

# Encouraging Family Involvement through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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The purpose of this article is to describe one teacher education program's experience using an integrated approach to provide preservice teachers with both knowledge of and experience with diverse cultures. Included are three important components within this program that strive to assist preservice teachers as they develop an understanding of different cultures and working with families. First, we discuss research in parent/family relationships (Allen, 2007, 2010; Epstein & Sanders, 2006) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Villages & Lucas, 2002). Second, we provide descriptions of five instructional strategies that preservice teachers implement. Third, we offer strategies for supporting emerging bilingual students.

**F**amily involvement and the formation of school and home partnerships have proven beneficial to children's development and learning. Knowing and understanding one's own culture and cultures other than one's own enable teachers to create an inclusive environment that welcomes everyone and lays the groundwork for strong partnerships among families and schools. Teacher education programs are responsible for preparing students to work with all children and their families. This preparation includes both factual knowledge as well as strategies for applying cultural competencies to a culturally relevant and responsive teaching practice.

The purpose of this article is to describe one teacher education program's experience using an integrated approach to provide preservice teachers with both knowledge of and experience with diverse cultures. The program strives to nurture and develop an understanding of cultural diversity and what it means to early childhood teachers. Included are three important components

within this program that strive to assist preservice teachers as they develop an understanding of different cultures and working with families. First, we discuss research in parent/family relationships (Allen, 2007, 2010; Epstein & Sanders, 2006) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Villages & Lucas, 2002). Second, we provide descriptions of five instructional strategies that preservice teachers implement to demonstrate the connection between research and practice. Third, we offer strategies for supporting emerging bilingual students.

## Parent/Family Involvement

Research supports the value of parent-family involvement in education (Comer, 2010; Epstein, 1995 & Swick, 2003). Historically, parents were not included in school decisions and schools did not interfere with parenting. In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists such as Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) demonstrated through his ecological theory the connection between school, home,

community, country, and even the world regarding children's development and education. Attitudes and responsibilities began to change as research demonstrated the value of parent involvement in their children's education (Comer, 2010; Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Powell & Diamond, 1995). Swick (1993, 2003 & 2004) recognized the need to partner with and empower parents by listening to their concerns and possibly solutions.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant teaching derives from pedagogy which capitalizes on cultivating relationships that connect home and school cultures, social interactions and expectations for learning and the belief that knowledge is socially constructed and changing (Gay, 2000). Basic tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy include attention to the achievement of children who have been minoritized and marginalized, constructing curriculum and instructional practice in ways that draw on and include the knowledge, histories, and communicative styles of those outside as well as within the dominant culture, and developing children's abilities to use learning to affect social change (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001). While research tells us that all students must learn the languages and practices of the dominant culture (Freire, 2001; Johnson, 2006; Kincheloe, 2008), we also know that students extensively limited in their cultural congruence with the dominant class teacher and set of classroom materials can and will learn more effectively when the resources of their communities are honored (Fu, 2003; Gay, 2000; Samway & McKeon, 2007, Valdés, 2001). Early childhood education students are prepared to understand that home languages, L1, are foundational to second language, L2, usage in social and academic settings (Garcia & Wei, 2014;

González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Thus, many teacher education programs offer culturally relevant pedagogy as effective teacher practice (Gay, 2000; Villages & Lucas, 2002).

### **Preservice Teacher Education Program and Participants**

Consistent with the international character of the Upstate, the University promotes global perspectives across its programs. Supporting the regional employment objectives of most of its students, the University provides extensive experiential learning opportunities. Junior level early childhood majors take six co-requisite integrated courses that include: parent/family involvement, language development, early childhood curriculum; advanced growth and development; assessment, diversity and management; and a clinical course.

The clinical component of their course work is completed at a public school child development and family learning center serving low income families. The demographics of the population served as reported in the 2013-2018 school district strategic plan are 42% Caucasian, 33% Hispanic, 22% African American, and 4% Other with 28% having a primary language other than English (GCS Strategic Plan). Programs in the center include six 4 year old kindergarten classrooms, three preschool special education classrooms serving 3 to 5 year olds with disabilities, a part-time school nurse, one full time speech therapist and one part-time speech therapist. Additionally, high school students come to the center for a portion of the day to fulfill service learning projects. This program is part of the public school system where students will transition into five-year-old kindergarten classes.

## Connecting Research to Practice

It is important to expose preservice teachers to diverse cultures and help them begin to embrace home cultures of their students and build confidence in working with parents. This multifaceted project began with one university early childhood program and a child development and family learning center located in a public school. The partnership between these entities started over seventeen years ago and has seen many changes but continuously provide high quality programs for children and families most at risk. The university and public school partnership also prepares preservice teachers to work with young children and their families in developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive ways. This longstanding partnership strives to provide preservice teachers with opportunities that introduce diverse cultures and allow experiences that help to build their confidence when working with parents. Preservice teachers' reflections provide positive evidence that they do indeed gain a better understanding of what it means to embrace diversity and the home culture of the children within their classrooms.

The partnership has strengthened the trust between the two institutions and enables professors to create assignments that are both meaningful and authentic. Connections between theory and practice are then more easily made by preservice teachers. Getting to know students and their families well means getting to know students' relationships and roles in their families and in their classrooms.

Performance-based engagements can be more authentic and more culturally congruent when students' home languages, familiar contexts, and realia (real objects and events) are part of the school's curricula. Research based instructional practices are implemented throughout a

course of study during one semester and culminate in a school wide family night project. The following includes descriptions of five assignments connecting research to instructional practices: a). interviews, b). home visits, c). telling stories, d) sharing expert/apprentice roles and e) parent/family night project.

**Interviews.** The first illustration, based on building community in schools, describes family interviews as an instrument for getting to know families (Allen, 2010). Teachers can interview students and their families to find out their interests, talents, and roles in their homes and communities, and the languages and literacies they use to communicate in and outside of school. As part of a course on parent/family involvement in early childhood education, preservice teachers have two opportunities to interview parents and families. The first interview is with a family that is representative of a specific diverse culture such as Asian American, same sex parents, or divorced/blended families. For this assignment students research a specific culture or family situation, interview the parents or adult child from that type of family and then share their knowledge with fellow preservice teachers.

**Home visits.** The second illustration is an opportunity for students to interact with parents and families during a home visit. This family can represent any diverse culture but is required to have at least one child between the ages of 1 and 8 years old. Visiting students' homes, churches, sports, dance, or other out of school activities is an important way for teachers to learn about the influences in students' lives (Gregory, Long & Volk, 2004). Preservice teachers make connections to child development, parental views and involvement in education, home literacies and social or environmental influences on the children's development.

Observing ways that families learn and care for each other in their home environments gives insight into academic environments needed for authentic and effective engagements in school (Allen 2007, 2010; Dantas & Manyak, 2009; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

**Telling stories.** The third illustration involves oral foundations and traditions in the learning process and seeking materials that represent participants in the community of learners.

Getting to know students also means listening to students' stories. Listening to and writing memoirs, biographies, and family events can give insight into the meaningful stories of children's lives. Illustrations prompt detail in writing so drawing should be honored. Allen's (2007, 2010) work provides a multitude of examples of ways that teachers bring the stories of families into the classroom. Preservice teachers can identify tiered vocabulary in stories, storytelling lesson plans, student-authored stories and in children's literature for utility across contexts (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). These words can be translated and learned in home languages to practice in multilingual conversations and disciplinary literacies. Cognates, cues across languages are learned as emergent bilingual students mediate meanings in two languages (Samway & McKeon, 2007). Another example would be ensuring that the classroom is filled with texts using many languages including African American Language and engaging in lessons in contrastive analysis across languages and in recognizing and celebrating the use of multiple languages as communicative and literary tools (Rickford, 1999).

**Sharing expert/apprentice roles.** The fourth illustration is based on reciprocal teaching research or using exchanges of novice and expert roles in learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Getting to know students well means inviting their knowledge, their languages,

and their particular skills and abilities to school to share in expert/apprentice roles. An example of this can be allowing bilingual students to share what they know by charting their language and creating student authored books of texts with vocabulary words of interest in academic inquiries, school routines or social events. Through a cross-campus partnership between preservice teachers and early translation to Spanish students, we created dual language documents such as lesson plans, bookmarks, and multilingual print environments. We exchanged roles as experts in language acquisition to learn from experts in Spanish translation. We published the translated/dual language documents such as bookmarks at school family nights where student populations represent multilingual homes. We nurtured interdisciplinary partnerships by creating cross-campus dyads to create contexts where conversations can take place in two or more languages, translanguaging, as theorized by Garcia & Wei (2014). This started as a result of one professor's participation in a community service alliance and proved to be a way to get to know how to serve and learn as a diverse community. Interdisciplinary partnerships work together to translate texts that have value to social justice themes and design critical literacy experiences for children (Canella, 2003). One preservice teacher wrote, "At first, the parents just walked by the poster tables where the dual language bookmarks were and then when I told everyone the bookmarks were in Spanish and English, the parents went back and all the bookmarks are gone!"

Figure 1



**Parent/family night project description.** The creation and implementation of a parent and family night project is the fifth strategy used to involve parents in their children’s education and is the culminating project of a semester. This multifaceted project requires preservice teachers to use their voices as they plan and implement a family literacy night that honors the voices and stories of children, parents and grandparents in a multilingual four-year-old public school program. Securing and sustaining a partnership that presents linguistically diverse classrooms is key to providing a context for our preservice teachers to gain experience with diverse populations. It requires preservice teachers to develop confidence in their own ability to listen and respect the voices of others. Preservice teachers are empowered when we engage them in the planning and implementation process. They observe and interview students and families to learn about their home languages. Preservice teachers develop multilingual materials, such as bookmarks and storytelling lessons with multilingual social and academic vocabulary. The professor states the task at hand, “You will plan and carry out a Family Literacy Night for our clinical site.” They are given the date and a \$150.00 budget from which to plan. Students are then given the power to select a leader, identify responsibilities, and

plan how to use the budget, gather material, select activities, solicit donations and plan what will be served for dinner. They must also determine how to advertise, arrange the environment, greet the families and then implement literacy engagements. Professors in the early childhood program support the process for the students. Following the program students reflect on the process and the actual night. Preservice student voices show the impact of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy and their sense of what it means to get to know students and their families. Preservice teacher comments included:

“I think it would be a great idea if someone handed out pamphlets. This person can talk to parents about information instead of simply handing them out.”

“I think this was a great opportunity to see how dual language (bookmarks) can be incorporated in the classroom. I also got to make Spanish speaking parents feel important and appreciated.”

“As a teacher it is important to have resources available to accommodate diverse learners.”

### Beyond a Teacher Education Program and Family Night

Preparing preservice teachers who have strategies for learning, social interaction styles, and languages other than English is preparing teachers who can be effective in the twenty first century. As our preservice teachers graduate and begin their careers, we impress upon them that getting to know their students is their main objective. In early childhood classrooms where routines and rituals promote learning, curricula content

begins with the students, their home languages, traditions, and cultural competencies. We hope they have memorable experiences to refer back to and strategies like these offered to use when learning with all families including emerging bilingual students and families.

**Strategies for supporting emerging bilingual students.** Because the plight of English Language Learners is particularly obvious, it is important to provide a few strategies and resources focused on support of those students. Some strategies and resources proven successful in language immersion and bilingual education programs (Allen, 2007; Rickford, 1999; Slavin & Cheung, 2005; Wheeler & Sword, 2006) include the following:

- **Dual language documents:** Accessing and providing bilingual trade books, class-made books, environmental print to represent home languages of students.
- **Heritage texts:** Accessing and providing print and non-print materials of individual learners' language heritage history, multiple genres to represent heritage cultures such as fables, music, anime, and poetry.
- **Translation tools:** Accessing and providing translation technology and/or bilingual dictionaries to support students as they are transitioning into proficient bilingualism.
- **Student authored texts:** Creating vocabulary books, charts, and picture dictionaries in students' home languages as well texts in English and bilingual texts.
- **Talk:** Engaging in opportunities to talk and listen in home languages and in English.
- **Contrastive analysis** (Rickford, 1999): Comparing and contrasting the rules and features of African American Language (AAL) and Standard English (SE) to help students develop knowledge of the legitimacy of both and to instruct students in how to use their knowledge of AAL and SE features to read, write, and speak proficiently in different contexts and for different audiences.
- **Code-switching** (Wheeler, 2008): Noticing, naming, and building expertise in switching from one code to another by paying attention to not only written and oral language but to the ways that dress, noise levels, and speech change according to events and contexts; to help students identify with and understand the importance of changing actions and language dependent on context.
- **Read alouds or family book clubs:** Gathering to read and discuss literature that reflects the diversity of students and families in the classroom.
- **Teachers' language learning:** Committing as teachers to learn and use words and phrases in students' home languages.
- **Teacher study groups:** Supporting minoritized students by reading and discussing testimonies of biliterate, bicultural students who have lost and sometimes rejected their identities in order to succeed (de la Luz Reyes, 2011; Fu, 2003; Garcia, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Long, Hutchinson, & Niederhiser, 2011; Samway & McKeon, 2007; Santa Ana, 2004). Supporting multiple languages in the classroom could start by initiating conversations within schools and communities using

professional readings as a way to begin critically considering the ways that school practices perpetuate inequities for emerging bilinguals.

### Conclusion

Using culturally relevant strategies for getting to know children and their families in addition to seeking out culturally relevant materials, teacher educators prepare preservice teachers to provide children and their families meaningful contexts for learning. Honoring diverse linguistic and cultural talents and traditions forges relationships with children and their families. Teacher educators and preservice teachers gain new perspectives and open meaningful possibilities for using research based strategies in practice. Background knowledge of parent/family involvement and culturally relevant teaching prepare preservice teachers for practice in responsive and responsible ways.

Preservice teachers gain both knowledge of diversity within families and strategies to use with the families of the children who are in their future classes. Opportunities for preservice teachers to interact with children and their families allows them to develop skills and value diversity. Experiences during university coursework that allow preservice teachers to interact with children and their families help to build preservice teachers' confidence and abilities to interact and work with families in their future classes. Development of knowledge and skills prepares them to be responsible for their own classrooms.

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