

Family, school, and community intersections in teacher education and professional development: integrating theoretical and conceptual frameworks

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Research conducted periodically in the United States over the last twenty-seven years has documented the failure of most teacher education and professional development programs to address family involvement in schooling (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Foster & Loven, 1992; Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994; Williams, 1992; Williams & Chavkin, 1984). State and national groups have attempted to influence preparation in family involvement by setting standards (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1998; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1994; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 1994). More recent reports indicate that educators in the United States and Europe have begun to develop programs to support teachers working with families (Allexaht-Snider, Phitiaka & Martinez, 1996; Corrigan, 1996; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). There has been little research, however, on the theoretical and conceptual foundations of these programs. Similarly, we have had few reports of studies analyzing teachers' and teacher education students' efforts to make sense of their learning about family involvement in schooling and to apply their understandings to their work in schools. In the following paper, we examine a theoretically and conceptually grounded approach to teacher education for family involvement used in programs for preservice teachers, inservice teachers, and graduate students in education.

Brofenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) and Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1990), as well as her typology of parent involvement, have offered a broad foundation for work in family involvement. These theories have also assisted teacher educators in sketching a portrait of the landscape and arenas in which families, schools and communities interact to support children's learning. In addition to these two foundational theoretical frameworks, we have found three other conceptual frameworks to be particularly helpful in assisting teachers to develop a critical, inquiry-based stance and explore multiple perspectives on their work with families.

Framework

Chavkin and Williams (1993) offer a deceptively simple framework to use in teacher education for family involvement, suggesting the following sequence for investigating a variety of perspectives on family involvement: Personal, Conceptual, Practical, and Contextual. We begin a course or a module of study by asking teachers to explore their *personal* experiences with family involvement, reflecting on the roles their own parents played in their schooling and learning and the expectations the schools set for their parents. An important conceptual framework for both preservice and inservice teachers as they begin their personal exploration of family, school and community links is the concept of the families'

funds of knowledge, drawn from the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992). Teacher education students and teachers first begin by compiling and comparing information about the funds of knowledge developed within their own families and communities (for example, cultural knowledge about fishing and hunting, sewing, car repair, religious beliefs, cooking, or sports). The next step is for them to consider the funds of knowledge developed by their students within their family and community contexts and analyze the ways in which they might be able to make links for children between school learning and family and community funds of knowledge.

After our initial exploration of personal perspectives on family involvement, at the graduate level, teachers are introduced to an ethnographic theoretical (*conceptual*) framework Allexsaht-Snider (1995) constructed in her research with parents and teachers. Aspects of teachers' cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values, and family's cultural knowledge, beliefs and values are outlined in the framework. Family-teacher relationships are portrayed as dynamically constructed, with teachers and parents drawing on unique bodies of cultural knowledge about family-school collaboration as they build relationships with each other centered on the individual concerns of the child. The term cultural knowledge, as used here, refers to the knowledge that teachers and parents socially construct in both formal and informal settings through interactions with each other and with others..

At the graduate level, following the exploration of teachers' cultural knowledge and beliefs, we move to inquiry about parents' construction of cultural knowledge about family-school collaboration (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin; 1999). In addition to analyzing research presenting diverse parents' perspectives on their roles in children's schooling (e.g., Boutte, 1992; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Cook & Fine, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Yao, 1993), teachers design and carry out inquiry

projects with families in their own communities. Through both of these avenues, teachers develop understanding of the ways in which different parents draw on their own schooling experiences, their prior collaborations with teachers, their life experiences in diverse community contexts, and their participation in school-wide parent activities to construct their cultural knowledge of family-school collaboration. As they analyze parents' perspectives on their interactions with school related to the different children in the family, teachers begin to recognize the roles that individual children play in the construction of family-teacher relationships. This leads to the understanding of family-child-teacher interactions as being jointly constructed.

At the undergraduate level, teacher education students are given opportunities to construct new cultural knowledge for working with families and communities. Preservice teachers conduct community inquiry projects in which they observe, collect data, ask questions, gather resources, and analyze existing community structures. Students informally interview a variety of community members (including children) to understand the complexities and intricacies of life in the community, understand themselves as members of the community and also recognize the ways in which other community members influence the lives of the students and their families (Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992). As part of their inquiry project, preservice teachers visit local agencies, talk with service professionals, and collect resource information as they construct a resource notebook enabling them to discover the ways in which the community can support teachers and families (Morris, Taylor, & Knight, 1998).

With both preservice and inservice teachers, consideration of conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding parent-teacher relationships and the potential for family-school-community collaboration is followed by readings about *practical* strategies for working with families and communities (e.g., McCaleb, 1994;

Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Orman, 1993; Valentine, 1984; Vopat, 1994). At the graduate level, teachers implement strategies in classroom and school settings and then gather data through observation, surveys and interviews for analyzing families' and students' responses to the activities. The opportunity to implement practical strategies and then analyze the implementation from the perspectives of parents, other caregivers, and students leads to discussion of the *contextual* aspects of work with families. Curran's (1989) assertions about re-examining traditional assumptions, Moles' (1993) discussion of the barriers and supports to parent involvement, and Swap's presentation of four models of family involvement are all important conceptual frameworks that teachers draw upon in making sense of family involvement efforts that they have observed.

In order to analyze preservice and inservice teachers' efforts to make sense of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined above, we conducted a study with the following overall research question: How do beginning and experienced teachers apply the personal and conceptual frameworks they have explored in making sense of their learning about family involvement and applying their understandings to their work in schools? Document and narrative analysis were conducted with materials collected over a two-year period from two preservice teacher education courses and two graduate courses. Course syllabi, readings and assignment guidelines, as well as 85 students' reflective writings, action research reports, and family involvement project evaluations were collected and analyzed using ethnographic (Spradley, 1979) and other qualitative analysis techniques.

Working with families

On the first day of class, a group of 25 undergraduate students were asked to define family and share any ideas or questions that they had about working with families. Many preservice students expressed deficit views of families as they

compared and contrasted other families to their own family situations. They were concerned with how they would 'connect with students who grow up with unsupportive parents. Is there enough time in the school day to meet these kids' needs?' This student as well as others implied that children would need to be saved or protected from their families if they were to succeed in school. Another of her classmates wondered, 'If a child does not get much family support or encouragement, are there ways to compensate for this in the classroom?' Not only was lack of encouragement a concern for these students, they also wanted to know, 'How will I deal with families who haven't instilled values/morals that I feel are necessary to attend school?' This student continued, 'for this reason, and also lack of parental support, I am very worried about going into the classroom.'

Other students shared their views that parents have something to offer as supports to the school curriculum and agenda, with one student suggesting, 'I hope to involve my student's families in any way possible. I hope I can have families volunteer to assist children with reading, homework, projects, field trips, or to come and eat lunch with children.' A small number of students did not suggest that families or students needed 'fixing;' nor did they limit their perspective to families as serving the needs of schools. Instead, they considered how they might build a reciprocal relationship with families or how they might integrate and meet the different needs of their students' families. One preservice teacher expressed interest in incorporating 'activities in the classroom that are of interest to the children based on their family backgrounds and experiences.'

Student reflections on completion of their first assignment, the community portfolio, showed that some students' views on family and community were changing. Other students were beginning to see broad connections between home and school, and still others were beginning to understand the

complex relationship between knowing students and their communities and their own planning for teaching. One student wrote: 'You can't fully understand your kids in your class unless you find out what their home lives & community lives are like,' and another stated, 'I do think that I should inquire and explore the community in which my students live. I feel that this kind of activity will help me better adjust my lessons to the needs of my students.'

Students reported that the second family-community oriented assignment, the community resource file, helped them begin to understand family and community experiences that were different from their own. One student was surprised to find many churches serving people without homes in her own town. She shared, 'I always imagined that homeless shelters would be in downtown Atlanta or New York City. I never realized that there were so many people everywhere without basic needs [being met].' Another student reported a similar eye-opening experience: 'Visiting DFACS (Department of Family and Children Services) made me more aware of the problems that my students could face. I was shocked to see a sign that read, 'Attention Homeless Persons: If you use this office as your address, be sure to check your mail at least once a week.' I was not shocked that homeless people could use DFACS as their address, but rather that there are enough homeless people that use this service that such a sign was necessary! Visiting DFACS made me realize what a 'sheltered' environment in which I had been living.'

If we reflect back to the students' beginning ideas about working with families and communities, it is clear that as other teacher educators working with family involvement have found (Bucci & Reitzammer, 1992; Morris, Taylor, & Knight, 1998), preservice teachers can and do change their attitudes and beliefs. Analysis of their writings and projects provided evidence that these teacher education students extended their

knowledge about working with families and communities through participation in well-planned inquiry activities grounded in new theoretical and conceptual frameworks for making sense of family-school collaboration. Analysis of an inservice teacher's work in a graduate course provides insight into the ways that teachers might change their practices as a result of explicitly integrating those theoretical and conceptual frameworks into the design and interpretation of inquiry projects with families and communities.

Barbara Beasley was an experienced first grade teacher when she took a graduate course on family and community involvement in schooling. She decided to conduct an inquiry study of her work with a child named Julie in her classroom who was being raised by her grandparents. In her report, Barbara wrote that Julie's grandparents were trying to adopt Julie and her brother, and that the grandmother worked in a nursing home from about 10 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. most days. Barbara explained that Julie got very excited about books, and, 'A weak area for her is her struggle to learn the words for the week (sent home daily) or spelling words since she had no one helping her do her homework and learn her words for the week. I have learned through my interviews with the student and her custodial grandparent that there are no magazines, newspapers, etc. in the house.' Barbara posed two questions to guide her inquiry project. The first was, 'What can a teacher do to keep the love of books alive in a student who has so little?' and the second was, 'How can a teacher help a family encourage literacy when they do not seem to have time to parent?' From the start of her inquiry project, it became clear to Barbara that Julie's grandmother was not able to come to school and was not comfortable with Barbara coming to the house, so they worked out a system of twice weekly phone appointments. Barbara used these phone conversations both to learn about the grandmother's perspective on Julie's literacy at home, and to share ideas about how her

grandparents might support Julie's literacy learning.

When they discussed writing opportunities for Julie at home, Barbara learned that the grandmother had taken away all of the children's art supplies because they had written all over the walls of the house. Barbara offered to send some materials home and remind Julie that she could only write on the paper. The grandmother thought that would be fine, adding that maybe she had earlier bought the art materials for the children when they were too young for them. Barbara worked with the grandmother to see ordinary daily activities as opportunities to model literacy skills, pointing out that when she paid the bills she could talk to Julie about how important it was to read the information carefully and know what you are paying for. When the grandmother seemed reluctant about listening to Julie read 'One Fish, Two Fish,' Barbara encouraged her to have Julie read to her while she was preparing dinner.

At the close of her project, Barbara reported that she felt that she had learned to develop a collaborative relationship with Julie's grandmother, engaging in two-way communication (as recommended by Swap and discussed in our ethnographic theoretical framework) that guided her suggestions for Julie's literacy development. She stated that, 'I have learned that literacy can be seen in many forms besides just magazines, newspapers and books. I have learned to take into consideration the social experiences and the background of my student as a starting point. As teachers, we have to realize that parents do not always have access to the information that we do.'

Conclusion

The analysis of preservice and inservice teachers' perspectives discussed above illustrates teachers incorporating what they have learned from discussions of theoretical and conceptual frameworks into new ways of thinking about their work with families and communities. Preservice teachers were able to expand their understandings of and respect for families different from their own, as well as to conceive of new ways of collaborating with families and incorporating knowledge of communities in their teaching. The experienced teacher was able to apply the frameworks directly in her own efforts to develop a partnership with her first grade student's guardians to foster the child's literacy development.

Our analysis of these cases leads us to value even more strongly than before the importance of exploring powerful conceptual and theoretical frameworks with both experienced and beginning teachers as a means to expanding their perspectives and practices of family-school involvement. In future research, we need to examine a broader range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks to determine the ways in which they can assist teachers in extending their work with families. In addition, we need to consider the parameters of time and opportunity for in-depth examination of the frameworks in the context of applied projects to determine optimal approaches for teacher education for family involvement and assess whether changes in teachers' practices are being sustained and maintained.

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