

Comparing the Effects of Suburban and Urban Field Placements on Teacher Candidates' Experiences and Perceptions of Family Engagement in Middle and High Schools

Daniel J. Bergman

Abstract

Two groups of teacher candidates completed a survey based on the Parent Teacher Association's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships at the start and end of the semester of a general methods course and corresponding fieldwork (practicum) experience. One group of participants ($N_S = 60$) completed their clinical fieldwork in a suburban middle or high school; the second group ($N_U = 40$) completed fieldwork in an urban school setting. Repeated measures *t*-tests were conducted for the entire sample and found significant increases from pre- to post-survey in the number of specific ideas shared for welcoming families into the school as well as for communicating with parents and families. A mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the impact of different semester-long field placements (suburban or urban), finding that urban-placed participants had significantly more ideas about communicating and welcoming families. Implications are addressed, including the role of family engagement in teacher education and the impact of fieldwork placement location.

Keywords: family engagement, parent involvement, field experiences, urban, suburban, secondary teacher education, preservice teachers, middle grades, high schools, candidates, practicum, perceptions

Conceptual Framework and Introduction

Importance of Family Engagement in Schools

Parents and families have a major impact on students' school performance (Epstein, Simon, & Salinas, 1997; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In fact, over 20 years of research reveals that family engagement leads to improved student achievement (Constantino, 2008). Family engagement has been defined as more than just parental involvement. Heather Weiss, Founder and Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, describes family engagement as "a shared responsibility between schools/programs, communities, and families" (as cited by Tschantz, 2010, para. 2). Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) outline several effects that echo the importance of school–family partnerships:

1. Partnerships are closely linked to student academic achievement.
2. They build and sustain public support for schools.
3. Families and community members can help schools overcome challenges.
4. Teachers benefit from positive partnership involvement.
5. Partnerships meet the legal requirements of legislated education reform.

Partnerships do not flow in only one direction, however. Rather than a means to an end, family engagement benefits parents and families beyond student achievement. To quote Joyce Epstein, "The way schools care about children is reflected in the ways schools care about children's families" (2009, p. 7). Research by Epstein and her colleagues laid the foundation for the Parent Teacher Association's (PTA) National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010). These standards focus on a partnership approach and include welcoming all families, communicating effectively, supporting student success, and more. Instrumental to the creation of the standards was research that linked student achievement to family engagement, which included proactive components of organized programs reaching all cultures and an outcome emphasis on student learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; PTA, 2012). In these standards, partnerships are created and sustained not just through involvement of families, but through active engagement—including balanced contributions and initiative taken by both families and schools.

Teachers are aware of the key role parents and families play in education and support their participation in schools (Smith, 2002). More parental involvement is the number one response teachers give for ways to improve students' success (Metropolitan Life, 2002). In recent years, partnerships among schools, families, and the community have become an educational priority at both the state and federal levels (Flanigan, 2007). Since the late 1990s, a growing number of states have included family/community involvement skills and knowledge in their teacher preparation standards (Gray, 2001).

Teachers' Perceptions and Preparation for Family Engagement

Despite the recognized importance of family engagement, multiple studies have found that teachers feel ill-equipped to interact with students' families (Dotger, 2009; Freeman & Knopf, 2007; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Levine, 2006; Lynn, 1997; Tichenor, 1998; Turner, 2000). Historically, teachers have had scarce formal preparation—preservice or inservice—to work with parents and families (de Acosta, 1994; Epstein, 2001; Epstein, Sanders, & Clark, 1999; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005). Teacher education programs often lack any course or unit that focuses exclusively on parent and family involvement (Coleman, 1997; Flanigan, 2005, 2007; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Moreover, programs that do address this content are typically found in a few specific license areas such as early childhood, elementary, or special education fields, as opposed to preparing all teachers (Epstein, 2001; Giallourakis, Pretti-Frontczak, & Cook, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Powell, 2000). Where family engagement is addressed, curriculum often focuses mostly on parent–teacher conferences, parent concerns, newsletters, and working within the community (Dotger, Harris, & Hansel, 2008; Stevens & Tollafield, 2003; Tomczyk, 2009). Gray (2001) dubs these actions as “reactionary strategies,” in that they usually occur after an incident or experience with a difficult situation. Missing have been proactive strategies such as interactive homework, workshops, class-originated newsletters, and year-long partnership programs.

More recent efforts have emphasized a proactive approach for family engagement, taught largely through inservice teachers' professional development. Following the example of counselors, one course taught teachers active listening and related skills through practice and reflection, resulting in increased confidence and improved communication with students and families (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). The Bridging Cultures Project, which includes both inservice training and action research, has been found to enhance teachers' interactions with families as well as instructional methods (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Additional proactive approaches that have yielded higher student achievement and parental involvement include regular telephone and text/written correspondence (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2002) and interactive homework accompanied by teacher-initiated communication (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011a, 2011b). The significant impact of these strategies suggests that preservice teachers should also learn and practice similar methods.

Teacher preparation plays a critical role in school–family partnerships, since the ideas formed during this time may last throughout educators’ entire careers. Unfortunately, teacher candidates often perceive from their fieldwork cooperating teachers that students’ struggles are due to uncaring, uninvolved parents (Grossman, 1999). Future teachers may receive mixed messages from cooperating teachers and university faculty (Flanigan, 2005). From the university perspective, cooperating teachers’ “negative attitudes [about students’ families] are undoing everything faculty have tried to do with teacher candidates at the university level” (Flanigan, 2007, p. 106).

Past Efforts and Present Research

With proper attention, preservice teachers can learn how to successfully work with students’ parents and families (Hunzicker, 2004; Katz & Bauch, 2001). A one-semester course (in special education) showed gains in teachers’ understanding of family engagement (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). However, the primary focus of these teachers remained on laws and legal obligations. Flanigan (2007) notes that further research is needed to determine teachers’ attitudes, understandings, and abilities in collaborating with parents and families. Moreover, little work has been done with teachers working with middle and high school students, whose families may have multiple engagement opportunities in athletics and activities, but are less likely to attend parent–teacher conferences (Henderson, Hunt, & Day, 1993; Welsh, 2003).

Another unexplored topic is comparing teacher candidates’ experiences and perceptions of family engagement after clinical fieldwork (or practicum) experiences in urban or suburban schools. Disparities between suburban and urban schools are widely known and include financial distribution (Gamoran, 2001), quality of facilities (Marx, 2006), and graduation rates (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center [EPERC], 2008, 2009), with suburban schools typically having the advantage in all of these areas. In addition, parental involvement is typically less in urban schools than in suburban schools (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 2002). Many teachers in urban schools do not know how to foster partnerships with students’ families, especially for teachers who do not live in the same community as the school (Sanders, 2006). Although a study into graduate coursework for new teachers finds significant growth in participants’ dispositions, knowledge, and relationships with students’ families in urban communities (Warren, Noftle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011), research has also found that teacher candidates struggle to grasp the complexities of urban teaching and reflect on their role in such settings (Hampton, Peng, & Ann, 2008; Hatch, 2008).

The present study sought to explore the relatively unexamined issue of preservice middle and secondary teachers' preparation to engage families in different types of fieldwork school settings. In particular, two questions framed the research, focusing on middle and high school teacher candidates:

1. How do middle/high school teacher candidates' perceptions of family engagement change after experiencing a one-semester general methods course and accompanying in-school fieldwork (one hour/week) with explicit family engagement instruction?
2. How do perceptions of family engagement compare between teacher candidates with fieldwork experience in urban middle/high schools and teacher candidates with fieldwork experience in suburban middle/high schools?

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Overview

Participants of this study included teacher candidates (preservice teachers) in their junior year of college, enrolled in a one-semester general methods course for future middle and secondary teachers (grades 6–12), along with a parallel fieldwork experience (practicum) in local schools. This undergraduate class is an introduction to instructional strategies, teacher classroom behaviors, assessment methods, and classroom management. There were two sections of the course in each semester studied, both taught by the same instructor.

Throughout the semester, three different guest speakers came to present to the classes. One speaker was the coordinator of an afterschool tutoring/mentoring program for middle school students. Another was the state director of the Parent Information Resource Center. The third presentation was by a team of individuals from a local school district's family engagement support office. All three presentations featured various means of engaging students' families and shared information and resources for teachers to work with families.

In addition to the three guest speakers, an in-class activity featured a "jigsaw" book study, during which participants worked in groups to examine published resources on family engagement and then shared major themes and noteworthy ideas to the entire class. Books featured in this group study included titles based on research in the field of family engagement (Constantino, 2008; Henderson et al., 2007), as well as other texts for educators with ideas for involving and engaging students' families (Boult, 2006; Glasgow & Whitney, 2008; Lucas, 2006; Rudney, 2005).

The teacher candidates used information from the class to compose an introduction letter to parents/guardians of the students in their fieldwork classroom. These letters were written in English, but teacher candidates were

exposed to translation services provided by some school districts for converting correspondence to families' native languages. Although optional, the teacher candidates were encouraged to share their letters with their fieldwork classroom students. Moreover, they were encouraged to use their letter as a template for future letters to their students' families as one way to proactively welcome and communicate with families. Guidelines for the letter assignment are found in Appendix A.

For the semester-long field experience, the teacher candidates attended an assigned placement in their subject—one class period one day per week, for a minimum of fifteen (15) hours total. Placements included middle and high schools in both urban and suburban communities. More data about participants and the placement schools are provided in the following sections.

Participants Profile

The total number of teacher candidates participating in the study was exactly 100. One group ($N_s = 60$) completed fieldwork in a suburban middle or high school and was designated “suburban teacher candidates;” the second group ($N_u = 40$) completed fieldwork in an urban middle or high school, designated “urban teacher candidates.”

Although the teacher candidates consisted of traditional and nontraditional college students, all were accepted into the teacher preparation program and considered to be in the spring semester of their “junior” year, or second-to-last year. By the next spring, the teacher candidates would student teach full-time and complete the undergraduate teacher licensure program with graduation. The teacher candidates were preparing for secondary education degrees (grades 6–12) with an endorsement in English, history/government, math, or science.

Approximately 95% of the teacher candidates were White (non-Hispanic), and all spoke English as their first language. In the suburban-placed group, 15% of participants were parents of school-age children. Out of the urban-placed group, 10% of participants had school-age children. In the suburban group, 52% were male and 48% female; in the urban group, 34% were male and 66% female.

Field Experience Schools

All placement schools were public middle or high schools in or near a large Midwestern metropolitan area. In this area, suburban schools have an average graduation rate 27.1% higher than urban schools (EPERC, 2009). Suburban teacher candidates were placed in one of eight different schools in communities surrounding the city. Each of these schools was located in communities classified as small suburbs (populations less than 100,000) by the National

Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2006). The suburban schools housed an average of 18% minority students, and an average 21% of the student body qualified for free or reduced-lunch services. Urban teacher candidates were placed in one of five different schools inside the urbanized area classified as a large city, with a population of more than 250,000 (NCES, 2006). The urban schools all had a “majority minority,” for an overall average of 64% minority students. The average percentage of students qualified for free or reduced-lunch was 73%. On average, school buildings in the urban setting were 45 years older than the building age of the suburban schools. More information about each school can be found in Appendix B.

Survey Instrument

At the beginning of the semester, all participants completed a short survey about their experiences and ideas about family engagement with schools (see Appendix C). The same survey was completed at the end of the semester (post-survey) for comparison and study of the effects of the course as well as for comparing the impact of suburban versus urban field experience placements. The survey featured open-ended questions to promote extended answers from the participants and draw out their ideas, as opposed to giving them options from a list or multiple-choice questions (Esterberg, 2002). Furthermore, questions did not prompt participants to share a certain number of ideas, but rather allowed them to share as much as they desired or deemed necessary.

The survey inquired about participants’ previous experiences and preparation to interact with students’ parents/families, as well as what participants wanted to learn more about to enhance their interactions with parents/families. Several questions were phrased to align with the PTA’s National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010), which will be featured in more detail with the discussion of results. For the purpose of this study, only Standard #1 (welcoming all families into the school community) and Standard #2 (communicating effectively about student learning) are featured, as they address two essential ingredients of successful family engagement (Epstein, 2001, 2009; Henderson et al., 2007; Weiss et al., 2005).

Data Analysis

A naturalistic inquiry approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Harry, Sturgis, & Klinger, 2005; Norris & Walker, 2005) was used in qualitative analysis, reflected by the open-ended nature of survey questions and no constraint to participants’ responses. In questions related to PTA Standards, participants’ responses typically consisted of listing ideas with little or no description. Therefore, analysis involved recording the different ideas shared, as well as counting the total number of different ideas given to each response.

Survey data were disaggregated according to the two different instances of completion: the beginning of the semester (pre), and the end of the semester (post). These two samples provided for comparison of the same teacher candidates to determine effects of their participation in the general methods course and its corresponding fieldwork that semester. Additional analysis compared the post-survey responses of the suburban teacher candidates with the urban teacher candidates. Quantitative tests—repeated measures *t*-test and mixed between-within subjects ANOVA (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 2003)—were performed to compare the number of responses and check for significance in difference between groups.

The mixed-methods approach of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to enhance data analysis and provide insight not readily available through just one technique. With the complimentary methods creating “binocular vision” (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994) of the data, both the quantity and quality of responses can be considered to get a more complete picture.

Results and Discussion

This section highlights the analyses of survey responses from the participants, including noteworthy trends and specific comments. The topics addressed are organized through the survey responses, including Standards 1 and 2 of the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010).

Preservice Experiences With Students’ Families

One question on the survey asked participants to describe the level and scope of interactions they have had with students’ families during their preservice program, including practicum/fieldwork experience(s). In the pre-survey for the teacher candidates, the question referred to participants’ experiences prior to their current semester placement. Example responses from participants include: “I have had no interactions with parents in my previous practicum placements,” “I’ve heard some teachers talk about speaking with parents but have never personally experienced it,” and several answers of “None.”

Table 1 summarizes participants’ responses about their preservice experiences with students’ families. Results indicate that teacher candidates in both groups had little or no interaction or communication with families during their previous preservice placements. One noteworthy consideration is that the teacher candidates of this study are still in their junior year of the undergraduate program and will not assume a full student teaching schedule and experience for another two semesters. Nevertheless, these future teachers reported having no meaningful interactions with students’ parents or families since entering into the teacher preparation program.

Table 1. Preservice Experiences With Students’ Families (Pre-Survey)

Rank (1 = Most Frequent)	Suburban Teacher Candidates	Urban Teacher Candidates
1	70% = None	95.0% = None
2	15% = Minimal	2.5% = Minimal
3	8% = Observed	2.5% = Conferences
4	7% = Other Work	

Welcoming Families

Aligned with Standard #1 of the PTA’s National Standards for Family–School Partnerships (PTA, 2010), a survey question asked participants for their ideas about effective ways of welcoming families into the school community (see Appendix C). Example responses to this question are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Example Responses to Question: What do you think are effective ways of welcoming families into the school community? (Emphases added.)

Teacher Candidates in Suburban School Placements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Holding an <i>open house</i> at the school. Sending a <i>letter</i> home to invite the parents to sit in on your class.” • “Have an <i>inviting school</i>; encourage the parents to become a part of the school environment.”
Teacher Candidates in Urban School Placements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “By having <i>family events</i> centered around the school and district. Having a parent <i>newsletter</i> they get every month with a calendar of events and news and updates about things going on in school.” • “Having school-wide <i>open houses</i>, personal (<i>positive</i>) <i>communication</i> with parents/families throughout the semester/year, and parent–teacher <i>conferences</i>.”

As seen in the example responses, participants often gave multiple strategies, and their responses were analyzed through two approaches. The first was to count how many specific actions each participant provided as a response. In this case, responses such as “be inviting” or “be friendly” were considered ambiguous or vague, as opposed to particular actions teachers could take to welcome families. Figures 1a and 1b in Appendix D highlight the two participant groups and the percentages that provided specific strategies as well as no answer or ambiguous replies.

A paired-samples (repeated measures) *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the semester-long course and field experience on all teacher candidates’ number of strategies for welcoming parents and families to the school

community. This analysis featured all teacher candidates participating ($N = 100$), including those in urban and suburban school placements. There was a statistically significant increase in number of ideas from the beginning of the semester (pre, $M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.16$) to the end of the semester [post, $M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.52$; $t(97) = 7.88$, $p < .01$]. The eta squared statistic (.39) indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

A split-plot analysis of variance (SPANOVA), or mixed between-within subjects ANOVA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), was conducted to compare the impact of different field placements (suburban or urban) on teacher candidates' ideas about welcoming parents and families to the school community. The interaction effect of school placement and time was significant, with a large effect size [Wilks' Lambda = .70, $F(1, 96) = 42.10$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .31], indicating that teacher candidates with urban field placements shared significantly more welcoming strategies than teacher candidates with suburban experiences.

Descriptive statistics for number of ideas for welcoming parents and families into the school community are shown in Table 3. On average, both groups shared one or two ideas on the pre-survey. In the post-survey responses, however, participants with an urban field experience shared an average of almost three ideas, while those in a suburban field experience shared less than two ideas.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Number of Specific Strategies for Welcoming

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean Pre	Std Dev	Mean Post	Std Dev
Suburban Teacher Candidates	60	1.63	.99	1.90	1.54
Urban Teacher Candidates	38	1.74	1.39	2.84	1.30

The second approach to analyzing data was examining specific actions shared by participants. Table 4 shows the strategies participants gave for welcoming families to the school community. The percentage listed for each strategy is the percent of participants in that group/survey who gave the particular action in their response. Since participants could give more than one strategy, the sum of percentages for each group of participants is more than 100%. Any strategy with a "--" listed means that 5% or fewer of the group participants mentioned it in their responses.

Table 4 shows a large increase from pre- to post-surveys (more than double in both groups) in participants who mention using a written letter as one method of welcoming families. This is understandable, since writing an introduction letter is one project teacher candidates completed during the semester's

fieldwork setting. Open houses decreased from pre- to post-survey results in both groups, perhaps due to teacher candidates' limited experience with these two events during the spring fieldwork semester. Phone calls as a way of welcoming families into the school community were not mentioned by more than 5% of either group in the pre-survey. However, over one-third in both groups cited this strategy in their post-survey response. This indicates that teacher candidates' fieldwork experience, as well as additional course curriculum and guest speakers, may have increased their awareness of this approach.

Table 4. Strategies for Welcoming Families (PTA Standard #1) Teacher Candidates Gave in Their Open-Ended Survey Responses*

Strategy	% of Suburban Candidates' Pre-Survey Responses	% of Suburban Candidates' Post-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates' Pre-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates' Post-Survey Responses
Activities/Events	--	--	34% (2)	39% (1)
Open House	55% (1)	37% (2)	42% (1)	29% (3)
Letter/Postcard	18% (2)	40% (1)	11% (6)	24% (4)
Phone Call	--	35% (3)	--	37% (2)
"Invite"/General	13% (3)	28% (4)	34% (2)	18% (5)
Conferences	12% (4)	8% (8)	29% (3)	29% (3)
Newsletters	10% (5)	8% (8)	13% (5)	18% (5)
Email	7% (6)	18% (5)	16% (4)	24% (4)
Meet/Home Visit	--	15% (6)	--	--
Welcoming Building	--	12% (7)	--	--
Internet Tools	--	--	--	10% (6)

*Parentheses indicate rank of frequency (1 = most frequent strategy) found in each group's responses.

--Indicates 5% or fewer of the group participants mentioned it in their responses.

Communicating With Parents/Guardians

A second question on the surveys addressed PTA Partnership Standard #2—effective communication. Again, participants' responses were analyzed both by quantity (how many specific actions) and quality (what kinds of actions). Example responses from participants are found in Table 5. These responses typically featured multiple actions for communicating with families.

Figures 2a and 2b in Appendix D show the two participant groups and the percentages that gave specific actions in pre- and post-survey responses. As

with the previous topic, any response that was vague (“interact,” “be polite”) was counted among those who gave no response (0).

Table 5. Example Responses to Question: What are some ways to effectively communicate with students’ parents/guardians? (Emphases added.)

Teacher Candidates in Suburban School Placements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “<i>Phone, email, regular mail.</i> Especially when the student has done something positive. In other words, don’t just send out negative letters.” • “Find out what is the best way for parents—<i>phone calls, emails, notes</i>—and then communicate with them on a regular basis, and encourage communication.”
Teacher Candidates in Urban School Placements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The most effective way of communication is <i>face-to-face</i>, but if that is not possible, over the <i>phone</i>, through <i>emails/letters</i>, or even <i>questionnaires</i> students can take home to their parents/families and have them fill out and bring back.” • “Sending home <i>introductory letter</i>. Building positive 2-way communication via <i>telephone</i> and <i>email</i>, especially <i>positive interactions</i> (in other words, don’t always communicate just bad news).”

Like before, a paired-samples (repeated measures) *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the semester-long course and field experience on all teacher candidates’ number of ideas for communicating with parents/guardians. This analysis included all teacher candidates participating and answering the survey ($N = 100$), including those in urban and suburban school placements. There was a statistically significant increase in number of ideas from the beginning of the semester (pre, $M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.35$) to the end of the semester [post, $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.50$; $t(99) = 7.35$, $p < .01$]. The eta squared statistic (.35) indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

A split-plot analysis of variance (SPANOVA), or mixed between-within subjects ANOVA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), was also conducted to compare the impact of different field placements (suburban or urban) on teacher candidates’ ideas about communicating with parents/guardians. The interaction effect of school placement and time was significant, with a large effect size [Wilks’ Lambda = .72, $F(1, 98) = 37.67$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .28], indicating that teacher candidates with urban field placements shared significantly more communication strategies than candidates with suburban experiences.

Descriptive statistics for number of ideas for communicating with parents/guardians are in Table 6. On average, both groups shared between two and three ideas on the pre-survey. In the post-survey responses, participants with a suburban field experience still had an average between two and three ideas, whereas those with an urban field experience shared an average of almost three and a half ideas.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Number of Strategies for Communicating

Group	<i>N</i>	Mean Pre	Std Dev	Mean Post	Std Dev
Suburban Teacher Candidates	60	2.72	1.21	2.90	1.48
Urban Teacher Candidates	39	2.64	1.56	3.44	1.50

Specific communication actions shared by participants are shown in Table 7. Phone calls and email were the two most cited actions by all the survey groups, a majority in every instance. As with strategies for welcoming families, the response rate in both groups increased in citing writing a letter home to parents. Other strategies mentioned include meeting parents and families either face-to-face or through a home visit, newsletters, or conferences and general comments such as “invite” the families or be “positive.” One strategy that was absent in both groups’ pre-survey responses but appeared in their post-survey responses was Internet tools (15% for suburban teacher candidates, 10% for urban teacher candidates). In addition, texting appeared as a strategy only in the post-survey responses of the urban teacher candidates.

Table 7. Strategies for Communicating With Parents/Guardians (PTA Standard #2) Teacher Candidates Gave in Their Open-Ended Survey Responses*

Strategy	% of Suburban Candidates’ Pre-Survey Responses	% of Suburban Candidates’ Post-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates’ Pre-Survey Responses	% of Urban Candidates’ Post-Survey Responses
Phone Call	66% (1)	78% (1)	64% (1)	77% (1)
Email	66% (1)	70% (2)	59% (2)	69% (2)
Letter/Mail	36% (2)	48% (3)	26% (4)	46% (3)
Meet/Home Visit	27% (3)	25% (5)	21% (5)	38% (4)
Newsletters	24% (4)	6% (8)	21% (5)	21% (5)
General (“Invite,” “Positive”)	--	28% (4)	21% (5)	21% (5)
Conferences	19% (5)	20% (6)	28% (3)	--
Notes via Student	12% (6)	--	13% (6)	18% (6)
Internet Tools	--	15% (7)	--	10% (8)
Texting	--	--	--	15% (7)

*Parentheses indicate rank of frequency (1 = most frequent strategy) found in each group’s responses.

--Indicates 5% or fewer of the group participants mentioned it in their responses.

Implications of Findings on Teacher Preparation

Need for Explicit Learning Experiences in Preservice Programs

As seen in both groups' responses, middle and high school preservice experiences typically lacked substantial preparation for parent/family engagement. Teacher candidates cannot wait for their student teaching semester before they practice and prepare for interactions with families. Preservice programs must provide additional and earlier opportunities to work with students' families.

Comparisons of the pre- and post-survey responses from the teacher candidates show that purposeful instruction embedded in the standard teacher education program can improve teacher candidates' awareness of family engagement. Results indicate that even one semester of exposure and experience can significantly impact teacher candidates' ideas and attitudes about interacting with students' parents and families. In particular, participants in both school placements showed an increase in ideas for welcoming and communicating with students' families, two standards in the PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships.

Furthermore, the number of participants citing an introductory letter to parents as a way to welcome families doubled for both groups between pre- and post-surveys. This is important to note, since in the past teacher education programs have emphasized mostly reactionary strategies (Gray, 2001). Teacher educators may not have the flexibility in their preparation programs to create or add another course dealing specifically with parent/family interactions, as advocated by some (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009). Nevertheless, faculty can insert proactive content into an established class or classes through assignments, discussions, activities, assessments, and guest speakers. Application in fieldwork experiences before the student teaching semester will further solidify teacher candidates' learning and practice of family engagement.

Clarifying Teachers' Roles in Welcoming Families

A large portion of teacher candidates cited open houses and similar school events as the primary means to welcome families to schools. However, many parents are not available for or comfortable with building visits (Benson & Ogletree, 2012). The post-survey results indicate that teacher candidates are much more aware of communication tools like letters to welcome parents. Such communication strategies can be used not only during the school year, but also as one method to engage families from before school even begins.

Since family engagement activities often start prior to the school year, preservice programs could enhance teacher preparation by structuring their fieldwork requirements so that teacher candidates participate in "back to school" events

in placement schools. Welcome events should not be limited to an administrative duty. New teachers must be educated and encouraged to play an ongoing role in welcoming families to their schools—through communication, participation, and more.

Promoting Multiple Communication Methods

Phone calls and emails were largely considered the primary methods for communication with parents/families. Convenience was a common reason for communicating through these tools. Post-survey results show that after their semester experience and exposure to course content and speakers, more teacher candidates were aware of Internet tools as a communication resource with parents (e.g., schoolnotes.com, PowerSchool). Statistical analysis reaffirms this, indicating a significant gain in teacher candidates knowing more specific actions for communicating with parents and families. Awareness of Internet tools may have been a product of teacher candidates' fieldwork experience throughout the semester, during which they observed their mentor teachers using such technology or describing it.

Since not all families have consistent or permanent Internet or phone connections, preservice programs must promote multiple methods of communication for teacher–parent interactions. Teacher candidates need to learn how to use current tools and methods found in schools. Teacher preparation programs can partner with schools to examine these resources and how to meet specific community needs. Further study will also be needed to determine how teacher candidates perceive these methods—as either proactive or reactive strategies—with preparation programs emphasizing both in appropriate situations, as opposed to just the latter (Gray, 2001).

Significance of Field Experience School Placements

Results comparing the two groups of participants (those with urban field experiences and those with suburban field experiences) indicate that the placement school for clinical fieldwork can also impact teacher candidates' development. After a semester, teacher candidates in urban schools showed a greater awareness of tools and strategies for welcoming and communicating with students' families. Improved family engagement is especially noteworthy in urban school settings, where research finds significant impact of parental involvement on student achievement (U.S. GAO, 2002), despite common disadvantages in these communities (EPERC, 2008, 2009; Gamoran, 2001; Marx, 2006).

All of the urban schools in this study received Title I funds, as opposed to only half of the suburban schools. At the time of this research study, schools

were required by law to commit one percent of their Title I money to family engagement activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). An urban school building, therefore, may have already put more procedures in place than the typical suburban school. This indicates that policy decisions and mandates can impact not only the teachers and students in the schools, but also the future teachers training in those buildings.

With typically more diverse populations, urban schools may have also provided teacher candidates with opportunities to explore more avenues for engaging families. Likewise, urban schools may have identified building- or district-wide practices (as well as resources and personnel) to support these endeavors. Schools from all types of communities—urban, suburban, and rural—would benefit from actively identifying and implementing strategies for engaging parents and families. Moreover, teacher candidates placed in such schools for fieldwork will gain additional support and exposure to habits they themselves can enact when they become fully employed in their future schools. In the end, preparation programs can enhance research-supported and proven family engagement coursework (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2011) by providing urban fieldwork experiences for its teacher candidates with experience in direct application.

Conclusions

Although this study is ongoing, findings do provide insight and implications that inform the initial research questions about middle/high school teacher candidates' perceptions of family engagement, examining the impact of a general methods course as well as two different field experience placements—urban or suburban schools. These questions focus on the experiences and perceptions of teacher candidates preparing to work in middle and high schools, whose preservice preparation has historically overlooked family engagement (Epstein, 2001; Giallourakis et al., 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Furthermore, until now, little has been known about the impact of field experience school placement (suburban vs. urban) on teacher candidates' ideas about family engagement. Even with insight gained from this present study, potential limitations must be addressed, as well as a consideration of future efforts.

Limitations

Despite the statistical significance in comparing the two groups of teacher candidates, the standard deviation is considerable compared to the mean scores. The use of a sample of convenience does make the two groups uneven in number. Even so, Levene's test for homogeneity was upheld in all statistical tests described in the analysis.

Many other aspects may have also influenced the teacher candidates' survey responses. The participants could have gathered additional experiences in other courses, worked in schools as paraeducators, interacted with schools as parents of students, and other variables. All of these experiences, both during the semester and prior to its beginning, could impact individuals' growth. Nevertheless, a significant increase does occur over the course of one semester—just sixteen weeks—in which participants study in a general methods course emphasizing parental/family engagement along with fieldwork one hour a week in schools.

Further Research and Efforts

The results of this study provide insight into the preparation and experiences of middle and high school teachers. These findings inform not only teacher education practice, but also teacher education research. The potential impact of cultural and language differences must be examined further with respect to teachers' experiences and perceptions of parent/family interactions. The teacher candidates in this study participated in a one-semester general methods course infused with explicit instruction and application of parent and family engagement. Other models for preparation—including different courses, course sequences, fieldwork experiences, assessments, and applications—could be studied to determine traits of effective preparation. With this particular study and group of participants, a longitudinal project can provide insight on the long-term impact of such course design on individuals' preparation and initiation to the teaching career.

As with any useful study, the questions outweigh the answers. The present results provide immediate insight and localized assessment. More importantly, these findings inform future decisions and investigations, as well as practical application by all educators. Purposeful action is needed to benefit future and present teachers and, ultimately, students and their families. In teacher preparation programs, the emphasis must be on proactive approaches for positive outcomes from family–teacher interactions.

Whether the preparation is through a single semester course or from an overarching program theme built through a teacher education program, future teachers must learn about the need for family engagement and proven methods. Schools can assist with this preparation during clinical fieldwork, introducing teacher candidates to building and district practices and inviting them to participate in the process. Regardless of the school setting—urban, suburban, or rural—these efforts are necessary to benefit everyone involved—future and current teachers, teacher educators, students, their families, and their communities.

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Daniel J. Bergman is an associate professor and chair of the Secondary Science Education Program at Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. Scholarly interests include teacher classroom behaviors, teacher preparation for family engagement, preservice preparation, and the role of popular culture in teaching and science education. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Bergman at Corbin 117, Campus Box 28, Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount, Wichita, KS, 67114, or email daniel.bergman@wichita.edu

Appendix A. Assignment Guidelines for Introduction Letter to Parents/Guardians

Purpose

Introduce teacher candidate to the role of parental communication and involvement in the successful education of middle and secondary-level students through the composition of an information letter to share with students' parents/guardians while in practicum setting.

Task

Write a brief (1-page) letter to the parents/guardians of students in your practicum classroom that includes the following components:

1. **Introduce yourself**—significant information about your practicum teaching position (which cooperating teacher you are working with), your background, experience, interests, professional goals, etc.
2. Share some of your **goals for the students**. What do you want them to learn and develop by the end of their time spent with you?
3. Describe your **plans and procedures for ongoing communication** with the students' parents/guardians. How will you contact them? How often? For what reasons?
4. Describe potential **opportunities for the parent/guardians' involvement** with their students' learning during this semester. What can they do to help with the content learning, assignments, and projects? What events or programs will you use with the students in which the parents/guardians can participate?
5. **Invite** the parents/guardians to share any concerns, feedback, or questions to you at any point during the semester. Share appropriate contact information (school phone number).

After your letter draft has been evaluated and returned to you . . .

1. Print the letter on the provided letterhead.
2. Make copies and give to each student in your practicum classroom (optional).

URBAN/SUBURBAN PLACEMENTS & FAMILIES

Appendix B. Placement School Information

School (Grades)	Year Building Built	Student Enrollment (2010–2011)	%White (Non-Hispanic) Students	% Minority Students	Title I School	% of Students Qualified Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
<i>Suburban Schools</i>						
S-A (9-12)	2001	828	88%	12%	No	10%
S-B (6-8)	1996	627	85%	15%	No	6%
S-C (7-8)	2010	410	82%	18%	Yes	16%
S-D (7-8)	2002	389	78%	22%	Yes	29%
S-E (6-8)	1958	564	81%	19%	Yes	58%
S-F (9-12)	1996	1,525	79%	21%	No	13%
S-G (6-8)	1983	753	79%	21%	Yes	21%
S-H (6-8)	2009	791	81%	19%	No	11%
<i>Averages</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>736</i>	<i>82%</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>50%*</i>	<i>21%</i>
<i>Urban Schools</i>						
U-A (6-8)	1957	857	49%	51%	Yes	78%
U-B (9-12)	1961	1,558	41%	59%	Yes	51%
U-C (6-8)	1939	529	17%	83%	Yes	83%
U-D (9-12)	1929	1,960	25%	75%	Yes	81%
U-E (9-12)	1959	1,501	48%	52%	Yes	73%
<i>Averages</i>	<i>1949</i>	<i>1,281</i>	<i>36%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>100%*</i>	<i>73%</i>

*Percentage of school buildings receiving Title I funding

Appendix C. School/Parent Involvement Survey Instrument

(with annotations for post-survey modifications)

NAME (optional): _____ SEMESTER/YEAR: _____

SUBJECT ENDORSEMENT(S)/GRADE LEVEL(S): _____

COURSE: _____ PRACTICUM PLACEMENT: _____

1. Describe the level and scope of interactions and communication you have had with students' parents during your PREVIOUS preservice practicum/field experience(s).

Rephrased Question #1 on the Post-Survey for Teacher Candidates:

1. Describe the level and scope of interactions and communication you have had with students' parents during THIS preservice practicum/field experience.
2. What do you think are effective ways of welcoming families into the school community?
[Aligned with PTA National Standard #1 for Family-School Partnerships: "Welcoming all families into the school community—Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are doing in class" (2010, p. 1).]
3. What are some ways to effectively communicate with students' parents/guardians?
[Aligned with PTA National Standard #2 for Family-School Partnerships: "Communicating effectively—Families and school staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about student learning" (2010, p. 1).]
4. What role do parents play in supporting students' success?
[Aligned with PTA National Standard #3 for Family-School Partnerships: "Supporting student success—Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively." (2010, p. 1).]
5. What would you like to learn in order to enhance interactions with students' parents/guardians?
6. Are you currently a parent/guardian for any school-aged children?
7. If you answered "Yes" to number 6, how many and in what grade(s)?
8. In what ways does the school(s) encourage you to be involved with your child(ren)'s education?

Appendix D. Charts of Percent of Participants and Number of Actions Shared in Survey Question Responses

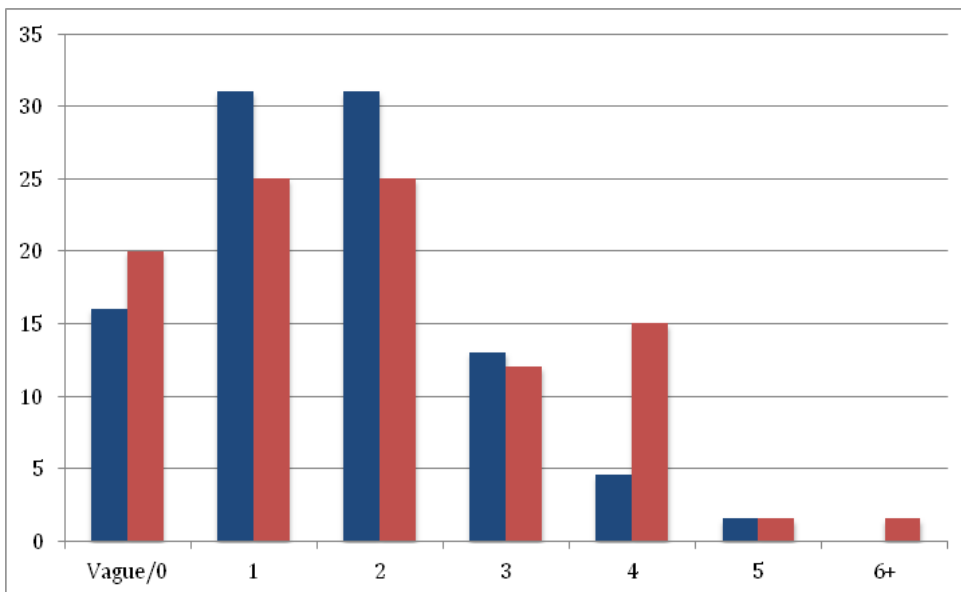


Figure 1a. Number of specific actions to welcome families into the school community given by teacher candidates in SUBURBAN field experience schools. (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **BLUE** = pre-survey; **RED** = post-survey

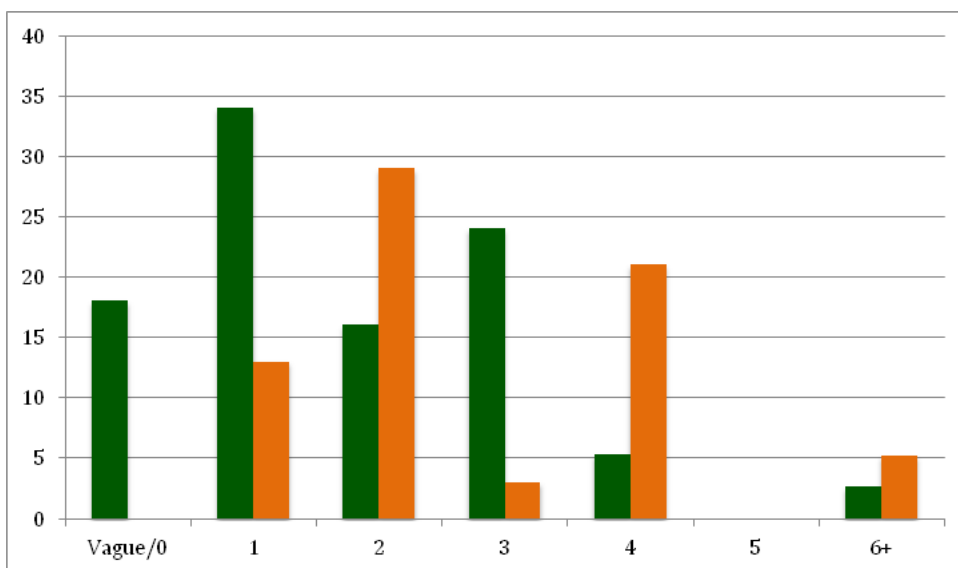


Figure 1b. Number of specific actions to welcome families into the school community given by teacher candidates in URBAN field experience schools. (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **GREEN** = pre-survey; **GOLD** = post-survey

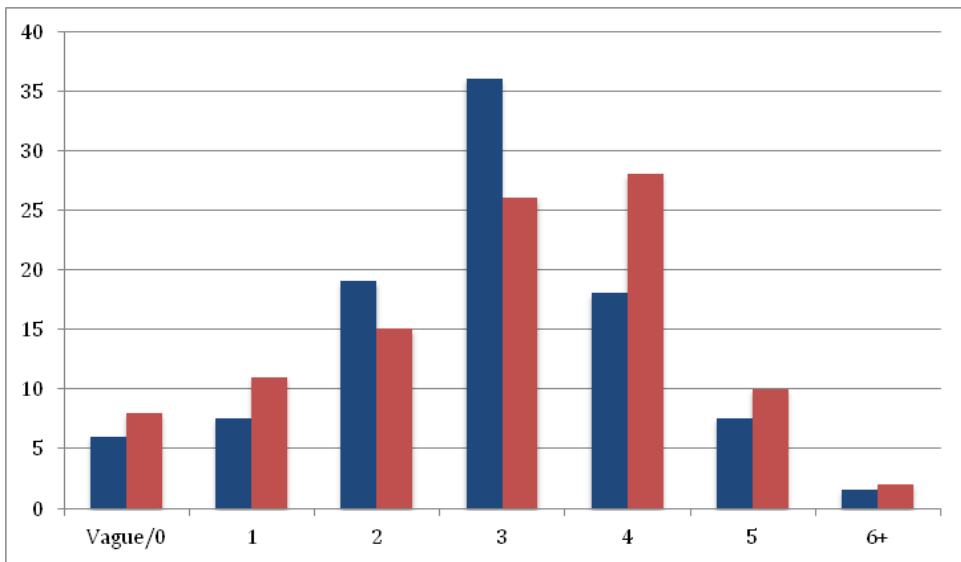


Figure 2a. Number of specific actions for communicating with parents/guardians given by teacher candidates in SUBURBAN field experience schools (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **BLUE** = pre-survey; **RED** = post-survey

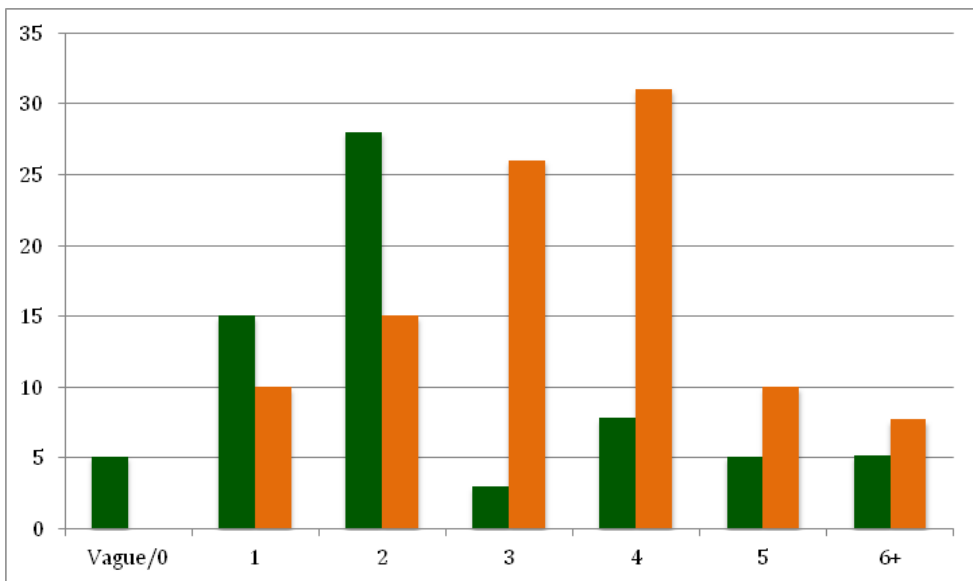


Figure 2b. Number of specific actions for communicating with parents/guardians given by teacher candidates in URBAN field experience schools (% of respondents vs. # of specific actions). **GREEN** = pre-survey; **GOLD** = post-survey