

Someone's Most Precious Darling: Building the Home-School Connection in Preservice Teacher Education Programs

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Blame it on lousy Maine weather. The inspiration for the "Home-School Connection" project came two years ago, on a dreary December afternoon in 1998 when sleet and freezing rain were streaming outside the windows in Brenda's university office. She was waiting for her last student conference of the day, scheduled for an hour later. As the weather deteriorated, she finally decided to call the student and see about rescheduling later in the week. After looking up the phone number, Brenda realized the student lived on a street not far from her own home. She called and volunteered to stop in for a brief conference at his home in an hour, rather than making him drive on the slick roads to campus.

Jefferson was as formal a student as his name implies. He had entered the M.A.T. program that summer, attempting to shift to a teaching career after a short stint as a geological engineer. He was a cipher as a student—extremely quiet in person, strongly opinionated on paper. It was a surprise and delight to meet him that afternoon at home. A big black Lab sat at his feet, the wood stove roared out heat. While Jefferson's wife worked quietly in the corner, telecommuting to her editing job in Chicago, we talked for over an hour. After thirty minutes, his wife joined us for a cup of tea. Brenda saw a side of Jefferson that was only revealed when he let down his guard in an environment where he was truly comfortable—home.

We talk all the time about the importance of building home-school connections as we work with preservice teachers. There is a wide base of research to support these exhortations (see Comer, 1984; Hoover-Dempsey

& Sandler, 1995; Epstein, 1995). We tell these novice teachers that parents will be important, even essential, partners in their work. But if there's one thing we've learned as teacher educators, it's that the things that will endure from our classes are those things our students have tried themselves. We can't just talk about the value of writer's workshop; students who will soon teach themselves need to struggle through crafting a poem or essay. We can't just extol the virtues of discovery science; students need to experience a minds-on approach in our university labs.

Though collectively we have almost 40 years of preservice teacher education experience, we realized we had never made a serious attempt to understand the home-school connection with our students. It was one important area of the curriculum where we never modeled activities and behaviors we hoped our students would emulate. As coordinators of the Elementary Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) program at the University of Maine, we work with a small cohort of students in a thirteen-month program each year. This program leads to initial K-8 certification in the state of Maine. It is intense, rigorous, and all-consuming for students who complete the program. We know these students well by the end of the year.

In the fall of 1999, we decided to implement a home-school component for the program. The Professional Development School (PDS) Sites selected for the M.A.T. program all have strong family outreach programs. What was missing was a family outreach component in the M.A.T. program itself. We wanted to test out the ideas we had shared for years with our interns. Would building a partnership with families and friends outside the classroom lead to greater learning for students and us? Would interactions with families and friends cause any change in our own thinking about the program? Finally, would experience as a student with teachers building home-school connections change the interns' perceptions of their own work with families in the future?

Designing the Program

Our first priority was to design a program that was doable. Anything enormously time-consuming would not be a model that students could readily adapt to their own work with children. So we began with the premise that we would devote no more than 20 total hours in the fall to building the family-school connection with our preservice interns. This worked out to be a little more than an hour a week stretched over the semester—not a great outlay of time and effort.

The program had four simple components: solicited letters from family and friends, home visits, an open house, and roundtable discussions with parents of children at the professional development school site where we

all worked. Our goal was to provide interns multiple ways to participate at whatever level they were comfortable. All events and activities were voluntary – no one was required to participate.

Letters From Home

We began in early September by distributing a revised version of the letters in Figure 1 to the interns, soliciting information about the intern as a learner from a friend or family member. The texts of these letters were developed by Kim Campbell and Ruth Hubbard, teacher educators at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon (Campbell & Hubbard, 1999). Participation in this activity, like all elements of the Home-School Connection, was completely voluntary on the part of interns. We asked the interns to have a friend or family member write a letter about the intern as a learner, to help us better teach our students in the program.

Figure 1: “Letters From Home” Assignment

September, 1999

Dear (student):

As kids advance through their school years, one common complaint is that the home-school connections that are so eagerly forged in the elementary school years fall by the wayside. There’s so much to be gained from these bonds. That’s one reason we stress continuing to work with families throughout the secondary school years.

As we were talking about making this a priority this year, we realized that we continue to make the same omission – we leave out an important source of information and support – your friends and families. With your help, we’d like to make an attempt to invite those close to you to give us some insights into what helps you learn and what special gifts you bring to the classroom community we are building together.

Please give the attached letter to someone in your family – significant other, son or daughter, mom or dad, close friend, roommate. We’d really appreciate hearing from them. It’s not just young children who need the support and insights of family and friends in their educational pursuits. We’re all in this together!

Sincerely,

Kim and Ruth

September, 1999

Dear (Friend? Family? Advocate?):

Ideally, schools and families form a partnership, helping each other to create the best possible educational experience for every unique learner. It's what every parent wants for their children, what every teacher wants for the students in their classroom. No surprises here. But what if the school is Graduate School — one that includes both rigorous coursework and an intense year-long internship? And what if the family extends beyond parents, but includes kids, close friends, spouses, and significant others? Shouldn't we still work together to make this the best possible learning environment for our teachers-to-be? We think so.

So, help us out here. Tell us what we should know about and the way she approaches learning. What should we bear in mind? What hidden talents will she bring to the class? What are some tips you have about the best ways to help her grapple with new material and difficult situations? We'd really appreciate it if you'd take a few minutes and write a letter to us and tell us what we need to know — help us get to know her a little better as we embark on this journey together.

With Downright Good Cheer!
Kimberly Campbell, Cohort Leader
Ruth Hubbard, Friend of the Cohort

We were leery about asking family members and friends to write full letters. We toyed with the idea of distributing some sort of survey instead. But Hubbard and Campbell assured us that we would get a high response rate, based upon their own work with interns.

Within a month, we had received letters from 10 of 12 friends or family members of our students. We were surprised at the variety of responses, and the care these folks put into explaining the intern to us.

Here is an example of one letter we received from a parent. Lorna Tobin, a veteran teacher herself, reveals how much we can learn about an adult student from someone who has observed their child since birth. She writes about her daughter Jill Tobin, an M.A.T. intern:

October 8, 1999

Dear Brenda and Connie,

The following is information about Jill that I hope will be helpful to you in providing the best possible learning environment for her.

What should you know about Jill? Having been voted as “class wit” in eighth grade, she has earned that reputation honestly. She is both funny and witty and finds it easy to laugh. She’s casual and down to earth. She’s easily touched by the gentle souls in the world. She likes kids (and us old folks too!). She attaches to cute kids and old folks easily (she’ll want to take them home with her). She’s not as naive as she was growing up as an only child and being very protected by both parents. Sharing feelings and being able to recognize them in other people is a strong attribute of hers. As a result of that, she is able to see through the insincerity of people. As a child, she used to line her dolls up on the stairs and using her fingers as puppets create “her family” through role playing. Her strong family ties are very important to her. She loves her Gramps and keeps him supplied with “Big Bird” Band-Aids and chocolate chip cookies. She is poised, personable and painfully neat (takes after her mother!). She has ethics and character (and is one too!).

It would be important to bear in mind that she is not afraid to confront issues and can get quite indignant about injustices. I would have to say she is intensely loyal though not always wisely.

A hidden talent that she may bring to class is her art in baking wonderful goodies. Another is her ability to impersonate, of course, teasing to be funny. Her secret wish is to write children’s stories someday. She certainly has the talent to be her own illustrator, too.

Teaching and learning began at a very early age for Jill. It was brought into focus after her kindergarten screening, she came home climbed up on the kitchen table on her hands and knees and gave her Gramps a “peering and screaming” test (a.k.a. “Kindergarten Screening”) which, of course, he failed. Schoolwork has always been a priority. She has high expectations for herself and others. She doesn’t mind hard work as long as “it makes sense.” She is a practical thinker. Objective type tests stress her out. She appreciates writing to show what she knows. Hands-on is best. She also needs time to process.

Hope that what I have shared will help you get to know Jill better. Good luck on your journey!

Forever learning

Lorna Tobin

Letters from parents were heartfelt. We had glimpses of our students as children struggling to learn to play the piano, or dealing with their first poor grade from a stern teacher. In contrast, letters from the interns' friends were brutally honest. They warned us that we needed to set high personal and professional standards if we were to gain the respect of these interns. We could see our students sitting up all night in dorm rooms with these friends, railing against hypocritical professors who do not "practice what they preach" or place unrealistic demands on students. Some letters came through e-mail; others were carefully written by hand on the finest stationary. The letters were a powerful beginning to understanding the lives our students had far beyond the classroom.

Home Visits

The second element of the home-school program was initiated in early October, when we made visits to the homes of students. Once again, this program was voluntary. We worried about imposing on students who might be in difficult home situations. We again had 10 of 12 students volunteer for visits.

We know home-school visits can be prohibitively time-consuming for teachers. With that in mind, we adapted a home-school visit format developed by Terri Austin (1994), a teacher in Fairbanks, Alaska. Terri sends out a letter to parents of her sixth grade students, informing them that she will be dropping in for visits on a designated Saturday. She lets parents know the visits will be brief, and they needn't change their plans to stay home and wait. If no one is home, she moves on to the next closest home in the neighborhood. Terri easily stops in at all 27 students' homes during a long Saturday, popping in for no more than 20 minutes at each home.

We picked two afternoons in October, and informed students we would be making visits from 4-7 p.m. We asked students who volunteered for visits which date was preferable, as well as for directions to their homes. We mapped out a route which involved the least time and travel between sites, and easily made all the visits within five hours on two nights. Eight of ten interns were home when we stopped in.

Once again, we were astonished at what we learned. We knew a few of our students were single moms, but there is a difference between knowing this and seeing them tend to their children even as they welcome us into their homes. We know our students live below the poverty line. That fact became more real when we visited tiny homes with no running water in the kitchen, or basement apartments with stereos blaring. We thought about how often we tell students they need to spend \$25 for an "essential" book,

and we see their faces fall. We were reminded of our own days in graduate school, when we often had to choose between one of those “essential” books and groceries for the week.

Open House

The third element of the program came in early November, when we had an open house at our local professional development school site just for family and friends. We met parents, grandparents, young children, spouses, and significant others. The interns delighted in giving their loved ones tours of the place that was taking so much of their time away from family and friends throughout the year.

Roundtables

The fourth and final element of the program was an afternoon series of roundtables with parents of children at the PDS site. We placed 2-3 interns with 3-4 parents, and asked them to have an open conversation about the role of parents in schools. Parents were asked to give their best advice to teachers just beginning their careers. We asked each group to have a note-taker, and then we compiled these notes later for everyone to analyze.

When we shared these notes with the teachers at the PDS, they were surprised at how much of the discussion at each table was about home-school visits. Interns asked parents about the best ways and times to structure these visits. “I don’t understand,” said one mentor teacher. “Why would they ask about home visits when it isn’t something we do?” We realized our interns valued the visits because they had experienced them with us, and now clearly saw the importance of incorporating these visits into their own teaching in the future.

Findings and Future Work

It would be impossible to capture all that we learned from making the home-school connection. Our learning is clustered in three broad areas:

1. Families have a crucial role to play in facilitating learning for students of all ages. We heard echoes of the admonitions in the letters from family and friends throughout the year. We learned more about our students’ learning styles, preferences, and quirks than we could have in a month of Myers/Briggs testing.
2. Building even small connections to the home will affect academic programs in unexpected ways over an extended period of time. We’ll give just one example of unexpected insight from the program. We

noticed a few interns came alone to the open house, even though attendance wasn't required. We quickly realized they came to tour the classrooms where other interns worked. We had mistakenly believed the interns had a good sense of the layout and décor of classrooms throughout the school, but this wasn't the case. Schools are busy places, and there is rarely time to get into the classrooms of colleagues. This insight led to the development of a classroom visitation program for both interns and mentors that was implemented in the spring, and proved to be the most popular element of the spring internship for both mentors and interns.

3. What we do as teacher educators still has far more impact than what we say. Throughout the spring, we saw interns develop a rich variety of outreach programs in collaboration with their mentor teachers. From newsletters to family nights to new formats for parent conferences, the interns showed us how much they came to value including family and friends in the learning process. Though we can't prove a direct correlation with our own work, we did see more family outreach by far than in any previous year.

We now plan to include these activities and experiences every fall. In addition, we are going to add a "neighborhood walk" activity in September, which will allow interns to walk in teams through the local streets and analyze the communities where the families of their students live, work, and play.

Final Thoughts

We live in an age when standards and testing move us farther and farther away from acknowledging the importance of affect in our students' lives. Our work in building the home-school connection reminded us of the power of including those lives beyond our classroom walls in the programs we design for students. The barriers between school and home are strong,

well-built, and often well-guarded over time. One of our favorite poems, “Aspects of Autumn” by Roberta Chester, expresses beautifully how even the youngest students learn quickly that home and school will be disconnected:

Aspects of Autumn

On the first day
 my grandfather took me to school.
 His accent was thick and so he kept
 his voice beneath his tongue, never
 speaking once we left the house,
 and now we stood, my hand pressed in his,
 face to face with Mrs. McCarthy. Then it would have
 embarrassed me to death, but now
 I wish he had said, “This child
 is more precious than gold, she is my heart,”
 and suddenly we would have seen the pins
 flying from her head and would have
 heard them striking in the far corners
 of that room like thunderbolts.
 Instead, the silence was deep
 enough to drown, as she put me down
 on the chart and pointed to a table
 where the children sat around a can
 of broken crayons. All that long year
 we would fight about each stick of bright wax
 as if it were a wand our lives depended on
 to get the world right, as if only blue
 would keep the sky from falling.
 Even now, the smell of crayons
 sweetening the darkness of a tin can
 lingers on and has the power to turn me
 around and around as if it is really full
 of tears and beards, and shoes and tears
 and whispers, and pictures
 of our old houses with the lights out
 where our lost crayons may still be lying.

Roberta Chester

Simply put, every student in our care is someone's most precious darling, more valuable to them than gold. Whether our students are five years old or forty, entering kindergarten or starting on the path to be certified as a teacher—there is almost always someone out there who cares deeply about each of them. And with the care comes awareness of that student as a learner. They may not speak our language when it comes to talking about learning, and they might not be wholly comfortable in school environments. But a wide range of opportunities for families and friends to teach us about students can lead to a high rate of family participation in a home-school outreach program for students.

Now we don't know how we managed to teach at the university for all these years without tapping this incredible resource. Time devoted to building the home-school connection with preservice teachers is truly time well-spent.

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