

Dispositions Toward Families and Family Involvement: Supporting Preservice Teacher Development

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Abstract This article highlights the importance of nurturing preservice teachers as they develop the dispositions essential to establish empowering relationships with children's families. The authors identify and describe several key dispositions necessary for working with families and offer suggestions for ways that these elements might be integrated into early childhood teacher preparation programs.

Keywords Early childhood teacher preparation · Family involvement · Dispositions

In recent years, researchers have stressed the importance of providing preservice teachers with focused education and high quality experiences in preparation for their work with families (Abrego et al. 2006; Baum and McMurray-Schwarz 2004; Graue 2005). This emphasis is being strengthened by the increased attention being paid to standards for early childhood teacher preparation programs, such as those published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC 2001). While many teacher preparation programs have made revisions to their curricula, granting the importance of high quality relationships with families much needed attention, some assessments suggest that

early childhood preservice teachers still lack an understanding of what empowering relations with families require (Graue 2005).

Explorations into teacher preparation programs reveal that, most frequently, preservice teachers receive instruction regarding skills and strategies for working with families, but little else. Further, many of our teacher education exposures to family involvement are theoretical and lack real-life application (de Acosta 1996). Sumison (1999) noted that until she actually became involved with families during her first year of teaching, she had little or no prior experience with them; including the period of time in which she was enrolled in her teacher preparation program. So, while progress is being made on improving preservice teachers' preparation for their work with families, further efforts are necessary before teacher educators can feel confident that this preparation is adequate, or even more preferable, exemplary. This involves not only focusing our preparation efforts on the skills and strategies needed as teachers strive for mutually beneficial relationships with families, but to nurture the essential dispositions necessary to accomplish this goal (Swick 2004). Katz (1993) defines disposition as "a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal" (p. 1). While many early childhood teacher educators have begun to have discussions in their programs regarding the importance and delineation of dispositions, little has been written regarding those dispositions that are specific to the development of positive relationships with families. Thus, the authors seek to articulate the key dispositions that will enable early childhood teachers to develop empowering relations with families. Further, the authors will offer suggestions for ways that these elements might be integrated into early childhood teacher education programs.

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Dispositions Toward Working with Families

A Positive Attitude Toward Families and the Family–School Relationship Process

A review of research and scholarly practice points to several key dispositions essential for teachers as they work with families. Perhaps one of the most essential is for teachers to possess a *positive attitude toward families and the family–school relationship process* (Graue 2005). According to Blasi (2002), teachers are most likely to experience success in their interactions with families when they look for potential, strengths, and resilience rather than focusing on perceived family deficits. A positive relationship between teachers and families offers important benefits for young children. For example, in the context of a close, caring relationship, teachers are more likely to “delight in children’s progress, remember details to share about the day, think about the children after hours, and remain connected to the family...” (Baker and Manfredi/Petitt 2004, p. 17). Conversely, a relationship characterized by tense feelings and conflict may negatively impact a teacher’s attachment to children.

On the surface, it may seem that this disposition would occur naturally in those choosing the field of early childhood education. It is a part of our Code of Ethics (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1997) and is identified as one element in the professional early childhood education standards (Hyson 2003). However, as Baum and McMurray-Schwarz (2004) note, many preservice early childhood students have conflicting expectations about families and their involvement with them. In the positive sense, they see the value of strong family involvement. On the other hand, students often envision very stressful relations with parents and families. Baum and McMurray-Schwarz (2004) found that “Students seemed to expect that their relationships with parents and families would be characterized by conflict and criticism” (p. 58). The expectation of negative interactions and frequent criticism may influence a teacher’s openness to form relationships with families. In order to avoid unpleasant interactions, teachers (particularly those new to the field) may minimize family involvement opportunities as a strategy to avoid potential conflict.

The challenge for teacher educators, therefore, is to help early childhood preservice teachers to develop positive, yet realistic dispositions toward working with families. With the well-documented benefits of family involvement, it becomes essential that teachers view positive relationships with children’s families as not only desirable, but as critical. Within this perspective lies an authentic desire and willingness to put forth the effort necessary to form relationships with families that can enhance the growth and development of the children in their care.

An Empowerment Perspective of Parents and Families

Another disposition central to developing constructive relationships with families is for teachers to adopt an *empowerment perspective of parents and families* (Bronfenbrenner 2005). Unfortunately, parents and families are often viewed with a deficit lens, through which their weaknesses and dysfunctions are noted and emphasized (Lightfoot 2003). When viewing families in this way, teachers are likely to see families as being less effective and are less likely to participate in parent involvement activities (Jones et al. 1997). We learn from the ecological perspective, however, that all families have strengths, especially when we employ a focus of empowerment (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

According to Bateson (2000), empowerment refers to the ability to support each other as “learners” who are able to commit to care for children and families amid constant change and the continuing challenges of learning from each other. It means that both teachers and families will feel influential in the partnership and believe that their efforts can have an impact on any given situation (Greenman 2001). Teachers need to see families as meaningful contributors to their child’s education, whose knowledge, opinions, and concerns are a valuable and critical component of the educational process. In addition, teachers must commit themselves to the discovery and implementation of strategies allowing for empowerment to occur within their relationships with families.

Nurturing an empowerment disposition in emerging early childhood teachers is complex. For the most part, their education and life experience has been dominated by a deficit orientation or, at best, by a rigid scheme of dichotomies (Sawyer 2001). As Lightfoot (2003) reminds us, an empowering education is based on dialogue, openness, and a willingness to see the best possibilities in each other.

Engage Parents and Families as Partners

Another essential disposition is *to engage parents and families as partners in the total learning and growth process* (Epstein 1995). If early childhood professionals do not see parents as capable partners in supporting the child’s learning journey, then the true power of the early childhood education experience is lost. According to Lueder (1998), teachers must work to help families become “fully involved” in their children’s education. This requires offering the support and encouragement needed for parents to be engaged in their child’s education, both at home and at school. In order to become a “partner,” Lueder states that family members must be willing and able to fulfill a variety of roles within the education process, including nurturer, communicator,

teacher, learner, advisor, advocator, and collaborator. In order for a true partnership to form and be successful, teachers must commit to help parents develop the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfill these roles, acknowledging the importance of parents as fully involved partners.

According to Gestwicki (2007), a perceptual orientation of families as partners calls for early childhood preservice teachers to develop three constructs. First, they need to develop an image of parents as their children's primary educators. Second, preservice teachers need to view themselves as "family educators," not only as teachers of young children. Finally, preservice teachers must commit to foster, in themselves, the tools needed for engaging parents in meaningful and supportive endeavors with teachers and children.

Valuing and Supporting the Cultural and Social Diversity of Parents and Families

An additional critical disposition is for emerging early childhood professionals to *value and support the cultural and social diversity of parents and families* (Bateson 2000). Successful relationships hinge not only on a teacher's understanding of a family's cultural and social perspectives, but also on the teacher's ability to be responsive to their needs and preferences based on these perspectives. A teacher's recognition and acknowledgement of families' diverse contexts and needs sends messages of belonging and inclusiveness (Coleman and Wallinga 2000). On the other hand, an unwillingness or inability to build bridges between the social and cultural differences between schools and families may negatively impact children's emotional resilience and motivation to learn (Bowman 1994). Too often, families who are different are viewed negatively because the teacher may lack insight into that parent/family culture or perspective (Lightfoot 2003). Yet we are all "different" in the eyes of others. As Bateson (2000) notes, "We are all immigrants today, because we are all learning to live in a world different from the one we were born in, strangers and pilgrims gazing at new worlds" (p. 134). Indeed, future early childhood professionals must be excellent cultural learners so they can engage all families in empowering relationships within all of the child's ecological settings (Bronfenbrenner 2005).

Commitment to Effective Communication

A *commitment to effective communication* is another disposition that is essential for successful relationships with families (Coleman and Wallinga 2000; Knight and Wadsworth 1998). When engaged in positive, two-way

communication with teachers, parents feel that their thoughts and feelings are respected (Lam 2000). A commitment to effective communication involves the willingness and ability to articulate information clearly, listen receptively, ask open-ended questions with the purpose of learning about the families' perspectives, and explore and respect families' preferred ways of communicating. As part of the communication process, it is also important that teachers are willing to share power and decision-making with parents and families (Keyser 2006).

Unfortunately, much of the communication that occurs between teachers and families is negative, existing mainly when someone at school wishes to express a problem or concern about a child (Lueder 1998). While the expression of these concerns is certainly important, teachers need to participate in communications that emphasize the positive aspects of children's experiences at school. In fact, when relationships are built on a foundation of healthy communication, any problems that do arrive are more likely to be resolved in a positive way.

When teachers make a commitment to effectively communicate with parents and families, children experience important benefits (Lam 2000). According to Keyser (2006), when children see their teacher and their family member interacting in a comfortable and respectful manner, they feel safe and valued. In addition, effective communication between home and school can provide for a more consistent, integrated, and responsive system of care and education.

Envision the Teacher as Learner

The final disposition to be discussed in this paper is that of *envisioning the teacher as a learner*; "as someone who teaches in response to the children and families with whom he or she works (Graue 2005). In essence, this image of the "teacher as learner" emerges from the integration of the five dispositions discussed previously. To do so requires the teacher to not only value family involvement for the benefit of children, but to recognize that a high quality, empowering relationship with parents can, in fact, make one become a more effective teacher. By becoming committed to the interactive nature of teacher-family relationships and developing respect for the rights, responsibilities, and needs of each person in the relationship (Graue), preservice teachers are setting the stage for a lifelong learning process that will enhance their success, as well as their joy, in the classroom.

Strategies for Teacher Educators

Clearly, research identifies the necessity of early childhood teacher education programs to support preservice teachers

as they develop the dispositions essential to their effective work with families. The research also recommends that many varied strategies be implemented in an effort to support this developmental process in emerging teachers (Coleman and Wallinga 2000; de Acosta 1996). These efforts should not be designed exclusively for only one course focused on working with parents and families, but need to be integrated throughout the entire early childhood teacher education program (Baum and McMurray-Schwarz 2004).

Envision and Communicate a Clear Conceptual Framework

Teacher preparation programs, at their core, must be designed with an emphasis on helping students acquire the conceptual basis necessary for a comprehensive understanding of families and the issues involved when working with them (de Acosta 1996). For example, teacher educators must critically examine their program's content to ensure that preservice teachers are adequately involved in studying family dynamics, as well as the various dimensions of a teacher's work with parents and families. Do preservice teachers have a realistic and accurate understanding of the diverse situations that families experience? Are they knowledgeable about family dynamics? Do they acquire information on strategies for working with families? This knowledge component of preservice teacher education is critical and needs to be continually examined and enriched in light of current research and the changing contexts in which families are situated.

Provide Opportunities for Self-Examination

Teacher educators also need to ensure that preservice teachers have many wide-ranging opportunities to critically examine and identify the personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes that influence their involvements with families (Baum and King 2006). This includes guiding students through an in-depth reflection of their personal experiences within their own family-school environments and then helping them to consider how these experiences and others may have shaped their current perspectives regarding the families with whom they work. Teacher educators can help students as they thoroughly and honestly consider their responses to questions such as the following (Swick 2004):

- (1) How do I perceive the parents and families of the children with whom I work? Do I regard them as equal and important partners, or otherwise?

- (2) How do I interact with parents and families? In a respectful and inviting manner, or otherwise?
- (3) What kinds of opportunities do I offer parents and families for being engaged in their child's learning journey?

The exploration of self is a difficult, yet necessary step as preservice teachers construct images of parents as active and important partners in their child's education.

Allow Students to Listen to the "Voices" of Parents and Families

Emerging teachers can also benefit from authentic opportunities to listen to the "voices" of parents and families (Lightfoot 2003). As stated previously, it is important for teachers to be willing to seek and learn from parent and family views. Too often, teachers may only be able to consider their own perspective, thus minimizing their resources for empowering the total learning system.

One approach is to involve preservice teachers in in-depth and prolonged interactions with parents and families. For example, Swick (2006) engages students in a semester-long study of one parent/family through a process that involves sequential interviews, observations, and other interactions. He notes that students report a sense of an entirely new voice entering their thinking: that of the parents. Parent evaluations suggest families are enriched through this experience, as well. One parent noted "We, as a family, gained a really wonderful sense of how important reading is to everyone in the family. I am not sure if we would have gained this perspective otherwise." Other parents noted that they gained support, resources, education, and validation from the student involvement in the interview process. It can be particularly meaningful for students to experience, first-hand, the positive influence that they can have on the families with whom they interact.

While many teacher educators do require assignments such as parent interviews, the most beneficial experiences come from prolonged, consistent and meaningful interactions with a family, rather than from an isolated, one-time discussion. Not only do students have the opportunity to adopt a more meaningful and comprehensive picture of the family's context, but they have time to thoroughly reflect on their interactions over a longer period of time. Experiences characterized by authentic information and time for reflection are more likely to result in the development of dispositions essential to enable students to truly listen to and understand the contexts in which families exist.

Provide Students with a Variety of Experiential Situations Involving Families

Bronfenbrenner (2005) suggests that, in many respects, teachers lack insight into and experience with the complexities of family interactions within their multiple ecological settings. Therefore, an important strategy is to place preservice teachers in a wide variety of experiential situations that provide the opportunity to interact with parents, families and school personnel (Swick 1997). This includes settings beyond the more traditional school-based settings (e.g., parent–teacher conferences and home visits), such as family agencies, community and recreational organizations, and parent education events. For example, students may develop a disposition more attuned to parent and family voices while participating in an event outside of the context of school, such as one designed solely to support participants in their daily role as a parent.

Students' involvement in family and community agencies help them gain a sense of families' varying needs and how these needs may be addressed. Within multiple contexts, students can acquire a deeper understanding of the stressors families experience. For example, students doing service learning work in an agency such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), contribute to the families served by the agency while simultaneously learning about important prenatal care needs and critical well-care child assessments and resources. Swick (1994) suggests that these types of service learning activities enhance student understanding of the key needs that all families experience. This understanding is critical to the development of dispositions related to a perspective of empowerment, a support of diversity, and an overall positive attitude toward parents and families (de Acosta 1996; Swick 1997).

Finally, allowing students to work more closely and in more meaningful ways with parent–teacher groups can provide important insights into how successful partnerships occur (Swick 2004). Many beginning teachers lament that they had little or no experience while enrolled in their teacher preparation programs to see how parent–teacher partnerships are initiated and sustained (Sumison 1999). This, again, highlights the importance of providing students with ongoing and in-depth experiences, at all stages of the schools' relationships with families, rather than isolated experiences that provide only a snapshot of a teachers' engagement with families. Teacher educators must make a concerted effort to assign students to programs that pay special attention to their relationships with families and are willing to allow preservice teachers opportunities for meaningful involvement (Chavkin 2005). Providing students with opportunities to actually contribute by helping out with the details of goal setting, development of strategies, use of resources, planning meetings, and

related tasks, will strengthen future teachers' understandings of how parents and teachers can most effectively work together.

Future Directions

This article provides a preliminary discussion of the dispositions that are necessary in order for teachers to develop empowering relationships with families. Additionally, the authors propose some strategies for teacher educators to consider in their work with preservice teachers. Further efforts are necessary to aid teacher educators as they strive to enhance their support of emerging teachers in this most critical area.

First, efforts should be made to engage the early childhood teacher education community in responding fully to NAEYC's standards for professional preparation related to building family and community relationships (NAEYC 2001). For example, teacher educators may need to engage in professional development activities allowing them to reflect on their personal beliefs and understanding of this topic, in addition to carefully examining their teacher preparation program's curriculum to ensure that it reflects best practice in the preparation of teacher candidates. It is also important for teacher preparation programs to develop partnerships with schools that have strong family-based early childhood programs to serve as models and practicum sites, especially those that will permit students to actively engage in comprehensive and meaningful interactions with families.

Finally, as teacher educators make programmatic revisions and develop strategies to support the development of an empowerment view of families in preservice teachers, research must be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts. This research should document the impact of new or enhanced teaching strategies, as well as identify new possibilities for learning through interacting with families in dynamic and complex environments. Strengthening such teacher preparation efforts through scholarship is a critical step as programs continue to recognize the importance of fostering the development of these critical dispositions in emerging teachers.

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