

# An Interdisciplinary Course To Prepare School Professionals To Collaborate with Families of Exceptional Children

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To help children succeed in schools, professionals must work with the family system since “the family is the child’s first teacher” (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2001, p. 48) and the benefits of involving families in educating children are evident in research findings (California State Board of Education, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994). School professionals include teachers, school social workers, school psychologists, school counselors, and school nurses.

When professionals collaborate with families, they must understand and align their approaches with the world view of families from different cultures (Brown, Pryzwansky, & Schulte, 2001). In essence family involvement is an event of multicultural engagement. Therefore, training opportunities for future professionals to develop school-family-community partnerships will also enhance the development of their multicultural competence (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004).

Among different types of families that professionals encounter in schools, families of exceptional children have unique experiences that impose an additional dimension of difference. Exceptional children would qualify for special education or related services if they meet one or more of the following criteria: autism, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, specific learning disability, mental retardation, orthopedic impairment, speech/language impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, or some other health impairment which adversely affects educational performance (IDEA Amendments of 1997).

Working with families of exceptional

children is pertinent to help them succeed. Encouragement and support from the family contribute to reducing the gaps in college access and completion among students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In collaboration, families are “equal and full partners with educators and school systems” and this relationship “will benefit the student and the entire school system” (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, p.13).

To be effective in collaboration, professionals must know how to engage families of diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, effective models to train future school professionals in working with families of exceptional children are lacking. National accrediting agencies provide “minimal guidelines for disability training for school counselors” (Milsom & Akos, 2003, p.87). State requirements for education programs to train future teachers and school professionals in the area of family involvement barely emerged in the past few years (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1998; California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2001).

Involving parents and contributing to a multidisciplinary team are two crucial areas of professionals’ roles in assisting children with disabilities (ASCA, 1999; ASCA, 2000). In view of practical limitations of programs to provide specialized training to prepare professionals to work with families of exceptional children (Korinek & Prillaman, 1992), and the reality that professionals must collaborate with one another to address children’s specific conditions (Conoley & Conoley, 1991; Strother & Barlow, 1985), the use of an inter-disciplinary course to address specific topics and competencies related to serving special needs becomes a viable option (Milsom, 2002).

## The Interdisciplinary Course Used in This Study

### *Background*

As a professor in a counselor education program, I was assigned to teach students in Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) programs taking a course entitled, “Counseling Parents with Exceptional Children.” At the same time, Deanna Schilling, another professor from the special education program of the same department was charged to instruct student teachers in special education taking a course entitled, “Home/School/Community Collaboration: Policy, Research, and Practice.” Both were three-semester-unit courses and were offered at the same time and on the same day during the semester.

In view of the fact that the goal of both courses was to prepare school professionals to work with families that have exceptional children and that school professionals must work together to best help exceptional children and their families, we saw the potential benefits of combining students from these courses together in one class. With the support of the department, we were able to keep the number of students in each class to a minimum and to use a bigger classroom for students to meet together.

By combining students from these two courses together, we created a multidisciplinary class with graduate students in special education, deaf education, social work, psychology, and counseling. We co-designed and co-taught this course for four consecutive semesters. During this period, we met and talked regularly after each class meeting to share our observations of students’ progress and before each class meeting to review lesson plans.

### *Training Modules Used in This Multidisciplinary Course*

The interdisciplinary course for family involvement described in this study inte-

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grated different areas of training modules for family involvement and collaboration:

*A. Continuum of Family Involvement Training*

Evans-Schilling (1996) proposed a Continuum of Family Involvement Training which encompasses four areas: (1) developing self- and other-awareness; (2) developing a knowledge base; (3) direct experience with families; and (4) contributing to the field.

*B. Modules for Collaborative Training*

The design of the multidisciplinary course used in this study mirrors the modules for collaborative training suggested by Staton and Gilligan (2003) with particular emphasis on the following areas: (1) instilling professional identity through reinforcing reflection and enhancing self-awareness and self-efficacy; (2) developing knowledge of and respect for other professionals through exposing students to other professionals and sharing training experiences; and (3) building systemic thinking into the curriculum (p.170-173).

*Course Assignments*

*A. Partnership Project with Parents*

Each student was required to establish a partnership with a family of an exceptional child in the community. The student would meet with the family for a minimum of four times. During the meetings, the student tried to understand the family's experiences, goals, strengths and needs. The student then developed a Family Resource Notebook with the family, including written information and resources at school and in the community that addressed their presenting goals and concerns.

*B. Reflection Papers*

Each student was required to write six reflection sheets about their in-class experiences and four reflection sheets about their family meetings. Reflection for in-class experiences addresses what students have learned in class; what questions/concerns they might have and other personal reactions. Reflection for family meetings focuses on what was discussed in the meeting, the responses of the family members, what students have learned and what they would do next.

At the end of the semester, each

student was required to write a culminating reflection paper addressing the following areas: their learning about families of exceptional children, about themselves, the difficulties they encountered in completing the Partnership Project, and suggested changes to improve their work with families and to improve the course assignments.

*C. Multidisciplinary Group Assignment*

Students were assigned to multidisciplinary groups that met on a regular basis in class to discuss their work with their families. Students shared experiences relating to the following: their concerns and/or difficulties before, during and after each family meeting, the resources they could identify, their plan of action at different stages of the partnership, some similarities and differences among the families that they served, and what they had learned in the process.

*Method To Measure Outcome of Student Learning*

Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) include self-efficacy and great expectation among the five components of motivational resources in collaboration with families of exceptional children. In assessing student outcomes, we focused on self-efficacy which refers to students' belief in their own capabilities (Bandura, 1997) in working with families and great expectation which refers to students' belief in families' abilities to affect what happens to them (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, p. 42).

In order to measure self-efficacy and great expectation, a questionnaire was developed by adapting one originally used in the study of Evans-Schilling (2000). The individual items were written to assess the following areas of students' perception: (1) the interest and ability of parents to help their children, (2) the student's own ability (skills and knowledge) to help children and their families, and (3) how well the education program prepares them to work with children and their families. Likert-type scales running from 0 to 10 were used to denote the respondent's relative agreement with the statement, with 0 indicating "not at all," 5 indicating "so-so," and 10 indicating "very much." All questions are listed in Table 1.

The questionnaire was given to all students twice, on the first day (pre-questionnaire) and the last day (post-questionnaire) of the semester of their enrollment. Students were invited to respond to the

questionnaire on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Students supplied the maiden name of their mother and this name is used to pair the pre- and post-questionnaires for comparison.

**Purpose of the Study**

After having taught this multidisciplinary course for four consecutive semesters, this author has accumulated information about the learning experiences of 142 students from their responses to pre- and post-questionnaires and reflection papers. Upon receiving approval from the department to use student data in research and publication, statistical analysis of pre- and post-questionnaires and thematic analysis of reflection papers were conducted to address the following questions:

- (1) Is there a difference between students' sense of self-efficacy and great expectation for families before and after taking this course?
- (2) Is there a difference between students' perception of their educational preparation before and after taking this course?
- (3) How does working with peers in a multi-disciplinary class contribute to the difference, if any?

**Method**

*Data Analyses*

*A. Quantitative Data*

T-tests were conducted to compare students' pre- and post-questionnaire responses.

*B. Qualitative Data*

I analyzed students' responses in their reflection sheets and final paper by first highlighting all remarks relating to their experiences from interacting with their peers. After that, I went back to the highlighted remarks to identify common themes. Common themes are grouped under these categories: (1) knowledge of one's and others' profession, (2) collaborating with other professionals, and (3) how other professionals contribute to one's work with families.

*Student Background*

A total of 142 students took this interdisciplinary course in four different semesters with an average of 35 students in each class. These are graduate students

## Theory to Practice: Research, Models, & Projects

in a public university in a mid-size town in California. The number of students in different specializations is as follows: 37 Special Education Teachers, 23 Social Workers, 10 Marriage and Family Therapists, 46 School Counselors, 11 School Psychologists, 10 Deaf Educators, 1 School Administrator, and 4 Undeclared Majors.

Not all students completed the pre- and/or post-questionnaires since some were absent on the first day or the last day of class, supplied different names of their mother, or chose not to respond to the questionnaire. In the end, responses from 85 students, 60% of all enrolled students, were usable for statistical analysis. Among these 85 students, 78% were female, and 22% were male. Their ages ranged from 22 to 58, with the following breakdown: 25 or under (32%), 26-30 (31%), 31-40 (20%), 40-50 (12%), and 51 or above (5%). The breakdown of the ethnicity of students is as follows: African-American 4%, American-Indian, 1%, Asian 20%, Caucasian 38%, Hispanic 30%, and Other 7%.

### Results

#### A. Quantitative Data

The mean scores for students' pre- and post-questionnaire responses and the t-scores comparing the pre- and post-questionnaire responses are reported in Table 1. Results denote a significant increase on all assessment items at the end of the semester, with  $p < .001$ . Regarding perceptions about families, students feel more strongly that parents are interested in playing an active role in their children's education and psychological growth and parents are effective in doing so.

Regarding perceptions about their college education, students feel more strongly that their education programs prepare them well to teach parents how to teach their children, to understand the emotional needs of parents and their children who have learning difficulties, and to provide them with useful printed materials. As regards their self-confidence, students agree more strongly that they

are effective in working with parents, and that they are prepared to lead a parent support group, consult with parents concerning their children's education, lead a support group for children with special needs, counsel a child with special needs, and counsel parents who have a child with special needs.

#### B. Qualitative Data

Students' comments about their experiences in a multi-disciplinary class are categorized under three areas. Themes of their responses for each area are as follows:

##### (1) Knowledge of one's own profession and that of others:

Students reported an increase in knowledge about commonalities, similarities and differences between disciplines and an increase in awareness of their professional limitations and potential contribution from other professionals. Examples of students' comments in this category include:

Table 1:  
Pre- and Post-Survey Comparisons

| Assessment Item  | Pre-Survey |           | Post-Survey |           | Paired-difference |           | Paired-t value |
|--|------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
|  | <u>M</u>   | <u>SD</u> | <u>M</u>    | <u>SD</u> | <u>M</u>          | <u>SD</u> |                |
| 1. How interested are parents in playing an active role in their children's education and psychological growth?  | 7.61       | 1.74      | 8.45        | 1.45      | .84               | 1.90      | 4.05***        |
| 2. How effective are parents at playing an active role in their children's education and psychological growth?   | 6.61       | 2.05      | 7.58        | 1.84      | .96               | 2.35      | 3.78***        |
| 3. How well have you been prepared in college-level courses to teach parents how to teach their children?  | 5.78       | 2.11      | 7.20        | 2.28      | 1.42              | 2.47      | 5.31***        |
| 4. How well have you been prepared in college-level courses to understand the emotional needs of children who have learning differences and their parents? | 6.14       | 2.35      | 7.95        | 1.72      | 1.81              | 2.58      | 6.45***        |
| 5. How useful do you think any printed materials you have received in college-level courses could be in working with parents?                              | 6.37       | 2.19      | 8.50        | 1.35      | 2.13              | 2.38      | 8.19***        |
| 6. How confident do you feel about your effectiveness in working with parents?   | 7.12       | 1.75      | 8.35        | 1.36      | 1.23              | 1.74      | 6.47***        |
| 7. How prepared do you feel to lead a parent support group?  | 5.49       | 2.47      | 7.08        | 2.36      | 1.59              | 2.04      | 7.19***        |
| 8. How prepared do you feel to consult with parents concerning the education of their children who have special needs?                                     | 6.24       | 2.38      | 8.29        | 1.53      | 2.06              | 2.52      | 7.52***        |
| 9. How prepared do you feel to lead a support group for children with special needs?   | 5.36       | 2.54      | 7.29        | 2.15      | 1.93              | 2.39      | 7.43***        |
| 10. How prepared do you feel to counsel a child with special needs?  | 5.93       | 2.51      | 7.76        | 1.93      | 1.84              | 2.37      | 7.14***        |
| 11. How prepared do you feel to counsel a parent who has a child with special needs?   | 5.76       | 2.45      | 7.78        | 1.79      | 2.01              | 2.27      | 8.19***        |
| 12. How informed do you think you are about community resources available to parents of children with learning difficulties?                               | 5.15       | 2.47      | 8.52        | 1.49      | 3.36              | 2.74      | 11.31***       |
| 13. How informed do you think you are about the legal rights of children with learning disabilities and their parents?                                     | 5.81       | 2.41      | 7.75        | 1.85      | 1.94              | 2.36      | 7.59***        |

Note: N=85; \*\*\*p<.001

"Our class of diverse majors has different ways of approaching issues. Some majors use a feeling based approach while others use an environmental approach. While approaches may be different the goal remains the same: to help the family with presenting problem."

"Today I learned about the many different services that other majors offer. I got a good understanding of where I can refer my clients later on when I am a professional school social worker."

*(2) Collaborating with other professionals:*

Students reported a decrease in stereotyping other professionals and an increase in sensitivity in expressing their own viewpoint; an increase in empathy for other professionals who have similar emotions and struggles; and an increase in confidence in using other professionals for support, consultation, guidance and referral resource for families. Examples of students' comments in this category include:

"Sometimes different professions may be perceived as being closed-minded but they are actually open to new ideas and assistance. We share a lot in common, especially our passion to help others."

"We as teachers and counselors are looking for support. Classes like this one and others have been excellent resources of information and support."

"Since I will be working in schools as a school psychologist, it is important for me to remember how teachers are feeling. From class I need to remember that new teachers feel very nervous when they first start-when parents or other people come in to observe, it feels like these people are looking over the shoulders of the teacher. It is also important to remember that parents bring a lot of emotion to teachers and professionals at schools, and we must be prepared to help them with it."

*(3) How other professionals contribute to one's work with families:*

Knowing that other professionals share common struggles and concerns about working with families, students reported feeling less isolated and more confident in working with families. Students learned to use other professionals to get suggestions on ways to approach families, to narrow their focus and direct strategies, to get new ideas in using other resources, to monitor their attitudes and behavior, and to learn how others handle specific situations with families. Examples of students' comments in this category include:

"I was surprised that so many people were worried or concerned about their efficacy in counseling roles. I think I was more surprised that even those people with long term goals of being counselors also had feelings of insecurity. I was reassured that my feelings of insecurity were natural and common."

"The class is helping me to develop my skills as a professional and I am becoming more aware of myself and my own style by talking with individuals from other professions or areas of practice. I gained a clearer understanding and appreciation of the diverse backgrounds of those in our class and also realized what a tremendous impact this population has on all areas of study."

**Discussion**

A course specifically designed to prepare future professionals to partner with families of exceptional children makes a difference in their attitudes toward family-school-community partnership. Results from this study support Milsom's (2002) findings indicating that taking courses with information about disabilities correlates with the sense of preparedness students felt to perform activities for students with disabilities.

When state departments of education do not require course work in special education for school professionals (Prillaman, 1990 as cited in Korinek & Prillaman, 1992) and degree programs choose not to make necessary changes to help graduates become more capable of serving exceptional children (Korinek & Prillaman, 1992), they create unfortunate gaps between what school professionals should do for these families and their actual contribution. Without proper preparation, school professionals may shy away from actively involving families or may become less effective because of lack of knowledge and skills.

Students' reflections on their multidisciplinary group experience shed light on many misconceptions and assumptions they had for one another. For example, they did not know much about others' job responsibilities, professional terminology, approaches to serving families, and knowledge about school/community/internet resources. Some students assumed that they were the only ones who have struggles and emotional difficulties in working with families.

When students have a safe learning environment in college to openly interact with peers from different professional tracks, they can acknowledge, confront, and correct their misconceptions and as-

sumptions about other professionals. They can have a better picture of how to support one another in helping families. Feeling empowered by mutual understanding, acknowledgement and respect for one another, these future professionals can have a head start in successful collaboration with families when they enter the work force.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Given that the pre- and post-questionnaires were completed by only 60 % of all students who took this course, the data may not be representative of the whole group of students. The study took place in one public university in California. The results may not be representative of other students in other universities and/or other states.

Another potential limitation of this study is the self-report nature of the data. Students may have a tendency to rate their experience as more positive at the end of the semester regardless of their experience. Students may have an increase in their sense of preparedness simply because of taking a course on working with families with exceptional children regardless of the specific design of this course. Students' confidence may also increase as a result of combined learning from other courses they took concurrently with this course.

Despite these limitations, this study renders meaningful information about the potential benefits of bringing students from different professional tracks to support one another in learning how to collaborate with families. Such design can be viable to train students in other aspects of professional development.

However, to make a multidisciplinary course possible, support from education programs to make necessary accommodation in student enrollment, master scheduling, classroom arrangement, and faculty assignment is pertinent. Future studies should be conducted to compare learning outcomes from different designs of courses that prepare professional to collaborate with families of exceptional children.

Follow-up studies to measure the actual job performance of students who have taken this type of courses will generate more feedback on how to better prepare students for their actual service for families. Also, follow-up studies to measure the families' level of satisfaction about the family partnership project, and the benefits they receive from such partnership are necessary.

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