers to effective collaboration are created when families perceive that school-based professionals have an overly negative view of their family's functioning or fail to identify the child's strengths when addressing problems (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Participants were also taught to identify their own potential biases toward collaboration as a prerequisite for effective relationship-building. School-based professionals may be prone to adopt their school's norms for collaboration; if individuals within schools view collaboration as a burden, teachers may inadvertently act toward parents in a manner that leads parents to avoid future interactions. Teachers may then be reinforced in their belief that collaboration is difficult and unrewarding. However, this cycle may be broken when educators become aware of how their own attitudes and behaviors may enhance or serve as barriers to collaboration (Hudson & Glomb, 1997; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006).

Specific skills addressed in the coursework included communicating at basic and advanced levels, conducting ethnographic interviews and focus groups, and planning action research. Development of these competencies was facilitated through didactic instruction, in-class practice using videotaping and corrective feedback, field experiences, and action research.

While strong communication skills do not ensure collaboration, their absence will likely be an impediment. Effective communication requires one to be both an effective listener and speaker. Thus, coursework addressed basic skills such as reflecting feelings, summarizing content, paraphrasing, developing appropriate questions, active listening, and integrating nonverbal and verbal messages. These constitute the underpinnings of successful collaborative relationships as described by most authors (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Friend & Cook, 2006). In many instances, even excellent communication skills are insufficient to navigate the complex path to successful collaboration. Consequently, more advanced skills were introduced. These included: conflict management, reframing, systematic problem solving, and ethnographic interviewing.

Consistent with literature describing best practices in pedagogy (Joyce & Showers, 1980), participants practiced skills in both simulated and authentic situations and were provided with guidance and corrective feedback. Project participants learned and practiced basic interviewing through a carefully designed training sequence that occurred over the course of the project. They first interviewed one another to explore personal family stories and then interviewed a panel consisting of family members from their schools. Participants subsequently interviewed individual families and conducted focus groups composed of professionals and families from their school communities.

The family member panel was noteworthy as it provided a model for incorporating authentic family engagement into project participants' skill development. Project participants developed questions to facilitate discussion regarding families' perspectives on their experiences advocating for their children with special needs while coping with complex school system policies and procedures. Questions were prepared, critiqued, and revised in class based on principles of ethnographic interviewing (Westby, Burda, & Mehta, 2003). Three parents from the project participants' school community were then invited to attend a class meeting where project participants asked questions and practiced listening skills while panel members responded. Sample questions are listed in Table 2. The panel interview was videotaped so that project participants could later critique their own communication skills, as well as listen for and identify themes regarding parents' views of collaborating with school-based professionals. The expectation was that these in-class experiences would prepare participants for fieldwork that occurred at the end of the second course and that constituted the major component of the third course.

Table 2. Family Member Panel: Sample Questions

Questions Developed by Project Participants
Describe a typical day with (child's name).
Please give an example of the most regarding and most challenging aspects of raising (child's name).
Describe your initial experiences working with a school team.
What suggestions do you have for school teams in terms of improving interactions with family members?
If you had to advise a parent who is in the initial stages of the special education process, what would you tell the parent?

During the second course, Family–Professional Collaboration, participants worked in pairs or groups of three to conduct an ethnographic interview with a family from their own school community. The purpose was to practice framing questions to foster understanding of a family's story and to facilitate family engagement. The complete process included identifying a family from the community to interview, formulating appropriate questions, conducting the interview, analyzing interview data, and presenting what they learned through ethnographic interviewing to the class. The rubric used to grade the ethnographic interview is presented in Table 3 and provides detailed expectations for project participants.

Table 3. Grading Rubric for Ethnographic Interview

Requirement	Criteria
Description of family	The description should include why this family was selected for interview and family demographics, but should not compromise the family's privacy.
Description of the specific steps from initial preparation through conducting the interview	This should include planning questions for the interview, contacting the family, determining your roles, and detailed description of procedures used to collect interview information.
Copy of release form	This release form must have signatures of interview participant(s).
List of questions	This includes both initial and follow-up questions.
Description of observations made during the interview process	This includes observations of both the interviewee and interviewer(s). A strong response includes attention to why a particular behavior may have been noted.
Summary and analysis of information	This includes your analysis of information obtained from the interviews, during both formal and informal interactions, including the major themes and support for the themes. A strong response integrates data from observations and responses to interview questions.
Observations about the process of arranging for, conducting, and analyzing the interview	This includes your perceptions, as a group, about what worked, what didn't work, and what you might do differently next time.

During the third course, Project in Community Program Development, participants worked in pairs to conduct focus groups exploring perceptions of school faculty, related service providers, and families within their particular school in regard to building family–professional relationships. They analyzed focus group data to arrive at an understanding of factors that enhanced or impeded family involvement within that school. Participants shared this analysis with all stakeholders, including the school administration, and proposed action plans to address concerns that emerged during the focus groups. Examples of action plans are discussed below and summarized in Table 5. Following completion of the Professional Development Coursework, project participants were given the opportunity to implement action plans as an independent study under one of the project developers.

Method

Researchers and Participants

The first listed author (Note: authors are equal partners in this work, thus they are referred to in the order listed rather than as first and second author) previously worked as a school psychologist in a public school system for 17 years before becoming a university professor. It was through her work on school teams that she initially became interested in the effect that school professionals have on family members' willingness and ability to be involved in their children's education. The second listed author is a licensed counselor and professor. Her background includes direct service working with and understanding families. Through her work as an occupational therapist and certified professional counselor she became interested in family quality of life and the importance of family–professional relationships. The authors' professional and personal experiences and interests brought them together and became a focus of their collaborative relationship. They developed a university program that prepares graduate students and professionals from various fields to collaborate with families and with one other. The co-authors received a state department of education grant to offer the graduate program in selected counties in the state. This article presents outcomes from the first year of the state-funded project. The first listed author taught one of the three courses and prepared program evaluation materials. The second listed author taught two of the courses. Both authors participated in data analysis. They met regularly to discuss themes and the overall process. They shared the belief that strong family-professional relationships are essential for a child's progress in school and overall well-being. They both also believed that the courses taught as part of the graduate program they developed would change attitudes and practices of professionals as they

attempted to engage families. To counter any potential positive biases they worked closely with two different qualitative research consultants when designing the program evaluation and analyzing data.

The pilot project was initiated in a suburban school district in Maryland with support by a grant from the Maryland State Department of Education. The district educates a diverse population of approximately 106,000 students, of which 52.3% are White, 39.3% are Black, 4.7% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.3% are Hispanic, and .6% are American Indian/Alaska Native. Approximately 2% are English Language Learners, and 13% have been identified with educational disabilities. One third of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged.

School-based professionals learned of the opportunity to participate in the project from a flier that was distributed through the professional development office in their school systems. An effort was made to recruit participants who represented different professions within the school and to obtain at least two individuals from each school. This latter aim was based on the contention of Garet et al. (2001) that when several teachers from the same school engage in training experiences together, new practices are more likely to be sustained than when training is provided to a single individual from a school. All individuals who applied to participate were selected, thus forming a sample of convenience. Course fees were paid by the local school system consistent with established policies for professional development. Fifteen participants completed the first course (FMST 601), 12 completed the second course (FMST 610), and 11 completed all three courses. Based on responses during brief phone interviews conducted with non-completers, the three participants who did not continue after the first course indicated that competing demands from their employment settings, schedule conflicts, and the level of outside work required by the courses contributed to their respective decisions. The single participant who did not continue after the second course indicated that her decision was based on a scheduling conflict. The data discussed in this paper will be limited to the 11 participants who completed all three courses. Table 4 describes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Across all three classes, 29 family members were involved in the pilot project in the capacity of advocacy panel members (5), interviewees for the ethnographic interview (6), or members of the school-based focus groups (18).

Table 4. Demographics of Participants

Variable	*N* = 11	%
Gender		
Male	2	18%
Female	9	81%
Race		
Black	5	45%
White	6	54%
Age		
30-39	6	54%
40-49	1	9%
50+	4	36%
Education Level		
BA/BS	6	54%
MA	5	45%
Position		
Classroom Teacher	4	36%
Special Educator	3	27%
School Counselor	1	9%
School Nurse	1	9%
Media Specialist	1	9%
Occupational Therapist	1	9%

Project Evaluation

The effectiveness of the professional development coursework was evaluated using multiple methods: culminating assignments completed for each course and graded according to rubrics delineating expected competencies, post-coursework questionnaires, and a post-coursework interview conducted in person with individual participants six months after courses were completed.

Description of Questionnaire

Following completion of all three courses, participants responded anonymously in writing to a questionnaire asking three questions: (1) Has your interest in collaborating with families changed (either increased or decreased) since beginning the Professional Development Coursework? If yes, please list up to three ways your interest has changed. (2) List up to three of the most important skills you have gained through the Professional Development Coursework. (3) How, specifically, do you plan to integrate these skills into your work in your school?

An essential aspect of any professional training is the extent to which participants apply what they have learned during training in their employment setting. This is especially true in light of the extensive time and financial commitment made by both individuals that pursue and organizations that sponsor continuing education opportunities. Thus, six months following completion of the Professional Development Coursework, interviews were conducted with program completers to determine how the participants were using the information learned during the project and the status and progress of action plans developed in the third course.

Data Collection and Analysis

Responses to post-coursework questionnaires were read repeatedly before themes were analyzed. Two research assistants reviewed the responses, coded them independently according to themes, then discussed and revised the coding until agreement was reached. The same process was then followed by project developers until major themes were agreed upon across research assistants and project developers.

Approximately six months after participants had completed all coursework, follow-up interviews were conducted to determine how they were using the knowledge and skills obtained from coursework; the status and progress of action plan implementation; and, if plans had not been implemented, barriers that might have prohibited implementation. Participants were contacted by the research assistants to arrange a convenient time and place for the interview. In all cases, interviews were conducted in the participants' schools at a time the participants identified as convenient.

Pairs of research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews with individual participants. One research assistant led the interview, while the other videotaped the interview and took notes on the participant's responses. The interview utilized a script that included questions exploring participant's qualitative impressions of the project coursework and the degree to which he or she was using knowledge and skills obtained in courses within the work setting. The interview was then transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Data analysis followed the same procedures as described above.

Findings

Findings below summarize outcomes collected via: (1) participants' responses to questionnaires completed immediately after conclusion of the third course (eight months after the program began), and (2) in-person interviews conducted six months after conclusion of the third course. The intent was

to determine both immediate and longer-term effectiveness of coursework in regard to enhancing both attitudes toward, and skills in, family–professional collaboration. All 11 participants completed the questionnaires at the end of the three courses comprising the program and 10 of the 11 participants completed the in-person interview.

Four primary themes were found in the responses: improved attitude toward family–professional collaboration, acquisition of new knowledge or skills, intention to apply new knowledge or skills in the work setting, and actual application of skills in authentic settings. Evidence of more positive attitudes and changes in the nature of interactions between participants and families were present at both data collection points. However, evidence of taking a leadership role to implement change at the school level was present only in the in-person interviews. In the following section, description of these categories and illustrative responses are provided.

Improved Attitude Toward Family–Professional Collaboration

Improved attitudes included taking interest in the family's perspective, appreciating differences among families, and increased self-awareness regarding one's own attitudes toward collaboration.

All 11 project participants noted increased interest in collaborating with families to engage them in the educational process. Several emphasized the need to expand upon how one defines "involvement," and several reflected upon an increased desire to understand family dynamics. The following quote illustrates this theme:

> I believe my interest in collaborating with families has increased since beginning the courses last fall. I am interested in pursuing more authentic collaboration that actively engages families in their children's school experiences, rather than focusing on more superficial involvement. I understand and accept (finally!) that there are some families that we will not be able to reach and that we should not give up, but instead, focus on those families we can reach.

Almost all participants (9 of 11) offered comments related to appreciating or accepting differences. They recognized the importance of actively seeking to understand the perspective of the family rather than merely expressing their own point of view when involved in dyadic interactions with family members. As stated by one participant, "seeking to understand" and developing the mindset necessary to suspend judgment must be deliberate and requires personal effort and skill. Typical comments included the following:

> When you stop to listen to [the family's] story…you understand that doesn't mean that they're not involved; you find out that there are other factors that hindered them from [coming]…when you take that extra step to listen, then you find other ways.
>
> We learned techniques and questions that don't put [families] on the spot so much…
>
> We learned how there's what we think and then there's what's really going on and how we need to step back and look at the parents' situation and then assess it from their side.

Keeping an open mind further describes the positive attitude change. This theme captured participants' reports of recognizing and avoiding the tendency to judge, rather than to appreciate, a family's unique situation. One participant who started the program with an especially skeptical and negative attitude wrote:

> I feel that a big focus of this class has been on not being judgmental. I wish I could say that I have learned to eliminate or control this aspect of my personality. However, as both a teacher and a parent, I find that I cannot help but evaluate the actions and inactions that I see within my own frame of reference. I think I can say with some degree of certainty that I am more aware of my tendencies in this area, and I am now more able and motivated to refrain from jumping to conclusions and making judgments.

Self-awareness regarding one's own attitudes toward collaboration is an essential step in understanding families' worldviews and thus a foundational component introduced in the first course. The following example from questionnaires administered at the completion of the coursework illustrates this lesson:

> I learned how much my bias, my life style, and my opinions impact how I view my students and their families. Many times it is so easy to say what should be or why don't parents do this or that, or the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, etc. Many times I draw these conclusions without knowing my student's family situation. The more I know about my students and their family situations, the more I can relate to my students and be a help to them.

While improved attitude was evident immediately upon the completion of the coursework, we did not feel this was a sufficient goal, in and of itself. Therefore, we were gratified to note that the change in attitude that was initially noted in questionnaires appeared to have been sustained once participants returned to their work settings. Specifically, participants noted that their

own behaviors reflected more tolerant attitudes and that this change was a direct result of the coursework. Comments that supported this positive attitude included mention of listening without judgment, taking a strengths-based perspective, and recognizing that each family has a story to be heard and a voice to be brought to the table. For example, one participant talked about previously interpreting a family member's lack of responsiveness to a request for a meeting as the family "not caring." Since completing the coursework, this individual has begun to explore other factors that might be involved when families do not attend school meetings and to reach out in other ways. For example, she indicated that she might send a more comprehensive email or find another way to communicate rather than requiring or expecting a family to come to the school. She further reported that parents appreciated this more flexible and open-minded approach.

Positive attitudes were also sustained in the form of willingness to use clearer communication when interacting with family members, as illustrated in the following quote:

> Communication is probably one of the best things that came out of the class. It's always in the back of my mind to think about what might be going on and what I'm saying and how I'm saying it and how it sounds and how things are coming out of my mouth and how it might be interpreted by other people in different situations. It just definitely made me more aware of what I say when I talk to people and how I say it sometimes.

Another indication of positive attitude change that transferred to the work setting was participants' ability to recognize a family's unique situation and identify their strengths. Interviewees offered comments highlighting the importance of recognizing what family members bring to the interaction as a prerequisite to building effective partnerships. One participant discussed how her improved attitude was demonstrated in her interactions with family members by sharing the following:

> …maybe change my demeanor a little bit so that in my interactions with parents I try… I think to maybe look for strengths rather than always looking for weaknesses and trying to approach things in more of a positive manner even when it's a negative thing.

A goal of the program was to increase participants' recognition that building trust with a family is a prerequisite to engagement and that even when one uses highly developed communication skills, true collaboration is not ensured. However, once trust is established, the stage is set for building the family–professional relationship by using new skills proficiently. Thus we now

transition from discussing attitudes that reflect awareness of the importance of relationship-building to a discussion of new knowledge and skills acquired by participants.

Acquisition of New Knowledge or Skills

The major category of new knowledge and skills acquired through the coursework was skilled communication, as this was mentioned by all 11 participants in the questionnaires. Participants' comments reflected the importance of developing effective questions and using other advanced communication skills (e.g., reframing, conflict resolution) as primary vehicles for building relationships with families. Nine project participants described specific skills gained in communication and collaboration. One participant stated that she now "feels more confident in engaging parents in a positive dialogue, because I feel I have refined skills and awareness in questioning and identifying verbal and nonverbal cues." Effective communication is frequently noted in the literature as critical when working with families, but the specific speaking and listening skills that comprise effective communication are often not delineated. Thoughtful preparation of questions or comments prior to communicating with families, as well as listening fully to another person while she or he speaks (rather than thinking of one's next response), were skills taught and practiced as part of the program coursework. Several participants reflected upon the need to simply "be present" as a way to let families know of their interest in developing a relationship. Two quotes below clearly illustrate this concept:

> If we truly want to help children be successful, we must realize that parents and guardians need to feel that they are being heard and that their concerns are being taken into consideration. This allows us to work together for the betterment of the children, and as educators, that should be our main focus.

> It really does shed new light on a situation if you put yourself in the other person's shoes and truly see the situation through their eyes. I also learned that parents just want to be heard and understood and until we fulfill that need, we cannot build a relationship with them that can lead to offering assistance.

Most participants (8 of 11) identified conducting action research using focus groups as an important skill they acquired. In the final course, participants learned the method and art of group interviewing, and how to gather and analyze information for action planning. Skills were first developed and practiced in the classroom and then in the field, in the form of focus groups conducted in the participants' home schools. The importance of conducting focus groups in

the school setting, rather than using only simulated practice in the classroom, is expressed in the following statement:

> After completing this course, I feel that I developed an understanding of action research that could be put to use in a variety of ways. Book learning is great, but what we have completed is a reality. Meeting with our administrator and parent groups was a priceless way to interact with a cross-section of people who impact us as educators.

The program in its entirety was an opportunity for participants to integrate skills necessary to enhance family engagement into their professional practice. Rather than rely on a single workshop or course, the project allowed for consistent, ongoing learning and practice. The intent that each course builds upon prior courses was recognized by participants as critical to their skill development and was perceived as foundational to the success of the program. The opportunity to practice skills in increasingly authentic settings was recognized as important by participants and is highlighted in the quote below:

> We began with interviewing each other about our families. We then moved on [to] interviewing a family with a child with special needs. We ended by conducting focus groups of administrators or teachers and families. Through this all we learned an infinite amount of techniques to become better action researchers…we truly became expert interviewers. Additionally, we learned the proper techniques for conducting focus groups from preparation right through to data analysis. I feel confident that I could conduct another focus group in the future and have a successful outcome.

Intent to Apply New Knowledge and Skills in the Work Setting

While improved attitudes and effective communication are important competencies, they would be insufficient without intent to apply them in authentic situations. Too often professionals assume that because they are familiar with families, building relationships with them will be natural, easy, or automatic. Thus, a desired outcome of the coursework was for participants to identify intentional actions necessary to engage families. Through this process, we hoped to maximize transfer of learning from the training setting to the employment setting. In regard to the application of content and skills learned through the coursework to encounters with families in participants' schools, two subcategories emerged: using knowledge and skills in one's own work as an educator, and sharing new knowledge with colleagues.

At the conclusion of the program, 9 of the 11 respondents indicated that they planned to use their new skills to modify their own interactions with

families. A specific example demonstrating the skill of listening fully, as was discussed above, can be found in the following participant statement:

> I hope to use the information I learned in order to be a better teacher, communicator, and leader. As a teacher I have to talk to parents quite frequently. I will listen and ask questions, not just talk. I will try and find out "why," not just tell parents "what."

The program also emphasized collaboration among professionals as one approach to encourage practices that enhance relationships with families in participants' schools. Project participants understood that to truly change school climate, they must involve colleagues in enhancing relationships with families. For example, one participant suggested that the family involvement committee of which she was a part might be more effective if it changed its approach.

> At school, I am a member of the family involvement committee. This committee plans for and runs many of the after-school events. We gather, decide what events are needed, and go about planning them. From what I have learned in this class, maybe we are going about this in the wrong manner. Perhaps we should start the year with a survey or focus group to get input as to what the community of (school name) wants. I have learned that if people know we are interested in their thoughts and opinions, they will feel more connected and hopefully participate more.

Seven of 11 participants offered comments related to the intent to use new knowledge and skills for broader school change. A participant spoke of how the focus group process taught and conducted as part of the third course was already making an impact in her own practice:

> The knowledge and experiences I have gained from this class have already affected future professional endeavors. The focus group conversations were valuable and will be utilized in the future to address needs or further develop programs at our school. Also, we have presented a plan that we are eager to implement and feel will greatly benefit our school. It is already planned to present our plan to the staff, and key players have been identified to start the process. Additionally, we have started to break down barriers between families, staff, and administration, and we will hopefully continue to open doors for more opportunities to strengthen our relationships.

Authentic Application of Improved Attitudes, New Knowledge, and New Skills

Interviews conducted with 10 of the 11 participants six months after the program was completed were noteworthy in that most of the participants could

clearly recall the purpose of each course and what they learned in each course. While recall of content is fundamental for application in authentic settings, it is not an end in and of itself. A more important objective was to increase participants' use of skills in their own day-to-day practices and to enhance their ability to effect broader school change. All of the participants who completed the interviews reported using the skills and knowledge they had obtained and indicated some degree of action based on participation in the coursework. A list of specific action initiatives can be found in Figure 1. Some of the initiatives included: taking actions to facilitate home–school communication, assuming new leadership and/or family involvement roles in their schools, effecting changes in school culture related to collaboration, enhancing involvement of administrators, and conducting additional focus groups. However, it should be noted that participants did not always achieve goals established as a result of their focus groups. In one school, for example, the four professionals who completed the coursework did not achieve their goal of establishing a Welcome Committee at their school, although plans were in place and some aspects of the plan were enacted. Interestingly, several commented to us that the email requesting their participation in the in-person interviews revived their interest in fully executing their plan.

We were encouraged that 5 of 11 participants took a non-required independent study course (following completion of the three-course sequence) which guided them through implementation of the projects identified from their focus groups. Of those five, three completed three additional credits and earned a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Family–Professional Collaboration.

Interviews also revealed a positive outcome that was not anticipated—increased respect from colleagues and school administrators, as captured in this comment:

> There seems to be a greater awareness of different things that we identified as problems, and to me, it is not wonderful, but it's much better environment-wise here. I do think from taking the course that we gained respect in the school as far as from the administrators and from the other teachers that saw us do this project, as far as the validity of what we're offering and what we presented, because you know they did see us working hard, they were involved with our interview sessions that we would do, and so I think we came up with the ideas. They were supportive because they knew that the work was done within the building, with real people, with the families that we actually deal with. So, yeah, I mean that was a huge positive from it.

Broader School Initiatives With Examples of Each Initiative
Actions to Facilitate Home–School Communication
• Communication folders sent home in child's backpack (adopted by two schools) • Email communication between teachers and home enhanced with assistance of technology liaison • Letter sent home to parents with introduction and teacher's business cards • ESOL Information Packets developed for new students and families • Disability support information included in monthly school newsletter (adopted by two schools) • Option offered for evening special education (IEP) meetings
Actions to Improve Parent–Teacher Associations (PTA)
• Number of PTA meetings decreased to four a year based on parent feedback • Length of PTA meetings shortened • Liaison position created to improve communication between PTA representatives and principal
Actions to Improve School Environment
• Information table placed in main entrance to school • Bulletin board created to recognize family volunteers • Use of parent volunteers increased (e.g., to read books on tape for school use) • New program developed, "Diapers to Diplomas," that featured 10 professionals speaking on services for students from birth to 21 years of age with special needs • Involvement of administrators in nonacademic events with parents increased • Focus groups involving teachers, parents, and support staff developed to explore concerns related to students with behavioral problems

Figure 1. Application of Skills in School Settings: Summary of Activities Six Months After Program Completion

An additional unexpected finding was participants' increased leadership roles through interaction with the school's administration. Many of the participants reported developing a closer working relationship with principals and other school leaders as well as increased participation on family involvement committees. Other participants were pursuing or had acquired leadership roles. For example, one became an assistant vice principal, and another was planning on becoming a pupil personnel worker (i.e., school social worker).

In summary, findings indicated that improved attitudes, knowledge, and skills were immediately apparent upon completion of the coursework and were sustained six months afterwards, although participants demonstrated application of skills to varying degrees. All participants continued to report a positive

change in attitude toward collaboration and more effective communication with families. Engagement in the coursework provided opportunities for all participants to become advocates for, and some to become leaders in, increasing meaningful family involvement in their schools. Many implemented the plans that developed from focus groups and others used the knowledge they acquired to build more effective relationships with families on an individual level. Although gaining increased respect from school administrators and being provided with increased opportunity to take on leadership roles related to family involvement were not initial goals of the coursework, they were nevertheless important and noteworthy outcomes.

Discussion

The positive influence of family involvement on children's and adolescents' school performance has been well established, yet teacher preparation programs often do not teach the skills necessary to engage families in a thorough or systematic manner. The intent of the current pilot project was to address this training deficit. Analysis of themes that emerged from questionnaire data suggests that, following completion of three graduate level courses that addressed family–professional collaboration, school-based professionals felt they enhanced their skills in communication and collaboration and experienced positive change in attitudes toward collaboration. More importantly, several participants reported making changes in how they interacted with families even prior to the completion of the three-course sequence, while other participants articulated specific ways in which they planned to utilize new skills in their work settings. Additionally, six months after training was completed, most participants reported that they had generalized skills learned in the classroom to their work settings in a variety of ways. Five participants reported that they had voluntarily implemented action plans they had developed during the third and final course, and most of the others reported implementation of some aspect of the action plan.

The pilot project was successful in achieving stated goals. The developmental aspect of the coursework was reinforced as participants noted how the courses built upon one another and how, ultimately, they viewed this as an important aspect of the program. As the courses were offered as university graduate courses prior to being taught as part of this community initiative, they were more rigorous than other professional development experiences in which the participants had been involved. While this may have resulted in early attrition of some participants, those who completed the coursework emerged as leaders or potential leaders in their schools. The coursework was designed to

promote positive change in attitudes and use of skills in authentic settings and those goals were accomplished. Although increased involvement with school administration was an intentional aspect of the program, it was not initially articulated as a specific goal. However, it was in this area that another aspect of the program's success was evident. One participant captures this well:

> I think the biggest thing has been the message that was sent to the administration. I think that they heard some [of] the data that was presented. They are actually doing things now to increase that welcoming feeling; they have been active at more parent nights; they have tried to be a little more involved in the different things, more welcoming, more seen in the different activities instead of being isolated and secluded in the office.

The positive outcomes of the coursework extended beyond changing attitudes and improving skills. Not only did participants report using new skills individually but also reported contributing to change in their schools by working with family members, colleagues, and administrators to engage families. Several participants completed additional graduate coursework and had plans to move into leadership roles. While there were many accomplishments, there were also areas that could be improved as the program is replicated in the state and further developed into a model for other school systems.

First, as a grant-funded project, coursework was offered at minimal financial expense to participants. This may have affected their attitude about training in a positive direction or may have enhanced desire to participate from the outset. If this project were to be replicated in other school systems, several strategies might be effective in addressing this issue. As many school systems have policies for reimbursement of continuing education, prospective participants could be encouraged to take advantage of this benefit. A second strategy might be to further develop the leadership aspect of the program to make it more attractive to school administrators. A final option would be to explore a skills-based approach and merge the content from the three courses into a one- or two-course program. For example, the second course, which is more skills-based, may be offered as a stand-alone course if desired change is limited to improving participants' communication skills. This approach is being investigated in a related project by the current authors. A final limitation is that project participants came from a single suburban school system. While the school system was diverse in regard to race and socioeconomic status, similar outcomes may not be realized when participants work in urban or rural school systems. Exploration of factors related to replication will be addressed through expansion of the pilot project into additional school systems and eventually through offering the

coursework in a hybrid fashion, incorporating face-to-face meetings with online learning in an effort to reach learners in remote locations.

Future Directions

Other challenges lay ahead. There is often little incentive for school-based professionals to engage in rigorous graduate coursework that does not directly lead to an additional professional degree, increased salary, or other form of formal recognition. While an optimum solution would be for state departments of education to include mandatory coursework on family–professional collaboration in teacher education certification requirements, it is unlikely that this will occur any time soon. In the current pilot project, participants reported school administrative support to be important for both their motivation to complete the coursework and their ability to foster change in practice. Accordingly, recruitment efforts in subsequent school systems will incorporate school administrator commitment to recognizing contributions of project participants through a variety of means. These may include providing leadership opportunities related to addressing family–professional collaboration at the school or school-system level or public recognition through school or system newsletters or websites. Sustainability of practice over time is an important outcome of any system change effort and is significantly enhanced when participants are provided with the immediate opportunity for skill use after training (Jarrell, O'Neill & Hasse, 2009). Thus, affording project participants the opportunity to provide in-service to school faculty might serve to both increase generalization to other members of the school community as well as sustain project participants' own skills.

It will be important for future research to consider methods for reducing obstacles to implementing action plans developed as a result of focus groups. Not surprisingly, in interviews conducted with project participants six months post-training, the issue of time emerged as a primary barrier. A second issue that emerged was the continuing need to further change school climate in terms of receptivity to increasing family involvement. To address these issues, future coursework might include identifying potential obstacles to implementation of plans in the work setting and development of strategies to address them. Having participants engage in peer-to-peer coaching, long considered an effective approach for teachers who wish to incorporate new skills into their behavioral repertoire (Joyce & Showers, 1981; Licklider, 1995), may also increase the potential for action plan implementation.

Overall, preliminary analysis from this pilot project supports the feasibility of training school-based professionals to foster parental engagement in their children's education. In the words of one participant:

> Throughout all of these courses I have learned the value of forming and strengthening relationships between families and professionals. By putting aside our assumptions, we can hear the needs of each other more clearly. Additionally, I learned that families and staff have many common beliefs and that we can activate small steps in order to improve our relationships. Also, that listening is definitely important, but taking action to initiate change is what families and professionals find most significant.

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