

Preservice Teachers Lean Forward and Listen to Families of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

One feature of the successful education of students includes the valuing of families. This paper describes an on-going study of the impact of having preservice teachers learn about special education from the families of students with disabilities. Using a Disability Studies theoretical framework, we examined preservice teachers' archival work from six sections of an *Introduction to Special Education* course to learn how University students studying to become teachers interpret families' perspectives and experiences. The data was procured from University students' papers based upon informal family interviews and observations. Qualitative analysis revealed three overarching themes: 1) preservice teachers acknowledged students with disabilities and their families were complex and valuable resources, 2) preservice teachers showed a shift in their views and attitudes such as questioning constructs of normalcy, and 3) preservice teachers gained an understanding that their role included being inclusive advocates. A discussion of how involving families of students with disabilities might improve teacher preparation and inclusive education follows.

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Introduction

“These families must be so sad, I just wonder what they do and if they have any type of normal life.” “I am not sure how I will work with parents, I think they probably look to the school for a lot of help.” The two quotes above were taken from student papers early in their preservice teacher education program as they described what they thought about the relationship between educators and families who have children with disabilities. These students were on the verge of entering into an experience where they would be spending time with and learning from families who had children with disabilities as a part of an introductory class in special education. This experience is a key element of their teacher education program designed to 1) start the process of eliminating university students’ fears and stereotypes about disability, 2) allow university students to see families as resources and partners in support of their child’s education, and 3) provide an opportunity for university students to understand their role as an inclusive educator.

For several years researchers have suggested the value of involving families in teacher preparation and practice as an effective way toward improving children’s academic and social outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Ferguson & Squires, 1998, Harry, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In her early work focusing on cultural reciprocity between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse families, Harry (1995) used contrasting descriptions between teachers *leaning forward* or *bending backwards* in their efforts to collaborate. In this paper we take up her visualization of teachers leaning forward to illustrate what we hoped our University students would do as they actively listened to families describe their experiences. As faculty engaged in the work of educating preservice teachers it is our hope to begin to add complexity of understanding to students’ initial reactions of families being “so sad”, needy, and not normal. We

hope that students will come out of this experience with a critical understanding of how disability is positioned in our culture as well as a fierce commitment to creating space at school where families and children with disabilities can begin to work together as equals.

The need for partnerships that not only recognize the value of educators and families practicing together, but that recognizes the importance of practice demonstrating awareness and valuing differences that has been a part of educational mandate since 1975. PL 94-142 in 1975 (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA), focused attention on collaboration among families of children with disabilities and those who serve children in schools. IDEA specifies parent participation as one of its major principles with guidelines and timelines indicating how parent participation must include family – school interactions (Osher & Osher, 2002; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl & Crowley, 2005).

Furthermore, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) increasingly emphasizes the importance of teacher candidates' ability to collaborate with families in addition to working collegially with colleagues. In their 2008 standards, NCATE requires teacher candidates to “communicate with students and families in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to cultural and gender differences” (p.34, Standard 4), but this is something they continue to report feeling unprepared to do (Hansuvadha, 2009; Palmer, 2002). Their lack of experience with family collaboration is not missed by families. A study examining the barriers to collaborative partnerships indicated families preferred “professionals who really listen (and) who keep an open-mind to new ideas” (Defur, Todd-Allen, & Getzel, 2001, p.28). How do we facilitate teachers' self-awareness and critical thinking about these interactions and the impact of social and educational policies and practices in which they play a part? In the midst of this project students repeatedly used language that illustrated the tension many families experienced

when trying to work with schools. Words such as “crusade”, “road blocks”, and “struggles” were frequently found in students’ writing when describing the families’ interactions with the education system. In one analysis we did of only the interviews with culturally and linguistically diverse families, these tensions were described as disconnected visions, cultural disconnect, and procedural disconnect (Sauer & Kasa, 2011). It is of critical importance that we, as faculty engaged in teaching future teachers, not only impart the strategies necessary to build skillful collaborative relationships, but that we also teach students to respond with critical cultural competence regarding disability in general.

Disability Studies scholars have called into question the work of special education researchers over recent decades, noting how we have failed to take on the more broad social issues involving disability as one feature of diversity (Danforth, 2008). Disability Studies theory challenges the construct of disability as located within a person and positions dis/Ability within a social, historical, and culture construct. Disability Studies in Education provides “advocacy for, as well as the viable approaches for enacting, meaningful and substantive educational inclusion” (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008, p.447). The near absence of Disability Studies in teacher education has allowed the medical/deficit model to dominate the educational discourse and perpetuate the systematic oppression of our students with disabilities. The authors are working on a long-term, multiple-source study using a Disability Studies theoretical framework to examine University students’ informal family interviews and observations, their related papers, online discussions, and evaluations from an *Introduction to Special Education* course. This paper describes how one teacher education program has sought to engage families with children with disabilities and utilize their expertise of their children in the process of understanding special education. Our research is intended to improve educational outcomes for

all k-12 students, but particularly students with disabilities, to serve the public good in general as we work toward developing more reflective, critical teachers capable of becoming the inclusive school leaders needed for the 21st century.

Context

This research is based on the archival work of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a face-to-face *Introduction to Special Education* course in the spring semester of 2009, the fall and spring semesters of 2010, and the spring of 2011 at a mid-sized Western University. The research protocol was approved by the University Internal Research Board. All students were seeking general and/or special education licensure. In addition to utilizing critical disability studies readings, autobiographies written by people with disabilities, videos focusing on the autobiographical experience of disability, and guest speakers, students were required to spend time in the field, with families, teachers, and support personnel with whom they observed and interviewed. A key feature of the course has been collaboration between this University and the state Parent Training and Information Center, in a program titled “Families as Faculty.” In most of the course sections¹ the preservice teachers in the introductory course teamed up with families of students with disabilities to learn from them about their school experiences. Using voluntary participation procedures, families were recruited through the Parent center and provided with an orientation workshop outlining the project and the families’ and University students’ responsibilities. The emphasis of the program was based on Seymour Sarason’s (Fried & Sarason, 2002) work regarding the value of understanding the unique family perspective and experiences. University students were provided with background information about students

¹There have not been enough families recruited to require all students in all sections to pair up with families. In some cases, students found their own families or alternatively they interviewed teachers or other support personnel. This study examined only the work of students where families were directly involved. Some grant monies have been garnered to increase family recruitment in number and diversity as we work to expand this program.

with disabilities, role-modeling, an interview guide, and the use of a digital recorder if permission was granted to be used for transcriptions. The interview guide provided to the University students included the following guiding questions for families:

1. Tell me about your child.
2. Can you describe what has gone well in school?
3. Can you tell me about any struggles you have had?
4. What do you wish everyone would know about your child and your family?

The University students were encouraged to actively listen to families and use paraphrasing and follow-up questions to clarify understanding. They were discouraged from making it a formal interview, but rather to think of it as a conversation and allow for families to lead. Since some situations offered the preservice teachers with a chance to converse directly with the children with disabilities themselves and/or their siblings, additional suggested questions were provided such as “Tell me about yourself, your family,” “What kinds of things do you like to do?” and “What advice do you have for me as someone who hopes to become a teacher someday?”

The locations of these interactions varied, from the University classes to the families’ homes, in schools, and in the community. Nearly all of the interactions took place in a mid-sized western city, but a few interviews were conducted via Skype or in the hometowns of the University students while they were home for holidays. In some instances families agreed to have their conversations recorded and transcribed verbatim; these transcriptions accompanied the University students’ papers. The University students subsequently wrote papers about their interactions with families and/or the support personnel, which became the primary source data we examined for this study.

Data Analysis

Using a Disability Studies theoretical framework and the constant-comparative qualitative analysis procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), four sections of archival data spanning the 2009-2010 academic year and two sections from the spring of 2011 were examined. The qualitative data included the family interviews and observations along with the University students' papers based on those interactions. Our method followed the approach used by other researchers interested in examining preservice teachers' observation notes and reflections to learn about how their experiences might influence a change in attitude (Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Novak, Murraray, Scheuermann, & Curran, 2009). Novak et al (2009) utilized student reflection journals as data and the constant-comparative approach to their data analysis. In their study of speech acts focused on the use of *mental retardation* in common parlance, Danforth & Navarro's (1998) undergraduate special education students documented events in their daily lives in which they witnessed a spoken, written, or media reference to *mental retardation*. These students wrote detailed descriptions of the setting, gestures, and exact dialogue followed by extensive reflections for each occurrence. Because they were interested in examining "the meanings encoded in cultural ways of using certain language" (p.33), Danforth and Navarro did not focus on the number of occurrences, but rather they grouped the samples thematically.

Similarly, in our study we were less interested in counting frequency data than we were in learning how the preservice teachers' attitudes might be impacted by spending time with and interviewing families of students with disabilities. In our repeated readings of our University students' papers we paid attention to what they focused on and the words they chose to use in describing the situations and the families with whom they interacted. Individually, we took

memo notes and developed codes. After several individual readings of the data, each professor researcher shared her initial codes with the other and using inductive reasoning we collapsed codes and then came to a consensus on three general themes: 1) preservice teachers acknowledged students with disabilities and their families were complex and valuable resources, 2) preservice teachers showed a shift in their views and attitudes such as questioning constructs of normalcy, 3) preservice teachers gained an understanding that their role included being inclusive advocates.

“Parents really have a lot of knowledge”: Families are Complex, Unique, and a Useful Resource

As noted in the student quotes in this introduction of this paper, students entered this experience with a sense of pity for the families and a great deal of hesitancy. Students reported feeling, “scared”, “very nervous”, “unsure of what to expect”, and “hesitant to be around disability.” Much of this fear seemed to come from the dominant cultural notion of disability as undesirable, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable. After this experience, students reported that they had learned to listen and get to know individuals with disabilities and their families. University students overwhelmingly commented on the value of getting to know people with disabilities and their families, even if some noted their initial fears and anxieties about the projects. A student shared,

Families as Faculty lets a student learn about a disability in a more hands-on way than just learning from a text book ever could. Meeting Sam, James and Michael (children with autism) was a great experience and lead me to believe that not only should a person be require to attend more than just one SPED class while studying to become a teacher but they should require more interaction with students with a learning disability.

This student keenly recognized the need for more information, more time to learn about disability, and more interaction. Absent from reflections after the visits were the initial fears related to disability. Another student noted, “Going over to Colin’s to talk more with his mom and to get to know them and their situation a little better was big in easing my fears.” Getting to know a student as a part of a university class is a first step in teaching university students to reach out and communicate with families.

As students broke down barriers and learned to reach out to parents through conversation they learned that families have a lot to offer when they are working with them to support their children. A student shared, “I now will seek out families to help me when I struggle...parents really have a lot of knowledge.” “Man this family had a ton of ideas!” “How could I ever be successful without them?” While participating in this experience families of children with disabilities were asked to take the lead, design the time that they would spend together and share all that they thought pre-service teachers needed to know. Because of this university students were put in the position of learning from the families. Through this experience university students realized that in order to successfully support students with disabilities it will be critical for them to work with the family, seek their advice, and work together to utilize the students strengths so that they can be a participating member of the school. This more positive attitude illustrates the impact of disrupting more typical power structures between families and schools based on students with disabilities viewed as locating deficit within themselves.

In addition to the experience of meeting with families, students read autobiographies written by people with disabilities. This element contributed to the university students’ understanding of human diversity. One student, who was already teaching in schools at the time, suggested the experience offered “a rare opportunity to look inside the minds of (her) students,

and hear the feelings that I'm sure they can relate to.” After reading *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, an edited collection of autobiographies by Doug Biklen (2005), another student wrote: “They each explain the challenges they face while dealing with other peoples’ ignorance and misunderstanding as well as show their sense of humor, imagination, and intelligence. The book helps its reader to better understand how people who have been ‘classified with autism interpret themselves and the world.’”

The time spent with families coupled with the time reading autobiographies allowed students to gain insider information of different types. From parents, university students began to consider the value of working together and what they, as a teacher, could gain from parent knowledge. From the autobiographies university students began to understand the experience of disability in a more complex manner. The insider information assisted them in the journey of chipping away static knowledge about families and disability in general.

“They are a normal family”: Questioning Assumptions

The preservice teachers showed a shift in their views and attitudes and many began questioning constructs of normalcy. Several students used the word *normal*, as in “They are a normal family” after their family home visits. One student wrote, “Normal kids, normal family. I am ashamed to admit I did not expect that!” while another noted, “I saw passion, love, intense hope, and drive... I did not know that would be there; I will always remember that.” These comments illustrate their initial cognitive dissonance between their assumptions about families and what they found once they began to interact with families. In some instances the questioning of the normalcy construct emerged directly from the parents and the children themselves. For instance, one student’s observation notes taken while riding in the car with a family to the child’s hippotherapy session wrote:

The mother of an eight year old girl with Velo-Cardio-Facial Syndrome and Prader-Willi Syndrome) doesn't like when people make her child seem like "an alien or abnormal." She says (her daughter) is as normal as a kid gets. (The brother) joins in from the back (seat of the car) and exclaims, "Yeah! ! She loves Hannah Montana, her favorite food is ma n' cheese, she likes the color pink, and wants to be a princess. What normal eight year old girl isn't like that?"

This construction of the idea of normalcy is something that is increasingly being challenged by people with disabilities and their advocates. In her oft-cited book *Claiming Disability*, Linton (1998) explains how the different meanings of the normal/abnormal dichotomy indicate different values and assume shared understanding. She describes scenarios where people discussing people with disabilities use categories relying on abstractions of what constitutes normal as in "normal children", as though this construct is absolute, a permanent descriptor of a person or group of persons. She explains, "Setting up these dichotomies avoids concrete discussion of the ways the two groups of children actually differ" (Linton, 1998, p.24). If we, or in this case our preservice teachers, come to describe people with disabilities and their families as 'normal,' we are acknowledging them as equal to or more like us than unlike us. This notion of questioning normalcy begins to subvert the power structures so endemic in school-family dynamics.

In one paper the university student incorporated self-advocate Jonathan Mooney's discussions about normalcy:

Early in the book Mooney discusses "normal" and the idea of "normalcy". He makes the observation that there are two types of people in the world, people with clean carpets and people without clean carpets. Meaning he spent his childhood with carpets that were animal stained and ill kept, and until late into his adolescents didn't realize that there

were people whose carpets were clean all the time. His idea of “normal” when it came to cleanliness of a home was untouched until he was presented with another reality. This parallels most of his life submerged with a “reality” of disability.

The student then writes at length about one of Mooney’s friends named Kent, and how he wasn’t considered “normal.” He was called “defective”, she writes, “yet when he was performing on stage he excelled.” The student then asks the all-important question that seeks to understand how we ourselves construct concepts of normalcy and dis/Ability: “So, when in fact can you consider something a disability?” The presumed answer, that these concepts are created in context, echoes Disability Studies scholars such as Kliever and Biklen who explain “that human behavior, communication, and intent do not have built-in, universal meanings” (2007, p.2581). This student later writes about how “society’s view on an issue has such a strong hold and influence on what we think ourselves.” She understands the value in questioning assumptions as reflected in her final comment: “We have to constantly reexamine what we think about things especially regarding disability.”

When the University students used words like “surprise” to describe how they felt upon meeting people with disabilities and their families, it showed their shift in understanding to one where people with disabilities might represent the natural complexities evident in human variation. This shift seems to then allow the preservice teachers to see disability in individuals as only one aspect to the person. In other words, there was a sort of developmental change in thinking that happened with many of our students whereby once they relinquished control of the environment and interaction. Since their meetings often occurred in the family’s home with the families set up as the purveyor of information or ‘expert,’ a disruption of power occurred from

the more typical scenario where the families are visitors at the schools seeking information. This change then enabled the university students to reconceptualize the construct of normalcy.

To illustrate the impact of how preservice teachers conceptualized normalcy anew, we share the following excerpt which was written by a university student in response to a home visit with William (a pseudonym), a young man with multiple disabilities who uses a wheelchair to move and who types to communicate:

He has several unique qualities which increase your need to be around him. These include his sense of humor, sense of social justice and his knowledge of sport teams and a huge desire to participate in "normal" events such as camping, rafting, youth leadership conference and concerts. He likes to participate in everything that his family does. . . William's dislikes being separated from other people and talked down to. He is a very intellectual person who needs opportunities to share his gifts. He believes everyone should be treated fairly despite handicaps, color, gender or anything else that may differentiate. He just wants to be normal and be treated normal. William has wishes just like you and me.

In this excerpt the preservice teacher began to take note of William's interests and personality characteristics outside of the more common discourse around people with disabilities, especially where the person might have more visible differences. In her final sentence, she addresses an anonymous 'you' and includes herself as someone like William, as an equal.

Some students wrote directly about the normalcy construct at length making connections between their experiences and course readings. One student wrote explicitly about identity and her interactions with a youth labeled with a disability and his family; her section heading was Being "normal" (quotes in original). She included an excerpt of her conversation with the youth and then asks the question about how social interactions create dis/Ability:

Asking Peter how he felt about his disability, he said, “It’s ok.” So then he was asked why having a disability was just “Ok.” He answered by saying, “Even though I’m in a wheelchair, I don’t want to be.” For teachers, this is why acceptance for students with disabilities by their peers is important because the students with disabilities need to feel comfortable going into a general education classroom...So, is it because people treat others with a disability differently that makes the students have that desire of being “normal”? As Peter’s father said in an interview, “People will always judge Peter and determine certain abilities or lack thereof even though he can do much more than often given credit.” Having a disability can leave constraints on how others interact and treat their peers who get included into a general education classroom. A person’s “greatest desire is to be seen and treated as just another ‘normal’ student” because they do like to interact with their peers, but the disabilities can “distance you from people” (Low, 1996, p. 6). It is important to stop placing and changing “labels” on students with disabilities so that the attitudes towards the disabled can stop changing as well.

That this student focused a section of her paper on the normalcy construct and how teacher attitudes might contribute to undermining a general sense of belonging, illustrates a shift from fear and difference as stigma to a greater understanding of the importance of valuing human diversity.

The following excerpt from another student’s paper illustrates a similar emerging awareness. The student was writing about the history of the treatment of people with disabilities and quoting an author who had “broke it down” into seven eras:

The era of extermination, the era of ridicule, the era of asylum, the era of hope for education, the era of disillusionment, the era of integration, and the era of technology” (Low, p. 5). Notice that when looking at the names of these seven eras, people with disabilities have never seen the era of

equality, the era acceptance, or even the era of normalcy. Because of this, (the mother) feels “we need to begin teaching children acceptance of diversity” (personal communication, November 8, 2009).

In spite of students’ increasing awareness of the impact of societal values on dis/Ability, many of these preservice teachers continue to show their own social acculturation and stereotypes as evidenced in student comments where they express “surprise” at the abilities of the people with disabilities with whom they encounter and emphasis on families’ “patience.” This opportunity to learn from families and people with disabilities is viewed as a beginning to a journey of *un*learning cultural stereotypes that strip individuals with disabilities of complexity and render families of students with disabilities in a position of being pitied.

A Teacher’s role in an Inclusive Context

The preservice teachers in these classes seemed to have learned that their role involved being inclusion advocates. One aspect to this role became evident in the way they referred to children with disabilities. There was an overwhelming conscientiousness with regard to University students’ descriptive language when writing or talking about people with disabilities. In ways similar to the University students in Danforth & Navarro’s (1998) study, our university students frequently commented on their increased awareness of the differences between the person-first language of families and the school-based discourse where students were often referred to as “SPED students” or other acronyms based on disability labels.

In class students came to stop themselves or classmates mid-sentence to reconsider how they were describing a person’s impairment. For instance, when one student began to describe her interaction with a child labeled with autism, the University student said, “I was watching an

autistic kid,” then she paused, seemed to reflect as she searched for the words and finally resumed her story, but this time recasting the child as a student first: “When I was watching a student with autism...” Class discussions ensued about changing attitudes regarding person-first language and the underlying assumptions the words reveal. In addition to alerting students to current APA guidelines that requires the use of person-first language, we referred to autobiographic writing to examine this notion of language preferences. One example can be found in an online discussion where the moderator – herself a person with a disability - responded to a letter from another person with a disability who found the idea of reclaiming older language such as “gimps” or “crips” disrespectful. “In principle, I support person-first language,” she writes, “as it arose from within our own community -- unlike such euphemistic garbage as “differently-abled” and "special needs."

It is not surprising that there is not agreement within all groups of people labeled with disabilities regarding language preferences, but dominant discourses are increasingly being questioned. One example is the recent responses to Minnesota congresswoman Michelle Bachmann’s assertion that a vaccine protecting females against cervical cancer caused a woman “to become retarded.”

While the medical community questioned the accuracy of her statement, those in the disability community questioned her understanding of the social impact of her language. Especially concerning, explains Peter Burns, a national disability group spokesman, is the fact that Bachmann was a member of Congress when they passed Rosa’s Law in 2010 which officially removed the use of “mental retardation” in all federal legislation. The analysis of university students’ papers suggests that they began to see themselves as having to take the issue of using

person-first language into both school settings and personal and public conversations if they were to become allies with the families and their children with disabilities.

As part of the university students' emerging sense that their role as teachers would involve questioning language use in schools, their writing suggested they were adopting a role as inclusive advocates for the children with disabilities. The following examples of students' writing showed an increased willingness to teach all students regardless of their abilities and they came to view inclusion as not just possible, but a moral imperative:

We are not here to only teach them [students with disabilities], they are here in our path to teach us as well - to be more compassionate people, to value difference, to heed patience, and to remind us that if we get stuck in a rut, mix it up a little, there are endless possibilities for gaining insight. I learned I need to be accessible to the student through keeping an open mind about their potential and ways to achieve it and accessible to the parent through communication. Problems were solved with a "How" and not "Why" attitude, families have a "can do" attitude. . . .

That the university students picked up on these orientations – that how they perceived situations would have an impact on how successful inclusion would be for their future students - was important. In other words, these University students seemed to learn from families how their own attitudes would lead to behavioral outcomes that would directly influence the success (or failure) of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

In their role as inclusion advocates, several university students identified families' unique knowledge as tools for assisting them when supporting their students in inclusive classrooms. For instance, one student put it this way: "Listening to families can be a way to gain insight into reaching students." Another university student observed an elementary classroom in which they had a new fifth grade girl from Spain who had Down syndrome. He wrote about the teachers' reliance on the child's

family and how they worked together “to really understand” that her sometimes troubling behavior “was not deviance but confusion.” This University student witnessed a positive collaborative experience between a school and a family to, what he called “create that crucial missing connection” that the child needed to show her talents and learn in an inclusive school setting.

The understanding that inclusion is something that benefits all students can be seen in the following student paper based on family home visits with a young man with multiple disabilities:

They treated William as an equal and as one of the boys, entitled to all the experiences they were having. He had teacher aides in school, but his middle school aide was not only his aide, but was an asset to the entire school. He was a catalyst in making the school handicap accessible and changing the attitudes of teachers towards special needs children. William was fortunate to have many experiences of positive, problem solving challenges in school enriching his life and others... The principal refused “...to place a futon in the library for William to stretch out. This was a small accommodation for William, but would also have been used for all students.

After their family interactions, these university students who were enrolled in a preservice teacher education program, began to see that students with disabilities were assets to inclusive classrooms. Further, they were able to analyze classroom experiences and notice when efforts to accommodate could be made to increase student participation, membership, and learning.

Discussion

Qualitative analysis of the archival data from six sections of an *Introduction to Special Education* class show preservice teachers came to appreciate families’ willingness to share their personal stories and increasingly valued their knowledge. Overall, university students’ writing showed a shift in thinking away from the dominant deficit-based model where families are not valued or welcomed into schools to a perspective where students with disabilities and their

families were viewed as complex, unique, and resourceful attributes to inclusive schools. The preservice teachers expressed a greater understanding of the complexities of families' experiences. In his historical review of the relationships between families and schools, Ferguson (2008) cautions researchers and practitioners against generalizing families as "monolithic" in their responses to having a child with a disability. He emphasizes the importance of acknowledging how complicated and varied families can be, and to note how their constructions are "certainly influenced by class and other demographics. Probably most important, parents responded to their children's needs in a local context of the programs and supports available to them" (Ferguson, 2008, p.57). The preservice teachers in this study showed they were greatly impacted by their interactions with families and their understanding of the complexities of disability seemed to increase.

After interacting with families in contexts where the families were located in positions of knowledge and power, these preservice teachers began questioning constructs of normalcy and how the structures and practices in schools, along with the wider social and cultural discourse played a role in creating disability. Some university students struggled with the dominant discourse within educational structures and practices that seemed to devalue families or their children, but why more university students did not indicate cognitive dissonance remains unclear and suggests further interrogation of assumptions are needed. Regarding the students with disabilities themselves, preservice teachers seemed to benefit from direct interactions and repeated informal conversations. One additional aspect to our coursework might include explicit Disability Studies instruction, such as described by Linda Ware in her work with school teachers (2001), where they incorporated Disability Studies into the General Education Language Arts curriculum. Gill (2004) similarly calls for incorporating Disability Studies throughout K-12

curriculum to challenge the realization “that a significant portion of our instruction is filtered through various paradigms and understandings of how the world operates” which in turn directly impacts not just the content but a teacher’s pedagogy. Ferguson and Ferguson (2006) call on teachers to find the “proper attitude” in their efforts to collaborate with families using a Disability Studies frame. These researchers suggest that explicit work in Disability Studies needs to be done in K-12 school contexts, allowing for “counter-narratives” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001) to emerge, which lead us to conclude that all of our preservice teachers need preparation in these critical theoretical and pedagogical approaches to learning.

Seymour Sarason’s expansive work in education outlines several ideas about schools in which he explains how school patterns of interactions, procedures, and rules reflect assumptions that are not often clearly articulated (Fried & Sarason, 2002). He argues that power relationships need to be acknowledged in order for increased understanding between schools and families to emerge. It seems more explicit discussions about power imbalances could be done in the course to make bring these issues to the fore. One aspect to this broad study where we examined preservice teachers interviews and reflective comments upon interviewing culturally and linguistically diverse families suggested involving diverse families in teacher education programs facilitates preservice teachers’ understanding of the complexities of the intersection between disability and other marginalized groups and our role in the social construction of disability (Sauer & Kasa, 2011). However, it remains unclear the extent to which their change in attitudes results in substantive and longitudinal change. Follow-up studies with the university students as practicing teachers in the field are needed to determine the long-term impact, if any, of these family interactions.

Although family involvement is mandated by legislation in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and proven effective for student achievement, teachers continue to report feeling underprepared to understand the diversity of the families of their students with disabilities and the complexities involved in order to more effectively communicate and collaborate with these families (Hansuvadha, 2009; Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Palmer, 2002; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In an effort to address these issues and facilitate teachers' increased critical thinking and awareness of their role in perpetuating social exclusion in schools for students with disabilities, the authors suggest those of us in teacher preparation more thoughtfully take up Disability Studies in our coursework. Although our study suggests that opportunities to work with and listen to families early in teacher preparation seem to mitigate some of the fears and misunderstandings preservice teachers might have toward families, further examination is warranted into the long-term impact on these University students once they are enter the profession in school contexts.

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