Northern Illinois University Partnership for Parent Engagement

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A review of the literature provides justification of the importance of preparing teachers to involve parents. Researchers have demonstrated that teachers can and do impact parental involvement (Epstein, 1986) and that teachers’ practices have more influence on parent involvement than numerous other factors (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Teachers who take the lead in creating home and school partnerships establish positive relations with parents and foster children’s success more than teachers who do not. Unfortunately, most teachers have received little or no preparation for engaging parents during their teacher education (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Moles, 1993). As a result, teachers have tended to rely on instinct, personal experience, or advantage to the approach investigated here is that preservice teachers build knowledge and skills for engaging parents in the courses that they already take: No new course is added. A substantive advantage to embedding the topic of parental engagement within the required courses is that connections are formed to the knowledge and skills covered in each course. In that way, preservice teachers can envision parental engagement as an important routine rather than as a peripheral teaching practice.

The teacher preparation model presented here considers the different ways that parents are involved in their children’s education. Instruction and activities in each involved course pertained to a different aspect of engaging parents in children’s education. For

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folk theories to guide their encounters with parents rather than principles (Moles, 1993). Current standards in teacher education reflect the understanding that teachers need to learn about parents (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). For these reasons, teacher education programs are faced with the need to develop ways to prepare future teachers to engage parents.

Despite the importance accorded to having teachers involve parents, little prior research has been done about how to prepare teachers to work with parents effectively. The Northern Illinois University (NIU) model presented here involves guiding the preservice teachers in learning about parents and how to engage them throughout numerous courses in the teacher certification program. Many teacher education programs require a full load of professional courses, so adding another required class is impractical. One example, a basic issue to be addressed is family diversity. Teachers often need to develop knowledge and understanding of children’s background—their families, culture, and communities—in planning for classroom activities and in interacting with students in a way that facilitates student success (de Acosta, 1996). Parents are one source of that knowledge. Teachers also can learn from parents about children’s interests, dispositions, and social-emotional development. Accordingly, a case study assignment designed to help preservice teachers learn about the families and the community was embedded in the required Child Development course.

A plethora of research has established that children’s school success is enhanced when there is continuity between home and school (Au & Jordan, 1981; Heath, 1982, Neuman & Roskos, 1993). One
way to create continuity between home and school is to effectively communicate about the learning and needs of children. Both parents and teachers want children to be successful in school (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Burow, 1995). Research shows that adults are more effective facilitators of children’s success when they understand children’s development and learning (Bacon & Ichikawa, 1988, Price & Gillingham, 1985, Shumow, 1998). Accordingly, the preservice teachers in the Educational Psychology class examined and rated examples of communications about children’s learning patterns. The samples they studied came from professional organizations, university projects, and both federal and state departments of education. Thus, the samples were free or low cost and readily available to be used when they became teachers.

Preservice teachers in the first Reading Methods course worked in groups to design and present information about children’s literacy development to parents. This served the dual purpose of having them learn the information themselves and learn to communicate it to parents. The information was presented both in displays and pamphlets during the parent/teacher conference period at the partnership district schools.

Parents often want and need access to information about how their children are learning within different subjects. Teachers have the responsibility of grading children, interpreting test scores, identifying student needs and explaining those to parents. Preservice teachers in the Assessment course gained role-playing experience in these important skills.

Teachers also must be prepared to make decisions about homework. Most elementary school students do some homework each day (Snyder, 1998). Parents expect to help children with homework (Epstein, 1986), report helping with homework every day (Finney, 1993), and believe this help supports their children’s school success (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). However, some evidence suggests that parents can become frustrated with homework (Corno, 1996, p.29; Kantrowitz & Wingert, 2001, p. 52). Teachers are to be sensitive to parent expectations in developing homework policies and practices. They must take into account family and community characteristics and learn to assign homework that facilitates parental knowledge of the school program and the child’s learning as well as positive parent/child interactions. Parents’ role in homework was addressed in the second Reading Methods course.

Context of the Project

The project and accompanying study was conducted within a Midwestern state institution that certifies approximately 300 elementary education teachers each year. The present program was bolstered by the findings of a College of Education (COE) evaluation of students’ experiences during teacher education which identified the need for students to be more prepared to “work with parents.” The COE at Northern Illinois University (NIU) is currently implementing a strategic plan to meet the regional need for new teachers and for the continuing education of practicing education professionals. Those needs are being met through the design and development of partnerships, standards-based clinical field experiences, and professional development opportunities.

To prepare our students and to serve area schools, the COE has developed and continues to develop formal partnerships with PK-12 school districts. To reflect the diversity of the northern Illinois region, partnership districts are located in rural, urban, and suburban communities. Each partnership district serves some students at risk for academic failure. The present program was carried out in the elementary schools of one of the partnership districts. The school district had identified the improvement of literacy learning of students as their central school improvement goal. The district is committed to engaging parents in meeting this goal and has included both literacy and parental involvement as goals for school improvement. Analyses conducted by a collaborative team of school district and NIU representatives found that district students had consistently below expected reading performance on the state reading assessment over a seven-year period. NIU faculty worked with district personnel on several initiatives including this parental engagement project.

Elementary school, preservice teachers and their professors participated in the study. Six instructors in the College of Education implemented activities in the courses. In total, 129 students taking these classes agreed to participate in the study by completing questionnaires and having their work analyzed. The vast majority of preservice teachers were traditional, White, middle-class, college students. The class sizes ranged from 15 to 30.
Description of Project Activities

There were four components of the Northern Illinois University (NIU) College of Education project. The first three components have been completed, and the final component is in progress. The four components were preservice teacher education, practicing teacher education in the school district, a school/family literacy initiative, and dissemination of project activities and findings.

Preservice Teacher Education

This project was designed to embed activities throughout the teacher preparation of preservice teachers. Use of this model avoided having to add another course to the curriculum and was intended to emphasize the importance of parental engagement to education. It also was intended to communicate the multidimensional nature of parent involvement and its connection with a broad range of teacher responsibilities. Activities were embedded in courses typically taken in each semester of the teacher preparation sequence. Altogether, activities were developed for six of the courses required for certification as an elementary school teacher. These courses were:

- EPS 300: Educational Psychology
- EPS 304: Development of the Elementary School Child
- EPFE 410: Philosophy of Education
- LTRE 340: Elementary School Developmental Reading Program
- LTRE 350: Organizing for Effective Elementary Reading Instruction
- ETR 430: Test and Measurements, Elementary (Assessment)

The activities are described on the website created to disseminate this project (see subsequent section) and are summarized in the second column of Table 1.

Practicing Teacher Education in Partnership District

EPS 512: Teacher, Family, Community: Relationships and Resources was offered at the district high school on a day and at a time identified as convenient by the majority of interested teachers during the Spring 2002 semester. The class involved reading and discussing published articles, presentations by the teachers, and a work time during which teachers designed projects to engage parents and utilize community resources in their classrooms.

The assigned reading included theoretical, empirical, and practical articles. Topics covered by the reading included theoretical models and underlying issues, types of parent involvement, social context of parent involvement, educational activities drawing on family and community resources, outreach and communication from school, homework issues, conferences, and problem-solving. The topics of family diversity, programs to involve parents, and planning for parent involvement were included in the assignments and presentations completed by the teachers.

Teachers prepared and conducted two presentations for the other teachers. First, to expose and sensitize teachers to family diversity, dyads selected a type of family (e.g. immigrants, single parent, dual income, homeless), read about the families, identified special needs of and considerations for engaging such families, and presented their findings to the class. Each teacher also selected a parental engagement program that had been implemented and evaluated. Teachers read, summarized, and shared the program description and evaluation.

One hour of each class period was devoted to a “work time” during which teachers (individually or in small groups) planned a project to implement in their own classroom or school. Most projects were implemented during the 2002-2003 school year. Teacher projects included several devoted to literacy including improving reading at home, using the local newspaper, and a summer project in which the teacher communicated with the children (reading and writing email messages and postcards). A group of teachers created a website to include information for families before and after their students went on their three-day, outdoor education trip. Several teachers worked on a disability
awareness project: One faculty member helped inform parents with a mentally ill child or family member about the education and services provided by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, and another two faculty members developed an awareness and advocacy project about homelessness in the community. Yet another project involved providing information and building a partnership with parents about transition to first grade. A number of the projects are presented on the website.

School Family Literacy Initiative

District, early reading, intervention teachers and I worked together to plan to improve literacy readiness of kindergartners. First, we visited and evaluated other programs in a variety of districts. Two, parent/child, literacy fairs were held during Spring 2002, for four-year-olds who would be entering Kindergarten in Fall and their parents.

We also planned and created postcards to send to all parents of registered kindergartners during Summer. These postcards reminded parents about the importance of literacy readiness and suggested fun and simple activities to do with the child.

Effectiveness of Project

Multiple methods were used to assess the project. The evaluation focused heavily on the learning of preservice teachers about parental engagement since that was the main purpose of the project. Preservice teachers completed questionnaires in four of the courses in which parental engagement activities were implemented.

Measures

Questionnaire. The questionnaire used was to measure preservice teachers' beliefs about how much they knew about how to engage parents in various ways and how confident they were in their ability to do

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<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
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<td>Child Development</td>
<td>Observed 2 children, interviewed parents about child's learning &amp; development, home school relations, and home life related to school. Wrote comparative case study.</td>
<td>Increased knowledge of how to interview parents ((t = 8.6; p &lt; .001)) &amp; learn about families' ((t = 5.9; p &lt; .001)) increased confidence conducting parent interviews ((t = 5.8; p &lt; .001)).</td>
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<td>Educational Psychology</td>
<td>Studied, rated, and recommended communications for the partner district teachers to use to involve parents.</td>
<td>Did not participate in evaluation.</td>
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<td>Reading Methods I</td>
<td>Created pamphlets and put up bulletin board displays with suggestions for how parents can assist and support children's literacy. Interacted w/parents during conference days.</td>
<td>Increased knowledge of how to inform parents what children are expected to learn ((t = 4.2, p &lt; .001)) &amp; provide specific ways that parents can help children improve reading ((t = 2.1, p &lt; .05)).</td>
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<td>Reading Methods II</td>
<td>Designed homework assignments and accompanying materials for parents.</td>
<td>Did not participate in evaluation.</td>
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<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Role-played four different parent teacher interactions including conferences where they explain children's standardized test results to parents and conversations where they explain and respond to parent concerns about classroom expectations and grading.</td>
<td>Increased knowledge how to (a) inform parents about the results of student assessments ((t = 3.1, p &lt; .01)) and (b) implement a presentation or workshop for parents ((t = 2.2, p &lt; .05)).</td>
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<td>Philosophy of Education</td>
<td>Read, discussed, and conducted an interview with a teacher to gain insights into roles and relationships between parents and teachers.</td>
<td>Increased knowledge of how to communicate ((t = 2.8, p &lt; .01)) &amp; involve parents ((t = 4.4, p &lt; .001)) &amp; increased confidence to involve parents ((t = 1.9, p &lt; .05)).</td>
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so. This questionnaire provided a rating on a Likert scale of four points ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items were adapted from those used in published studies (Katz & Bauch, 1999; Morris, Taylor, Knight, & Wasson, 1996). There was also an open-ended question asking students to describe experiences that had prepared them to engage parents.

Three subscales were created from the questionnaire items that preservice teachers completed. Fifteen items measured preservice teachers' efficacy (confidence) about being able to involve parents. Factor analysis provided evidence of the construct validity of the preservice teacher efficacy for involving parents scale. Cronbach's alpha was .89 indicating high internal consistency. Six items measured preservice teachers' knowledge about how to communicate with parents. Factor analyses corroborated the construct validity of those items, and Cronbach's alpha indicated internal consistency (.83). Seven items measured preservice teacher's knowledge about how to involve parents in education. As with the other two subscales, factor analysis provided evidence of construct validity. Cronbach's alpha for the involvement subscale was .79.

Student Coursework. The assignments in each class were read, and content was analyzed by an expert in parental involvement. Indicators of student learning pertaining to the assignment were underlined. Themes were identified and matched to the underlined examples.

Instructor Interview. Instructors were interviewed and asked for their perspective on the project in a semi-structured interview. Instructors described the activities, students learning and attitude, and any difficulties or future changes planned for the activities.

Results
The results from the mixed method design are based on measures collected during the first two semesters of implementation. Questionnaire data was analyzed, and student coursework was coded for four of the six courses that have implemented activities in the teacher education sequence. Instructor interviews were conducted for all six courses.

The questionnaire data was analyzed statistically. Items on the pre- and post-questionnaire that were hypothesized to be influenced by the course activity were tested using paired t-tests. First, the data from all students enrolled in a course implementing an activity was examined to determine whether the students believed they had increased in their knowledge and confidence in engaging parents. Overall, students reported increased knowledge about how to involve parents (t = 5.9, p < .001) and confidence in their ability to involve parents (t = 5.2, p < .001) after participating in the activities. The open-ended answers on the questionnaires were content analyzed—55% of the students identified the course activity as an important preparatory experience for working with parents. Personal work experience was the second most frequent response (41%) given by students as the source of their knowledge about how to engage parents.

Items which measured skills and dispositions that were the focus of the assignment in each class were identified. Table 1 displays the results of the paired t-tests by course.

The content analysis of the preservice revealed that students learned different skills and knowledge within each class. Themes identified in the students’ case study assignments completed in the Child Development class were: (a) families can be a valuable source of information about a child; (b) teachers need to involve parents and understand children's backgrounds; (c) parental involvement is multidimensional; (d) families influence children's academic performance and behavior in school in multiple ways; and (e) child development theory/research is tied to school settings. Each of these themes are exemplified by the following examples drawn from student case studies.

Families as Valuable Source of Information
- "I have been pleasantly surprised at how open and willing parents are to discussing their child's particular weaknesses...there is a wealth of information."
- "This situation (observed in the classroom) immediately made me think of the parent..."
interview...it could be, but...more likely is that he is not interested because he is, as his father told me, an advanced reader.

**Teacher Responsibilities**
- “Children will come into my classroom with many different histories. I will need to consider all of these factors.”
- “Teachers need to be able to communicate with the students’ parents.”
- “Every child has a chance if we as teachers try to foster it [parent involvement].”

**Parent Involvement is Multidimensional**
- “So, the parents are aware of what is happening at school.”
- “While I was there, two mothers participated in the day’s lesson.”
- “His mother is not as involved in school but is involved in his education. She helps him with homework.”

**Families Influence Children in Various Ways**
- “I saw parent involvement was important in stressing the importance of education.”
- “Using the family as a model might be a good way to stimulate child development.”
- “The home (of child B) definitely provides the child with a rich literate environment but the lack of...might partly explain the struggles child A has with reading skills.”
- “I have seen how important parents are in the equation to help students reach their full potential.”

**Connections**
- “Being able to talk to the boys’ mothers made all of the pieces of the puzzle fit together.”
- “The knowledge that I acquired from the text and class has finally sunk in. I feel like I understand the information personally.”

Themes also were identified in the philosophy papers. For the student to be most effectively educated, philosophy students believed it to be important to establish, promote, and maintain open communication regularly and proactively between teacher and parents through conferences, phone calls, and newsletters. Students also believed that parents and teachers must work in partnership and respect each other’s responsibilities and insights. Common/shared goals and expectations were identified as important, as was a vital and dynamic connection maintained between the school and the home. Finally, students recognized that the relationship between the teacher and the parent is dependent upon the context of the school and family system.

The interviews with the professors indicated satisfaction with the activities. In particular, the professors noted that their students responded well to the “authentic” nature of the activities. Each professor intends to retain the topic and activities in their curriculum with some modifications.

**Evaluation of Course for Practicing Teachers in Partnership District**

The NIU instrument for evaluating professional development coursework was given to the District Partnership teachers participating in the workshop on involving parents at the completion of the course. The scale ranges from 1 (very poor) through 5 (very good). Eighteen items measure the teachers’ views of the assignments, breadth, instructor enthusiasm, clarity and fairness of evaluation methods, group interaction, instructor knowledge, instructor rapport, learning, and the class organization. Teachers rated the course as good to very good. The mean was 4.59 with a department average of 4.34. One item asks for an overall evaluation. The mean of 4.63 indicated that the teachers rated the course as very good. This rating is above the median department rating of 4.34 (in a department that consistently ranks among the highest in university teaching evaluations).

**Messages for Practice**

Researchers have demonstrated that teachers can impact parental involvement to the benefit of the students, but not all teachers do so (Epstein, 1986). Preservice teachers have received little preparation to engage parents. The model presented here demonstrates that the topic of parental involvement can be embedded in multiple courses with some gains in students knowledge and confidence in involving parents. The model reinforces the idea that parents are connected to and involved in schools in many ways and that engaging parents is an integral aspect of a
teacher’s responsibility.

The success of this project hinged on the collaborative, open-minded, and creative faculty and instructors who work in the teacher education program at NIU. However, managing to get every professor and instructor to implement such activities is a challenge. Not surprising, other material competed for time and primacy in each course. Perhaps it will require adoption of specific goals and objectives into the curriculum standards for the college. An unanticipated benefit was the way in which the project expanded as a result of the relationships formed between university faculty and partnership district teachers.

Successes also can be attributed to the school district commitment to preparing teachers to involve parents. Win-win planning was a factor in making this project work. The partnership district recognized the value and importance of parental involvement and wants teachers to be prepared in this area. Since many of the teachers they hire are graduates of NIU’s College of Education, the district administrators were active in contributing ideas for activities and in helping to implement the project activities. For example, it was district administrators who wanted the Child Development students to study the families of both a struggling and an average or successful student so that they would learn to understand and work with different parental involvement issues. The participating instructors were committed to the value of the activities as well. However, we encountered many time, scheduling, and organizational challenges in implementing the interviews, observations, material distribution, and encounters with teachers and parents. Such challenges need to be anticipated and resources provided for coordinating these activities. The tremendous goodwill that was created with the school district as a result of this project serves as an incentive to colleges of education interested in fostering positive relations with districts.


References

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