

Beyond the Textbook

Building Relationships between Teachers and Diversely-Structured Families

Katherine E. L. Norris

Introduction

It has been no secret that today's schools are faced with many challenges. U.S. schools are struggling with low test scores, high drop-out rates, and unequal quality public education. These schools are also struggling to meet the needs of an ever changing population of students. The changing demographics in our schools present challenges to teachers and administrators. In addition to working to improve grades, schools are faced with the challenge of building relationships with families to ensure that the needs of all students are met. Schools that strive to create better learning environments for children strive to empower *all* parents—not just ones from traditional families (Muscott et al, 2008). In order to build successful schools it becomes crucial for schools to build partnerships with diverse families.

According to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2002) diversity is defined as differences among groups of people and individuals. These differences can be based on race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical areas (NCATE 2002). Diverse family structures are families made up of diverse individuals or relationships that structurally differ from the traditional (married mother and father with biological children) family. More and more, the definition of families is expanding from the traditional family structure to more diverse family structures, and in order to build successful partnerships between teachers and families, it becomes crucial to address the needs of diverse families. This is especially true when training those who will work with our youngest students.

Katherine E. L. Norris is an assistant professor in the College of Education at West Chester University, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Many students in teacher education programs are entering the program with little experience in diversity (Valentin, 2006). While our nation's students are becoming more diverse, most individuals who enter teacher education continue to be White (87%), female (74%), and middle class (Banks & Banks, 2004) with little experience in diversity. Teacher education programs have the unique challenge of training students interested in becoming teachers (pre-service teachers) to build partnerships with *all* families including those from diverse structures. Many who teach pre-service teachers struggle with ways to go beyond the textbook with the goal of providing quality, memorable learning experiences for their students. How can we get pre-service teachers to best understand the importance of establishing relationships with diverse families while at the same time understand the concerns diverse families face?

Background

If we are going to be effective in producing teachers for a global society, we must begin to move beyond the common practice of using textbooks and case studies and examine the effectiveness of using teaching strategies that bring families and pre-service students face-to-face. Bringing diverse families and pre-service students face to face early during the undergraduate years is essential to allow students wishing to become teachers to understand the perspective of others while at the same time providing those students with first hand experiences with families that are diverse.

For years, campus instructors have used talks, speak-outs, and panel discussions as a way to allow students to move beyond the text and hear the perspective of others. Bringing panel discussions into the classroom can provide valuable experience for the students. Panel discussions

serve to allow students to hear the critical viewpoints and arguments of others, in contrast to the traditional classroom discussion which only allows students to state their points of view (Bucy, 2006).

The Project

The purpose of this project was to examine the effectiveness of moving beyond the textbook and bringing families and pre-service students face-to-face in an effort to begin to build a much needed understanding and to allow for perspective taking. Can in-class panel discussions serve to give pre-service teachers the necessary experiences that can help support them in creating positive relationships with diverse families?

The Panelists

For this project, a panel of parents from diverse family structures was assembled to speak to the students. The panelists were parents who volunteered to participate. The panel consisted of five parents who all represented diverse family structures. The selection of the participants demonstrated that although a family structure may be similar, within each family structure there also existed diversity. Every attempt was made to include a variety of diverse families; however, it was impossible to have all groups represented. The panel composition was as follows:

Panelist A: A single African American mother of two adopted African American boys ages 14 and 11. The first child was adopted at 17 months and the second child was adopted at age 8.

Panelist B: A single Vietnamese mother of a bi-racial (Vietnamese and African American) toddler.

Panelist C: An African American married woman with an adopted toddler.

The toddler was adopted as an infant through a private adoption agency specializing in open adoptions.

Panelist D: A White woman currently in a same sex unofficial marriage. Her wife was in the 33rd week of her pregnancy. Although not yet a parent, this soon-to-be parent was able to express concerns as she anticipates parenthood.

Panelist E: The final panelist was unique, a White single parent of two adopted children—one African American and one bi-racial (White and African American) child. She later married and had two White biological children.

The Audience

The project was part of a brown bag lunch series, an open forum for all of the university to attend. The primary audience for this particular program consisted of students in a class entitled *Families, Community, and School*, a mandatory class for early childhood education majors. The remainder of the audience was filled with students who volunteered to attend the brown bag discussion. Some of the students were pre-service teachers, some were not. During the presentation, the audience was attentive and many were actively taking notes. The panel discussion was well attended—all seats were filled.

The Discussion

The session began with a powerpoint presentation which lasted about 10 minutes. The purpose of the powerpoint presentation was to answer the question: What are diverse family structures and how do schools best build partnerships with diverse families? The audience was provided with examples of diverse families (for example, adoptive, single, foster, single dad, grandparents as parents, same sex parents, parents and/or children with disabilities) along with suggestions for strengthening communications with *all* families. After the powerpoint, the panelist began their discussion.

Efforts were made to keep panelists on task by guiding each panelist with three areas for discussion. Each panelist was asked to spend time describing their family structure and what made their family diverse. After the introduction of the family, each panelist described concerns and issues that they have experienced which had the potential of interfering with

partnerships between home and school. Finally, each panelist offered suggestions for the pre-service teachers—what they should remember as they take on the task of becoming new teachers. As each parent spoke, there were some suggestions that seemed to overlap with comments made by most of the panelists.

A summary of some of these suggestions offered by the panelist follows:

1. *Do not make assumptions based on the family structure.* Get to know the families before coming to any conclusions. All families are different and have different needs.
2. *Be prepared to offer alternative assignments if necessary.* If you are doing an assignment that may be difficult for a child (creating mother's day cards for a family with no mother living in the home) be ready to offer alternative assignments.
3. *Make an effort to involve all families.* Some families may be a little apprehensive about getting involved. Be equally welcoming to all families.
4. *Have high expectations for all students.* Regardless of their background or family structure, all students should be encouraged to do their personal best.

At the completion of the program, the students in the Family's course were given a questionnaire in order to gain feedback about the program. The questionnaire consisted of three questions: (1) Did you learn from the panel discussion? Were there any benefits to the panel discussion? (2) What questions persist about communicating with diverse families? and (3) What would you like to have seen done differently? Information was gathered in the hopes of determining the future of using a panel discussion as a teaching strategy on diverse family structures. Informal information was also collected from the panelists and the students in the course.

Results

Every effort was made to gather descriptive information from the panelists and the students attending the workshop. The participants' responses were then examined to determine themes that seemed to overlap across responses.

The Panelists

Through emails and telephone conversations, the panelists were able to communicate their feelings about the panel discussion. When examining the comments of all panelists, two major strands stood out. Overall the panelists expressed feelings of satisfaction with the discussion. It was felt that it was not only beneficial to the students to hear conversations about diverse families, but the families also felt that they gained by sharing what was important and necessary when dealing with their uniquely diverse situations. Secondly, the panelists were unanimous in stating that they would like to have seen the session be longer than 50 minutes in order to allow for a more extensive question and answer period.

Because of the success of this panel, within a week a second panel discussion of diverse families was set up with the intention of replicating the program in a classroom setting for a course in the women's studies program. This time it was set up to insure additional time for a longer question and answer period.

The Students

Following the initial panel discussion, the students in the Early Childhood Families course were given a short questionnaire, with three-open-ended questions, to get feedback on the panel discussion. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire for the purpose of guiding future programs. This process was anonymous in order to encourage the students to be honest in their responses.

The questionnaires were completed by 25 students enrolled in the Families course. The responses were examined and clear themes emerged. When asked what

Four Key Suggestions from Our Panelists

1. *Do not make assumptions based on the family structure.*
2. *Be prepared to offer alternative assignments if necessary.*
3. *Make an effort to involve all families.*
4. *Have high expectations for all students.*

Promising Practices

was learned and were there any benefits, overall the students agreed that the program was beneficial and the thing that was most beneficial was having the opportunity to hear the perspectives of the diverse families. Many students commented that they always hear the perspective of the teacher and that it was good to hear firsthand what the parents were thinking.

When asked what questions still exist about attempting to build communication and relationships between teachers and families, the responses varied. Overall, however, they seemed to be centered on being "politically correct," on communicating without offending. Pre-service teachers also seemed to want to know about the challenges that various families face.

Finally, when asked what could have been done differently with the panel discussion, the majority of the students wanted more time to ask questions. Pre-service teachers also wanted to hear from the spouses and/or partners (when applicable) and they also wanted to hear from a wider variety of diverse families (single dads, grandparents raising children, and other configurations).

Discussion

There are clear implications from this project. First, pre-service teachers overwhelmingly felt that having a panel discussion of diverse families as part of their undergraduate class experience is a tool that is valuable in helping create the atmosphere necessary for relationship building with diverse families. It seems clear that more time should be allotted to a program such as this. Both the panelists and students felt that hearing from more families and having more time for questions and answers would strengthen a program such as this. Further, the program encouraged students to ask more questions of themselves and of the families involved. However, this is just a beginning step in building partnerships with families.

More important than simply finding the program to be interesting, the program also needs to produce learning outcomes. It was clear that this activity began a much needed conversation around the issues of diversity in the family and hopefully opened doors that will allow pre-service teachers to continue discussions on the

topic. In turn, it is my hope that this is the beginning of partnership building that will be carried into the classrooms of these soon-to-be teachers.

In the past, my presentations about diverse families barely touched the surface. After hearing real life stories, the students seemed more willing and able to have discussions on topics that perhaps were not even thought about previously. If we are to move our schools in the direction of broad and inclusive success, it is imperative that teachers feel comfortable creating partnerships with all families regardless of their structure.

Conclusion

Pre-service teachers come to the university classroom with a range of background experiences in diversity, some extensive, but also some very limited. It is essential to prepare them to become effective teachers capable of teaching *anywhere*. Thus, it is critical to ensure that pre-service teachers enter the teaching workforce with an understanding of diversity and how it affects the classroom.

If pre-service teachers understand the importance of developing relationships with diverse families, once they enter the classroom they will be prepared to work toward positive home-school partnerships with all families. Thus the need to bring pre-service teachers face to face with diverse families.

The panel discussion format proved to be a powerful tool that can be used to teach pre-service teachers to appreciate and respect diverse family structures. More than a lecture or reading a book, the panel discussion allowed students to actually meet the families and hear their true life stories. This hands-on strategy allowed students to hear and understand the perspectives of others and to appreciate the differences.

Students overwhelmingly enjoyed this format and believed that the experience was an invaluable learning opportunity. Some of the key benefits revealed by the questionnaire are as follows:

- ◆ Students believed that this format was interesting and engaging.
- ◆ The panel had a strong impact on the students.

- ◆ The students felt they appreciated hearing the perspectives of others.
- ◆ It was useful to hear firsthand what diverse families wanted from teachers.

When preparing teachers, teacher education programs must make every attempt to prepare future teachers to build partnerships with all families, including families which are diverse. Teacher education programs could benefit by providing real life opportunities for pre-service teachers to engage in conversations with diverse families for the purpose of helping those pre-service teachers feel comfortable building partnerships with families from diverse backgrounds.

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