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Strengths and Areas of Growth in the Development of Early
Childhood, Preservice Teachers**

Jackie Proctor
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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PREPARING NEW TEACHERS TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD:
STRENGTHS AND AREAS OF GROWTH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD, PRESERVICE TEACHERS

By

Jackie Proctor

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Leadership

Under the Supervision of Dr. Jeanne Surface

Omaha, Nebraska

October, 2018

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Phyllis Adcock

Dr. Kay Keiser

Dr. Elliott Ostler

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PREPARING NEW TEACHERS TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD:
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CHILDHOOD, PRESERVICE TEACHERS

Jackie Proctor, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Dr. Jeanne Surface

The research is clear that parents and families are an essential component to the education of the whole child. Since this is so well-documented, it is essential for educator preparation programs to have coursework and experiences focused on this critical aspect of education. New teachers must leave educator preparation programs with the skills necessary to engage families. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explain the extent to which new teachers feel prepared to engage families in an early childhood setting. Therefore, this study explored the strengths and areas of growth in each teacher's educator preparation program in regard to family engagement in the early childhood classroom.

For the purpose of this research study, five second or third-year teachers in multiple midwestern school districts were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews surrounding educator preparation and family engagement in an early childhood classroom. The research themes found in the data collection and analysis process were (a) encouraging family involvement, (b) forming and maintaining positive relationships, (c) providing a number of communication opportunities, (d) diversity among families, (e) time as a barrier, (f) minimal courses in educator preparation with a specific focus on family engagement, and (g) a lack of authentic experiences working with families.

Dedication

First, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my first teachers, my mom and dad. You taught me the importance of faith and family first, and the power of education second. Your expectations were high and your support for both Jay and I was unmatched. I never questioned your love for me and always knew you would be there to catch me if necessary. I know that there were times that I did not make it easy on you, but thank you for loving me through it. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for both of you. I love you.

To Ben, this work would be unfinished without your support. Thank you for feeding, bathing, and loving on our girls when I was in class or writing. I think they often preferred their nights with dad. They are lucky to have you. We are lucky to have you. I feel so fortunate to wake up every day knowing that you love us and will do everything in your power to support your girls. I love you.

Last but not least, this is for you, Luci and Evie. Being your mom is one of my favorite jobs in the world. I love watching you grow and develop into kind, strong, and beautiful young ladies. I hope that you do not look back and remember the nights that I was gone, but instead feel empowered to pave your own path. I hope that I have helped to instill a love of learning that you can take with you forever. You are both going to change this world and I can't wait to watch. I love you to the moon and back.

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- The move to UNO five years ago was a scary one, but I am so glad that I took the risk. The people here are truly the best. I have found my place. I do not take for granted that I wake up each day happy to come to work. The leadership here is incredible and I feel supported each day, both in my career and as a person.
- To all my teacher and administrator friends, just keep swimming. The work you do is meaningful and important. You are changing the world every single day. I am inspired by you.

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Chapter I

Introduction to the Study

It was my first year of teaching. I remember it like it was yesterday. A new student came to my classroom from another school within the district. At first, our relationship was a positive one. He was quiet, but respectful. We were able to joke a bit with one another. He seemed happy that I was his teacher. Almost overnight something changed between us. He became defiant. He looked at me with what looked like hate in his eyes. I spent so much time reflecting on what changed within the dynamics of our relationship and could not put my finger on it. One day, I asked him to complete a simple, daily task. He glared at me and said, “my mom says that I don’t have to listen to you because you are too young”. There it was. I knew right then and there that it did not necessarily have to do with my age, but instead a lack of trust within his mom in my abilities to meet the needs of her son. I had not spent enough time building a relationship with his family and that carried over into our relationship in the classroom. I was twenty-two years old and felt that I lacked the skills and/or confidence to mend this relationship. The principal ended up moving this student to another fifth-grade classroom. I was slightly relieved, but mostly frustrated, with myself and my inability to work positively with this student and his family. Fast forward sixteen years, eleven of those spent in an elementary school setting and five spent in higher education, and I am still passionate about the importance of family engagement in a classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching is not just about walking into a classroom, teaching a certain content area, and then sending students on their way. Modern day teachers must have a solid content and theory base, but also must learn to work with a diverse student and family population. A report from the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality and Public Agenda (2008) stated that “large numbers of new teachers describe themselves as distinctly underprepared for the challenges of dealing with the ethnic and racial diversity that they find in the classroom at a time when many schools have increasingly varied populations” (p. 11). This suggests that perhaps something is missing in educator preparation when it comes to working with a diverse student and family population.

Family engagement in early childhood education has been shown to have a number of positive effects on a young child’s academic achievement and social and emotional development (Abel, 2014; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2010; Goodwin, 2010; Keyser, 2007; Nitecki, 2015; Smith, 2014; Tierney, 2002). This engagement must come through partnerships, or a relationship among equals, where each stakeholder is respected for the contribution made to the development of a child (Keyser, 2007). True family engagement in the early childhood classroom has implications for students, families, and teachers. Engaging the entire family in the educational process has become a focus in education, and for good reason.

Given the documented benefits of family engagement in early childhood, a true school-family partnership will provide an environment that fosters the development of the student academically, as well as socially and emotionally. This type of engagement will increase the likelihood of success in school and beyond. Family engagement allows

the family to be a strong voice in their child's education, making decisions that will benefit both the child and the family.

Student achievement is a constant source of discussion surrounding school reform. Schools and teachers are under an almost overwhelming amount of pressure to ensure students' academic success in the classroom. Welner and Carter (2013) highlighted that "educational disparities and intergenerational economic inequality are highly correlated with skin color, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status (p. 1). The authors went on to argue that children in these communities are not reaching their full achievement level due to a lack of equitable opportunities (Welner & Carter, 2013). Family engagement in early childhood education is shown to increase student achievement by supporting families in providing as many opportunities as possible for their children.

A teacher with strong self-efficacy, and a developed skillset, surrounding family engagement will have the necessary tools to be successful in the classroom. This success could lead to an increased desire to stay in the field of education, thus reducing teacher burnout. Burnout can be described as a chronic state of exhaustion due to long-term stress and/or feelings from repeated exposure to emotionally-charged situations (Scharzer & Hallum, 2008). When a teacher is confident in his or her abilities to teach content, engage families, and manage stressful situations, the likelihood of success in the classroom greatly increases.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explain the extent to which new teachers feel prepared to engage families in an early childhood

setting. Therefore, this study explored the strengths and areas of growth in each teacher's educator preparation program in regard to family engagement in the early childhood classroom.

Research Questions

The main research question was as follows:

- How did the experiences of second and third-year teachers during their undergraduate university educator preparation program prepare him or her to engage families in an early childhood classroom?

The sub-questions were as follows:

- What strengths did the research participants take away from their undergraduate university preparation during their first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?
- What areas of growth were still evident during the research participants' first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?

Conceptual Framework

Grant & Osanloo (2014) stated that a conceptual framework “offers a logical structure of connected concepts that help provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another...” (p. 17). The conceptual framework for this study encompassed the idea that it is necessary to prepare future teachers to engage families in early childhood education. This topic can be complicated as a number of concepts are related to the importance of preparing future teachers to not only meet the needs of all students in a classroom, but also to partner closely with families in order to meet those needs. The illustration in Figure 1 shows how these concepts are related to one another.

Why is educator preparation surrounding family engagement important?

- Benefits of family engagement
 - Language development, social skills, higher attendance and graduation rates, increased likelihood for postsecondary school attendance

What does family engagement look like in a classroom?

- Effective family engagement strategies
 - Meaningful, mutually respectful partnerships, family empowerment, positive communication, connection with the school community, parents as their child's first teacher

Current barriers for new teachers related to family engagement?

- Teacher preparation challenges
 - Programs heavy in theory, lack of practicum and real-world application surrounding family engagement, time constraints for teacher candidates

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for family engagement and educator preparation

Operational Definitions

- Early childhood education was defined as birth through grade three (education.ne.gov).
- Family engagement was defined as active participation by families in the educational process, through collaborative decision-making and constant communication.
- Self-efficacy was defined as a person's ideas about his or her capabilities to positively impact situations that affect his or her life (Bandura, 1994).
- Traditional educator preparation program was defined as an educator preparation program at a four-year university in which graduates receive a teaching license upon graduation.

- Diverse classroom setting was defined as being comprised of individual students with a variety of characteristics and needs.
- Diverse family population was defined as being comprised of individual members with a variety of characteristics and needs.

Limitations and Delimitations

1. This study was limited to five second and third-year teachers in an early childhood classroom.
2. The sample included some participants in a specialized graduate program where mentoring support was received during their first-year of teaching.
3. Participants' views were influenced by their own experiences as students in a classroom within their own family context.
4. Data was self-reported during an interview situation.
5. The data may be interpreted differently by another researcher.
6. The parent perspective is not discussed in this particular study.

Conclusion

Teaching in today's classroom is complex work. The pressure that teachers face to meet the needs of every student in their classroom is becoming increasingly overwhelming. Data shows that student success is inconsistent between a number of different student groups. Opportunities that exist for one group do not always exist for all students. Teachers are expected to overcome the challenges faced in the classroom in order to increase and sustain student achievement. New teachers are graduating from college feeling underprepared to meet the demands of today's classrooms.

Add in the desire and expectation to engage families in the classroom, and new teachers are faced with a number of barriers. The demographics of America's classrooms are changing, while the demographics of the teaching profession are staying the same. New teachers are struggling to engage families different from their own, including but not limited to, low-income families and those who speak a language other than English in the home (Abel, 2014; Tierney, 2002; Goodwin & King, 2002; Smith, 2014). Linguistic, cultural, and racial differences between the teacher and his or her students can cause additional barriers to engaging families in the classroom (Smith, 2014).

It is well-documented that family engagement in the early childhood classroom has a number of benefits for the teacher, students, and families. Educator preparation programs must be willing to adapt and change in order to build self-efficacy in the future teaching workforce. This shift in educator preparation is not only good for students and families within the P-12 community, but also could assist in decreasing teacher burnout and shrinking the opportunity gap.

Organization of the Study

The study begins with an introduction outlining the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, the conceptual framework, operational definitions, and limitations and delimitations of the research. The next piece contains the literature review. The literature review is divided into five categories, including the history and evolution of family engagement, benefits of family engagement, barriers to family engagement, effective family engagement strategies, and educator preparation programs and family engagement. The methodology is included next to discuss the framework of the research design, data collection procedures, and the analysis process.

Next, information about the research participants are shared, as well as themes found throughout the interview process. Lastly, a discussion of the research is shared, along with next steps.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

It is often stated that parents are a child's first teacher. This statement illustrates the crucial role that parents and families play in all aspects of their child's life. As a child's first teacher, it is essential for parents and families to be an active part of the educational process. The benefits of family engagement in early childhood education are well-documented. Family engagement has been shown to have a number of positive effects on a young child's academic achievement and social and emotional development (Abel, 2014; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Goodwin, 2010; Keyser, 2006; Nitecki, 2015; Smith, 2014; Tierney, 2002). In order to educate the whole child, families must be seen as an indispensable partner in the journey.

Often teachers are perceived as the only experts when it comes to the education of the children in their care. This perception often causes teachers to act as knowledge-givers, rarely allowing the family an equal voice in the educational process. Family engagement must come through partnerships, or a relationship among equals, where each stakeholder is respected for the contribution made to the development of a child (Keyser, 2006). Equal partnerships move the school and family partnership away from traditional forms of family involvement toward true family engagement in the educational process.

The demographics of American classrooms are changing, while the teaching population remains majority white females. This can bring about a level of discomfort for new teachers when working with a diverse family population, including low-income families and those who speak a language other than English in the home (Abel, 2014; Tierney, 2002; Goodwin & King, 2002; Smith, 2014).

It is troubling then that many teachers do not feel comfortable initiating family engagement programs that are most beneficial for children (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Teachers often feel ill-equipped in working with those different from themselves, causing a disconnect between the school and home.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the next generation of teachers must be prepared to work with diverse families in order to provide quality early childhood education to all children. Due to the need for strong family and school partnerships, educator preparation program graduates agree that more training in parent involvement and communication strategies throughout coursework is necessary (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). It is essential for teacher candidates to participate in at least one course focused on school, family, and community partnerships. A course of this type is just as essential as Math, Reading, and other core subjects (Epstein, 2001).

This literature review will focus on five different aspects of family engagement in early childhood education and the preparation of preservice teachers in working with diverse families. These five areas include (a) the history and evolution of family engagement, (b) the benefits of family engagement, (c) the barriers to effective family engagement, (d) effective family engagement strategies, and (e) educator preparation programs and family engagement.

History and Evolution of Family Engagement

From the early 20th century, progressive family engagement programs were developed to target low-income families. These programs instead became popular among the middle class (Semel & Sadovnik, 2008). One suggestion for this may be that middle-class families had differing ideas than working-class or poor families about the

knowledge children should have prior to entering kindergarten (McClow & Gillespie, 1998).

In an effort to include diverse perspectives, Ladson-Billings began her research more than twenty-five years ago by making a shift in her questioning when it came to working with African-American students. Rather than focusing on what was wrong with students in this population, she focused on what was right with African-American students and what was happening in the classrooms in which this group of students was successful (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Unfortunately, teachers do not always make this shift in thinking. Middle-class, majority values are brought into the classroom, allowing little room for inclusion among those outside that group.

In 2002, the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* became law, thus reauthorizing the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). This new law was built on four pillars, including expanding parental options. *No Child Left Behind* supported learning in the early years, as well as providing more information for parents regarding the progress of their child (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Another aspect of *NCLB* alerted parents to the performance of their child's school and allowed for options to move out of a low-performing school into one making adequate yearly progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Pieces of *No Child Left Behind* aimed at giving families multiple choices when it came to the education of their child.

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* and the *No Child Left Behind Act* were once again reauthorized in 2015, and the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* went into effect. Due to its focus on family engagement and its bipartisanship nature, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* is supported by the National Parent Teacher Association

(National PTA, 2015). *ESSA* includes language surrounding Statewide Family Engagement Centers that would enhance family engagement policies and initiatives (National PTA, 2015). Once again, the federal government agreed that family engagement is an essential aspect of the education of the whole child. While the current political climate in this country continues to shift, *ESSA* continues to be implemented by state education departments.

Benefits of Family Engagement

Parents begin to influence the development of their child from infancy. Warm, familial relationships and the development of secure attachments with parents can positively impact language development, social skills, and impulse control (Barber, 2000). These relationships also help strengthen cognitive development and literacy, social and emotional development, and physical development (Keyser, 2006). This familial influence continues as children move from infancy into toddlerhood, preschool, and beyond.

During this early development, the school becomes an important part of this equation and needs to work to build strong relationships with children and their families. When meaningful school and family relationships develop in preschool, those relationships have tremendous power to shape the perceptions of families regarding the educational process long-term (Nitecki, 2015). This positive beginning can propel families to continue to engage with teachers and school staff throughout the child's development. Jeynes (2014) noted a link between family engagement in early childhood education and school success moving into the elementary years. This continued school success can move well beyond the elementary years. Families as partners in education

also correlates with higher attendance and graduation rates and less grade retention (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2010). This positive effect of family engagement in early childhood can continue even after the completion of high school. Family engagement is shown to have a positive impact on grades and a higher likelihood of postsecondary school attendance (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). This strong school and family relationship begin a trajectory for school success for years to come. Part of this long-term success may come from students' perceptions regarding the relevance of academic content. Subjects in school become more meaningful to students when the home, school, and community engage with one another (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). The link between family engagement in the educational process and school success highlights the need for competent educators trained to work with diverse families.

Family engagement is important for all children. It can be particularly important for children of color, English Language Learners, low-income, and minority children (Smith, 2014). The changing demographics of our country require a shift in the way teachers and administrators work with families. New strategies to encourage family engagement must be established. The school team must understand and appreciate that parents know their children best and are in a position to inform schools about their needs (Goodwin & King, 2002). This way of thinking works to establish a two-way relationship in which all parties are respected for their expertise and encouraged to share that expertise to move the student toward school success. A true partnership between the school and family is best for all students.

Barriers to Family Engagement

The definition of family has commonly been that of a mother, father, and two or three children, but that definition is problematic in the 21st century (Tierney, 2002). This outdated view of a family unit excludes and isolates a large number of today's students and families. Patterns of family formation have changed dramatically, especially in urban areas with low-income families (Wilson, 1996). These changes will continue and the definition of family must evolve to avoid exclusion for those not in line with traditional viewpoints. The context in which a child lives must be considered, and viewed as important, in fostering positive family engagement. Every child and family have a right to the best educational experience possible regardless of family make-up or cultural differences.

Following this same theme, students and families are becoming increasingly diverse while teachers are becoming less diverse (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Cultural differences can present additional hurdles (Smith, 2014). This linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic divide between mostly white, middle-class teachers and a diverse student population can cause a huge barrier when engaging families. The changing demographics of families require that school personnel alter preconceived notions regarding a child's family structure and experiences (Goodwin & King, 2002). The shift in demographics also requires new strategies for involving families. It is more essential than ever for teachers to understand each student's context. Family engagement and communication strategies that have worked in the past, or have worked for many families, may no longer be effective due to cultural, linguistic, and/or socioeconomic differences.

Goodwin & King (2002) identify a number of misconceptions that can affect the home-school communication and/or cause conflict and misunderstandings (p. 9-11).

These misconceptions include:

- parents who don't visit school don't care about their child's education;
- good parental involvement 'looks' a certain way;
- all parents respond to the same strategies;
- parents who are struggling financially cannot support the school; and
- all parents have the same goals for their children

It is important for the school and families to come together to acknowledge, discuss and eventually alleviate these assumptions, biases, and stereotypes (Goodwin & King, 2002).

Many common barriers in engaging families in early childhood surrounds challenges in communication when a problem has occurred. Sometimes teachers and school personnel must share concerns about a child's behavior or development. It is important to remember during these tough conversations that the teacher's role is to listen, acknowledge the parent's experiences and frustrations, and provide information on appropriate child development (Keyser, 2006). This type of two-way communication helps to maintain a positive relationship among the school and family while addressing difficult issues.

Differences in opinion are bound to occur between families and schools, thus, creating the potential for conflict. Keyser (2006) emphasizes the importance of working through conflict without blame. Ultimately, conflict occurs because both the family and school want what is best for the child but disagree on how to reach that goal. Four resolutions to consider when working through family and school conflicts include teacher

education, parent education, mutual education, and agreeing to disagree (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). This approach allows stakeholders to educate one another, brainstorm possible solutions together, and if necessary move to a place of respectful disagreement.

Effective Family Engagement Strategies

Goodwin and King (2002) point out that “parents as allies are far more productive than parents as adversaries or passive observers” (p. 8). Parents do not always become instant allies and supporters. It requires work on the part of all stakeholders to build meaningful, mutually respectful partnerships that benefit children. Families are much more likely to get involved if they feel welcome in the classroom, that their input is valued, and that they are an integral part of the education of their child (Smith, 2014). While it requires work on the part of all stakeholders to build meaningful school and family partnerships, it is up to the teacher to create an environment that supports this relationship-building.

According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), when parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school. When schools engage families in ways that are linked to improving learning, students make greater gains. When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that improve student achievement. And when families and communities organize to hold poorly performing schools accountable, studies suggest that school districts make positive changes in policy, practice, and resources. (p. 8).

This welcoming, inclusive environment can be fostered in a number of ways. First and foremost, schools must embrace an attitude of collaboration and shared power among families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The relationship between school and families must be a two-way street, recognizing that each party has knowledge and expertise to bring to the relationship. Partnerships are effective only when families and teachers feel competent, confident, and respected (Keyser, 2006). This happens when a family and teacher identify the strengths of one another and form clear ways to facilitate the education of the child. A strengths-based approach can lead to a relationship among equals, where all stakeholders understand their true value in the child's education.

All parents, regardless of race, education, or income level, are involved in their child's learning and want their child to reach their full potential (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This will look different in every family. Empowering families to be advocates for their child is a lifelong gift to them (Keyser, 2006). Some families will enter the school feeling confident in their ability to bring valuable assets to the school-family partnership. Other families will need support from the school to feel confident in initiating conversations, and making decisions, regarding their child's education. The school should not feel the need to "rescue" a family. People of all ages feel more confident when they learn to take initiative and solve problems themselves (Keyser, 2006). Teachers, administrators, and the school community can work together to support and empower families. Family empowerment can only be achieved in an environment in which families feel respected as knowledgeable contributors of the educational team. A safe space, where questions and concerns are welcomed, is essential in the engagement of families.

Strong communication is at the forefront of all positive relationships.

Communication may look different in each relationship. There are many ways of communicating with families that are effective for some, but schools must be creative in meeting the needs of all families in communication practices. This requires a differentiated communication agenda for each family. Teachers must pay attention to the quantity of communication desired by each family (Keyser, 2006). Teachers must also pay attention to the forms of communication that are most effective for each family. Some families prefer a newsletter, while others prefer a phone call or email. Some families have multiple jobs and are harder to reach. Those families may need to touch base during school drop off or dismissal time (Keyser, 2006). More formal communication, like parent teacher conferences, may need to happen at an alternate time or location. Schools must be willing to meet families where they are, in order to provide the best educational experience for all children. This may mean providing home visits as an option for interested families. Home visits offer the school another way to make a deeper connection with the family. It gives teachers and administrators another glimpse into the life of the child (Keyser, 2006). It allows educators to see a child within the context of the family unit, thus gaining new information and perspective. Much can be learned by visiting a child within their own home, where he or she feels fully comfortable to be their true self.

A variety of opportunities must be made available for families to connect with the school community. When multiple opportunities are presented, the likelihood increases that families will have the time and desire to get involved. For example, parents from a Midwestern Head Start program felt connected to the school because they were invited to

stay through breakfast, invited into classrooms for special projects, and were given special projects to do with their children at home (Smith, 2014). Families are extremely busy and providing them with multiple opportunities to feel connected with the school community will benefit the child. It is also essential that teachers understand that a family's beliefs surrounding school involvement may differ from their own. That may be due to cultural differences wherein the school needs to offer flexibility in the way families participate in the educational process (Sanchez & Walsh, 2017). What works for one family may not work for another, and the differences in engagement should be welcomed and supported.

Connecting families with one another can also strengthen school and family partnerships. This can happen in a number of ways including family meetings, workdays, fundraisers, social events, and community advocacy groups (Keyser, 2006). Keyser (2006) stated that these events have the “potential to create and sustain support networks, acknowledge family expertise, share power and decision making, strengthen the appreciation of diversity, and provide multi-way information sharing between families and programs” (p. 95). Families can feel as if they have something to offer other members of the school community. Adding opportunities for connection among families within the school community adds one more layer to family engagement.

An important aspect of engagement between schools and families involves developing the capacity for school staff to work with families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Often, the assumption is made that teachers know how to connect with families. The reality is that working with families can be extremely intimidating and complex work. Many teachers do not know how to initiate and implement programs of family

involvement that help students the most (Becker & Epstein, 1982). School districts often have multiple parent engagement programs within the school district and offer little training or support for teachers (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2015). Family engagement is most successful when knowledgeable and confident teachers are working to form mutually respectful partnerships with families. This success can be better attained through intentional, focused support for both preservice and in-service teachers, especially those in the beginning stages of their teaching career.

Educator Preparation Programs and Family Engagement

Another barrier in family engagement in early childhood education occurs when there is a lack of preparation in preservice educator preparation programs focused on working with families. Teacher candidates often speak highly of the theory acquired in educator preparation programs but agree that more information and training on classroom management, parent communication, and involving parents in the classroom is necessary (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Educator preparation programs often focus on in-class activities or school-wide improvement rather than effectively working with families (Tierney, 2002). Hiatt-Michael (2001) stated that the push for more training in engaging families is coming from new teachers entering a classroom full of students different than themselves. Those same new teachers report that very little education was provided in educator preparation surrounding engaging families (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Often the education that is provided to preservice teachers is more reactionary and surrounds handling 'difficult' parents (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Educator preparation programs must be more proactive and focus on developing relationships with diverse students and families in order to engage families in the educational process from the start.

Much of the essential learning that takes place in educator preparation programs occurs during practicums or field experiences. There is a need within the training of preservice teachers to provide practicum experiences that involve family engagement (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). However, all practicum experiences are not beneficial. Working with an in-service teacher who has deficits when it comes to family engagement can actually be detrimental to the development of a teacher candidate. Preservice teachers need to be connected with in-service teachers who use parent engagement techniques effectively (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). These types of “real-life” experiences help teacher candidates gain the efficacy necessary to engage families in a proactive manner. There is a reason that practicum experiences directly tied to family engagement are often not a part of educator preparation. Practicums and field experiences in undergraduate educator preparation must work within certain boundaries. Students within an educator preparation program often participate in practicum experiences during the school day. This does not allow as many opportunities to engage with families as many families are not present during that time.

A large, public University in the southeastern part of the country developed a way to get around some of these time constraint issues while preparing teacher candidates to work with diverse families in early childhood and elementary education (Brown, E.L., Vesely, & Dallman, 2016). The University worked to develop “cultural humility” in teacher candidates by allowing candidates time to reflect upon and identify cultural biases. Cultural humility is defined as the “ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the person” (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013).

The first in a series of activities moving teacher candidates toward cultural humility embedded conversations and reflection in order to identify stereotypes, implicit biases, and assumptions. The activity culminated with scenarios where teacher candidates were asked to identify a family's background based on real-life situations. Personal and group reflection occurred to identify reasons each teacher candidate identified a family in a certain manner. The purpose of this activity was for teacher candidates to develop a more holistic view of diverse families (Brown, E.L., Vesely, & Dallman, 2016). It allowed for more than a single story when it came to families who may be different than their own.

The second activity in the series consisted of case study reviews. Brown, Vesely, & Dallman (2016) chose case studies that "focused on diversity in culture, language, race, ability, and family structure" (p.85). The teacher candidates had the opportunity to reflect individually before moving toward a group reflection. Participation in the case study activity allowed teacher candidates the ability to process through how situations may be handled in a classroom setting, working with diverse children and families (Brown, E.L., Vesely, & Dallman, 2016). It allowed a candidate to process through a real-life situation in a safe space, with support from university faculty and peers.

The third activity allowed each teacher candidate to participate in a home visit experience. This home visit occurred in a home where the cultural context was different than their own. The teacher candidates began with a pre-assignment, writing about why the family was chosen, a description of the family, and the way in which the family is marginalized in the US population. Teacher candidates also prepared a list of questions in preparation of completing the home visit. Next, each candidate visited the home to

complete an interview and observation of the family home. Finally, the teacher candidates shared a presentation with classmates, while also receiving feedback and additional items that may have been missed (Brown, E.L., Vesely, & Dallman, 2016).

The authors described two essential pieces in guiding teacher candidates toward “cultural humility” (Brown, E.L., Vesely, & Dallman, 2016). First, candidates participated in guided reflection throughout each activity. This in-depth reflection allowed candidates to recognize and admit stereotypes and biases. Second, teacher candidates participated in field-based activities. This experience allowed each candidate to recognize bias, observe and listen to a family different from their own, and move toward “cultural humility” when interacting with diverse children and families (Brown, E.L., Vesely, & Dallman, 2016). The goal of this program was to develop reflective practitioners, constantly facing their own personal biases and stereotypes to fully engage with diverse families.

A large, public university in the Pacific Northwest provided teacher candidates with a unique opportunity to engage families. The University created a Math and Science Family Night that was hosted by elementary teacher candidates registered for the elementary science methods course. This family night took place in partner schools and provided teacher candidates with an opportunity to work with linguistically and culturally diverse children and families. Bottoms, Ciechanowski, Jones, de la Hoz, & Fonseca (2017) stated that “in the university-school partnership context, supported conversations with teacher candidates about traditional and re-envisioned roles for parents are only possible through opening new pathways for parental engagement in the events” (p. 4). Teacher candidates were required to read two articles surrounding how to plan and

implement a family night and describing the benefits of such family nights. A training was held to assist teacher candidates in the preparation of hosting a Family Math and Science Night (Bottoms, Ciechanowski, Jones, de la Hoz, & Fonseca, 2017). This preparation helped teacher candidates gain confidence in their ability to host such a family night and gave practical information on implementation of the activity.

During the planned family night, teacher candidates were assigned to one station. Children and families moved around the multi-purpose room, stopping at stations of interest in no assigned order. Teacher candidates were able to engage with a number of different children and their families through discussion and answering content-related questions. Spanish and Arabic interpreters were available to assist in communication as needed (Bottoms et al., 2017).

Following the Family Math and Science Night, teacher candidates participated in a three-hour debriefing activity during a regularly scheduled class period. Candidates spent the first part of the debrief watching a slide show and writing down thoughts from the evening. The rest of the debrief was spent in whole group and small group conversation. Reflections were also required after the training, family night events, and the debriefing activity (Bottoms et al., 2017). This University had a strong focus on building reflective practitioners.

Data was analyzed around four themes including challenging attitudes and beliefs, grappling with resistance, leveraging culture and differences, and improvising pedagogical connections (Bottoms et al., 2017). Teacher candidates' attitudes and beliefs were challenged, and a shift in thinking from a deficit to asset perspective occurred. Candidates were able to identify preconceived notions about family involvement and

cultural differences in order to engage effectively with families. Barriers that were expected prior to the family night were found to be untrue. Teacher candidates noted feeling more self-confident in working with families. The cultural and linguistic differences once feared by many of the teacher candidates were now revered as an asset to the child and family (Bottoms et al., 2017).

A small, private university in the Midwest has set a number of goals for their early childhood candidates. Dauksus and Burke (2017) stated one goal of the redesigned early childhood program was an ability to “collaborate with students, families, colleagues, and community members to create learning communities that value diversity” (p. 43). The University noticed a need in continuing to provide support during the transition from teacher candidate to lead teacher within an early childhood classroom. For this reason, a program was designed partnering novice early childhood teachers with experienced early childhood teachers from the same educator preparation program, in an e-mentoring situation. Topics were planned for each Facetime meeting, allowing novice teachers to ask questions, engage in discussions, and revisit coursework as needed. Some of the topics included family communication and how to handle difficult situations and conversations with families. Exit interviews were completed with both the novice and experienced teachers. The exit interviews indicated that the relationship formed was beneficial for both parties involved (Dauksus & Burke, 2017). This particular university saw the need for continuing education surrounding family engagement even after the conclusion of the undergraduate educator preparation program.

Conclusion

Family engagement in education is not a new phenomenon. Progressive family engagement programs began to develop in the early 20th century. These early initiatives did not have the predicted outcomes but sparked the federal government to act. Work surrounding family engagement in the educational process continues to be a priority in school reform.

Family engagement in early childhood education has been shown to have a positive impact on the education of the whole child. This includes social, emotional, and academic development. The positive effects of a strong family-school partnership begin in early childhood and last throughout the educational process. These benefits include, but are not limited to, less grade retention, higher grades, higher attendance rates, and a stronger likelihood of postsecondary school attendance.

Family engagement is crucial to the educational process, but can be extremely complex work. A number of barriers can come about when teachers try to fully engage the families of their students. Some of the most common barriers include time, communication, preconceived notions or judgments, and cultural differences. It requires a lot of time and mutual respect to build meaningful, trusting relationships with families.

There are a number of effective family engagement strategies that benefit the child, family, and the school. Two-way communication is essential. This communication needs to be focused on the family as the child's first teacher. Families must be respected as experts in ensuring the success of their child and feel empowered to make crucial educational decisions.

In looking at the effectiveness of strong family-school partnerships in early childhood education, it is essential to provide preservice teachers with necessary coursework surrounding the development of these partnerships. This coursework needs to include both theory surrounding school and family partnerships, while also providing meaningful field experiences, working with teachers effectively engaging families. Educator preparation programs must challenge their teacher candidates to face personal stereotypes and biases by providing opportunities for group and individual reflection throughout coursework and experiences. Future teachers must leave the college classroom prepared to work with diverse families who are different from themselves.

Chapter III

Research Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explain the extent to which new teachers feel prepared to engage families in an early childhood setting. This study identified the strengths of each teachers' preservice educator preparation program and also identified gaps in learning or experiences. The research brought about previously held perceptions on what family engagement looks like based on participants' lived experiences as a student in an early childhood classroom within the context of their own family. Family engagement was defined as active participation by families in the educational process, through collaborative decision-making and constant communication.

John Creswell (2012) wrote that in qualitative research, the purpose statement and research questions are written in a way that allows the researcher to best learn from participants (p. 17). In reviewing literature, it is evident that many educator preparation programs are lacking family engagement courses and opportunities. Educator preparation programs often focus on in-class activities or school-wide improvement rather than effectively working with families (Tierney, 2002). This makes it difficult for new teachers to understand how to engage with all families, regardless of race or income level. This multiple phenomenological case study allowed the researcher to ask questions in order to collect data connected to the perceptions of participants surrounding their own educator preparation program and their own abilities in engaging families in an early childhood classroom.

Qualitative research does not occur in a vacuum and each participant brought into the conversation previously held beliefs and perceptions. The perceptions surrounding family engagement were not only based on his or her educator preparation program alone, but also lived experiences in the school environment as a student themselves. As stated in an earlier section, the interviews brought about previously held perceptions on what family engagement in education looks like due to participants' own experience with family engagement in the educational process.

Qualitative Research Design

Creswell (2014) described qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). The process looks different than quantitative research and allows for a more flexible structure. The procedures, data collection, and analysis are done in a way that allows interpretation by the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative research can be traced back several centuries, but in the late 1960's researchers really began to feel inhibited by the constraints of the scientific method in research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). During this time, new qualitative research methods began to emerge in order to assist in understanding the social world. Qualitative research allowed for a less rigid approach to research, using open-ended questions. Qualitative researchers seek to learn about, describe, and explain individuals based on their perceptions and experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Qualitative research has a strong focus on the context, perceptions, and lived experiences of research participants. Research participants are actually co-researchers and each individual's perceptions and experiences are an essential part of the research outcomes.

Phenomenological research. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) defined a Phenomenological Case Study as one that “seeks to gather information through a process of considering researcher and participant perceptions” (p. 159). This research study explored whether or not second or third-year, early childhood teachers felt prepared to engage families, based on their preservice education and experiences. Second and third-year teachers were chosen for a couple of reasons. First, second and third-year teachers have a strong recollection of their educator preparation program as they are recent graduates. Next, second and third-year teachers were chosen over first-year teachers due to their experiences with family engagement as a teacher in an early childhood classroom. Sometimes first year teachers do not know what they do not know because of a lack of real-life, authentic experiences.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher gathers data based on the lived experiences of research participants in order to describe the commonalities as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). The phenomena studied in this particular case study was educator preparation focused around family engagement in early childhood education. The ability to interview multiple second or third-year teachers brought about themes in what occurred in the participants’ educator preparation programs to build efficacy in engaging families from different backgrounds than their own. It also identified common lived experiences that helped build self-efficacy in engaging families, and also identified experiences associated with areas of growth for each participant.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is that of an active participant. The researcher is considered an instrument of the data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This requires the researcher to describe their own possible bias and context related to the research. The researcher must learn to bracket their own lived experiences and perceptions in order to accurately analyze the data. Bracketing in qualitative research can be used in a number of different ways. Bracketing can be used to assist the researcher in abandoning preconceived notions, to protect the researcher in emotionally charged research situations, and to support a reflective research process (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The researcher in this study used bracketing to assist in abandoning preconceived notions surrounding what family engagement should look like in an early childhood classroom. The researcher bracketed experiences within her own family context, her experiences with family engagement as an elementary teacher and counselor, and her experiences in working with preservice educators in higher education, while analyzing and interpreting the data of the research participants in this particular study.

Researcher's context and experiences. The researcher grew up in a Midwestern town of about 35,000 people, with two college-educated parents. Her dad was a teacher at the one public high school in town and both parents were actively involved in the educational process. There were high expectations set and strong academic achievement was a focus. Post-secondary school was not only encouraged but expected of both the researcher and her brother. The researcher's parents supported post-secondary school not only through high academic expectations, but also through financial assistance.

The researcher has over sixteen years of experience as an educator. This experience began in a fifth-grade classroom and led to a long tenure as an elementary school counselor, both occurring in an urban setting with diverse students and families. The researcher currently works in a university setting, working with preservice teachers. The researcher also has two school-aged children of her own. Engagement in the educational process is an essential part of her role as a mother. The researcher has had experiences working with teachers who work to actively engaged families, as well as teachers who struggled with family engagement.

The participants in this study have some commonalities with the researcher. The research participants are currently navigating how to work with students and families different from themselves. The researcher spent her years in a K-12 setting working to understand the perspectives and context of her students and their families. This posed a challenge for the researcher as the community and student experiences were much different than her own. The researcher learned during this time the need to engage families in the educational process. She also learned first-hand the families' desires to engage with the school community in order to ensure student success.

Data Collection

Creswell (2014) suggests that a phenomenological study typically has a sample size ranging from three to ten participants (p. 189).

Discussion of participants. The research participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

- Second or third-year teachers in an early childhood classroom (birth to grade three)

- Attended a four-year university in a traditional educator preparation program
- Obtained a degree or endorsement in elementary and/or early childhood education
- Currently work with students and families in an early childhood classroom setting

For the purpose of this research study, five second or third-year teachers in multiple midwestern school districts were recruited via email, after receiving recommendations from university faculty and school partner administrators. The researcher chose second or third-year teachers as the sample group concluding that the one or two years of experience in their own classroom will add to the richness of the conversation.

The initial email described the purpose of the study, an assurance of confidentiality, and the time requirement for participation. A meeting was set up with each teacher willing to participate in the research study to begin building rapport. Ryan and Dundon (2008) defined rapport in more general terms as “involving the exchange of meaningful dialogue that captures how respondents interpret their social world” (p. 444). The meeting began with a strong focus on building a relationship of mutual trust and respect in order to bring about meaningful dialogue and occurred in a location determined by the participant. The researcher again discussed confidentiality, informed consent, and shared more detail describing time requirements and the use of the recorded conversations and data.

The interviews took place from there and were semi-structured in nature. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has preset questions and the interview allows for the researcher to ask additional questions based on participant answers (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 359). This allowed the narrative of each participant’s experience to be

heard. The researcher transcribed each interview, looked for themes, and coded the data. Themes and direct quotations are shared in the data analysis section.

Pilot testing. A pilot test was administered prior to the interview process. A pilot test allows researchers to identify flaws, weaknesses, or other limitations within the instrument (Kvale, 2007). A pilot test must be executed with a subject or subjects similar in characteristics to research participants (Turner, 2010).

The participant in the pilot test has been teaching in an early childhood classroom for less than five years. The pilot study participant attended a four-year university, in a traditional teacher preparation program. Her input assisted in the refinement of the instrument used during the semi-structured interviews with research participants.

Confidentiality. The following steps were taken to ensure confidentiality among research participants in the study:

- Recorded interviews were erased once transcription occurs.
- The data analysis and written report contains pseudonyms such as research participant #1, research participant #2, etc.
- The data analysis and written report contains zero identifying information including, but not limited to school name, school district, student names, etc.
- The written report was stored on a password protected site, with password information known only to the researcher.
- Interviews took place at a location chosen by the research participant.

Ethical considerations. The research participants were recommended by University faculty and school partner administrators, but each participant participated by their own free will. This means that a research participant had the opportunity to dismiss

themselves from the research at any time, for any reason. The research participant also had the right to view and change their responses after the interview occurs. This member checking was not only an ethical consideration, but also allowed for more accuracy within the data (Creswell, 2014).

The proper approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), IRB Protocol: 014-18-EX.

Research Questions

In qualitative research, there is usually one over-arching question, with possible sub-questions below (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Creswell (1998) suggested one main research question, with less than seven sub-questions below.

The main research question was as follows:

- How did the experiences of second and third-year teachers during the university educator preparation program prepare him or her to engage families in an early childhood classroom?

The sub-questions were as follows:

- What strengths did the research participants take away from their university preparation during their first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?
- What areas of growth were still evident during the research participants first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?

Instruments

The researcher used a semi-structured interview process. This can be described as a conversation between the researcher and research participants with a set of questions as

an outline, with the flexibility to move where the conversation leads. This type of research means that the interviews will potentially vary greatly among participants (Fylan, 2005). Qualitative research is based in conversation and a semi-structured format allowed the conversation to guide the research process.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded using two different devices. The interviews were transcribed and shared with participants as the first step in the data analysis process. This allowed participants to confirm their question responses and to omit or add to any of the interview questions. Once confirmation of accuracy was received from participants, data analysis commenced.

The transcriptions were read and coded by the researcher, with themes developed throughout the process. Direct quotations were pulled from interviews to assist in answering each research question. Themes related to each research question were pulled from the interviews. The purpose of this study was to explain the extent to which new teachers felt prepared to engage families in an early childhood setting. In order to identify the strengths of each teachers' preservice educator preparation program, and identify gaps in learning or experiences, data surrounding other lived experiences was disaggregated and discussed separately if applicable. It was included to add context to each participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences as second or third-year teacher in an early childhood classroom.

The researcher coded the data manually in order to become immersed in the information. The researcher transcribed the interviews, rather than having a service complete the transcription. Listening to the interviews multiple times allowed the

researcher to have full immersion in the data, which was necessary prior to data analysis. Listening and viewing the data many times was necessary prior to the data analysis portion of the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The researcher chose to use thematic analysis throughout the data analysis process. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in the data collected (Braun & Clark, 2006). This method can be used across many different theories (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Thematic analysis supported both the phenomenological approach to the research, as well as the desire to become immersed in the data.

Summary

A qualitative research design allowed the researcher to gain perceptions and experiences of second and third-year teachers related to their educator preparation program and confidence in engaging families in an early childhood classroom. The conversation helped to identify the strengths and areas of growth for each research participant in family engagement in their own classroom situation. The research also identified lived experiences that also affect the confidence level of each participant surrounding family engagement in an early childhood setting. The researcher used a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. The phenomena being studied in this particular case study was educator preparation focused around family engagement in early childhood education.

The researcher was an active participant in the study, imploring a semi-structured interview approach with participants. The researcher's experiences and context were part of the research process. Bracketing was used in order to assist in the elimination of bias.

The researcher took a number of steps to ensure confidentiality and ethical considerations were made throughout the research.

Once each interview was completed, the researcher transcribed, coded, interpreted, and analyzed the data 'by hand'. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis through the lens of educator preparation and family engagement in an early childhood setting. Other themes and quotations surrounding participants' lived experiences were shared separately to add context the data findings.

Chapter IV

Presentation of Data

Introduction

The research is clear that parents and families are an essential component to the education of the whole child. Since this is so well-documented, it is essential for educator preparation programs to have coursework and experiences focused on this critical aspect of education. New teachers must leave educator preparation programs with the skills necessary to engage families. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explain the extent to which new teachers feel prepared to engage families in an early childhood setting. Therefore, this study explored the strengths and areas of growth in each teacher's educator preparation program in regard to family engagement in the early childhood classroom. The main research question was as follows:

- How did the experiences of second and third-year teachers during their undergraduate university educator preparation program prepare him or her to engage families in an early childhood classroom?

The sub-questions were as follows:

- What strengths did the research participants take away from their undergraduate university preparation during their first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?
- What areas of growth were still evident during the research participants first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?

Data Sources

The researcher used a semi-structured interview process. This can be described as a conversation between the researcher and research participants with a set of questions as an outline, with the flexibility to move where the conversation leads. This type of research means that the interviews will potentially vary greatly among participants (Fylan, 2005). Qualitative research is based in conversation and a semi-structured format allowed the conversation to guide the research process.

Research participant #1. Research Participant #1 works in a public, suburban school district with over 2,000 students. She has been teaching in an early childhood classroom for two years. Participant #1 participated in a graduate program where mentoring was provided during her first year of teaching. This had a tremendous impact on her experiences in the classroom as a first-year teacher. During the interview process, research participant #1 was encouraged to think about coursework and experiences during her undergraduate degree program when discussing educator preparation and family engagement. Participant #1 was a traditional student during her undergraduate educator preparation program, meaning that she completed four years of undergraduate work upon her high school graduation.

Research participant #2. Research Participant #2 currently works in a private school setting. She has been teaching in an early childhood classroom for two years, one year in a public school and one year in a private school. Participant #2 participated in a graduate program where mentoring was provided during her first year of teaching. This had a tremendous impact on her experiences in the classroom as a first-year teacher. During the interview process, research participant #2 was encouraged to think about

coursework and experiences during her undergraduate degree program when discussing educator preparation and family engagement. Participant #2 was a traditional student during her undergraduate educator preparation program, meaning that she completed four years of undergraduate work upon her high school graduation.

Research participant #3. Research Participant #3 works in a public school district with over 9,000 students. She has been teaching in an early childhood classroom for two years. Participant #3 participated in a graduate program where mentoring was provided during her first year of teaching. This had a tremendous impact on her experiences in the classroom as a first-year teacher. During the interview process, research participant #3 was encouraged to think about coursework and experiences during her undergraduate degree program when discussing educator preparation and family engagement. Participant #3 was a traditional student during her undergraduate educator preparation program, meaning that she completed four years of undergraduate work upon high school graduation.

Research participant #4. Research Participant #4 works in an urban, public school district with over 50,000 students. She has been teaching in an early childhood classroom for three years. Participant #4 was a non-traditional student during her undergraduate educator preparation program, meaning that she took some time off of school between high school and her undergraduate coursework. During this time, research participant #4 had a family of her own. This gives participant #4 a unique perspective when it comes to family engagement. She has two lenses when it comes to family engagement in an early childhood classroom, one as a teacher and the other as a parent in an early childhood classroom.

Research participant #5. Research Participant #5 works in an urban, public school district with over 50,000 students. She has been teaching in an early childhood classroom for two years. Participant #5 was a traditional student during her undergraduate educator preparation program, meaning that she completed four years of undergraduate work upon high school graduation. Research participant #5 has school-aged children currently living in her home. This also gives participant #5 a unique perspective when it comes to family engagement. She has two lenses when it comes to family engagement in an early childhood classroom, one as a teacher and the other as a stepparent in an elementary classroom.

Summary of Research Participant Demographics

Creswell (2014) suggests that a phenomenological study typically has a sample size ranging from three to ten participants (p. 189). For this particular study, the researcher recruited five teachers fitting the criteria for the research. The research participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

- Second or third-year teachers in an early childhood classroom (birth to grade three)
- Attended a four-year university in a traditional educator preparation program
- Obtained a degree or endorsement in elementary and/or early childhood education
- Currently work with students and families in an early childhood classroom setting

The five participants of the research study had many commonalities, but also unique perspectives to share with the researcher. The participants ranged in age from twenty-four years old to forty years old. Three of the participants do not have children of their own living in the home, one participant is a stepparent to school-aged children, and

one has biological, school-aged children living in the home. The participants were all female. The researcher attributes this to the disproportionate number of females to males in the field of early childhood education. Three of the participants participated in an accelerated Master's level program, which provided mentoring during their first year of teaching. The diversity in participant experiences made for rich data collection during the semi-structured interviews.

Data Analysis

The researcher chose to use thematic analysis throughout the data analysis process. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in the data collected (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis supported both the phenomenological approach to the research, as well as the desire to become immersed in the data. Data was labeled a theme if at least three of the five research participants discussed the topic. Seven themes were identified among the interview data. The first question in each interview had to do with the participants' own experiences with family engagement as a child in a classroom. Every one of the participants stated that their parents were not physically present often in the classroom but were supportive at home. This question was important in the beginning to start a discussion on what family engagement looks like and the lens through which the participant may view family engagement. It also highlighted that family engagement in the educational process can look different in every family. There is a difference between engagement and involvement. Participant #5 stated this in regards to her mom's engagement and commitment to her academic success:

Yeah, my mom always read to us even when we were little babies, and we always had books. She always tried to encourage us to read and learn and things like that. When I was in first grade, I struggled with reading...my mom used to always talk to us like we were people and not like we couldn't understand.

Her mom was a working mom and rarely involved in the classroom and school environment, but her engagement and commitment to education was strong.

Below are themes uncovered based on the main research question, as well as the two sub-questions. The data was disaggregated and analyzed by theme through the lens of the research question and sub-questions. The first portion of the data analysis will focus on both the main research question, as well as the first research sub-question.

Findings related to the main research question

- How did the experiences of second and third-year teachers during their undergraduate university educator preparation program prepare him or her to engage families in an early childhood classroom?

Findings related to the first research sub-question

- What strengths did the research participants take away from their undergraduate university preparation during their first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?

Encouraging family involvement. Multiple participants discussed the need to encourage family involvement in the classroom and school. This idea began in discussions during undergraduate coursework. Although it is essential for family engagement in the early childhood classroom, involvement in the classroom environment can be difficult due to family schedules, cultural barriers, and language barriers, just to

name a few. The process to encourage family involvement often needs to occur in non-traditional ways.

Research participant #2 discussed how her school requires engagement hours as part of admittance in the school. These hours can be obtained by volunteering in the classroom, or through participation in one of the many family nights at the school. Even with this requirement, participant #2 has to be creative in how she works with some families. She discussed the need to make a personal contact for some families to be present. She said, “In some cases I have said that if you come for a half hour of volunteer activities, I’ll count it for an hour of engagement. I just want to get you there”.

Research participant #2 also discussed in detail the needs of her school community and ensuring that family nights helped to meet a need within the community. She talked about offering food for families, making sure there is some community resources embedded in the family night, and not always focusing the family night on academics. Meeting families where they are remains a big focus in her classroom and school.

Participant #2 also focused on the importance of providing families with appropriate activities when involvement in the classroom occurs.

And I think it’s important to understand that they are still parents and not teachers so don’t send 10 kids with them because it may end in chaos and they may not want to come back. But parents know how to read a book. And if you’re not sure if they do, if there’s a language barrier, let’s draw pictures, let’s give them art supplies instead of a chapter book to read. Make sure you’re

reaching their comfort level...because I would hate to make a parent feel small coming into the classroom if they aren't able to meet my expectations.

Research participant #5 mentioned how hard her families work. She discussed that both parents often work outside of the home, often in jobs doing manual labor, and with non-traditional work hours. She has gotten around this issue by asking families to complete tasks for the classroom while at home. For example, she sends home a bag full of items that need to be cut out. She had parents asking her often how to support her and the classroom, and this is one of the ways in which those families can feel supportive of the classroom environment, their student, and the teacher without being physically present during the school day.

Forming and maintaining positive relationships. Participants mentioned courses with a focus on developing and maintaining positive relationships with families. Research participants took what was learned in coursework and tried to incorporate strategies in their classrooms to foster positive relationships. Words such as collaboration, warm, fun, and a safe environment were mentioned throughout the interviews with participants.

Two research participants discussed specifically learning about the importance of making sure the initial contact with families is positive, as well as maintaining a 7:1 ratio of positives to negatives during school-family interactions. Research participant #3 said:

I think it's important to try and keep every interaction with parents as positive as possible. I know in my undergrad they talked a lot about making sure that the first contact with parents is always positive. That first week of school, call them and say who you are and something good the student did. Let them know

some of the positive things. And that should continue throughout the year. It's important to share the positives because you are going to have those phone calls when you have to let them know about some negative things happening in the classroom...You want to work together through those problems.

Multiple participants discussed an open-door policy in the classroom and the importance of building positive relationships with families. This can be as simple as saying "hello" and conversing during drop-off and pick-up or encouraging families to be a part of the school day. One participant also discussed the benefit of families being involved in the classroom in order to connect with other kids in the school and their families. Keyser (2007) discussed a family-centered early childhood program as one that helps foster networks of support (p. 8). When families are provided opportunities to network with one another, this supportive environment can be maximized.

It is important to discuss that many participants mentioned time as a barrier to building these positive relationships. Time as a barrier will be discussed separately in greater detail, but participants often stated that interactions with all families must be planned. Positive phone calls or notes home need to be written in lesson plans to ensure that all children and families are reaping the benefit of this activity. Teachers are extremely busy, with many different tasks to complete, and it is essential that positive interactions be a part of the planning process in the same way as academics.

Providing a number of communication opportunities. Multiple research participants discussed the need for an open line of communication with families. Participants discussed what worked well for them, as well as the challenge of finding the best way to communicate with the diverse family population with whom they work.

What works well for one family may not work at all for another. The participants took what was learned in courses during educator preparation, reflected on their specific classroom environment, and adapted the strategies to fit their current students and families.

Research participant #1 highlighted the importance of communicating with families:

I think even just sharing the small little things that you do throughout the day is very important. It helps to build that trust with the family and helps them feel better about their child being from them for long. So I like to just share little tidbits about what is going on...and even just the small victories...

She realized that allowing her parents to be a part of the classroom, even while at work or at home, has allowed the communication to be a more two-way process.

One participant mentioned that “sending home the flyer is often not enough”. It must go beyond this type of communication. Weekly newsletters were still mentioned by multiple participants as effective communication tools, but not as the sole means of communication with families. There were a number of strategies shared via an electronic avenue. Research participant #5 discussed using a specific phone app that allows her to communicate with families via text message. She has found this quick strategy much more useful than more traditional forms of communication. Research participant #3 found that Facebook worked well in her classroom. It is a good tool to share information, events, and photos with her families. Even though that works well for most families, she also recognized that it cannot be her only communication tool. She said:

Although I do have a good amount that use the Facebook page, some people just don't like Facebook at all, some people don't have access to it. It can be difficult to communicate...It's important to keep a strong line of communication, whether that's phone calls home, newsletters, a website, whatever.

Another participant discussed specifically her classroom webpage, combined with weekly emails to parents and/or guardians. She feels that the information and classroom photos shared allows families to feel engaged in what is occurring in the classroom. It also gives families the information necessary to begin conversations about school with their own child.

Findings related to the second research sub-question

- What areas of growth were still evident during the research participants first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?

Diversity among families. All of the participants discussed both culture and language as a potential barrier to family engagement in an early childhood classroom. Multiple participants stated that even though discussions occurred in coursework surrounding these topics, they were surprised by how much engagement is affected by cultural and linguistic differences.

Research participant #5 stated it in this way when describing barriers for family engagement in the educational process:

Language barriers, for sure. But also some cultural barriers. I feel like it's especially the case with families who do not speak English as their first language or who are not from the United States. Maybe they immigrated here.

Some of them are really involved in their child's schooling but then there are other cultures who are more hands off because that is their culture. They are like you do your job and we respect you and we'll do our job at home. Culturally they may feel like they can't get involved because they don't speak English or whatever it may be.

Research participant #1 echoed this by saying:

I always knew parents were different but you have the parents that want to know every little bit and want to be there whenever they can. Then you have the parents that you email five to six times and you still never hear back from them. But I don't think it's a lack of caring. It's just different dynamics and often cultural differences...It doesn't mean it's wrong but I think it's just learning to accept and understand that everyone parents in a different way. And they're going to participate in different ways.

Research participant #2 described specifically the language barrier and the impact that it may have on families:

If they're coming in (as a parent) for a fun activity, it may not be what they're used to...What if they don't speak the language of everyone? I probably wouldn't want to go if I can't talk to anybody. That's not fun.

As discussed in the literature review section of this paper, students and families are becoming increasingly diverse while teachers are becoming less diverse (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Cultural differences can present additional hurdles (Smith, 2014). This linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic divide between mostly White, middle-class teachers and a diverse student population can cause a huge barrier when engaging

families. While this is well-documented, many educator preparation programs still allow for little interaction between future teachers and a diverse family population.

Time as a barrier. The issue of time as a barrier for engagement has been addressed but will be discussed here in more detail. All participants mentioned this as a stumbling block for family engagement. The lack of time occurs on both the side of the new teacher, as well as the family.

The participants in this study did not feel prepared and confident in balancing all that goes into a classroom. Participants did not realize the time and intentionality it takes to truly engage families in the educational process, while also meeting all of the academic requirements. Participant #1 confirmed the issue of time in this way, “I think time (is a barrier) because there is a lot the first year so I think there were times that I got so consumed with getting lessons and materials ready that I realized that I hadn’t shared in a while”. Participant #2 discussed the intentionality it takes to engage families by stating:

It has to be planned or you will not remember. I can say I’ll give five positives this week and share with families. If I don’t have it written or laid out saying this is who will receive it, and I’m not that specific, then I won’t remember.

Balancing academics and personal/social development, while also engaging families, can be extremely difficult for a new teacher.

Multiple research participants also discussed busy family and work schedules as a barrier to engaging all families in the educational process. Participant #3 discussed her population of families and their work schedules. Many of her families work the night

shift so they can be hard to reach at times. She also addressed parents and guardians with a more traditional work schedule and the time barriers that exist:

I have tried to call them during the day while my kids are at specials or something...if I want to contact them right away for a student that needed to be discussed. They were at work and told me they were really busy. That was kind of frustrating on the opposite end too.

Generally, families are extremely busy and hard-working. Teachers are also extremely busy and hard-working. This can make it very challenging for families and teachers to communicate and connect with one another. On top of being busy with the day to day task of running a classroom and engaging families, new teachers are learning curriculum, district and state standards, and procedural requirements of the school. It can become overwhelming very quickly for new teachers.

Minimal courses in educator preparation with a specific focus on family

engagement. One hundred percent of the research participants stated that there were 0 – 1 courses offered during their educator preparation program that focused on family engagement. The two participants who shared that one class was mandatory mentioned it as part of the early childhood coursework. Participant #1 said, “We took one class, I don’t remember the name of it, for early childhood, that centered on families. We learned a lot but I think it’s hard to talk about it then to actually do it”. Participant #5 also spoke of the coursework specifically designed for teacher candidates seeking an endorsement in early childhood when she said:

(We did discuss family engagement) as part of our multicultural class. I think we did have a few assignments attached, especially since I was early

childhood. We did talk about it and stuff like that but it wasn't anything that was a huge focus. It was not the focus of the class, just embedded in it.

Many of the participants echoed the sentiment that it is hard to recreate authentic experiences with families. The lack of authentic experiences provided by the educator preparation programs will be discussed in greater detail later.

All of the research participants thought that conversations about families were embedded throughout coursework, but that there was never a large focus. All participants identified the discussions as surface level discussions, with little to no classroom application. The research participants either could not remember specific details regarding the discussions on family engagement or were unable to apply any of the discussions into their first year in an early childhood classroom. Research participant #2 articulated this by saying:

Honestly, I can't say that I remember anything that really...they talked about how parents were important but there weren't a lot of strategies that focused on what barriers you might face, how to go around them, things like that...in undergrad was more so just focusing on here's what you're teaching and here's how you should teach it and here's the assessment that you should use. It's kind of just that overarching umbrella of here are some things to know and then hit the ground running and figure out the rest. So, we knew parents were important, but specifically how to make them feel important and how to get them in here (the classroom) was something I just had to ask other veteran teachers at my school.

Epstein (2018) confirmed this idea by pointing out that teachers learn how to teach all content areas and all ages. Administrators learn to manage a school, create

building schedules, and supervise the staff. Epstein went on to say that teachers and administrators are still underprepared for working with families as a crucial component in the educational process. She believes that at least one required course should occur in educator preparation for all endorsement areas and future teachers of all ages. All teachers will work with families; not just those entering the field of early childhood. While strides are being made in educator preparation surrounding family engagement, the trajectory needs to continue in the direction of requiring family engagement courses for all future educators.

Lack of authentic experiences working with families. The research participants were asked to share specific information about interactions with families during any field experience, including both practicum and clinical practice (student teaching). The majority of participants discussed interacting with families only during their final clinical practice semester. When discussing these experiences, a newsletter home and parent teacher conferences, were the activities discussed most frequently. Two participants mentioned that although conference participation occurred, it was mostly just observation. Participant #5 followed up with, “even though I saw conferences, it was totally different when I had my own classroom. It is exhausting. It’s so much”.

Participant #5 did discuss the array of activities provided for families in the school in which she completed clinical practice. She said:

During student teaching I felt like I had a lot (of parent interactions). My school had a health center and they offered a lot of classes for parents. And they do the parent family nights...they do a lot with getting families involved. We had a lot

of newcomers to this country and many of those families were up at the school a lot...

The experience she described was much different than the other participants when it came to their clinical practice experience. The interactions with families allowed the other four participants during clinical practice were much more limited.

While all of the research participants mentioned family interactions during clinical practice, one discussed a very rich practicum experience in an early childhood setting. Participant #1 described this experience in this way:

I came earlier (for the experience) because I had to miss some days, so I was there almost all day on Fridays. I would see parents drop the kids off and pick them up so that interaction was nice...the director of the school also let us go on the home visits with the teachers which was a huge eye-opening experience because it's one thing to meet the parents and get to know them but to truly see where that kid lives really helps you understand them and know what they're involved in day in and day out.

This experience allowed her to get to know those families on a different level. When she spoke of this experience, it was evident that she was thankful for the opportunity provided to her. It assisted in developing her confidence for working with families as an early childhood educator.

While all participants were thankful for any experience in which family interaction occurred, many participants discussed a lack of authenticity in some of the experiences and assignments. Participant #4 discussed an assignment where she had to create a family board and a brochure:

I remember making a family board...We had to randomly look things up that we will never use to put on the brochure. Fake things. And it wasn't even for a grade that I even knew. I'll probably never make a brochure. And most parents won't stand and look at a family board. If it's important, I'll just give them the information...And I think I had to do it in two of my classes.

Participant #1 went on to explain an actual interaction she had with families during her educator preparation program:

(Describing the family night) The whole concept and idea was really cool but when we got there it was just weird because we were supposed to go up to a family and be like this is an activity that I have, let's go ahead and do it. And I think it's really hard to plan something when we didn't really know the age of the kids or the languages they spoke. That made it really difficult. I think it would have been different if all of us had set up an activity and let parents come to us. We didn't know who we were planning for...a lot of the families did not speak English...so that was a big barrier because we weren't prepared for that. We had made pages and they were all in English so that was very difficult.

This experience, although well intentioned, did not provide an authentic experience for the teacher candidates participating in the family night. This experience highlights the importance of the relationship that must be formed between teachers and families for true engagement to occur.

Conclusion

The data collected during the semi-structured interviews brought about rich conversation surrounding family engagement and educator preparation programs. In summary, the research themes found in the data collection and analysis process were as follows:

- Encouraging family involvement
- Forming and Maintaining Positive Relationships
- Providing a Number of Communication Opportunities
- Diversity among families
- Time as a Barrier
- Minimal Courses in Educator Preparation with a Specific Focus on Family Engagement
- Lack of Authentic Experiences Working with Families

Each theme was analyzed through the lens of the main research question, as well as the two research sub-questions. A number of strengths and weaknesses of research participants' educator preparation programs were discussed multiple times during the course of the interviews. While participants discussed experiences during educator preparation, all of the participants did not feel completely prepared for all of the aspects that go into teaching in today's classroom. Specifically, family engagement and the importance of families in the educational experience was discussed as a more abstract concept, rather than allowing candidates to experience family engagement first-hand in coursework and field experiences.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explain the extent to which new teachers feel prepared to engage families in an early childhood setting upon graduation from an educator preparation program. Therefore, this study explored the strengths and areas of growth in each teacher's educator preparation program in regard to family engagement in the early childhood classroom. This chapter includes a review of the study's findings, a connection to the literature, as well as implications for the field of early childhood education and educator preparation. This chapter ends with a discussion on the limitations of the study, future research possibilities, and a brief summary.

This chapter contains information focused on the research questions of the study.

The main research question was as follows:

- How did the experiences of second and third-year teachers during their undergraduate university educator preparation program prepare him or her to engage families in an early childhood classroom?

The sub-questions were as follows:

- What strengths did the research participants take away from their undergraduate university preparation during their first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?
- What areas of growth were still evident during the research participants first-year of teaching in an early childhood classroom when it came to engaging families?

The data collected during the semi-structured interviews and the subsequent analysis brought about seven themes: (a) encouraging family involvement, (b) forming

and maintaining positive relationships, (c) providing a number of communication opportunities, (d) diversity among families, (e) time as a barrier, (f) minimal courses in educator preparation with a specific focus on family engagement, and a (g) lack of authentic experiences working with families. These themes directly tied to both strengths and areas of growth of undergraduate educator preparation programs related to the preparation of preservice teachers to engage families in an early childhood classroom.

Review of the Findings

Many of the research participants stated that the discussion surrounding the encouragement of families to participate in the educational process as a strength of their educator preparation program. The discussions that began in undergraduate coursework inspired these teachers to find creative ways to get families engaged in the classroom and school community. This included understanding how hard families work and trying to accommodate their schedules to encourage family involvement. There were multiple discussions surrounding the needs of the community and ensuring that the family engagement helped to meet the needs of the community. One of the participants discussed the importance of making sure that engagement activities were appropriate for families and working hard to stay within each families' comfort level.

Participants mentioned courses with a focus on developing and maintaining positive relationships with families. The research participants saw this as a strength within the educator preparation program from which their certification was received. Multiple participants discussed the importance of positive communication outnumbering negative communication or interactions. This concept came directly from undergraduate coursework and was applied in the classroom setting. The importance of an open-door

policy was mentioned, along with providing families opportunities to network with one another and the school community as a whole. These networking opportunities assist in creating a positive classroom and school environment, and engaging families in the educational process.

Research participants discussed the importance of creating multiple means of communication for families. This goes back to the fact that families are extremely busy and hard-working and need a variety of opportunities to engage in the education of their child(ren). Participants discussed the use of classroom newsletters, but also agreed that sending home a newsletter is not enough. The teachers in this study discussed classroom websites, Facebook and other social media accounts, texting apps, and email as communication. No one communication tool can work for all families so the participants worked to accommodate each individual family in the best way possible. The importance of communication, and even some specific methods, were discussed in the participants' undergraduate coursework. This was seen as a strength of the undergraduate educator preparation programs represented in this study.

Multiple research participants stated that even though discussions occurred in coursework surrounding the diversity of families, they were surprised by how much engagement is affected by cultural and language differences. While this diversity is well-documented, many educator preparation programs still allow for little interaction between future teachers and a diverse family population. This limited interaction happens for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to, difficulties in scheduling interactions. This lack of experience in working with diverse family populations made the transition to a classroom somewhat difficult for a new teacher.

Time as a barrier has already been discussed briefly and is an area of growth for educator preparation programs. The lack of time occurs on both the side of the new teacher, as well as the family. The participants in this study did not feel prepared and confident in balancing all that goes into a classroom setting. Participants did not realize the time and intentionality it takes to truly engage families in the educational process, while also meeting all of the academic requirements. The focus during educator preparation is often on the academic requirements of students. This makes sense in the culture in which we live, where student achievement and state testing are constant points of discussion when it comes to public education. Research participants felt more prepared to meet the needs of students academically but not as prepared to include families in this process.

Another area of growth for educator preparation programs included minimal courses focused on family engagement. One hundred percent of research participants stated that there were few courses in educator preparation where family engagement was a focus. Family engagement was discussed, but all participants identified the discussions as surface level discussions, with little to no classroom application. The research participants either could not remember specific details regarding the discussions on family engagement or were unable to apply any of the discussions into their first year in an early childhood classroom. Participants also pointed out that the discussions on family engagement occurred specifically in the early childhood content courses.

A lack of authentic experiences working with families was discussed in detail as an area of growth in the participants' undergraduate educator preparation programs. The majority of participants discussed interacting with families only during their final clinical

practice semester, with little to no interaction with families during preceding practicum experiences. Two of the research participants discussed assignments and experiences that were inauthentic and did little to prepare them to work with families in their own classroom. While the intentions behind the assignments and experiences were authentic, these examples show how difficult it can be to provide meaningful experiences with families in undergraduate educator preparation.

Connection to Literature

The results of this study align with the literature surrounding educator preparation in regards to family engagement. The research participants discussed a number of barriers to family engagement. Students and families are becoming increasingly diverse while teachers are becoming less diverse (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Cultural differences can present additional hurdles (Smith, 2014). This linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic divide between mostly White, middle-class teachers and a diverse student population can cause a huge barrier when engaging families. The participants in this study identified cultural and language barriers that inhibited the full engagement of some of the families in their classrooms.

This shift in demographics also requires new strategies for involving families. Family engagement and communication strategies that have worked in the past, or have worked for many families, may no longer be effective due to cultural, linguistic, and/or socioeconomic differences. Participants in this study discussed in length the variety of strategies used to engage families. The more traditional methods of involving families do not work for every family and teachers must now “think outside of the box” when it comes to family engagement. All parents, regardless of race, education, or income level,

are involved in their child's learning and want their child to reach their full potential (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Participants in this study realized quickly that this will look different with every family and in every classroom.

Authentic family engagement requires work on the part of all stakeholders to build meaningful, mutually respectful partnerships that benefit children. Families are much more likely to get involved if they feel welcomed in the classroom, that their input is valued, and that they are an integral part of the education of their child (Smith, 2014). Multiple research participants discussed specifically learning about the importance of making sure the initial contact with families is positive, as well as maintaining a 7:1 ratio of positives to negatives during school-family interactions. Participants discussed the importance of having an open-door policy in the classroom and the essential task of building strong school-family partnerships. This can be as simple as saying "hello" and conversing during drop-off and pick-up or encouraging families to be a part of the school day. One participant also discussed the benefit of family involvement in the classroom, working with appropriate school content and tasks, in order to connect with other kids in the school and their families. When families are provided opportunities to network with one another, a supportive classroom and school environment can be maximized.

Literature identifies that another barrier to family engagement in early childhood education occurs when there is a lack of preparation in preservice educator preparation programs focused on engaging families. Teacher candidates often speak highly of the theory acquired in educator preparation programs but agree that more information and training on classroom management, parent communication, and involving parents in the classroom is necessary (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). Every one of the research participants

stated that there were few courses in educator preparation where family engagement was a focus. Family engagement was discussed, but all participants identified the discussions as surface level discussions, with little to no classroom application. The research participants either could not remember specific details regarding the discussions on family engagement or were unable to apply any of the discussions into their first year in an early childhood classroom.

Literature states that much of the essential learning that takes place in educator preparation programs occurs during practicums or field experiences. There is a need within the training of preservice teachers to provide practicum experiences that involve family engagement (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005). These types of “real-life” experiences help teacher candidates gain the efficacy necessary to engage families in a proactive manner. While all participants in this specific study were thankful for any experience in which family interaction occurred, many participants discussed a lack of authenticity in some of the experiences and assignments. These experiences and assignments, although well intentioned, did not provide authentic opportunities for the teacher candidates to interact with families.

Implications for the Field

Public schools in this nation are under fire. Administrators and teachers are under a microscope, constantly being questioned by lawmakers, critics, and the general public. Modern teachers need to be equipped to work with a diverse student and family population while increasing student achievement. When a teacher candidate leaves an educator preparation program, it is crucial that he or she has the efficacy necessary to work with each student and family that enters their classroom.

It is essential upon certification that teachers have the ability to engage a diverse family population. The benefits of engaging families in the educational process is well-documented. When families engage in the school and classroom community, there is an increase in academic, social, and emotional development. It is a teacher's job to help each child reach their full potential. This is an extremely difficult task if the family is not engaged in the process, ready to support the teacher, and to provide their own expertise in this endeavor.

Student achievement is the focus of conversation in school reform. It is expected that all students will master grade level content and it is the teachers' responsibility to ensure this occurs. This can feel like an overwhelming task, especially for novice teachers. Literature highlights the benefits of family engagement, including an increase in student achievement. Families play an integral role in the process of maximizing student potential and that role needs to be embraced and family engagement fostered in every classroom and school. Educators can leverage the expertise that families have in order to increase student achievement.

Teachers must leave educator preparation programs with the necessary skillset and efficacy to excel in today's classroom. This goes beyond teaching the content and state standards. Educator preparation programs often focus on the theory and content in the field of education but fail to prepare students to work with a diverse student and family population. It is crucial for preservice teachers to gain experience and knowledge surrounding family engagement in order to gain the efficacy necessary to meet the needs of students and families with whom they will work. A teacher with strong self-efficacy, and a developed skillset, surrounding family engagement will have the necessary tools to

be successful in the classroom. This success could lead to an increased desire to stay in the field of education, thus reducing teacher burnout. When a teacher is confident in his or her abilities to teach content, engage families, and manage stressful situations, the likelihood of success in the classroom greatly increases.

Limitations of the Study

While the researcher was able to uncover a number of relevant themes related to family engagement and educator preparation, there were a number of limitations to the study. This study was limited to five second and third-year teachers in an early childhood classroom. Creswell (2014) suggests that a phenomenological study typically has a sample size ranging from three to ten participants (p. 189). The researcher was within the suggested criteria, with a sample size of five participants, but more perspectives would have been welcomed. Teachers, especially those with fewer years of experience, have a lot to balance. The recruitment effort of the researcher was not as successful as originally planned.

This study was limited to early childhood educators. The literature is clear that while family engagement in early childhood aides in beginning a positive trajectory for school success, family engagement is important at all levels. The benefits of family engagement in the educational process extends well beyond early childhood and into middle school and high school.

The teacher perspective is the focus of this particular research study. The parent and family perspectives are a crucial part of the family engagement discussion. Families bring a different lens with which to identify effective strategies and barriers to true engagement. While the study focused on educator preparation and family engagement,

families could provide insight into the strengths and areas of growth of teachers related to this specific topic.

For Further Study

Ideas for future research in this area are directly related to the limitations of this qualitative study. Two of the themes found in this research were minimal courses in educator preparation with a specific focus on family engagement and a lack of authentic experiences working with families. The study could be replicated with secondary teachers in order to identify strengths and areas of growth in their educator preparation program surrounding family engagement. A number of participants in this study discussed coursework and family interactions and assignments related to family engagement as a part of their early childhood training. That raises questions surrounding coursework and opportunities provided to those preservice teachers seeking an endorsement in secondary education.

It is important to consider families as a crucial voice in this conversation. Parents and families would have ideas to share surrounding strengths and areas of growth in new teachers when it comes to engaging families in the educational process. Throughout this study, family engagement is framed as a two-way partnership, with equal importance shared between the family and the teacher. This notion means that the family perspective is just as important to the discussion as that of the new teacher. It would be interesting to weave the parent and family voice into a similar study, or to complete a study focused on the family perspective.

Joyce & Calhoun (2010) provide information and a rationale for the mentoring of new teachers. The work of these researchers states that preservice educator preparation

programs orient teacher candidates to schooling and teaching and provide an introductory knowledge base. The researchers assert that following student teaching, first-year teachers need another year or two to gain other necessary skills in becoming a highly effective educator (p. 42). This makes the idea of mentoring new teachers as important as providing quality preservice educator preparation programs. This study could be continued and the five participants interviewed again regarding the districts' mentoring practices. Multiple research participants shared that discussing theory and applying the theory to a classroom are two very different ideas. Strong district mentorship programs could help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Conclusion

The job of the modern-day educator looks much different than it did fifty years ago. The profession has evolved into one that requires teachers to meet the needs of all students while working collaboratively with families. This collaboration can be extremely difficult, especially for new educators. The goal of this study was to identify strengths and areas of growth surrounding the sample's undergraduate educator preparation programs. This occurred through conversation with five second or third-year teachers. The data collected aligned with the current literature surrounding undergraduate educator preparation programs. The participants of this study were able to identify some of the challenges that occur when engaging families and how their educator preparation program provided essential tools for working collaboratively and overcoming obstacles for family engagement and partnership in the educational process. The participants were also able to identify some common areas of growth in their educator preparation program. The data collected could lead to replications of this study, as well

as new related studies. The conversation surrounding family engagement and educator preparation is critical at this time in history. Current research is clear that when families engage in the educational process, student development increases. This increase in development encompasses all three domains: social, emotional, and academic development. The idea of successful family engagement is focused on meeting the needs of the whole child in order to provide all students with the opportunities necessary to be successful in the classroom. Every teacher who enters a classroom does so in the hopes that he or she will make a positive impact in the lives of each child and family. It is crucial to equip every new teacher with the necessary tools to make this happen.

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Appendix A



PREPARING NEW TEACHERS TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: STRENGTHS AND AREAS OF GROWTH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD, PRESERVICE TEACHERS

Introductory Email

Dear _____,

My name is Jackie Proctor and I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Research program at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

I will be conducting a research study surrounding undergraduate educator preparation and the extent to which new teachers feel prepared to engage families in an early childhood setting. Your participation in a graduate program during your first year of teaching, where mentoring support was provided, has given you a perspective unique to many new teachers. My research study will focus on your undergraduate experiences. Anything shared related to your graduate experiences may be discussed separately to add context, but the focus remains on your undergraduate experiences in educator preparation.

Please know that confidentiality throughout the study will be a focus. Your identity will not be shared in the discussion of findings.

Should you choose to participate, I will ask you to participate in an in-person interview discuss your undergraduate educator preparation program and family engagement during your first years of teaching. The interview will be semi-structured in nature and I will have guiding questions for the interview. With that said, the conversation is the focus of the interview and the questions remain flexible. The conversations will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The recordings will be reviewed by myself only, and destroyed following transcription.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions. I truly appreciate your consideration in participating in this research study.

Sincerely,

Jackie Proctor

Coordinator of Practicum Experiences
College of Education | Roskens Hall 204H
University of Nebraska at Omaha www.unomaha.edu

402.554.4916

jjproctor@unomaha.edu



Appendix B



Title of this research study

PREPARING NEW TEACHERS TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: STRENGTHS AND AREAS OF GROWTH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD, PRESERVICE TEACHERS

Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this research study based on your years of experience working as a teacher in an early childhood classroom following a traditional undergraduate educator preparation program.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

Family engagement in early childhood education has a number of academic and personal/social benefits for children. Teachers play a large role in the engagement of families in an early childhood classroom. Literature shows that there is a large focus on theory in many educator preparation programs, but often there is a disconnect between putting theory into practice when it comes to engaging families.

What will be done during this research study?

Participant Selection

Participants were purposefully selected through recommendations from a University faculty member. An initial email was sent to discuss the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and time requirements of study participation. The consent form was shared for review by each participant. Once participation is confirmed, the interview will be scheduled.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview will be conducted with each participant. The interview will be transcribed and shared with each participant in order to allow he/she an opportunity to add to and/or retract any of the statements. Each interview will be analyzed and themes will be identified. Any information shared outside of the participants' undergraduate educator preparation program will be discussed separately to help provide context for the research.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to you?

You are not expected to get any direct benefit from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?

This study will help to identify the strengths and areas of growth in some undergraduate educator preparation programs. By using these findings, educator preparation programs can reflect on current practices and also changes in the way educators are prepared to engage families in early childhood education. This, in turn, can assist in developing the skill set and confidence in new teachers to engage families in their own early childhood classroom.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study?

Instead of being in this research study you can choose not to participate.

What will being in this research study cost you?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be paid for being in this research study?

You will not be paid to be in this research study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the end of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person or agency required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You have rights as a research subject. These rights have been explained in this consent form and in *The Rights of Research Subjects* that you have been given. If you have any questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, talk to the investigator or contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) by:

- Telephone (402) 559-6463
- Email: IRBORA@unmc.edu
- Mail: UNMC Institutional Review Board, 987830 Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha, NE 68198-7830

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, or with the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If the research team gets any new information during this research study that may affect whether you would want to continue being in the study you will be informed promptly.

Documentation of informed consent

You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study.

If you have any questions during the study, you should talk to one of the investigators listed below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Subject: _____ Date: _____ Time: _____

My signature certifies that all the elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ Date: _____

Authorized Study Personnel

Principal Investigator

Jackie Proctor
(402) 554-4916
jproctor@unomaha.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Jeanne Surface
(402) 554-4014
jsurface@unomaha.edu

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your own experience with family engagement as a student in a PK-12 classroom.
2. Do you feel that your own family contributed to your academic achievement? If so, how?
3. Describe your idea of what it means to truly engage families in the educational process.
4. What surprised you most about engaging families in the educational process during your first year of teaching?
5. What strategies worked during your first year of teaching to engage families in the educational process?
6. What were some of the barriers in engaging families during your first year of teaching?
7. What did you learn during your first year of teaching surrounding family engagement in the classroom?
8. Did you have coursework focused on family engagement during your undergraduate educator preparation program? If yes, please describe.
9. Did this coursework transfer to your classroom during your first year of teaching? Please explain why or why not.
10. Describe any interactions you had with families during field experiences (practicum or clinical practice) during your undergraduate educator preparation program.
11. Is there anything else you can share about educator preparation and family engagement in the early childhood classroom?

Appendix D



NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

January 24, 2018

Jackie Proctor, M.S.
Education
UNO - VIA COURIER

IRB # 014-18-EX

TITLE OF PROPOSAL: PREPARING NEW TEACHERS TO ENGAGE FAMILIES IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD:
STRENGTHS AND AREAS OF GROWTH IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD, PRESERVICE
TEACHERS

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for Exempt Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes for your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum approval period of 5 years from the original date of approval and release.

If the research is completed prior to 5 years, please notify the Office of Regulatory Affairs at irbora@unmc.edu. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2018-01-24 12:10:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP
IRB Administrator III
Office of Regulatory Affairs