

# Preparing Urban Teachers to Partner with Families and Communities

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## Abstract

This study explored how graduate coursework can impact urban teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions regarding family and community involvement. (Note: California requires graduate work for teacher certification.) Specifically, the research investigated how teacher attitudes toward family and community involvement changed after taking a graduate level course taught at two separate universities. The study utilized mixed methods combining a semantic differential study of graduate student attitudes with a qualitative analysis of the students' perceptions of their experience in the course. Results from the semantic differential ( $p < .05$ ) and qualitative data indicate a significant change in teachers in three global areas: (a) their professional knowledge and skills, (b) their professional dispositions, and (c) their authentic relationships with students, their families, and the community. The findings from this study can be used by teacher education programs, university professors, and school districts as they structure and implement programs that support and encourage teachers in interfacing with their students' families and communities.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, family involvement, community, organizations, parents, families, teacher education, urban schools, collaboration, teachers, professional development, programs, candidates, preservice

## Introduction

Numerous studies over the past decade show that when schools, families, and community groups collaborate to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more (Barnard, 2004; Bryan, 2005; Epstein et al., 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Ingram, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Putnum, 2000; Sheldon, 2003, 2007). Research also confirms a need to prepare teachers, particularly those working with families of color and in poor urban communities, on how to establish more authentic relationships that will lead to increased family and community involvement and student success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Ingram, 2007; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Sheldon, 2003, 2007). This preparation can and should be a part of the preparation all teachers receive in their college or university programs (Morgan, 2009; Villani, 2004).

### Family and Community Involvement in K-12 Schools

Leading researchers have found that when schools work with students' families, everyone involved benefits—students, families, and schools (Green et al., 2007; Henderson & Berla, 1997). Additionally, when families are invited to participate at their children's schools, they do become involved (Feuerstein, 2000; Green et al., 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005; Warren & Quintanar, 2005). Warren and Quintanar (2005) found such involvement leads not only to improved academic achievement for students, but it also increased teacher morale. Some (Ingram, 2007; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; McWayne et al., 2004; Sheldon, 2003, 2007) suggest this is particularly the case in urban communities. Kellaghan, Sloan, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993) have even gone so far as to suggest that interventions with children from disadvantaged backgrounds need a home component in order to be effective.

The literature provides significant evidence supporting the value of family involvement, yet questions remain unanswered regarding how to effectively engage families, particularly in poor urban communities. The Harvard Family Research Project (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997) reported that many teachers and principals lack training on how to reach out to parents. Additionally, some researchers (Delpit, 2006; Kellaghan et al., 1993) emphasize the lack of effectiveness of schools to reach out to communities of color, where the ethnicity and background of the teachers often differs from that of the students. Delpit (2006) and Valdes (1996) assert that many educators and schools have placed the blame for lack of academic success on students and their families and suggest that much research and practice has supported this “deficit

model” that moves the accountability for student success away from the school and its teachers.

Teachers and school administrators need to understand how they can tap into community resources and how these resources can provide valuable time, talent, and materials that facilitate student success (Epstein et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001). Sanders (2006) suggests that goal-oriented school–community partnerships are an effective way to generate the resources that are essential for building strong learning environments in an era of shrinking educational budgets. Furthermore, the author also proposes that community-provided human and material resources can support innovative educational programs to meet the learning needs of increasingly diverse students and to promote equity in the educational opportunities available to all students. Sanders suggests, however, that many educators have an inadequate understanding of how to effectively create these community partnerships, particularly in urban communities that may differ greatly from the communities in which they live (2006). Others concur with this sentiment and also challenge teacher educators to step up to the task of preparing future teachers to partner effectively with families and community parties (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2006).

### Teacher Education Programs

Teacher education programs, aligned with state guidelines, work to ensure that their graduates are prepared to teach specific subject matter in a way that supports the academic success of all K–12 students. A key task for teacher education programs is to prepare novice teachers to utilize all available resources. These educators, for example, need to know how their teaching practices and effectiveness can be enhanced via effective connections and interfacing with the families and communities of their students and schools. Understanding the correlation between effective teacher, family, and community relations and student success, researchers (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2006; Epstein et al., 2009) argue that teacher preparation programs must deliberately focus on how teacher credential candidates understand school, family, and community partnerships. Specifically, researchers suggest that, via coursework and field experiences, graduate teacher education programs need to emphasize the respect, appreciation, trust, and collaboration between and among all of the adults who influence and affect children’s lives and learning (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). According to Epstein (2001), “there should be at least one comprehensive *required* course on school, family, and community partnerships (or home–school relations, or something similar) in every preparatory program” (p. 9). Additionally, Epstein (2001) also purports that this course should not only be required but considered as important and central as the teaching of

reading, math, or other core subjects. Furthermore, the school, family, and community partnerships course should focus on preparing teacher credential candidates to work in urban settings (Delpit, 2006).

### **Research Questions**

This investigation explored the benefits of using a graduate course to equip urban teachers with the knowledge and skills of how to effectively involve and interface with their students' families and communities. The study was guided by the following questions: (a) How does a graduate course in family and community involvement influence the way urban teachers perceive the importance of and their role in including the families and communities of their students? (b) Can such a course help to facilitate a (positive) change in teacher attitudes regarding their students' families and communities?

### **Overview of the Family and Community Involvement Course**

The goals of this course were to: (a) provide urban teacher candidates with knowledge and skills in family and community involvement, (b) prepare them to identify all available resources and learn to establish partnerships within the school community, and (c) equip them with specific strategies for building relationships and collaborating with families and the community to increase success for all students and be effective teachers in the classroom.

The course focused on family involvement, community dynamics, and community building as essential components of education. Participants were provided with theoretical models of family involvement in school (Epstein, 2006) and community building (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993), as well as effective engagement strategies from a variety of sources including readings, case studies, websites, videos, and guest speakers. Structured as a dialogical, student-centered seminar, participants were expected to continually reflect on the learning and actively engage in discussions.

Successful school reform models of parental involvement and their connection to higher student achievement were examined. The importance of learning about and building relationships with students and their families was integrated throughout the course. The graduate students had the opportunity to discuss and define their role in building strong partnerships with all families, especially those in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities of color.

The course also centered around the belief that communities cannot be rebuilt by focusing on their needs, problems, and deficiencies. Rather, community building starts with the process of locating the assets, skills, and capacities of residents, particularly families and local institutions. Course participants were engaged in utilizing asset-based community building strategies

in educational practice as they mapped their school communities to identify resources, conducted capacity inventories, and developed action plans for family and community involvement.

Finally, the course requirements included experiences in the community with organizations connected to children and families. Participants conducted interviews with various community members, volunteered at an organization that supported children, and visited programs that connected to students and their families. All of these experiences were documented in a resource notebook that the teachers submitted, along with their asset map projects that identified the resources in their school community, and personal action plans for family involvement and community building.

## Method

### Participants

Elementary and secondary urban teachers taking a graduate level course in family and community involvement at one of two different private universities (University A and University B) in Southern California participated in the study. Participants selected the course from a list of choices of required courses at the end of their 18-24 month program. Since the family and community involvement courses at University A and B were designed by the same faculty member, the courses were parallel. As University A had a much larger enrollment in its education program, there were six sections of the course offered at University A each year and one section offered at University B. Table 1 shows the number of participants for each of the four quantitative and qualitative data sources.

Table 1. Number of Participants from Universities A and B for Each of the Four Data Sources

| Data Source                              | University A | University B |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| Semantic Differential                    | 26           | 0            |
| Individual and Small Group Interviews    | 27           | 3            |
| Asset Map Projects                       | 12           | 32           |
| Written Comments from Course Evaluations | 7            | 5            |
| *Total Evaluations Analyzed              | *129         | *28          |

\*Total *N* = 157

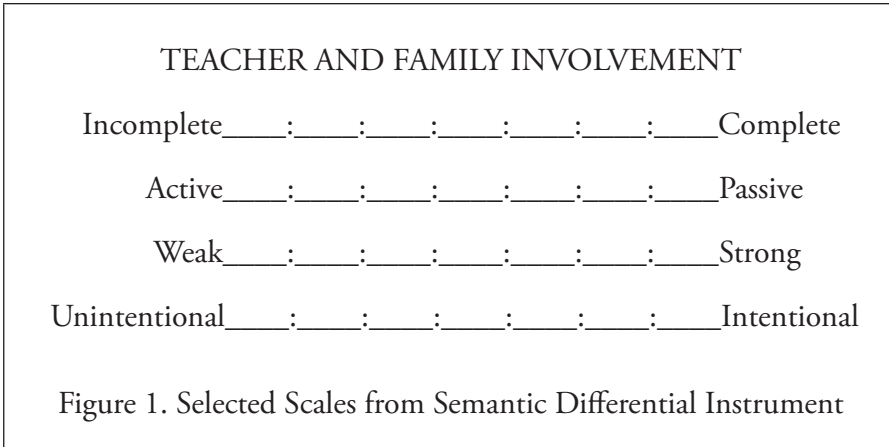
## Data Collection Procedures

### *Semantic Differential Analysis of Teacher Candidates' Attitudes Toward Family and Community Involvement*

The semantic differential has proven an effective technique for measuring a subject's attitude toward a particular concept (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). The participant is asked to select where his or her position lies on a scale between two bipolar adjectives (i.e., adequate–inadequate, good–evil, or valuable–worthless). One distinctive feature of the semantic differential is its reduction of ratings to three reoccurring attitudes that individuals use to evaluate words and phrases: evaluation, potency, and activity. Examples of bipolar adjective sets for the three dimensions of meaning include: evaluation—*good–bad*, potency—*strong–weak*, and activity—*active–passive* (Heise, 2010). When applied in a graduate university setting, the method allows for the observation of a shift in attitudes from the beginning of the course to its end (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957).

A convenience sample of 26 graduate students from two different class sections of the Family and Community Involvement course at University A completed semantic differential scales designed to measure attitudes toward four different concepts: “Family Involvement in Schools,” “The Teacher’s Role in Family Involvement,” “Community Involvement in Schools,” and “The Teacher’s Role in Community Involvement.” The sample was comprised of graduate students who were currently teaching in K–12 schools and concurrently completing requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education: Teaching (emphasis) as well the requirements for a California preliminary teaching credential. The investigators used separate semantic differential scales for each of the four concepts, with each scale consisting of nine bipolar sets of adjectives selected from Osgood’s thesaurus study (1957). The bipolar sets in each scale measured the three different dimensions of meaning—evaluation, potency, and activity—for each concept (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957). Teacher candidates completed the same semantic differential survey the first night of class as they did on the final night of class. Figure 1 depicts selected scales from the semantic differential instrument used to measure “Teacher and Family Involvement.”

Cronbach’s coefficient alpha (Crocker & Algina, 1986) was utilized for internal reliability. In addition, paired sample *t*-tests were performed on each of the scales to prove the research hypothesis that a shift in professional attitudes will occur as a consequence of participating in the Family and Community Involvement course.



*Qualitative Analysis of Students’ Perceptions of Their Experience as Teacher-Researchers*

The qualitative portion of the investigation utilized three different methods of data collection: individual and small group interviews, course evaluations, and analysis of asset maps completed by students as part of the course. All of the teacher candidates at the two universities who completed an elective course on family and community involvement over a two-year academic period were contacted by email and/or phone to participate in the study (129 teacher candidates from University A who were in 12 course sections and 28 teacher candidates from University B who were in 2 course sections,  $N = 157$ ). Those who responded were given the choice to participate in an interview or submit their asset map project. The asset map was a culminating project in which the graduate students spent several weeks in their school community investigating and identifying resources or assets (individuals, organizations, associations, and institutions). The final written report provided a historical overview as well as detailed mapping of the resources, or assets, within their school communities. Furthermore, the project included a reflection of their role in and future plans for family and community building. The sample included 30 students who participated in individual and small group interviews (27 from University A and 3 from University B) and 44 students who submitted their written asset map projects (12 from University A and 32 from University B) for analysis. In addition, the student comments from the course evaluations (129 from University A and 28 from University B) were also analyzed. Twelve of the 157 evaluations (7 from University A and 5 from University B) contained comments regarding how the course changed teacher candidates’ attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors toward family or community involvement. Triangulation of data was accomplished through the use of three separate sources of data reflecting



students' perceptions of their experiences as family and community builders. Interview conversations were tape recorded, with tapes transcribed for analysis of language content and themes (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Content analysis utilizing a constant-comparison method of the three qualitative data sets was used as the researchers agreed to participate in both an independent and collaborative process for interpreting different levels of emerging category themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the first step, a team of three researchers read and coded the data independently, making separate initial analyses of tentative open-coding patterns. Then the researchers met to discuss collaboratively the data which included one session for each source of data. At the final meeting in this step, the researchers reviewed and reflected on the three independent data sets in order to agree upon one listing of open-coding patterns for each data source. In the second step, the researchers continued their collaborative process of reviewing, reflecting, and reconfirming as they grouped the open-coding patterns around more salient, second-level axial-coding themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the third and final step in the qualitative analysis process, the researchers reviewed the listing of themes from axial coding with an eye on interpreting larger, global themes. Given the data-based themes analyzed at this point, the researchers asked themselves: What attitudinal changes, if any, emerged in teacher candidates through their experience in the Family and Community Involvement Course: (a) the nature of the change; (b) factors influencing the change; and (c) the depth of change?

## Results

### Qualitative Analysis of Interviews, Teacher Evaluations, and Asset Map Projects

After collecting the three planned sources of descriptive data—transcripts of individual and small group interviews, teacher evaluations, and asset map projects—the researchers used a two-stage process for identifying the emergent themes. As a result of the first stage, 21 patterns emerged during open coding for the interviews, 20 patterns emerged for the course evaluations; and 16 patterns emerged for the asset map projects. A summary of the first two stages, open coding [●] and axial coding [>], is depicted in Table 2.



Table 2. Open (●) Patterns and Axial (>) Themes Coded in Three Data Sources

| Interviews   | Course Evaluations  | Asset Map Projects   |
|--|---|--|
| <p>&gt;Personal Growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Life-long commitment to working with families and communities</li> <li>●Motivated to stay in the profession</li> <li>●Change in habits to promote connections with families</li> <li>●Stronger sense of self-efficacy</li> <li>●Higher expectations of self, students, and families</li> </ul>  | <p>&gt;Personal Growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Confidence grew</li> <li>●Assumed role as advocate</li> <li>●Teachers are #1 intervention</li> <li>●New view as change agent</li> <li>●Lifelong process and commitment</li> <li>●Teach from the heart</li> </ul>   | <p>&gt;Personal Growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Gained awareness of community building</li> <li>●Paradigm shift toward school as center of community</li> <li>●Accountability to make community connections</li> <li>●Duty to be optimally effective</li> </ul>                     |
| <p>&gt;Teaching Strategies &amp; Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Understand “how to” collaborate/partner with families</li> <li>●Awareness of community resources</li> <li>●Development of community guide</li> <li>●Inspired to attend community events</li> </ul>  | <p>&gt;Teaching Strategies &amp; Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Family involvement strategies</li> <li>●How to listen to families</li> <li>●Significance of collaborating with families</li> <li>●Greater preparation for teaching in a new community</li> <li>●Integration of community into the classroom</li> </ul> | <p>&gt;Teaching Strategies &amp; Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Awareness of community resources</li> <li>●Value of action plans</li> </ul>   |
| <p>&gt;Relationships with Families</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Fear was obstacle</li> <li>●Families are valuable</li> <li>●Families as partners</li> <li>●Openness to home visits</li> <li>●Role of advocate</li> <li>●Importance of authentic relationships</li> <li>●Challenge previously held assumptions regarding families</li> <li>●Specific skills to work with those in poverty</li> </ul> | <p>&gt;The Course</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Asset maps – best graduate project</li> <li>●Led to greater success</li> <li>●Motivational</li> <li>●Practical components</li> <li>●Guest speakers</li> </ul>   | <p>&gt;Advocacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Transform school culture (negativity of others)</li> <li>●Deliberate planning</li> <li>●Commitment to initiating change</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>&gt;Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Constant self-evaluation</li> </ul> |

Table 2 continued next page

| Interviews  | Course Evaluations  | Asset Map Projects  |
|---|---|---|
| <p>&gt;Relationships with Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Multi-dimensional view of students</li> <li>●Importance of authentic relationships</li> <li>●Increased confidence through successful interactions</li> </ul> | <p>&gt;Quality of Professor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Inspirational &amp; passionate</li> <li>●Role model</li> <li>●Challenging yet supportive</li> <li>●Positive attitude</li> </ul> | <p>&gt;Relationship with Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Involving students in asset mapping their community</li> <li>●Connecting students through service learning</li> </ul>   |
| <p>&gt;Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Importance of ongoing self-assessment as an educator</li> </ul>   |   | <p>&gt;Action Plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●Importance of meeting &amp; greeting families</li> <li>●Understanding families' strengths</li> <li>●Assuming role of community guide</li> <li>●Commitment to community</li> </ul> |

While reviewing the interview transcripts, the researchers observed that a majority of the participants were surprised by the nature and extent of change that had occurred through their experiences in the Family and Community Involvement course. One aspect of this surprise was *an awareness of the assets of families and the community*. Many teachers had changed from holding negative assumptions about students' families to valuing their contributions. One teacher candidate expressed:

This class really opened my eyes as to how much or how important it is to involve families and the community and how big of a role they play in our students' lives....Now I really am stepping back and looking to see; how much I am including my students' families?

Additionally, participants discovered a plethora of valuable resources in the community that they could connect to students and their families. One teacher shared, "This experience [the asset map project] has provided much insight to my community. More importantly, the insight has led me to understand how the capacities of the individuals and local organizations can unite for the enhancement of the community." Another teacher said, "It is through a shared knowledge and responsibility that the home, the school, and the community are connected in providing an appropriate, stable, and productive learning environment."

A second aspect of surprise indicated in the participants' responses was *realizing a greater awareness of their role as change agents*. They had noticed that during the course the focus lens had widened, bringing themselves into view. Their role had extended beyond the classroom to include a sense of responsibility towards family and community building and advocacy. This process relied heavily on engaging more fully and honestly in critical self-assessment. One teacher noted:

My role as an educator is crucial in forming effective partnerships between the school, my students, and the larger community that surrounds them. As I become more familiar with my school community and get involved in it as much as possible, I hope to serve as a community guide for others who may need it, especially for the large numbers of my students' families that are immigrants and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged and do not always have supportive social networks in place.

Another, also recognizing her role as change agent, reported:

In order to understand my community in greater depth, "I" must commit to initiating change at the school level. "I" must educate my students on the services that are readily available to them beyond the limitations of the school walls... "I" will initiate change by integrating students' school studies with opportunities to become active learners and contributors in their neighborhood.

A third aspect of surprise held by participants was the *nature of the change that becoming a family and community builder had on them, their students, their families, and the community*. They had not counted on the course taking them beyond learning a few ideas for increasing family and community involvement. More specifically, they had not predicted that family and community building would lead to stronger interpersonal relationships, increased communication, and the identification of networks and resources that ultimately transformed their beliefs. In recognizing the impact of community building, one participant shared her new commitment to deepen her involvement:

I hope to do more than learn about the various resources available in the community and refer my students to them. I plan to work with and between those organizations to strengthen their ability to create a supportive, integrated community. Additionally, I hope to set an example and compel my own students to think about and participate in social work and organizations within and beyond their own community.

Another who was surprised by a new level of confidence in community building reported:

I feel confident about connecting my school to the community in engaging ways that will foster relationships that will work in two ways. First, they [strategies] will make students and teachers more comfortable interacting outside the realm of academia. Secondly, this new comfort [level] will cause students and teachers to learn and teach in a way that will be more authentic and result in better academic achievement.

As a result of the course activities, these teachers deepened their perspectives about the level of family and community building in which they would engage.

In the second stage of analysis (axial coding), the researchers derived a set of more salient themes, each grounded in the patterns that emerged from the open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the interviews, 5 themes emerged during open coding, 4 themes emerged for the course evaluations, and 6 themes emerged for the asset map projects.

As depicted in Table 2, most of the themes derived from axial coding identified a congruent set of open coding patterns. A few themes from axial coding (“Reflection,” “Teaching Strategies and Tools,” and “Relationships with Students”) were supported by only one or two open coding categories. The determination of these distinctive themes was based on their importance or gravity, not on an arbitrary number of related, open coding patterns.

Further review of Table 2 reveals that two themes from the axial coding occur across the three sources of data. In all three data sources, the researchers found that teachers valued a change in their “Personal Growth” and “Teaching Strategies and Tools.” Across two data sources, they found that teachers perceived a heightened awareness in their “Reflection” and “Relationship with Students.”

For the third and final stage in the qualitative analysis process, the researchers reviewed the listing of themes from axial coding with an eye on interpreting larger, global themes. Given the data-based themes analyzed so far, they asked themselves: *What best characterizes the more global nature of the participants' fundamental changes?* As depicted in Table 3, three distinctive global themes emerged: Teachers in the study were documenting “Change in Professional Knowledge and Skills,” “Change in Professional Dispositions,” and “Change in Authentic Relationships.”

Table 3. Global Themes of Teacher Change Emerging from Three Qualitative Data Sources

| Emerging Global Themes                             | Descriptors of Themes   |
|--|---|
| <b>Change in Professional Knowledge and Skills</b> | Teachers were seeing a change in themselves as having <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• greater awareness of community resources</li> <li>• developed specific actions plans for themselves and their students</li> <li>• more confidence in communication and community building</li> <li>• a deeper understanding of the impact of diversity on families and communities and seeking effective strategies to increase student achievement</li> </ul> |
| <b>Change in Professional Dispositions</b>         | Teachers were seeing a change in themselves as having <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• enhanced accountability to students, families, and communities</li> <li>• a deeper commitment to being lifelong advocates of families and communities</li> <li>• increased reflection</li> <li>• a greater value for the assets of families and communities</li> <li>• a greater appreciation of other voices</li> </ul>                                       |
| <b>Change in Authentic Relationships</b>           | Teachers were seeing a change in themselves as having <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased partnerships with families and their communities to benefit students</li> <li>• broader communication networks among home, school, and community</li> </ul>  |

### Analysis of Semantic Differential Results

The semantic differential study consisted of 36 scales measuring four concepts: “Family Involvement in Schools,” “The Teacher’s Role in Family Involvement,” “Community Involvement in Schools,” and “The Teacher’s Role in Community Involvement.” Each of the four concepts consisted of nine scales for a total of 36 included in the data analysis. Pre-test and post-test data were collected for 26 participants enrolled in two sections of a masters level graduate course in family and community involvement, and paired sample *t*-tests were performed on each of the scales. Table 4 depicts the Cronbach’s coefficient alpha (Crocker & Algina, 1986) for the semantic differential subscales indicating internal reliability.

Table 4. Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient of Semantic Differential Subscales

| Concepts                                | Pre Survey | Post Survey |
|---|------------|-------------|
| Family Involvement in Schools           | .711       | .835        |
| Teacher’s Role in Family Involvement    | .590       | .788        |
| Community Involvement in Schools        | .834       | .689        |
| Teacher’s Role in Community Involvement | .909       | .867        |

Table 5 shows results, indicating that two scales yielded differences between the pre-test and post-test that were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), one scale was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), and one scale had a  $p$  value = .058 ( $N = 28$ ). Results suggest that participants viewed their role in all four areas regarding family and community involvement as more active, important, and stronger as a result of their course experiences.

Table 5. Comparison of Semantic Differential Pre-test to Post-test Results – Paired Sample Statistics

| Concepts                             | <i>N</i> | Pre Mean | Pre Std. Deviation | Post Mean | Post Std. Deviation | <i>t</i> value | Significance <i>p</i> value |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|--------------------|-----------|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| Parent Involvement in Schools        | 26       | 41.14    | 8.10               | 51.38     | 7.65                | -7.25          | $p < .001$                  |
| Teacher’s Role in Parent Involvement | 26       | 43.28    | 4.51               | 50.28     | 7.91                | -4.65          | $p < .001$                  |
| Community Involvement in Schools     | 26       | 44.75    | 6.71               | 48.10     | 5.88                | -2.02          | $p = .058$                  |
| Teacher’s Role in Community          | 26       | 43.95    | 7.59               | 48.55     | 7.96                | -2.33          | $p < .05$                   |

## Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the benefits of using teacher preparation coursework to equip urban teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to involve the families and communities of their students and schools. The semantic differential results (Table 5) indicate a statistically significant increase in course participants’ pre- and post-course perceptions of the importance of and their role in each of four areas: (a) Family Involvement in Schools, (b) Teacher and Family Involvement, (c) Community Involvement

in Schools, and (d) Teacher and Community Involvement. Teacher education programs that deliberately focus on understanding school, family, and community partnerships through coursework and field experiences can transform teacher candidates' sense of value for collaboration among adults. After taking these courses, teachers often realize the significance of their role and how they can influence partnerships. The result can be enhanced respect, appreciation, trust, and collaboration among all who influence and affect students' learning and lives (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009; Henderson et al., 2007; Sanders, 2006).

Teacher education courses are typically designed to provide candidates with new knowledge and skills in a variety of areas that prepare them to be effective teachers in the classroom. The school, family, and community partnerships course in this study, likewise, accomplished this goal as evident in the first global theme in the qualitative data (Table 3). Preparing new teachers to utilize all available resources within the school community is important (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2006). Additionally, equipping them with specific strategies for building relationships and collaborating with families and the community can lead to increased success for all students (Epstein et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001). "When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7).

Perhaps more difficult for schools of education, however, is providing courses and experiences for teacher candidates that challenge their belief systems and result in a change in dispositions. This research study affirms the importance of offering courses in family, community, school partnerships in order for teacher candidates to gain a greater appreciation for this collaboration. Two of the global themes emerging from the qualitative data highlight the changes in teacher dispositions (Table 3) as a result of the course experience. Furthermore, these courses should also focus on preparing teacher credential candidates to work in urban settings (Delpit, 2006; Sanders, 2006; Valdez, 1996) which may be very different from their own communities. When teachers value and appreciate the contributions of families and the community, authentic relationships can be built that result in enhanced educational opportunities for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2007; Epstein, 2001).

## **Implications for Action and Further Study**

This research can be used to inform both teacher educators and school administrators as they assist in the ongoing professional development of urban



teachers. Evidence supports integrating a family and community involvement course into all teacher education programs as well as into school district professional development programs. Family and community involvement courses must be designed to prompt educators to transform beliefs and practices in ways that nurture and promote the success of all students by including all stakeholders, particularly those who are most connected to the students, their families and neighbors.

Further research can and should be done to see if the findings of this study are generalizable beyond the context of the two universities where this course was taught. Additionally, further research is needed to see if other university-based courses with similar objectives are equally as effective at facilitating changes in teachers' professional knowledge and skills; their professional dispositions; and their authentic relationships with students, their families, and the community.

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