# INVESTING IN COLLABORATION: PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATORS AND THEIR READINESS FOR HOME SCHOOL COLLABORATION

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## Abstract

Home-school collaborations offer the promise of increased social and academic outcomes for students with disabilities. This qualitative study examines the practices of 25 preservice special education teachers and their implementation of state standards to collaborate with families of children with disabilities in schools during student teaching. Respondents' responses were categorized into two main themes of direct and indirect collaboration activities. Direct collaboration included invitations, meetings conversations, and sharing information. Indirect collaboration included training. Although the preservice special education teachers evidenced typical family involvement strategies, a more integrated connection between theory and practice is necessary for creating effective home-school collaborations.

**Keywords:** Preservice Special Educators, Home School Collaboration, State Standards, Direct and Indirect Activities

*It was the first open house of the school year and the first open house for Lisa. As a new teacher she was excited and nervous, spending hours decorating her classroom with students' work, ensuring that each student's work was represented in some area of the room. She had spent the week preparing for the night's event by calling each of her 35 students' parents or guardians to remind them of the open house. She had even purchased refreshments to add a personal touch and to make her students' parent feel welcome. When the families arrived, they began to ask her about opportunities to assist in the classroom. Many were eager to participate in the classroom experience and some even had questions about the educational content. Lisa realized that she was somewhat unprepared for the parents' offers to collaborate with her and soon felt overwhelmed. Having only completed one course on collaboration with a small emphasis on home-school collaborations, and with minimal field experience working with families, Lisa went home afterwards feeling disillusioned and wondered why her teacher education program had not better prepared her. She thought about all of the things she had learned in her special education teacher*

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*program, like classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessments, but realized collaborating with urban families was something that had not been adequately discussed.*

Lisa is not alone. Of all of the skills that are taught and thought to be valuable to beginning teachers, home-school collaboration is a new and necessary skill that is minimally addressed in teacher education programs (Capse, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Many special education teacher programs have limited emphasis on home-school collaboration, which may be the reason why special educators report being unprepared to involve families (Hiatt-Mitchael, 2004; CEC, 2008).

Historically, the importance of home-school collaboration and parental involvement has increased because of requirements of state and national agencies. The California Commission on Teaching Credentials (CCTC) requires that special education teacher preparation programs meet specific home-school collaboration standards. Program standard 4.5 directly relates to home-school collaborations and family involvement (CCTC, n.d). Specifically, this certification standard requires that the candidates document specific activities related to building rapport with families for the purposes of "ensuring a supportive carryover, and facilitating home-school relationships" (CCTC, n.d.). Additionally, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, special education teachers have a responsibility to children with disabilities to involve families in every aspect of their child's education (Idea, n.d). At the national level of accreditation, although home-school collaborations are currently one of 10 content standards that must be met for recognition by the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), this hasn't always been the case. Clark and McNergney (1990) reviewed the teacher education requirements of 51 state departments and found that although such collaborations were required by the state of California (CA), most states did not mention working with families. Additionally, even though recent research (Blair, 2002) reported an increase in the number of states that require a component for preservice teachers to collaborate with parents, there is still a paucity of home-school collaboration experiences for preservice teachers.

The need for home-school collaboration as a tool to optimize the education process has been consistent over time. Meidel and Reynolds (1999) found gaps between what teachers were trying to do in school and what students were being taught at home because families were not always aware of expectations, thereby leaving them [families] unable to reinforce or extend what was being done in schools. Teacher education programs must look at how they can better prepare teachers to involve families in every aspect of their children's learning. There is a gap in the literature regarding what kinds of experiences are provided for special education teacher candidates in order for them to become more competent and confident in home-school collaboration. (CEC, 2008; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997).

## Theoretical Frameworks and Purpose

Collaboration with families is considered to be a critical feature in special education. It has been recognized as key to addressing dropout prevention, over-representation, enhancing student advancement to selective post-secondary education, and improving outcomes for students with disabilities (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2006). Therefore, this

study is based on two theories: The Theory of Multiple Influences and The Theory of Cultural Reciprocity.

**Theory of Multiple Influences**

The researchers utilized a Theory of Multiple Influences that suggests that learning takes place everywhere, not just in schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hidalgo, Sui, & Epstein, 2004). This theory of overlapping spheres includes both influences of external and internal structures. The external structures represent the context of the home, school, and community, which may overlap. The internal structures represent interactions between families and education professionals; education professionals and communities; and families and communities within and across individual and institutional contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gordon, Bridgall, & Meroe, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hidalgo, Sui, & Epstein, 2004; Latunde, 2009). This theory helps explain why home-school collaboration is so important, while Cultural Reciprocity helps to explain how it can be practiced.

**Theory of Cultural Reciprocity**

The Theory of Cultural Reciprocity acknowledges that one cannot be sensitive to cultural differences unless they are first aware of their own biases and assumptions that guide their thinking and behaviors (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999). One cultural assumption related to home-school collaborations is that most families need to be the passive recipients of information on parenting, special education legislation and disabilities. In this example, educators become aware that family members come with diverse levels of knowledge and experiences regarding these topics. A posture of reciprocity believes that communication, growth and learning are bi-directional and all involved are in a position to gain new insights.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the activities of special education teacher candidates with families of children with disabilities. This paper provides a summary of how students enrolled in clinical practice or fieldwork met the criteria of ensuring a supportive carryover, and facilitating home-school relationships with families of children with disabilities. This study was guided by the following research question: What kinds of activities are used to ensure a supportive carryover and facilitate home-school collaboration?

## Method

This qualitative study gathered data using a document collection process. This type of field research collects and "assemble[s] written materials and make[s] a written report"(Lofland, 1974). The activities of 25 special education teacher candidates enrolled in clinical practice were collected at the end of a three-unit course. Candidates were given a syllabus containing the California state teaching standards 4.1-4.5 related to home-school collaboration and were asked to document the activities they did to meet these

standards. The syllabus did not specify what the student needed to do to meet the standards, only that they document the activity, number of hours, and location in which the activities occurred. For the purposes of documenting activities, students could document between 10-100 hours of activities for any specific standard.

**Context of the Study**

For the past four years a special education teacher preparation program at a private university in the Los Angeles area included a collaboration course. The course includes a family involvement component and is required for all students who seek to become credentialed to work in mild and moderate special education settings from grades kindergarten to twelfth grade. The course content includes communicating students' strengths & challenges, engaging families in decision-making, co-teaching, collaborative consultation, and providing information to families on community resources. The three-semester unit "clinical practice" course is consistent with what the state of California requires, and with the recommendations of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in order to prepare teachers for family involvement.

**Participants**

To examine the kinds of activities in which preservice teachers participated in to meet the criteria of facilitating home-school relationships, a sample of 25 special education teacher candidates was studied. All 25 student teachers held bachelor's degrees, were enrolled in a special education teacher education program, and 70 percent were pursuing a master's degree. The participants included two students who were working with a state-issued intern credential who acted as the teacher of record (interns), and 23 students (student teachers) placed under the supervision of a master teacher. Both types of students were used in this study and were responsible for the same coursework and meeting the standards. Additionally, all participants were in the last semester of the program and were assigned a university mentor who provided them with individualized support including site visits to nearby urban schools.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for the current study included self-reported activities of special education teacher candidates related to questions regarding home-school collaborations. The student teachers were asked to document activities, over a period of 18 weeks that specifically addressed building rapport with families of children with disabilities to ensure a supportive carry-over and facilitate the home-school relationship. All ten mentors were sent an email requesting all responses to standard 4.1-4.5. At the end of the course, five of the ten mentors sent the responses to the researchers. Although one of the researchers is the university field supervisor for the course and program, the investigation was conducted jointly.

Five of the ten mentors provided the researchers with data from the students they mentored during one term. Each mentor was instructed to email the responses after they de-identified the documentation of the activities related to the specific standards 4.1-4.5 related to home-school collaboration. The university mentors de-identified data of 25

former special education clinical practice students and provided them to the researchers over the course of 3 weeks. At the time the researchers collected the data from university mentors, the participants were no longer in the special education credential program, thus the study was given an exempt status from a full IRB review.

The data were analyzed using topic coding. According to Richards, (2005) topic coding is used to "allocate passages to topics" and is the "hack work of the qualitative researcher, labeling text according to its subject" (p. 88). The researchers worked collaboratively to develop themes and analyze the data. The data was reviewed several times to allow for the emergence of patterns and themes (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In analyzing the data, the participants' exact words were used (Creswell, 2004) and the number of occurrences of a particular activity was recorded.

## Results and Discussion

This study focused on the kinds of activities that are used to facilitate home-school relationships with special education preservice teachers and urban families. The kinds of activities that the preservice teachers responded to revealed important levels of communication and contact with parents. The sections below describe some primary themes found in the data. The themes that consistently emerged in the data were:

- Special education teacher candidates communicated directly with families. Participants consistently stated that they called family members to invite them to or remind them of meetings.
- Information was shared with families formally and informally.
- Training activities were considered indirect methods for building rapport with families.

### Direct Collaboration Activities

**Invitations to school programs**. In this study, inviting families to school programs and events was a method used by 6 (24%) of the special education teacher candidates to build rapport and facilitate home-school communication. Participants reported making phone calls home as a method for inviting families to programs and events. "I called all parents to remind them of open house tomorrow night," noted one participant. Teachers' invitations have been found to play a vital role in how the home-school relationship will play out (Keyes, 2000). It was not always the actual invitation but how families were invited that made the difference. A few of the events and programs extended to parents included back to school night, musicals, fundraising, holiday events, and open house. This finding was consistent with Katz and Bauch's (1999) study of how student teachers developed home-school collaboration by making phone calls by inviting parents to participate.

**Formal meetings.** Initial meetings between teachers and families can be a determining factor in the development of the home-school relationship (Keyes, 2000). Sometimes it is the first chance families and teachers have to exchange information about a child, ask questions or share concerns. Depending on how the meeting is structured it can be a chance for teachers and families to develop a plan to collaborate by sharing information about a child's strengths, interests, past successes and challenges, the

curriculum, and specific instructional strategies employed in the classroom. One participant wrote, "Show the parent the accomplishment of the student attending resource specialist program (RSP)." In this study, 40% of the teacher candidates initiated contact with families to request or remind family members of meetings. "I called the parents to remind them of the upcoming IEP," is what one student noted. Most participants who noted this activity simply wrote "parent meeting or IEP meeting." For special education students, these formal meetings with parents were usually IEP meetings, however, a few were other formal meetings. Home visits were also reported to discuss concerns and used as a means of building rapport. Depending on how the home-visit came about and if the family was comfortable with the home-visit, home-visits can be a strategy for building cultural reciprocity with diverse families (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999).

**Informal discussions or unscheduled meetings.** Some special education teacher candidates believed that unscheduled meetings and impromptu conversations met the criteria of the standard, but felt less comfortable with them than scheduled meetings (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Since teachers and families come with different skills and expectations of how the teacher-family interactions should work, communication and shared goals are very important for building reciprocity and enhancing the multiple structures that influence the student (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999: Bronfenbrenner, 1979). On one hand, families and the teacher may have specific skills and think that all of the interactions must be distant and professional while the other may want to develop a more informal relationship. Informal discussions make this possible. In this study informal discussions were impromptu, addressed both concerns and positive news and occurred during face-to-face interactions. "I stand at the door each morning to greet all of the parents," shared one participant. This indicates that sometimes the conversations were when the parents dropped off their children for school or when they picked their children up in the afternoon. Five participants reported holding impromptu conversations with a family member to share both good news and concerns.

**Sharing information**. "I called the parent to share with them ways to increase their child's fluency," was one of the responses from a participant. Five of the twenty-five participants documented specific activities related to sharing information with families. The information shared with families was both positive and negative. Information shared regarding concerns about a lack of progress or behavior significantly outweighed the positive information shared with families according to the documentation.

Telephone calls were the most common way to communicate, followed by, writing notes and texting messages. "I called the parent to compliment the child (Participant 1, Personal communication, 2008)," and "I communicated with parents through phone calls and all of the parents were very supportive and continued to provide support at home" (Participant 2, Personal communication, 2010), were reported as examples of sharing information. Another two participants reported utilizing meetings to share information with family members on specific learning strategies. "I met with the parent to show her how to use TouchMath, because I use it at home with my son and in class" (Participant 3, Personal communication, 2010), reported a respondent. In this study, special education teacher candidates considered sharing information with families as a method to ensure carry-over of a supportive environment. Theories of Multiple Influences and Cultural Reciprocity espouse sharing information with families as

essential for home-school collaboration. When respondents initiated positive contacts, they found that those efforts enhanced school programs and events with relationship building components and built and facilitate home-school collaboration.

### Indirect Collaboration Activities

Several of the participants (24%) participated in more than 18 hours of activities related to training or conferencing with paraprofessionals under the standard 4.5 for building rapport with families. One participant wrote, "Conducted paraprofessional training classroom management" while another participant wrote, "Instructions for aides [done] weekly for activities." The rationale for this being viewed as a collaborative activity is unclear, but it could possibly be that although there may not be direct contact with the families, the candidates may feel that the training provides an opportunity for building collaboration, which will eventually benefit home-school relationships. Participants reported ten hours of assessment and three hours of writing IEPs as activities aimed at building rapport with special education families to improve home-school communication and ensure carry-over.

## Discussion

The literature of family engagement in special education is clear. Teachers are expected to make families full partners in the educational process. In this study we learned that preservice teachers used school programs, meetings, and training as means to nurture the home-school relationship and build rapport. What we did not see were activities that demonstrated shared decision-making, reciprocal teaching and learning, and collaboration. Research on improved outcomes in special education consistently suggests that families that provide information on their child's strengths and help to monitor progress have improved outcomes (NCSET, 2006; Whitbread, n.d). There was no evidence that teachers used formal meetings, informal meetings or programs to prepare families for the IEP meetings, elicit ideas for goals, elicit information on strengths or work collaboratively to monitor progress. The preservice teachers' interactions mostly demonstrated one-way communication and not the bi-directional communication expected in collaboration (Dettmer, et. al., 2009).

## Implications and Recommendations

Research on high-performing schools espouse a Theory of Multiple Influences and maintain better communication and home-school relationships than poor performing schools (Civic Enterprises, 2008). Lisa may have benefited from a more comprehensive special education teacher program and felt more prepared to engage families in schools because of it. "Teacher preparation for engagement is a matter of equity as low performance among minority groups persist. Family involvement plays a significant role in eliminating these inequities" (Capse, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). Research (Dettmer et. al. 2009; Williams, 2007) suggests five steps for collaborating with families: 1) examining personal values, 2) building collaborative relationships, 3) initiating home-school interactions, 4) individualizing for families, and 5) evaluating home-school collaborations. Successful models employ Cultural Reciprocity for home-school

collaborations by practicing respect for the family as the first teacher; empowerment for the family, and positioning themselves to learn from families while recognizing that all families want the best for their child (Williams, 2007). Although establishing rapport is among one of the most cited strategies for building trust and effective partnerships with families most teacher education programs offer little direct instruction for building trust, rapport building and collaborating with families (Kunjufu, 2005; Louque, 2009; Thompson, 2009). There was no evidence in this study that preservice teachers had any support from mentors or specific activities for building rapport with families.

In this study we found that the clinical practice experiences were not closely linked to course content or the collaboration class; they did not require students to use specific assessments or activities learned in their collaboration classroom. This connection is essential to connect links between theory and practice. Also recommended is a combination of approaches to creating a strong foundation for home-school collaboration in special education teacher programs. Offering a continuum of education for family engagement is a promising practice for teacher education programs. One course in addition to clinical practice may have had some positive effects on student perceptions of home-school collaboration, but more should be done in this area to reap the benefits for all involved.

A more comprehensive approach might include adding another course, strategically placing students in field experiences where they can interact with diverse families, including home-school collaboration topics and activities throughout the program, using specific collaboration rubrics and assessments, specific collaboration activities, offering seminars on family engagement, utilizing field work supervisors to guide teacher candidates in an array of home-school collaboration activities and providing clinical practice students with specific home-school collaboration standard activities (Capse, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Katz & Bauch, 1999).

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