

Preparing pre-service teachers to work with parents:

An experiential learning tool

Nurit Kaplan Toren* and Carol Buchholz Holland

In the last decades, researchers and educators have agreed that the responsibility of developing successful school-based family communication rests in the hands of schools and teachers (Epstein, 2018; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Therefore, teacher education programs need to identify effective methods that provide pre-service teachers with strategies and skills for developing collaborative teacher-parent relationships. Although some universities and teacher education training programs include courses on family engagement, these courses do not provide pre-service teachers with adequate instruction pertaining to family-school partnerships (Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde, & Mutton, 2018). Therefore, the authors sought to provide pre-service teachers with a meaningful learning experience aimed at furnishing them with the knowledge, skills, and attitude needed to build positive and trusting teacher-parent relationships.

The present paper has two objectives: (a) to give pre-service teacher educators an experiential learning tool designed to prepare pre-service teachers for work with parents, and (b) to discuss the unique contribution of the parent interview assignment to the education of pre-service teachers.

Keywords: experiential learning, pre-service teacher training, parent interview guidelines

*Nurit Kaplan Toren, University of Haifa, Faculty of Education, Department of Learning, Instruction and Teaching Education; Oranim Academic College of Education, Israel.

ntoren@edu.haifa.ac.il

Carol Buchholz Holland, North Dakota State University, Counselor Education Program, North Dakota, US.

carol.e.buchholz@ndsu.edu

Introduction

The importance of teacher-parent relationships

According to the School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) model, the two most important factors in the life of a young child are the child's family and school. In light of this understanding, an effective way to foster children's well-being and educational functioning is to mobilize both family and school resources (Gerrard & Soriano, 2019). Since teachers have a fundamental role as SBFC professionals (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013), the present paper focuses on one way of strengthening and preparing pre-service teachers to engage with parents. Teacher-parent engagement has been described as a "process of relationship building, based on reciprocity, mutual respect, and trust that facilitates greater teacher-parent collaboration in support of student's success" (Bachellier, 2015, p. 32). There is broad agreement among researchers and educators about the importance of parents' educational involvement for students' success and for positive outcomes such as self-evaluation and academic achievement (Kaplan Toren, 2013; Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015). A strong teacher-parent relationship can also "contribute to a more positive school climate and greater teacher retention" (Bachellier, 2015, p. 32). One of the predicting factors for parents' educational involvement is the degree to which parents feel welcomed by teachers and school personnel (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). The more welcome parents feel, the more likely they are to become involved in their children's education. Bachellier (2015) also maintained that "effective parent engagement

depends upon a teacher's capacity to engage parents in support of children's learning" (p. 2). Teachers consider lack of support on the part of parents as their most pressing challenge (Johnson, Yarrow, Rochkind, & Ott, 2009). Because teachers play an important role in engaging parents in their children's education, they should possess the knowledge, skills, and attitude necessary to promote strong family-school partnerships by the time they become licensed teachers. Research stresses the extensive need for teacher education programs to provide pre-service teachers with instruction on how to build family-school partnerships before they graduate and enter the workforce (Epstein, 2013).

Pre-service teachers' training

An essential competence needed to develop family-school partnerships is communication skills (Symeou, Roussounidou, Michaelides, 2012). Epstein (2013) noted that teachers need to know how to facilitate positive and respectful interactions with parents and to be able to convey the message that they value parents' input about their children's education. Yet, not all pre-service teachers, or teachers in general, naturally possess strong communication skills. The development of effective communication skills requires a structured process and opportunities for practice. Many teachers, however, report that they were not provided with opportunities to practice interaction with parents while completing their undergraduate teacher education programs (Lopez & Patton, 2013; Markow & Pieteres, 2009). Because of lack of training in this area, most of the teachers felt unprepared to effectively engage with families when they began their professional careers.

Pre-service teachers often express negative attitudes toward parents, concerns, and hesitance about working with parents. Recent graduates consider themselves unprepared to develop effective family-school partnerships (Epstein, 2013). If new teachers did not receive

training while completing their teacher preparation programs on how to develop communication skills or engage parents, they are likely to be surprised when they discover that interacting with parents is a tense and often frightening experience (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Teachers who did not receive adequate knowledge or skill training during their teacher preparation are expected to have low confidence and are less likely to initiate positive relationships with parents (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987). Even when teacher candidates demonstrate high self-efficacy, they possess a limited number of strategies for dealing with situations involving parents (Walker & Dotger, 2012). In sum, although current teacher education training curricula have started emphasizing this topic, newly graduated teachers still report that they feel unprepared to work with parents (Miller, Coleman & Mitchell, 2018).

While some teacher education programs include courses on family engagement, these modules do not fully prepare teachers to communicate and work with families (Chavkin, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Few teacher education programs offer hands-on training opportunities, such as simulated parent-teacher conferences (Walker & Dotger, 2012) using parent stories (Broomhead, 2013) or role-playing (Mehling & Shumow, 2013), which are designed to address the challenges of parent-teacher conferences. Most educational training focusing on family engagement has been designed for teachers and not pre-service teachers (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Mandarakas, 2014).

Below are two examples from the recent years of pre-service teachers' training programs aimed at preparing pre-service teachers for effective relationship with parents. The first program focused on in-service training in Cyprus (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012), preparing in-service teachers to communicate with parents, and on the use of basic counseling skills in a real school setting. Five counseling skills were taught over several sessions: nonverbal

communication, asking questions in conferences with parents, paraphrasing, reflecting on content and feelings, and summarizing and closing sessions. Later, all in-service teachers were asked to design, organize, and implement teacher-parent sessions in their schools. Data collected at the beginning and at the end of the course attest to the effect of this training on the in-service teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of the communication skills that they were taught and show a positive appraisal of their competence in organizing and leading briefing sessions with parents. The second research project focused on the need to develop pre-service teachers' empathy toward parents, specifically toward parents of children with special needs. Broomhead (2013) used parent stories to develop empathy of pre-service teachers and address communication and collaboration problems with parents. A mother of two sons with special education needs (SEN) was invited to share her story with pre-service teachers. In her presentation, she discussed the various aspects of daily life and associated challenges in parenting two children with SEN (e.g., sleeping, eating, shopping, mobility, etc.). Pre-service teachers' feedback indicates that the mother's experiences were valuable for developing empathy and understanding.

In sum, there is an agreement that educational practitioners, including teachers, need to be encouraged to understand parental perspectives and empathize with parents. Unfortunately, teachers receive limited preparation for developing effective parent-teacher cooperation (Minke, 2010). Therefore, it would be beneficial to develop these skills from the very beginning of their careers when they are training as pre-service teachers. Both researches noted that pre-service teachers cannot improve their communication and empathy skills by only reading about theories from a book (Broomhead, 2013). They also need to put these theories into practice. If we want pre-service teachers to feel confident in talking with parents, we need to equip them with the

socio-emotional and communication skills required to form effective teacher-parent relationships. Pre-service teachers should also be exposed to parents' thoughts and feelings, and practice communication skills in real life interactions during their training programs.

Professional development opportunities aimed at fostering parent engagement strategies are limited even in K-12 school settings (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Therefore, it is important to find effective methods for building pre-service teachers' capacity for developing positive parent-teacher relationships before they graduate from their training programs. The authors' goal was to develop effective hands-on teacher-family engagement training for pre-service teachers. The purpose of this training was to provide pre-service teachers with an experiential learning experience aimed at equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and attitude needed to build positive and trusting teacher-parent relationships.

The benefits of experiential learning

When designing effective learning opportunities for pre-service teachers, it is important to consider parent engagement pedagogy, which is defined as “the teaching and learning of parent engagement” that “broadly encompasses all theory, research, knowledge, and instruction relating to parent engagement” (Bachellier, 2015, p. 1). Bachellier (2015) argued that teacher education programs should not only help increase pre-service teachers' knowledge about the benefits of positive parent engagement, but also provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to practice effective research-based strategies for engaging parents. Knowledge gained by reading textbooks does not always equate to comprehension or actual skill development (de Bruine et al., 2014). For example, even when new professionals have acquired valuable content knowledge from didactic teacher education courses, they often “fail to activate and use this knowledge in professional practice” (Walker & Dotger, 2012, p. 63). De Bruine et al. (2014)

stressed that pre-service teachers “should have opportunities for simulated and real encounters with parents” (p. 412). Ellis (2010) noted that teacher education programs need to provide pre-service teachers with information about how to develop school-family partnerships and offer educational experiences that encourage concrete skill development and opportunities to practice with families what they have learned in class.

Taking this information into consideration, it is also helpful to examine how Bloom’s taxonomy can be used as a guide in designing curricular activities for pre-service teachers. It is important that teacher educators provide pre-service teachers with educational opportunities that require a higher order of thinking, such as the application of knowledge (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). One example of an effective method for providing opportunities for students to apply knowledge is through experiential learning activities. Experiential learning is defined as “a means of acquiring knowledge through actions and feelings: it creates an emotional understanding and changes attitudes” (Warren, Hof, McGriff, & Morris, 2012, p. 275). Experiential learning includes authentic learning activities and application-based tasks. Dewey (1916) realized the importance of experiential learning over a hundred years ago, when he wrote “an ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance” (p. 169). Below are presented the interview guideline questions, an experiential learning tool that served as a scaffold for pre-service teachers, as they learned how to communicate effectively with parents.

Overview of the parent interview assignment

The course “Common Space for School and Family” is a one-semester course that includes 14 class sessions. The objectives of the course are to present a broad picture of parenting in the 21st century, to expose students to the importance of parental involvement in

education, and to give students tools for engaging with parents. In this course, pre-service teachers were exposed to teacher-parent engagement in two main ways: (a) addressing dilemmas in the classroom (case studies), and (b) a face-to-face interview with a parent. A 5-step process model was designed to prepare pre-service teachers to engage with parents (Figure 1).

The course was taught at Oranim Academic College of Education in Israel. The college trains kindergarten, elementary, and high school teachers, and offers BA, BSc, BEd, and MEd degrees. About 4,000 students study at Oranim College, with 1,800 students in the BA program (average age of 23), 600 students in the teaching training program (average age of 37), and 700 students in the MA program (average age of 37). Note that average age of Oranim College students is higher than that of students in comparable institutions in other countries.



Figure 1. Five-step process for preparing pre-service teachers to work with parents

The first part of the course was devoted to providing students with content information. The course content included theories that focused on families and parenting in the 21st century, and on parents' involvement in their children's education. The second part of the course was dedicated to developing pre-service teachers' communication skills, which are essential in

engaging with parents. To this end, each student was asked to record an interview with a parent. The parent interview was an experiential learning assignment that had four learning objectives aimed at affecting the students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding their interactions with parents. The objectives were to: (a) expose pre-service teachers to parents' perceptions about school and teachers; (b) increase pre-service teachers' understanding of their responsibility for collaboration with parents; (c) develop empathy for parents; and (d) practice communication and listening skills.

Most of the students used their smartphones to record their interviews. The average length of the parent interview was 20 minutes. Students were given four weeks to complete the assignment. At the end of the course, the students presented their reflections about the interview and discussed its contribution to the teachers' development training.

Assignment instructions given to pre-service teachers

Below are the general instructions given to students on how to conduct the parent interview assignment:

1. Choose your interviewee carefully (a mother or a father who has a child enrolled in a school). Do not interview one of your immediate family members or other relatives.
2. During the interview, ask the parent to think about his or her child attending school.
3. Select a quiet place for the interview, or let the interviewee choose the location and time.
4. Get prior agreement from the interviewee to record the interview, and make sure at the beginning of the interview that your recording equipment is working.
5. Try to talk less and listen more.
6. If you are not sure you understand the interviewee's answers, or if you think you would like to hear more, do not hesitate to ask for clarifications, expansions, and explanations.

Asking the interviewee to give a concrete example of what he or she says will make it easier for you to understand.

7. Avoid judging the interviewee and his or her statements, and do not argue with the interviewee about his or her answers or opinions. Listen, ask for clarifications, and try to understand.
8. Although you will record the interview, it is recommended you write down insights that come to your mind during the interview in real time. (Such insights tend to fade quickly, and they might not be “chirping” in your mind when you listen to your recording at home).
9. Be attentive not only to what is said but also to how it is said (body language, eye movements, changes in intonation, et cetera.).
10. An interviewee who feels comfortable with you will want to share more of his or her feelings, thoughts, and opinions.

Below are the guidelines for submitting the assignment that were given to the pre-service teachers:

1. Include a description of the interviewee (age, gender of the parent and child, place of residence, school) and discuss why you chose to interview him or her.
2. Submit a full printed transcript of the interview, together with any comments that you wrote down during or immediately after the interview.
3. Interpret the most significant findings.
4. Reflect about the emotions and thoughts that arose during and after the interview, and share them.

An experiential learning tool

The development of the parent interview guideline questions originated during a conversation about the need for a trusting relationship between parents and teachers. This conversation took place at the Oxford Symposium for School-Based Family Counseling in 2015. To the best of the authors' knowledge, only a few researchers have examined parent-teacher trust relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Adams, Forsyth & Mithchell, 2009; Guddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Lerkkanen, Kikas, Pakarinen, Poikonen, & Nurmi, 2013; Rotter, 1967). Therefore, the authors wished to learn more:

1. What makes parents feel comfortable with teachers (and schools)?
2. What makes parents feel welcome to be a partner in their children's schooling?
3. What makes parents realize that teachers truly care and want the best for their children?

To answer these questions, we determined that it was best to interview parents of students and we created the parent interview guideline questions, which were later incorporated into the experiential learning assignment required for the course.

Parent interview guideline questions (Kaplan Toren, Buchholz Holland, & Kelly, 2015)

The parent interview guideline questions are based on two dimensions: parent-child-teacher communications and parent-teacher trust relationships. The parent interview guideline includes 11 open-ended questions:

1. How do you find out what is happening with your child at his/her school?
2. In what ways is your child's school staff communicating with you?
3. On a scale from 1 (very unwelcome) to 10 (very welcome), how welcome do you feel at your child's school?
4. Who do you think is your child's most effective teacher?

5. Why do you think this teacher is effective?
6. If you cannot think about a specific teacher, try to imagine an effective teacher.
7. What would you like to see in this teacher?
8. What could the school staff do to make you feel more welcome?
9. In your opinion, what is a parent-teacher trust relationship?
10. Is there anything else you feel that teachers and school staff can do to increase your level of trust?
11. Thank you, I truly appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview. Are there any things this interview made you think about that you would like to share with us?

Pre-service teachers' feedback on the experiential learning

Fourteen pre-service teachers, 10 women and 4 men, 11 Jews and 3 Arabs, who were enrolled in the course titled “Common Space for School and Family,” wrote a reflection about their interview experience. The original student reflections were written in Hebrew and translated into English. Pre-service teachers’ reflections regarding their interview experiences determine the effect that the interview assignment had on them and how it helped them develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to build positive and trusting teacher-parent relationships.

Pre-service teachers' fears and hopes

Pre-service teachers’ face-to-face meetings with parents raised fears and hopes among the pre-service teachers:

“It is a little stressful because we, as teachers, have a great responsibility to be monitored and not to miss anything in the child’s life, but on the other hand, the responsibility gives us hope for independence and a real ability to advance the children and instill values according to our point of view.”

Although the pre-service teachers participated in a special course focused on teacher-parent relationships, they still had some fears and felt stressed when engaging with parents. Epstein (2013) noted that pre-service teachers often enter school with limited knowledge and skills needed to establish and maintain successful family-school partnerships. The next excerpt illustrates this:

“I also wonder to what extent to allow parents to be involved in everything... What about my private life? I’m afraid of being too available, and too much of sharing with the parents may lead parents to crossing the borderline and interfering with my teaching and my personal life.”

The interview also raised hopes about the pre-service teachers’ future orientation regarding teacher-parent relationships:

“Informal parent-teacher communications are far more important than the verbal messages and grades. Collaboration helps create healthy relationships between teachers, parents, and students. It helps us learn how to be generous, a very important value, in order to be better people.”

Pre-service teachers experienced fear of engaging with parents and working with them, which is consistent with the findings of a recent survey of early career teachers, who described general frustrations and inadequate knowledge that led to ineffective family-school partnering (Miller, Lines & Fleming, 2014). At the same time, pre-service teachers became aware of the unique contribution of an informal teacher-parent relationship and expressed a desire for positive teacher-parent relationships.

Developing Empathy to parents

The vast majority of parents, especially those of children with special needs, perceived teachers to be unable to empathize with parents (Broomhead, 2013). Decety and Jackson (2006) defined empathy as a way "to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person" (p. 54). Therefore, teacher-parent empathy is a process that includes several communication skills (e.g., listening to another's experience, reflecting on information provided about the experience, and responding). The interviews assignment contributed to pre-service teachers' increased recognition and understanding of the parents' points of view. As seen in the reflections, the interview assignment helped pre-service teachers to learn about the parents' expectations regarding their children's schools:

“Even though I [pre-service teacher] have a good relationship with A [the child], I have never been exposed to his world at school and I didn't know what his father's thoughts were about school. The conversation made me better understand his father's thoughts about the ways the school handles discipline and late arrival to school.”

The interview gave the pre-service teacher an opportunity to know better his student's father, what the father's expectations were, how far he was willing to go to have the school meet his expectations and how much he trusted the teachers.

“As parent, D [the father] expected the school to educate his child, and to this end he was willing to give the teachers all the independence they needed.”

The pre-service teachers' awareness of the parents' points of view was integrated into their awareness of the parents' warm feelings toward their children.

“I was particularly excited to be exposed to the mother’s high level of educational involvement and to the extent that she was present in her children’s lives... How she speaks about them, with love and excitement.”

“I could see the father’s smile, his pride in his son. He stated several times during the interview that his son was an excellent student and social leader.”

The interview experience also highlighted the parents’ thoughts about the importance of the parent-school relationship:

“As I listened to the recorded interview, several things became clear to me regarding the importance of the parent-school relationship. [I realized] how important parent-school relationships were for the mother, and how much she has appreciated it over the years. The great contribution of these relationships was to establishing her child’s status and sense of safety.”

Improvement of interviewing skills.

The interview assignment helped pre-service teachers develop their interviewing skills and increased their awareness of the advantages of non-verbal communication:

“The exercise [the interview] was very interesting and challenging, paying attention to the body movements, the tone of voice, the look in the [parent’s] eyes, and at the same time paying attention to the words being spoken. During the interview I took notes and wrote comments about the physical aspects. No doubt, it contributed to the interpretation of the words and gave them another aspect.”

Other pre-service teachers mentioned having close feelings toward the parents during the interview and feelings of empathy toward the parents.

“Personally, I felt close to the father and to his position in the family dynamics.”

“I felt that the mother was sad and helpless and had no solution. She was worried about her son’s future and didn’t know how she could help him.”

The interviews increased pre-service teachers’ awareness of the complexity of parent-teacher relationships.

One pre-service teacher highlighted the complexity of parent-teacher relationships and wrote:

“The interview strengthened my insight on the partnership between school and home... It also pointed out the complex and inconclusive situation. In my opinion, there is no single prescription, and it is impossible to say what is the necessary and proper way of conducting parent-teacher partnerships. We need to work together sensitively and find the way that suits each school. A bit like intimacy.”

In sum, according to the pre-service teachers' reflections, the parent interview assignment was a positive experience and a significant learning experience. It helped the pre-services teachers to learn more about themselves and to get to know parents.

Discussion

Bronfenbrenner (1979) addressed the vital link between family and school. Parent-school engagement has become an increasingly common educational policy goal worldwide, and it is seen as a critical factor in children’s educational success (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010). The importance of family-school collaboration underlines the need to build trust relationships between educators and parents. Researchers point to the important role school plays in the engagement with parents (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Epstein, 2018). School environment and especially class atmosphere affect parent-school relationships and the degree and type of parents' involvement in education (Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015), which in turn

affects students' functioning in school, it helps reduce discipline problems and absences (Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Simons, Johnson, & Conger, 1994) and improves students' self-evaluation and academic achievement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015; Kaplan Toren & Kumar, in press). Teacher-parent connection is based on the teachers' engagement skills and such characteristics as communication, empathy, and degree of trust.

Given that teachers play a significant role in initiating contact and inviting parents to become involved in their children's education, it is important to nurture teachers' skills for effective and positive relationship with parents. Recently, the *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* (2018) published a special volume discussing the teachers' challenges in establishing family-school partnerships. Yet, one aspect of the home-school relationship, teacher-parent communication skills, elicited little attention. The parent interview assignment presented in this paper was developed for use in a pre-service teachers' training program and designed to be an engaging hands-on activity. The assignment encouraged pre-service teachers to "take the plunge" and meet the parents. The primary goal of this experiential assignment was to provide pre-service teachers with an opportunity to develop and practice communication skills by interacting face-to-face with parents. From the pre-service teachers' reflections, we learned that the interview assignment guidelines served as a good scaffold for the pre-service teachers. It provided them with clear and simple instructions to follow. The interview guidelines also fostered a sense of confidence in pre-service teachers' sense of self-efficacy, helping them simplify the complex process of teacher-parent engagement. The interview helped reduce the pre-service teachers' negative attitudes toward parents, by providing them with an opportunity to experience first-hand what it feels like to have positive interactions and informal relationships with a parent. More broadly, the interview assignment helped pre-

service teachers improve their conversational skills and increased their empathy toward parents and others.

Grossman and McDonald (2008) pointed out that teachers' training programs leave the development of pedagogical skills in the interactive aspects of teaching almost entirely to field experiences, where there is the weakest control over the professional education component. Therefore, pre-service teachers may learn teacher-parent relationship practices only if they happen to encounter them in field settings. Yet, most often core practices are not identified and systematically taught through closely aligned course work and field experiences (Forzani, 2014).

In sum, SBFC emphasizes, the child's two important systems--home and school. Students are part of multiple systems, including family, school, teachers, peer group, and the community. According to the SBFC approach, to enhance student's wellbeing and academic performance, teachers and counselors need to work with both home and school (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013). Pre-service teachers engaged as learners, through an interview assignment, with parents, and gained knowledge about the child (e.g., abilities, strengths, hopes, and fears), about the parent (e.g., expectations from the child, the school, and the teachers), and about themselves (e.g., listening, communication, and empathy skills). This knowledge will help them in the future to communicate with parents and serve as a bridge between the two systems: the home and the school.

Limitations and Implications for Practice

Researchers and practitioners point out the essential need to improve teachers' preparation for developing dialogue and partnerships with parents. The parent interview assignment tool we developed and present in this paper was aimed to improve teachers' skills to engage with parents. One limitation of this tool is that it has only been used among pre-service

teachers in Israel. Since teacher-parent relationships are influenced by cultural aspects (Lavenda, 2011; Van Schalkwyk, 2017), the authors recommend examining the use of this tool with pre-service teachers across a variety of cultures. In the future, we hope this tool will be part of the universal toolbox training opportunities for students interested in SBFC.

In order to evaluate the overall impact and effectiveness of the parent interview assignment tool, it is recommended to use it in a longitudinal study. The authors also recommend interviewing the pre-service teachers or asking them to answer self-report questionnaires before and after the assignment. In this way, teacher educators could systematically point out changes in the perception of the pre-service teachers regarding parents and their relationship with the parents.

In sum, the authors hope this paper and the process presented in the pre-service teachers' training will stimulate the development of creative techniques to foster pre-service teachers' skills to engage and work with parents as well as research in the field.

Acknowledgement

This project was conducted as part of the activities of the research team at the Oxford Symposium on School-Based Family Counseling.

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