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Asking, listening, and learning: Toward a more thorough method of inquiry in home–school relations

Janice Kroeger*, Martha Lash

Kent State University, Kent, OH 44224, United States

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ABSTRACT

The article provides a rationale and description of a constructivist parent–teacher approach used to support preservice teachers' understandings of relationships between home and school. Using a critical theoretical framing of policy, social science, and enacted curriculum, the authors ask readers to consider moving away from proscribed models of home–school relationships to a partnering lens which allows teachers to view their initial communications as a crucial teacher-learning endeavor. With this approach, preservice teachers are constructing their understanding of parents' views of children, uncovering resources and parents ideals, and empowering themselves to deconstruct/reconstruct images of families in a more just framework.

1. Introduction

Within the last decade, an estimated 2.2 million new educators were expected to enter the teaching force in the United States (Caspe, 2001). Given the many competencies that preservice teachers must acquire, it is disappointing that in the recent past, researchers in the United States indicated that the majority of states did not mention parent involvement in teacher certification requirements (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Shartrand, Kreider, & Erickson-Warfield, 1994). Often training exists as one-shot workshops rather than more organizational professional development (Weiss & Stephens, 2010). In teacher preparation programs with adequate course work on family relations and family involvement, preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competency levels on these topics increase (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Uludag, 2008).

Standards for the teaching profession have grown to integrate family and community relations as a professional competency across multiple professional associations. The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, for example, has required that teachers understand how children's learning is influenced by individual experience, talents, prior learning, culture, and family and community values in order to connect instruction to students' experiences (INTASC, 2007). Clearly, the degree to which teachers understand parents and community life contributes to the making of a competent and well-prepared teacher (Hyson, 2003; Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008).

2. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, a theoretical overview of our assumptions helps us to illuminate how we see constructivist learning ideology as well as critical and postmodern theories operating in our understanding and delivery of preservice teacher education (Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner, & Yarnall, 2001). Secondly, we review current models of home–school relationship practices against the growing demographic of diversity in the U.S. and give a critical rationale to create alternative approaches. We then provide a brief overview of NCATE/NAEYC Standard 2 illuminating some of the inherent problems with teaching preservice teachers how to incorporate family engagement in schooling. Finally, we describe how we support teachers in their abilities to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 330 672 0617; fax: +1 330 672 3246.
E-mail address: jkroege1@kent.edu (J. Kroeger).

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work with parents, presenting a research study of an inquiry-based project we utilize. This experience with preservice teachers is a suggested approach for working with parents as refined and taught by the authors.

2.1. Constructivist learners using critical and postmodern theories

In our teacher education program we understand social constructivism as a theory of learning that makes processes of teaching collaborative, purposeful, active, and personally transforming for both learning and teacher (Wells, 2002). Two key elements for the novice teacher professional competence are reflection and questioning (Pedro, 2006). Incorporating a questioning stance in relation to families and communities as part of daily practice helps facilitate reflective practice. Because constructivism as a learning theory does not fully lend well to conceptualizing power relationships between individuals (including teachers and parents), we use critical and postmodern lenses to situate our work of educating teachers.

Since the 1960s, debates in the social sciences in Europe and the U.S. have centered on the inadequacy of research paradigms that utilize scientific empirical approaches to explain social phenomena (Genishi et al., 2001; Vandenbroeck, 2006). Utilizing holistic and critical lenses to conceptualize the early childhood preservice teacher education program at our university, in 2004, the early childhood faculty developed a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework positions the preservice teacher centrally as a critical educator/teacher learner; tenets of the critical educator/teacher learner include pedagogical experts, curriculum experts, democratically accountable leaders, committed professional, reflective thinkers, and teachers as co-decision makers.

The conceptual framework[1] features a critical lens and prods our preservice students "to question the patterns of knowledge and social conditions that maintain unequal social divisions (e.g., class, race, gender, sexuality), with an aim of orienting individuals toward actions that will lead to social change…" (Genishi et al., 2001, p. 1197). Such a framing draws upon early childhood reconceptualists as well as the work of critical curriculum theorists and feminists; additionally, many of these scholars draw upon the work of discourse theorists and the theorizations of power and knowledge gleaned from Michel Foucault (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006; Lather, 1991, 2004; Lubeck, 1996, 1998; McLaren, 2009; Pinar, 1975; Polakow, 1989; Swadener & Piekeilek, 1992).

A constructivist and critical framing by faculty allows us to collaborate with preservice teachers to self–evaluate and notice the ways in which many of our early education and social policies and practices reflect the values and actions of dominant groups of people, while marginalizing others (Genishi et al., 2001; Wells, 2002). During our course work (as an example for this paper) we critically examine national policies about family involvement, and with our students, come to interrogate common practices of parent involvement as a form of cultural "production" in which "different groups in either subordinate or dominant social relations realize their aspirations through unequal relations of power" (McLaren, 2009, p. 65).

When we are able to describe many parent–teacher communication opportunities in schools (such as conferences) as "discursive formations" in which parents and teachers are socially positioned in particular ways, we are more able to examine power relations within family-school partnerships with our preservice teachers (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1972). Teachers are more likely to see their own subjectivity and the subjectivity of parents within their practice against a backdrop of alternative literatures, which critique dominant notions of family involvement. Ultimately we hope our preservice teachers come to challenge dominant versions of truth (Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006) and instead position families, children and teachers as makers of collaborative meaning within the educational process.

Research in several international contexts such as that with Brunei children, parents, and teachers, feature listening to one another to help children transition to school (Kitson, 2004); early childhood educators working with families to develop sustainable living communities (Van Keulen, 2010); and educators in Ontario, Canada recognizing the need for a dynamic framework for working with non-dominant cultural and linguistic students (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Schecter, 2002). These global examples give evidence to the advantages of examining power relations in schools and furthering alternative ways of working with families in the US.

2.2. Common models of home–school involvement: implicit power relations

As we work with our preservice teachers we deliberate upon one common model of home–school participation that has gained prominence in the U.S. educational system that is Epstein's (1986, 1996) typology. Drawn from a series of sociological studies associating children's school success with frequency of parents' partnering activities, Epstein's typology illuminates roles that parents play in schools to support students' school success. Specifically the model calls for teachers to activate the potentials of parents in various forms of partnering activities including parents as teachers, supporters of school endeavors, advocates, decision makers, volunteers, homework guiders, and collaborators. Less clear in the model are what types of essential skills teachers have in order to be effective with parents or how teachers go about gaining partnering supports from parents.

Prior to being presented with alternative interpretations of Epstein's model found in the literature, preservice teachers seem to believe that parents who are able to perform the types of parent engagement she proposes are often seen as "good", involved, and as the kind of parents who care the most about their children. Because many of our students have been raised with these mainstream practices that make up these models (Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003), they themselves take Epstein's typology as "natural" not recognizing the constitutive nature of discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1979).

We demonstrate to preservice teachers how the elements of parental roles from Epstein's typology are frequently cited as components for parent–teacher involvement and used by U.S. policymakers and in national organizations (e.g., National Educational Goals Panel (NGEP), 2000; National Parent Teacher Association; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005); however, we also reveal how the relationship literature from cultural studies, anthropology, and education (Igoa, 1995; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Valdes, 1996) as well as critical geographies of childhood and early childhood teacher education (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Rosier, 2000; Turner-Vorbeck & Miller-Marsh, 2008) counter theorize with cautions and caveats regarding what is taken for granted in parent–teacher relations.

Although we do not reject Epstein's model, we agree with much of the critical literature, in which Epstein's tenets of communication, advocacy, volunteerism, homework, parenting, and collaboration are not portrayed as neutral constructs but contain ideologies of dominant power relations paralleling that of the

[1] Contributing faculty included: Andrew Gilbert, Eunsook Hyun, Martha Lash, Sherri Leafgren.