

The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative: Preparing Preservice Teachers for Family/School Collaboration

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The first open house for parents was scheduled for September 15, and new teacher Lela Martin was nervous. Just having enough time to get her classroom under control, she was faced with a new and uncertain situation. When parents started asking her questions like:

- “When will he start reading?”
- “Are you married? Have any kids?”
- “What’s wrong with phonics anyway?”
- “May I see your gradebook?”

Ms. Martin was unprepared. With no classes about parent involvement and no training in handling difficult questions, she struggled through the evening. On her way home, she wondered why her undergraduate program had ignored this critical part of her professional role.

Most new teachers are surprised to find that interacting with parents is a tense and often frightening experience if they are not prepared. Their perceptions of parent involvement may be shaped by these early contacts, and often influence their attitudes toward parent involvement for the rest of their career.

The joint supportive roles of the home and the school have been recognized since the beginning of schooling. Families shape the critical first few years of the child’s life and influence all aspects of their development. Schools, through teachers, have the designated responsibility for educating the children. They also have the obligation for building partnerships

with the families so that the education process is optimized. The need for school/home communication is fairly constant over time, but how parents and teachers interact is influenced by the circumstances of the time. Changes in the school/home relationship arise from changes in society and in our notions of schooling. Among the influential factors that shape the current situation are the rapid changes in family structure, parental roles, and economic demands (Perry & Tannenbaum, 1992). On the school side, the movement toward bureaucratic school management, larger schools, and the professionalization of teachers all seem to play a part. These forces and movements have produced a frustrating irony; everyone recognizes the need for better parent involvement (Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1993), but not much changes from year to year (Decker, Gregg & Decker, 1994). In this paper we look at the initial preparation of teachers to engage families in these partnerships. Our focus comes from our belief that teachers rarely do well in what they are not well-prepared to do. Our presentation will survey the preparedness of the current teaching force, analyze results from an evaluation of one college's efforts to improve teacher education, and suggest ways to expand and improve parent involvement through preservice teacher preparation programs.

Opportunity Lost

If there are gaps between family influence on development and what the schools are trying to do, there are lost opportunities to maximize the educational success for the child (Riley, 1997; Bradley, 1997). If parents are not aware of what teachers expect from students, they are not likely to reinforce or extend the school objectives at home and in the community. When teachers are unaware of home or community characteristics, they cannot capitalize on the out-of-school experience to energize the school curriculum. When teachers and parents miscommunicate it is often the student that has to interpret or even mediate the differences. At the most extreme, parents and teachers may find themselves at cross purposes if they do not have frequent communication.

The literature is replete with cries for expanding and improving parent involvement in children's education, and virtually everyone recognizes the importance of synergy between families and teachers (Henderson & Berla, 1995). Some even estimate that the out-of-school variables of the home and community are more powerful predictors of student success than the in-school variables of curriculum and instruction (e.g., Coleman, et. al., 1966; Mosteller & Moynihan, 1972). The parents themselves recognize the gaps, fully seventy percent think they and other parents should be "more involved" (Farkas, et al., 1999). It falls to the teacher to either compensate

for an absence of support from student homes or to initiate strategies that will improve the interaction between home and classroom. This does not seem to be an unreasonable professional expectation. But when you look at the preparation of teachers, you find that the vast majority of teachers in today's classrooms *have little or no preparation in parent or community involvement* (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Imig, 1995).

The Gap in Teacher Preparation

The benchmark study of teacher education for parent involvement was conducted by Chavkin and Williams (1988). They surveyed teacher educators in six Southern and Southwestern states and found only 4% taught a complete course about parent involvement to preservice teachers. Of these teacher educators, 82.8% thought such a course should be required. A 1992 survey by Young and Hite (cited in Stamp & Groves, 1994) confirmed this very low rate of course offerings on family involvement. They searched 973 teacher preparation programs and found that there were very few that fully prepared teachers to work with families. With such a small percentage of professors teaching and colleges offering a course, we can infer that an equally small percentage of graduating teachers had any preparation to engage families in their children's education.

The requirements for teacher education also reflect low interest and low expectations. Since teacher education licensure is controlled by each state, the requirements of content and emphasis must be examined state by state. In 1994, when the Minnesota Center for Social Change surveyed state parent involvement training requirements, they found that only three states (Iowa, Minnesota and Virginia) required coursework in parent involvement for elementary teachers. No states had this requirement for secondary teachers (Richardson, 1994). In the Harvard study of teacher education, Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez (1997) reviewed the 1992 requirements for all fifty states and the District of Columbia. Many of the requirement statements did not even mention phrases like "parent and community involvement". Those states that had some expectation for training in this area were almost all focused on the elementary level. The authors of this comprehensive national study concluded that preparing teachers for family involvement was not a high priority, and was lagging behind other reform movements and school practice.

Parent involvement was also virtually absent in the teacher certification exams. Greenwood & Hankins (1989) found that only 1.94% of the 826 competencies measured by tests such as the National Teachers Exam dealt with "extra-classroom influences" including parent involvement. Piphon (1997) reported on the assessment of teacher training in parent involvement by the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. The survey

of licensure requirements in the 50 states concluded that not many states require teachers (or administrators) to study parent involvement or to develop skills that will promote parent partnerships. Less than one third of the states had any stated requirements, and many of these were vague or unfocused. Radcliffe, Malone, and Nathan (1994) summarized the status of teacher preparation in parent involvement, stating: "Teachers and school personnel report that they have received little training on ways to help parents get more involved in their child's education" (p. 148).

In the mid-1990s, there was a hint that the teacher preparation situation may be changing. Young and Hite (1994) conducted a national study and found:

- one-fifth of teacher education institutions still offered no parent involvement preparation;
- a few colleges "include some parent involvement content" in five or more courses;
- 79.1% of teacher education programs "offer one or more courses that include content dealing with parent involvement" (p. 157).

These results must be viewed carefully, since "including some parent involvement content" is not clearly defined. *Offering* a course is not the same as making parent involvement training a requirement for all prospective teachers. Survey results like these from the colleges themselves often reflect an overly-optimistic view of the preparation program. At many universities, the drive to add an academic major to undergraduate professional education for teachers has either reduced the availability of parent involvement courses or prevented the addition of requirements to an already full curriculum. Taken together, only a small percentage of currently practicing teachers had even minimal preparation to work effectively with student families over the past thirty years, and the nation's teaching force entered the profession quite unprepared. Stamp and Groves (1994) said the effect of this situation is that teachers "... may feel that they are left to their own devices when it comes to working with parents and, consequently, may feel that what they know was learned at the expense of mistakes and miscalculation." (p. 6). Teachers and administrators recognize the absence of training. In their six-year study conducted in southwestern states, Chavkin and Williams (1988) reported that 86.6% of 575 teachers said they needed more undergraduate training on parent involvement. Becker and Epstein (1982) also reported that teachers perceive themselves as being poorly prepared to engage parents in the education of their children. Scales found that about half of a random sample of 439 teachers thought that their preparation in parent involvement was inadequate (Gursky, 1991). The National Center for Education Statistics reported a similar finding: 48%

of teachers in a national sample from 900 schools cited the absence of training as the second most influential barrier to better parent involvement (Burns, 1998).

The absence of initial training and experience working with parents is connected to what teachers do to involve families in their schools. The landmark studies by Epstein (1983) and Becker and Epstein (1982) established the following relationships:

- Teachers who involve parents are much less likely to form negative stereotypes about parents and families.
- The more often teachers interact with parents, the more positive are their attitudes about parent involvement and listening to parent input.
- Teachers who learned the values of parent involvement were more likely to overcome barriers and obstacles to school/home interaction.

These relationships were originally conceptualized in the Rand *Change Agent* studies (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977) as *teacher efficacy*. In these studies, efficacy was found to be the most powerful variable in predicting the success of program implementation.

More recently, Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler and Brissie (1987) pursued the topic of *efficacy* applied to parent involvement. They concluded that teachers who had gained confidence and skills in parent involvement were more likely to engage in parent involvement activities. It follows that teachers who have not had knowledge and skill training during their teacher preparation are likely to have low confidence (efficacy) and therefore are less likely to initiate positive parent relationships.

After teachers begin their professional service, support for their parent involvement activities does not get much better (Brand, 1996). Secretary of Education Richard Riley noted: "Schools and school systems seldom offer staff any formal training in collaborating with parents or in understanding the varieties of modern family life" (Riley, 1994). Moles (1993) said that: "This lack of initial training is not compensated by inservice training except in the rare school district, so most teachers must rely on their accumulated experience in dealing with parents" (p. 32). It is no wonder that 90% of teachers believe that lack of parent support is a big problem in their schools (Olson, 1988). Unprepared teachers are unlikely to positively engage parents and build the relationships between school and home. Shimoni (1991) argued that the specialized knowledge and skills of parent involvement are particularly needed by early childhood education professionals – those teachers who influence children and families early. There is little question that teachers should be prepared to work effectively with families, and that the preparation ought to be part of their preservice teacher education.

The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative

For more than ten years, Peabody College of Vanderbilt University has had a “parent involvement” course as a required part of the undergraduate teacher education program. The course (“Parents and their Developing Children”) is required for all students seeking certification in early childhood education (pre-k through grade three) and often elected by elementary and some secondary education majors. The three-semester hour course is consistent with current recommendations to prepare teachers for family involvement. The course was routinely taught by both of the investigators in the study, accompanied by frequent joint planning and occasional team teaching.

Conceptual framework of the program

The following themes were emphasized throughout the PFII:

- All families are unique and to be respected.
- All families have strengths.
- The family is the child’s first and most important teacher.
- Family/school collaboration is important in maximizing a child’s potential.
- Family involvement includes activities both at school and home.
- Family/school activities are effective when they strengthen the relationships between the child and family as well as address the teacher’s needs.

The Peabody Family Involvement Initiative (PFII) involved three major components: 1) general knowledge, 2) skills, and 3) authentic “real life” settings. These components were based on themes that addressed families, family-school collaboration, and developmental issues of children in their preschool and early elementary years. Themes pertaining to families include every family as unique, having strengths, and respected as being their child’s first teacher. The concept of “family” is presented as constituting many different structures (e.g., two-parent, single, blended, divorced, adoptive) with the child’s primary caregiver being a parent, sibling, relative, friend, foster parent, etc. Each family is perceived as having their own shared values, priorities, roles and relationships in raising children; that is, their own culture. Culture is defined according to Goodenough (1981), a cultural anthropologist, as “shared expectations of standards people hold for perceiving, believing, acting, evaluating and communicating”. Our program operates from a “cultural competence” approach that views the school as an inclusive, respectful setting where diversity is welcomed. A family systems theory is presented to help prospective teachers better

understand the roles and relationships within a family unit and how the impact of the school environment affects families in different ways. An ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is used to organize the complexity of biological, psychological, social, cultural, and economic information to better understand how forces of the environment besides the family directly or indirectly influence a child's growth. By perceiving each child's family as an individual unit and part of a larger system, family involvement is discussed as activities both inside and outside of the classroom that build on family strengths and foster collaboration with the school.

In the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative, these themes are first addressed in a one-semester university course called "Parents and their Developing Children." This class is most often taken by students during their sophomore or junior year. During the course, family/school collaboration strategies are taught that are representative of Epstein's six family involvement categories. According to Epstein, schools have a responsibility to:

1. provide families the skills and knowledge needed to help their children at each age level;
2. communicate with families through notes, telephone calls, conferences, and other types of communication;
3. include parents as volunteers and assistants in the classrooms and other areas of school;
4. guide parents so they can "assist their own children" through monitoring, discussing, and helping with homework;
5. involve parents in decision making; and
6. draw on community resources, social agencies, health services, and businesses, and provide programs that give children and families the support that they need.

These Epstein "typologies" (Decker, Gregg, & Decker, 1996) have become widely-used frameworks for studying parent involvement, and are also the sources of the PTA's National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs (National PTA, 1997). One of the goals of PFII is to prepare preservice teachers to work in a wide range of schools so they can effectively implement traditional family involvement approaches that are common in many schools as well as use new and innovative approaches occurring less often. Some of these strategies were taught by course assignments, lectures, and exercises. Two examples of traditional strategies are role playing parent/teacher conferences and developing class newsletters. Examples of more innovative strategies are using electronic voice mail and interviewing families in their homes.

The third component involves a “theory into practice” approach where preservice teachers have an opportunity through course assignments and student teaching placements to implement some of the concepts and strategies they were taught in the course into “real-life” situations. We developed a list of approximately 14 family/school activities in conjunction with the Coordinator of Student Teaching, which became part of the expectations for the student teaching experience. This list was developed from the themes of PFII. Preservice teachers selected or adapted activities from this list and implemented them during their 15 weeks of classroom placements. These activities were supervised by Peabody’s teacher education program and the cooperating teachers at their assigned schools. The “practice” component allows students to translate the content learned in the course to the reality of the classroom situation. Incidentally, we also found that student teachers tried out some practices that were not regular routines of their placement school or cooperating teacher.

The Present Study

Purpose

In 1998, we decided to examine several questions about the PFII and to evaluate program effects as teachers left the university and became teachers. The main purpose was to gain a better understanding of how students felt about family involvement and what activities they used after completing the PFII experience. It was our intention to study the immediate effects of PFII as students ended the course, follow-up with student teachers, and also gather data from teachers in the field.

Research Questions

To better understand how students felt and what activities they used after completing the PFII experience, we pursued the following question areas:

1. What are the attitudes about parent involvement activities of teacher education students and graduates after completing a parent-involvement training program (PFII)?
2. Which strategies and approaches did student teachers and classroom teachers think are important and feasible?
3. Which strategies and approaches did classroom teachers actually use in their schools?
4. Were there differences in the parent involvement attitudes and practices between subjects who completed the PFII and those who

had no specific training?

PFI Survey Development

We developed survey instruments (based on earlier studies) that assessed teacher attitudes and parent involvement strategies. Many of the survey constructs were originally derived from Epstein's typologies of parent involvement by Gifford (1991). The "efficacy" elements originated with Gibson (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) and Ashton (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Gifford used data from her survey to assess the effects of student teaching on the attitudes of the student teachers in a college setting where there was no coursework on parent involvement. While Gifford found "no significant differences" in attitudes before and after student teaching, she noted a trend toward less positive attitudes after completing student teaching. This is not surprising in view of the lack of preservice coursework, training and practice. Unprepared student teachers faced the same situation that unprepared first-year teachers experience; uncertainty, confusion, anxiety and the beginnings of negative attitudes about parent and family involvement.

In another study of parent involvement attitudes of preservice teachers, Tichenor (1995) developed a Likert-type instrument that was adapted from one developed by McBride (1991). In the Tichenor study, the subjects at two universities took a parent involvement course before student teaching. She found that they had generally positive attitudes about the Epstein categories, but that the group did not feel well prepared to conduct parent involvement activities during student teaching. A comparison group of student teachers who did not take a course felt even less prepared. Foster and Loven (1992) also used a Likert-type questionnaire and the efficacy construct to evaluate the beliefs and perspectives about parent involvement of undergraduate students at Memphis State University.

Two different versions of the survey were designed to sample the different experiences of preservice and inservice teachers. The first form addressed nine general family involvement activities that were consistent with Epstein's model, the skill/content/practice construct promoted by the U.S. Department of Education, the content of the course, and studies regarding the types of activities being implemented in the schools (Bauch, 1994). These activities were:

1. introductory activities
2. written communications
3. telephone calls
4. volunteers
5. meeting with parents who have children with special needs

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6. home visits
7. recorded messages
8. decision-making meetings
9. parent/teacher conferences.

Each type of family involvement activity had two corresponding categories in a Likert scale response. The first category addressed the teacher's attitude and perceived feasibility in implementing this activity. The second corresponding category addressed their preparation towards implementing the activity. Likert-like scales have typically been used to sample these concepts (Guskey & Passaro, 1992). The first and second groups of preservice teachers received this survey with the only difference being the cover letter acknowledging their roles as students completing the course "Parents and their Developing Children" or student teachers completing their classroom placements.

The third group, the inservice teachers, received a modified survey. The main differences between the two surveys focused on the inservice teachers *implementation* of these identified parent/school activities. For example, all three groups were asked to respond to the family involvement activity of involving family members as volunteers in the classroom. Groups one and two were asked to respond to the importance and feasibility of this activity. Group three was asked to provide information about their use of the strategy, noting how many families were involved as volunteers in the classroom and in what capacity.

The survey was piloted with both preservice and inservice teachers. Interviews were held with each of the participants after they completed the survey. We used pilot tests to obtain feedback regarding duplication of content among the questions and unclear or incomplete directions. We were also interested in the participants' written comments. The revised version included ample space to elaborate on their preparedness and reasons for the extent of their implementing specific strategies.

Sample

Three groups of preservice and inservice teachers were asked to complete surveys during the 1997-1998 school year. The first group included students who had just completed the course "Parents and their Developing Children." These sixty-seven students were primarily undergraduates receiving certification in either early childhood or elementary education. Some were receiving dual certification in early childhood or elementary education as well as special education. Other students who took the course were majors in Child Development, Special Education or Human Organization & Development.

The second group of sixty-six students was composed of prospective teachers who were completing 15 weeks in classroom placements as “student teachers”. All of these students had completed a parent/school collaboration course. The third group consisted of teachers who had graduated and received teaching certification from Peabody College within the last three years. Members of this group had teaching experience from one - three years. About 210 surveys were mailed to the practicing teachers with sixty-nine (33%) returned. Of the returned surveys, thirty-three teachers had taken the course “Parents and their Developing Children.” Eight had taken another type of parent course as part of their special education training. Data from this small group were not included unless their responses added significantly to the overall results.

Limitations of the Study

A few of the students who took the course were not preparing to be teachers. We included their responses because they completed the same requirements and experiences as the teacher preparation group. Their responses were not dissimilar from the other students in the course.

A second limitation was in the limited opportunity to influence prospective teachers toward excellent family involvement. We offered one course plus application during student teaching. The Harvard Family Research Project on preparing teachers to work with families suggested that training should be taught on a gradual basis, through a number of methods, and spread throughout the teacher education curricula (Shartrand, et al., 1997). They point out that one course is not enough, especially when family involvement content is not integrated in other courses on related subjects. A third limitation was the measurement strategy. Survey instruments reflect the self-perceptions of the respondent and are difficult to verify or validate.

Results

The results of this survey are organized under three themes: preparation, activity types, and family participation. This grouping reflects the sequence of events for participants in the study; undergraduate preparation for parent involvement, activities selected by teachers and the number of families engaged in these activities.

Preservice Preparation Results

Sixty-seven undergraduate students who had just taken the course “Parents and their Developing Children” completed the survey. In addition, sixty-six preservice teachers who had just completed their student teaching

placement completed a similar survey.

Scores are reported according to the preservice teachers’ responses on the Likert scale from one to four: one being *strongly disagree* and four being *strongly agree*. Both groups of preservice teachers thought all nine of the parent involvement activities were important. Ninety-four percent of their responses were either three or four. The lowest items for students who took the course were eighty-four percent agree/strongly agree for *unscheduled parent/teacher conferences* and eighty-two percent for making *phone calls* to parents. The lowest scores for the student teachers were for the *home visit* activity (seventy-five percent), *recorded messages* (eighty-two percent), and *unscheduled meetings* (eighty-five percent).

Table 1: Preservice teachers’ feasibility ratings by activity

Both groups of preservice teachers demonstrated a slight variability in their ratings of feasibility for implementing certain family involvement activities. Table 1 shows the way the activities were ranked by undergraduates and student teachers.

Type of activity	Preservice UG	Student teachers
Introductory activities	97%	94%
Written communications	96%	97%
Meetings with parents of children with special needs	97%	93%
Scheduled parent/teacher conferences	98%	99%
Recorded hotline messages	94%	79%
Phone calls to parents	86%	74%
Volunteers	88%	86%
Committees	84%	84%
Home visits	65%	38%

The ratings with the most variability between preservice undergraduates and student teachers were in their perceptions of their *preparedness*. Students who had just completed the course thought they were most prepared to implement introductory activities, written communication, recorded messages, volunteers, and parent/teacher conferences. They felt less prepared to make phone calls, participate in committees, home visits, and special needs meetings. Few of the preservice students checked “No preparation” for any of the parent involvement activities. Student teachers rated themselves “very prepared” at the same or at a higher percentage than the students who had just completed the course on introductory activities, written communications, phone calls, and special education meetings.

Feasibility and Preparation Summary

Preservice teachers thought all the parent involvement activities were important. Their perceptions of feasibility varied. Students considered themselves most prepared for introductory activities, written communication, recorded messages, volunteers, and parent/teacher conference. All nine activities were addressed in the class, but these specific activities were given more emphasis. In spite of special attention in the course, students still thought they needed more training in all of the activities. Their perceived need for more training could be due to the need for a better understanding of a teacher's role and the reality of the school setting. Discrepancies in perceptions among student teachers could result from variety in their student teaching settings. Some classroom teachers may do more and expect more parent involvement activities than others. For example, only five student teachers went on a home visit during their student teaching placement. Student teacher anecdotal remarks regarding the feasibility of home visits focused on barriers to implementation, such as "considered too time consuming" and "can be hazardous in certain areas. I've heard many a horror story."

Types of Parent Involvement Activities by Certified Teachers

The types of parent involvement activities have been categorized in several different ways (Bauch, 1994). The Epstein "typologies" are the most popular, and influenced how the course was designed in this study. What teachers do to engage parents is influenced by their initial training (or lack of preparation) and the activities that are present in the schools where teachers work. If a teacher is well prepared to interact with parents at an "open house" event and the school does not have open house meetings, the teacher might report high preparation but low use of this activity. If the class does not emphasize meeting with parents of children with special needs and the school requires teachers to attend all IEP and other "staffing" meetings, the teacher may feel rather unprepared and report that they often do this activity.

In the present study we organized teacher responses under the activities and separated by whether they took the parent involvement course or had no course. The percentage of each group that used the most popular activities is shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Teachers' use of activity types

Activity type	Took course	No course
Introductory activities	81%	72%
Written notes	73%	77%

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Telephone calls	97%	96%
Special education meetings	79%	85%
Parent/teacher conference	88%	85%
Volunteers	63%	42%
Decision & advisory committees	49%	46%
Recorded messages	42%	27%
Home visits	12%	6%

Preparation

All the practicing teachers who took the course "Parents and their Developing Children" stated they were "very prepared" more often than the teachers who didn't take the course in all of the nine parent involvement activities sampled. Graph #1 shows the difference between the two groups: sixty-nine percent of the people who took the course said they were "well prepared" and only thirty percent of the non-course takers reported that they felt well prepared. Preparation for home visits was the one exception, where neither group felt well prepared.

When asked if they "need more preparation" to engage in parent involvement activities, both course-takers and non-course-takers stated that they needed more training. Teachers who did not take the course responded most often to "need more training" or "no preparation". Seventy-three percent of the teachers with no course felt that they need more preparation; sixty percent of the teachers who had the course felt this same lack of preparation. There was one inconsistent finding about preparation. For home visits and decision/advisory committee activities, none of the teachers who did not take the course reported that they needed more training. Only one teacher responded that s/he was "very prepared" to conduct home visits and participate in committees. The other teachers reported "no preparation."

Over half of the teachers who took the course stated they needed "more training" in meetings with families who had children with special needs. Anecdotal comments referred to the need for more training in this activity specifically in the referral and prereferral process. Other anecdotal remarks from the surveys highlight how the course helped prepare these teachers to implement parent involvement activities:

"I have referred back to my notes often especially during conference times."

"I felt very prepared for these (parent/teacher conferences). I still remember the clues and role playing from the class. They helped me to prepare."

"This class was one of my favorite courses because it was so practical and thorough. I have definitely put the information I learned to active use."

The handouts are still in my file and I also refer to my Parent Involvement Report . . .”

Family Participation

Teachers were also asked about the number of families in their child’s classroom that were involved in a specific parent involvement activity. This information was elicited for all of the nine activities except for meetings regarding students who have special needs and participation in decision making meetings. Graph 2 shows the percentage of teachers reporting that they reached “most or all” families by activity types, comparing data for teachers who completed a parent involvement course and those with no course.

In home visits, of the 6 teachers who took the course 83% (5) reached few families and 17% (1) reached all of the families. The 4 teachers who didn’t take the course but were engaging in home visits all were reaching few or less than half of the families. It is interesting to note that the small number of teachers who took a “families” course through the Department of Special Education conducted more home visits and reached more families than other respondents. Historically, home visits have been considered a more acceptable strategy in early intervention and early childhood/special education. Teachers who made phone calls were asked to respond to the number of phone calls they made regarding positive news about their child and about student problems. Teachers who took the course reached 25% of their families (most or all) with positive news whereas teachers who didn’t take the course reached 28% of the families (most or all). Ten percent of the

Graph 1: Well prepared in nine parent involvement activities

Graph 2: Most or all families involved in parent involvement activities

teachers who took the course called most of their families about student problems; 13% who didn't take the course called families called about student problems. Neither groups called all of their families about student problems. One explanation of the similar responses by both groups of teachers is the ambivalence teachers noted about dealing with negative issues in general. Many anecdotal remarks focused on apprehension to face-to-face interaction with parents and "being nervous about approaching negative issues."

The other parent involvement activities used less often by the teachers were those that only some schools have instituted such as recorded messages or home visits. Recorded messages depends on the availability of voice messaging technology and is rarely the decision of an individual teacher. Home visits are infrequently used as school-wide strategies, and may depend on the level of interest and commitment of individual teachers.

In addition, teachers may engage in other activities that are up to the discretion of the individual teachers as to their implementation such as "parents as volunteers". Teachers may engage in routine activities due to school policy or tradition but they may initiate parent volunteer activities to a greater extent (reaching more families) when they are more prepared to do so (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995.) Teachers who took the course reached more families for introductory activities, voice mail, and volunteers

than those who did not take the course.

Summary

Preparation of preservice teachers for parent involvement activities can have an influence on how they feel about parent involvement and what they do as practicing classroom teachers. Our study concluded that the parent involvement activities teachers most engaged in were introductory home/school activities, written progress notes to families, calling family members by phone, participating in a meeting with a parent who has a child with special needs, and conducting parent teacher conferences. These are activities that are traditionally part of many school programs and policies. In fact, teachers are likely to engage in the parent involvement activities that are valued or expected in the local school culture (Brand, 1996). For example, if the school sets a high priority on family literacy, it is likely that teachers would report being engaged in these activities *regardless of their preservice preparation*. The other parent involvement activities less often selected by the teachers were those that only some schools have instituted such as recorded messages or home visits. Even though we emphasized these topics in the course, individual teachers are not likely to start innovative practices in schools where those practices do not exist (or where special technology or policies are absent).

On the other hand, teachers may engage in activities that are up to the discretion of the individual teachers as to their implementation such as “parents as volunteers”. Teachers may engage in activities due to policy but they may engage in an activity to a greater extent (reaching more families) when they are more prepared to do so. Teachers who implement activities that are not part of regular school programs may reach a higher number of families due to their preparation for specific activities. Teachers who took the course actually reached more families in their classes than teachers who did not take the course for introductory activities, voice mail, and volunteers.

Teachers who took the course reported at a higher rate than teachers who did not take the course that they were more prepared to implement parent involvement activities. However, teachers who took the course still stated that they needed more preparation. This response indicates that a one semester course is insufficient to prepare teachers for parent involvement activities and that ongoing inservice training may be pertinent to meeting these needs.

Implications for Practice

We found that a fairly traditional plan (one course plus student teaching

practice) had a positive effect on the way teacher education students perceive and value family involvement in childrens' education. This element of the undergraduate teacher education program also carried over into teaching practice, where teachers who were involved in PFII reported that they were using many of the strategies in their schools. This seems to show that many other teacher education programs could follow this pattern without major revision of their curricula. While it might require the addition of one more required course, the value of preparing teachers to work with families far outweighs the inconvenience of a minor change in teacher education programs. Another minor change that could be done in any teacher education program is the selection of student teaching placements according to the kind and level of parent involvement present in those classrooms. The formal expectations for student teaching (often written in a "student teacher handbook") should specify a number of parent involvement activities that the student should practice while in the field.

A more comprehensive approach was suggested by Foster and Loven, where they recommended:

- include more parent involvement preparation systematically throughout the teacher education program;
- placing students in field experiences where they can interact with families of varying socioeconomic levels and ethnic backgrounds;
- engage students in practice of parent communication strategies during their undergraduate program; and
- plan additional training and support related to parent involvement for teachers during their first few years in the profession (Foster & Loven, 1992).

We agree with these recommendations and believe that a more systematic and integrated approach to parent involvement preparation would further improve the performance of beginning teachers. The challenge of working effectively with the parents of their students is serious, and beginning teachers deserve to be fully equipped to build partnerships with families.

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