Understanding Family Involvement in the Preparation of Graduate Students: Measuring Family-Centered Beliefs, Skills, Systems, and Practices

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Research Background

Family-centered practices by professionals serving families and their young children with disabilities have become a cornerstone of personnel preparation programs in early childhood intervention (ECI) and early childhood education (ECE; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Family-centered practices emphasize understanding of family experiences through empathy, respect, communication, collaboration, and an appreciation of the family's individuality and traditions. Our research project sought to develop a measure to examine the family-centered beliefs, skills, work systems, and work practices of ECI and ECE graduate students. These four family-centered constructs are defined in the following ways:

- *Family-centered beliefs* represent the graduate student's philosophical beliefs about family-centered practice.
- *Family-centered skills* represent the teacher's knowledge (ability) to work with families.
- *Family-centered systems* represent the environment in which the teacher works with young children.
- *Family-centered work practices* represent the teacher's actual practices in the work setting as a family-centered practitioner.

Research Questions

The study was guided by four research questions:

1. To what extent do graduate students from preservice preparation programs in ECI and ECE receive preparation in family involvement during their training?
2. What are preservice graduate students' family-centered beliefs, skills, system, and work practices?
3. What are the predictors of students' family-centeredness?
4. What are student perceptions of family-centeredness and family involvement?

Research Method

We developed the Partnership Scale as a 40-item survey that taps into 10 family centered themes (see box on next page). Participants rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) how much they agree or disagree with statements about family-centered beliefs, skills, systems, and work practices for each of the 10 themes.[1] Following are examples of questions from the scale:

- *I BELIEVE* families should have the opportunity to be involved in all intervention activities.
- *I have the SKILLS* to give families the opportunity to be involved in all intervention activities.

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[1] Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for the 10 belief items (.90), 10 skill items (.89), 10 system items (.87), and the 10 work system items (.86), indicating adequate reliability.

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- *MY SYSTEM* enables me to give families the opportunity to be involved in all intervention activities.
- *When WORKING*, I give families the opportunity to be involved in all intervention activities.

The survey also included four open-ended questions reflecting participants' family-centeredness and their participation in family involvement in preparation programs.

The participants ($N = 104$) in the research study were graduate students from preservice preparation programs in the areas of ECI and ECE. The participants were enrolled in 13 graduate programs from 10 states.[2]

Family-Centered Themes Measured

1. Family involvement in the intervention activities
2. Families as a resource to the practitioner
3. IFSP/IEP affording families the opportunity to be decision makers
4. The importance of demonstrating respect of the families' culture
5. Families as major decision makers
6. Professional/family working relationship
7. Sharing sensitive or contrary information
8. Families' educational legal rights
9. Discussing the nature and purpose of the assessment process with families
10. Communication between professionals and family members

Research Findings

Our research revealed four main findings:

1. *Family involvement is included in preservice preparation programs in moderate levels and has modest impact on students' perceptions of their preservice education.* Preservice programs provide moderate levels of family involvement.[3] The types of family involvement experiences reported in descending order of involvement are practicum experiences, a single-panel presentation, several individual presentations, several panel presentations, and co-instruction. Practicum experiences are often part of the ECI and ECE preservice program curriculum; the other types of family involvement are infused into classroom experiences at the discretion of the instructor.

Students also reported their perceptions regarding the level of impact that different types of family involvement had on their preservice education.[4] Students reported that all types of family involvement experiences had a moderate impact with the single-panel presentation at the highest level, followed by practicum, several panel presentations, several individual presentations, and co-instruction. The impact of the single-panel presentation could have been related to the content of the presentations or to the presenters. For example, topics presented by family members are usually based on the request of the instructor. These topics allow the students to hear a different point of view or highlight a family's personal experience, which can evoke an empathic response from the students.

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[2] Illinois ($n = 3$), Kentucky ($n = 17$), Maine ($n = 1$), Maryland ($n = 6$), Nevada ($n = 3$), Ohio ($n = 41$), Oregon ($n = 16$), Tennessee ($n = 8$), Virginia ($n = 6$), and Washington ($n = 3$)

[3] $M = 3.29$; $SD = 1.29$; Likert scale range from 1 = *none* to 5 = *great deal*

[4] Single-panel: $M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.10$; practicum: $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.11$; several panels: $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.30$; several individual: $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.24$; co-instruction: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.64$; Likert scale range from 1 = *no positive impact* to 5 = *high impact*

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2. *Family-centeredness embodies four separate dimensions*. Family-centeredness is a construct that is encompassed by *beliefs*, *skills*, the *environment/systems*, and *work practices*.[5]

Participants/preservice teachers tended to report that their own skills and practices, as well as the system in which they worked/taught were not as family centered as their beliefs. A high score on the beliefs subscale could be indicative of the philosophical underpinnings of the student's preservice program. Individuals with high beliefs scores could have been attracted to a preservice program that aligned with their own personal family-centered beliefs; however, they have yet to attain the same level of skills due to lack of training. Preservice students may also lack confidence in their abilities to behave as family-centered practitioners or lack the systems supports to carry out their beliefs.

3. *The students' work environment and amount of contact with families predict family-centered beliefs and practices*. Analyses were conducted to determine how the amount of contact with families during teacher preparation, the type of preservice preparation in family involvement and the system in which the graduate student is working contribute to students' family-centered beliefs, skills, and work practices.[6]

Our analysis revealed two main findings. First, the environmental system in which a teacher works with young children predicted family-centered beliefs. This suggests that the environment in which a teacher works influences the teacher's philosophy of family-centeredness. For example, teachers are encouraged to schedule IEP meetings at a time convenient to the family or to become sensitive to a family's cultural background by being willing to acquire relevant information through appropriate research sources. Second, the amount of contact a graduate student had with families during teacher preparation was associated with family-centered work practices. Engaging in family-centered practices in the field was positively associated with the amount of contact teachers had with families during their preparation programs, possibly because of the increased opportunities to practice and strengthen family-centered skills that this contact afforded them.

4. *Students report the value-added of family experiences in their professional preparation*. Last, a content analysis was conducted to examine participants' comments from the four open-ended questions.

In the first question, participants were asked to define the term family-centeredness. Participant responses revealed four main themes: (a) parents as decision makers, (b) parents as partners, (c) communicating information, and (d) acknowledging cultural diversity and family traditions. The following is a quote from one participant that is representative of parents as decision makers: "The family is an active team member regarding decisions about planning, placement, goals, and implementation."

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[5] A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated significant differences between the participants' ratings of the four subscales. Post hoc analysis revealed significant differences between beliefs and skills subscales, beliefs and system subscales, beliefs and work subscales, skills and system subscales, and system and work practices subscales.

[6] Three separate hierarchical multiple regression were used (one for each dependent variable). The independent variables included amount of contact with families, type of family involvement, and system. Dependent variables included family-centered beliefs, family-centered skills, and family-centered work practices.

The second open-ended question asked participants to address the "best" and "worst" aspect of their experiences with families who have participated in their preservice education. Participants' responses were placed into either the "best" or "worst" category.

Under the best category students' overwhelmingly believed that hearing family testimonies and learning from firsthand experience was beneficial. One respondent noted, "Listening to their experiences, one's feelings, frustrations, issues…the one who had the strongest impact was a relatively new mom."

Three themes emerged from the worst category. The themes were representative of the mixed meanings participants placed on the term *worst*. On one hand, students had concerns and empathy for families. For example, one student wrote, "When a parent of a child with [developmental delays]…got discouraged because [the child] was playing in a…[typically developing group]…and I think she really sensed how far behind her daughter really was." Students also wrote about troubled feelings about being part of the "system." For example, another respondent said, "Sometimes they imply that you are the bad guy because you are part of the system and this can make you feel awkard because you try to bond with the family but can't deny the role as a professional." Finally, students felt that the worst part of the experience was not hearing all family stories. One student said, "The worst aspect was the infrequency of these opportunities [families willing to share their stories]."

The third open-ended question asked the participants to comment on how family involvement in their preservice education would affect, or had affected their work as a professional practitioner. Two themes emerged for the responses: (a) empathy and awareness and (b) applying new skills. An example of the empathy and awareness theme is as follows: "It gives me an idea of how the family copes and feels about the child, the disability, and how the schools treat the family and how the family would like to be treated." An example of the applying new skills theme is as follows: "[This experience] has greatly impacted my perspective and my work, especially working with at-risk families where parents often do not participate…I now fully realize that even the least participatory parent still holds immense knowledge regarding their child and their family, and the needs and resource of the family."

The fourth and final open-ended question asked participants to comment on whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "The families who have participated as speakers, presenters, and/or co-instructors in my graduate education are NOT similar to the families encountered in work/practicum settings." Themes that emerged from the participants' statements regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement include (a) families have needs and/or information that is important to share with preservice teachers, (b) family involvement in preservice preparation could be improved on, and (c) family involvement in preservice education should be considered a learning opportunity because families are unique.

Implications for Professional Development

The findings of the study suggest family-centered concepts and practices should be incorporated into all aspects of preservice training. First, we must strive to select or construct family-centered environments in which graduate students can work or engage in practicum experiences, as these may influence their family-centered beliefs, family-centered skills, and family-centered work practices.

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Second, families also represent important members of a preservice ecosystem where future practitioners are trained to become family-centered professionals, and can be sought out by faculty to offer testimonials and other firsthand interaction with graduate students to make preparation more beneficial.

Finally, ECI and ECE preservice curriculum materials should contain subject matter that promotes and instructs a family-centered philosophy and practice, and the Partnership Scale could measure the impact of curricula in the classroom environment, practica, and internships on family-centered beliefs, skills, system, and work practices throughout and beyond preservice students' training.

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