Evaluation of a Family-Centered Early Childhood Special Education Preservice Model by Program Graduates

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This qualitative study evaluated the impact on program graduates of two personnel preparation projects founded on a family-centered preservice model and funded by the Office of Special Education Programs. Three cohorts totaling 22 participants were interviewed to (a) determine their attitudes and skill level in working with a diverse group of families and (b) identify pedagogical practices that reinforced the use of family-centered practices on the job. Results revealed that participants’ perceptions were similar, indicating that confidence in utilizing family-centered practices was the result of the multiple opportunities their preservice program provided them to interact with families. Family involvement in content-based and field-based coursework, as well as parent-members in the cohorts, positively affected utilization of family-centered practices in their careers.

The emphasis on family-centered practices in early childhood special education service delivery has been supported by legislation, specifically the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and has been articulated in position statements regarding recommended practice by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Although family-centered service delivery has been considered an essential component of quality programs, empirical investigations examining different aspects of this component have concluded that the use of such practices decreases as families move from early intervention to preschool and elementary service delivery (Dunst, 2002).

A review of the literature indicates that barriers exist in the actual utilization of family-centered practices in early childhood special education service delivery, with professionals challenged to understand and accept families’ views that are different from their own (Minke & Scott, 1995). Other investigations have concluded that service providers do not necessarily understand or value the construct of family-centered practices (Garshelis & McConnell, 1993; McBride, Brotherson, Joanning, Whiddon, & Demmitt, 1993). Additional studies have indicated that professionals lack those skills required to support the quality parent–professional partnerships necessary for promoting family empowerment: collaboration, teaming, and help-giving (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994; Judge, 1997; Krauss, 1997; Mahoney & O’Sullivan, 1990). Further studies designed to examine parents’ perceptions of early intervention and early childhood special education professionals’ use of family-centered philosophy and practices have concluded that parents of young children with disabilities perceive professionals to be either unprepared or unwilling to meet the needs of the child or the family (Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996; Catlett & Winton, 1997; Gettunger, Goetz, Stoiber, & Caspe, 1999; Stoneman, 1993; Winton, McCollum, & Catlett, 1997). The discrepancy between policy/recommended practice and actual practice as identified in the literature has presented several challenges to early childhood special education preservice programs striving to prepare candidates skilled in using family-centered practices. Preservice programs rely on field-based coursework, rather than content-based courses, to provide candidates with opportunities to increase knowledge and practice professional skills through observations and interactions with professionals and families (Kilgo & Bruder, 1997; McCollum...
& Stayton, 1996; Miller & Stayton, 1996). The number of available field placements that demonstrate family-centered practices is small, however (Mandell, 2001; Pretti-Frontczak, Giallourakis, Janas, & Hayes, 2002; Rosenkoetter & Stayton, 1997). As a result, experiences in child-focused and professional-centered programs not only reinforce candidates’ use of these practices, as opposed to recommended family-centered practices, but also perpetuate their use, given the reality that field sites often employ preservice candidates upon graduation.

A second challenge to preparing candidates grounded in family-centered service delivery relates to preservice curricula and pedagogy. Although family involvement in preservice education has increased since the 1990s, with programs striving to impress upon teacher candidates the importance of family-centered intervention service delivery (Egbeek, Fenichel, Pawl, Shanok, & Williamson, 1994; McBride & Brotherson, 1997), many teacher education programs provide candidates with minimal opportunities for family involvement (Bailey, Palsha, & Huntington, 1990; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991, Mahoney & Filer, 1996). Results of a study designed to examine the practice of including a family-issues course in the curriculum at more than 100 universities indicated that although one or more separate courses were offered, only 1 to 2 hours of related discussions occurred per semester (Knight & Wadsworth, 1998).

Empirical investigations focusing on family-centered service delivery practices and procedures have been a relatively new phenomenon and usually center on the process by which community-based programs incorporate family-centered principles, rather than testing measurable family outcomes. Comparable investigations specific to preservice practices have been nearly nonexistent (Guralnick, 1997). However, a recent investigation by Pretti-Frontczak et al. (2002) determined that a preservice program designed to prepare preservice students to use family-centered practices was effective. Participants were primarily part-time students, and data analysis focused on their perceptions regarding level of satisfaction with the curriculum and their capacity to implement such practices as measured via course evaluations, interviews, and self-reporting measures.

In this article, we present the results of a qualitative study designed to measure the perceptions of early childhood special education preservice graduates regarding the impact a Family-Centered Preservice Model (FCPM) program had on their use of family-centered practices within the work environment. Specifically, the following questions were addressed: Did program graduates perceive that the FCPM prepared them to use recommended family-centered practices? What types of family involvement strategies did program graduates rate as most valuable in shaping their knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward working with families on the job?

**FAMILY-CENTERED PRESERVICE MODEL**

The FCPM was developed in response to the need to prepare early childhood special educators to use family-centered practices in both direct and consultative service delivery. This model was developed as an outcome of two personnel preparation grants funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), Project ENHANCE (1997–2000) and Project FOCUS (1998–2001), which were awarded to Bowling Green State University. Both projects were designed to prepare candidates to work with young children, defined as birth to 8 years, with intensive special needs or low-incidence disabilities. For both projects, the curricula were similar in terms of course instruction and types of family involvement. Coursework was distributed over five consecutive semesters, with the first year consisting of content-based instruction emphasizing knowledge acquisition and emergent skill development and the second year providing students with opportunities to practice consultation and direct service delivery skills.

The knowledge, skills, and values identified in the FCPM program were built with respect to professional guidelines and standards articulated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Hyson, 2003) and the DEC (Sandall et al., 2000). Course content reflected the following tenets:

- Children of all ability levels can learn in inclusive environments (Smith, Miller, & Bredekamp, 1998).
- Diversity in young children and their families is valued (Mallory & New, 1994).
- Interdisciplinary, family-centered service delivery is an effective service delivery model (Dettmer, Dyck, & Thurston, 1999; Freisen & Schultz, 1992).

**Coursework**

The sidebar presents a listing of preservice coursework. Two courses addressed typical development, with the remainder focusing on knowledge and skills specific to serving young children with significant or low-incidence disabilities. Content included (a) developmentally appropriate (Linder, 1993) and exceptionality-appropriate assessment and intervention practices (Christensen, Mandell, & Davis, 2002); (b) routine and activity-based interventions (Bricker, Pretti-Frontczak, & McComas, 1998); (c) alternative and augmentative communication (Judge & Parette, 1998; Mar & Sall, 1999); (d) active learning (Klein, Chen, & Haney, 2000; Korsten, Dunn, Foss, & Francke, 1993); and (e) strength-based monitoring and evaluation procedures (Hemmeter, Joseph, Smith, & Sandall, 2001).
Practicum and internship coursework required candidates to spend more than 1,200 hours participating in a variety of community-based programs, including infant/toddler early intervention programs, inclusive preschool classrooms, family support and mentoring programs, an itinerant preschool program for young children with visual impairments, a pediatric day treatment program for young children identified as having medical or technology-dependent health-care needs, a charter school for young children with autism, and a regional infant hearing program serving infants and toddlers with hearing impairments. These programs served families who were culturally, linguistically, geographically, and economically diverse. Field experiences were structured to develop preservice students’ skills in two strands: (a) direct service skills in assessing, planning, delivering, and evaluating interventions and adapting curricula for the inclusion of young children with disabilities and (b) service coordination skills and skills in collaborating and consulting with families and professionals.

Recognizing that community-based programs provide candidates with many experiences, some exemplifying recommended practices and others not, we used a reflective supervision model (Clift, Houston, & Pugach, 1990; Fenichel, 1992) to develop candidates’ skills in analyzing instructional practices and program policies. Weekly seminars promoted reflection and dialogue through the use of the following: (a) journaling, (b) problem-based case study presentations focusing on critical field incidents, and (c) problem solving.

Family Involvement in Preservice Program

In recognition of the benefits that modeling collaborative efforts, as well as demonstrating role release and expansion, have on candidates’ future job performance, a community of practice model (Wesley & Buyse, 2001) was used to demonstrate preservice partnership strategies between families and professionals, faculty, and community-based providers (Bouas, 1996; Kilgo & Bruder, 1997). Although candidates were provided with multiple opportunities to work with families in field-based coursework, the challenge was to provide candidates with multiple opportunities to observe and interact with family–professional partnerships in content-based coursework. In collaboration with a parent advisory board, the project director of both personnel preparation projects identified strategies for demonstrating such partnerships. The advisory board also worked with faculty members to develop family-centered content and corresponding performance-based outcome measures to be demonstrated by students in all coursework. Students were required to attend meetings of the advisory board.

Table 1 identifies instructional opportunities for involving families in preservice education. Involvement levels varied, ranging from total responsibility for teaching a 3-credit-hour course for a semester to presenting a 1-hour topical session. Some family members participated solely in the planning, implementation, or evaluation phases of instruction; others were involved in all phases. It is important to note that although all content-based courses contained at least one assignment requiring candidates to partner with families, participation by these families was not included as a type of family–professional instructional interaction, nor were they included in the count of the number of families participating in the FCPM as presented in Table 2.

A goal of the preservice program was to prepare candidates who would be skilled in partnering with a diverse group of families in terms of race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status as well as educational goals and placement decisions. Therefore, a diverse group of families needed to be involved in the FCPM. Table 2 presents demographic information about family members who participated in content-based instruction. All 65 family members were compensated financially for their involvement. Although the majority of family participants were mothers of children with intensive or low-incidence disabilities, some fathers participated as co-presenters and presenters and others were involved in a fathers’ panel designed to address service delivery practices. The category labeled child with a disability refers to those children who accompanied parents who were co-presenters with service providers. In such instances, the parent–professional dyad demonstrated how they partnered to

### Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Coursework Titles

- Infant and Toddler Development
- Young Child Development
- Disability and Risk Factors in Young Children With Special Needs
- Technology for Infants/Toddlers/Young Children With Special Needs
- Behavioral and Ecological Management in Learning Environments
- Family Partnerships in ECI
- Service Coordination and Teaming in ECI
- Assessment and Intervention: Infants/Toddlers/Young Children With Low-Incidence Disabilities
- Nonverbal Communication Strategies and Interventions
- American Sign Language
provide intervention service delivery in natural environments. To ensure that a diverse group of families was involved in all types of instructional activities, as listed in Table 1, the project director collaborated with regional representatives from the Family Information Network and with local school district administrators and teachers to recruit families.

**Method**

**Participants**

Three cohorts, totaling 23 full-time graduate students, were recruited to participate in the 2-year, 64-semester-hour FCPM program. Over a 3-year period, all 23 students successfully graduated. All but one, who could not be located, participated in this investigation. The participants were full-time graduate students in either Project FOCUS or Project ENHANCE between 1997 and 2000. As presented in Table 3, participants ranged from 24 to 50 years of age, with more than 80% in the 24- to 32-year age category. Three participants, one in each cohort, were parents of children with intensive disabilities; they were in the 44- to 50-year age group. All but one were women. Employment status of the 22 participants at the time of this study was as follows: 10 preschool special needs teachers, 4 primary-level special education teachers, 2 early intervention specialists serving infants/toddlers and their families, 4 administrators, 1 university instructor, and 1 adapted physical education instructor. They were employed in 22 school districts in six different states and held positions in diverse community settings representing both the public and private sectors.

Six participants had held full-time professional positions prior to entering the graduate program, but the other 16 had matriculated directly from a bachelor’s program to the graduate program. Eleven participants held undergraduate degrees in special education, and an equal number had a bachelor’s degree in general education or early childhood education. Six participants (Cohort 1) were interviewed 30 months after graduation, 9 (Cohort 2) were interviewed 18 months after graduation, and 7 (Cohort 3) were interviewed 6 months after graduation.

**Setting**

The research protocol consisted of individualized interviews. Although the majority of these interviews occurred face-to-face in settings determined by the participants, such as place of employment, university office, and home, six took place over the phone due to distance. Each participant was provided with an opportunity to review his or her transcript for accuracy.
Design

Because this research study explicated the graduates’ perceptions of the impact of a family-centered preservice model on their attitudes, knowledge, and skills, naturalistic inquiry—a form of qualitative research design—was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This design is a rigorous, critical, and systematic investigation of phenomena (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). The purpose is to obtain the structure or essence of the lived experience of the participants in the search for unity of meaning, which is the identification of the essence of a phenomenon, and its accurate description through the everyday lived experience (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). The study of experience as lived serves as the foundation for the inquiry (Glesne, 1999).

Procedure/Interviews

The data sources included individual interviews and document analysis of the two grant proposals and course syllabi. Over a period of 3 months, each of the 22 participants was interviewed individually at a time and place of his or her choosing. Additional interviews with 3 participants were conducted when clarification was needed or when additional suggestions or ideas emerged through the interview process (Glesne, 1999).

Interviews were audiorecorded to capture the essence of the data and to provide an accurate, detailed account of the process. The interview began with social conversation to build rapport and lasted from 1 hour to 2 hours. Questions developed for the interview were varied, altered, or expanded upon during the actual discussion of the participant’s experience (Patton, 1990).

The following list is a sample of the interview questions:

- How did your graduate school experience impact your perception of family-centered practices?
- Did any course content or experiences in Project ENHANCE or Project FOCUS help you appreciate the value of family-centered practices?
- How did field experiences support your understanding of family-centered practices?
- What attitudes, skills, and perceptions regarding family-centered practices did you obtain from field experiences?
- How did your experience in the project change how you implement family-centered practices in your professional position?

Peer Review and Debriefing. Peer reviews and member checks were used to verify the information provided. The authors and a third professional reviewed all 22 transcripts for completeness and accuracy and to identify emerging themes and patterns. The reviewers met numerous times to discuss their notes. This was a continual process completed together with the study audit to triangulate the data.

Member Checks. Glesne (1999) described member checking as a process whereby the researcher asks participants to check transcribed data to determine if it accurately describes their experiences. Obtaining the reaction of participants verifies their perspectives and provides the researcher with new ideas (Glesne, 1999). After all the interviews for this study were transcribed, each participant was given a copy of his or her transcript, along with a summary of the transcript developed by the researcher, to verify content accuracy. Any questions or concerns were discussed and modifications made as deemed appropriate by the interviewee and the interviewer. All but one participant returned their transcripts and summaries.

Document Analysis. Documents that verified and supported the information provided in the interviews included the Project ENHANCE and Project FOCUS grants and course syllabi. Document analysis addressed both internal and external validity, with internal validity defined as the extent to which the research measurements were true descriptions of a particular reality and external va-
lidity referring to the degree to which descriptions accurately compared to those from other groups (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). These documents corroborated the interviews and thus made the findings more trustworthy (Glesne, 1999). They not only strengthened and supported the data gleaned from the interviews but also raised additional questions to be pursued (Patton, 1990).

Data Analysis. Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using constant comparative coding. A system of analytic files, memos, and coding schemes was used to classify and organize themes as they emerged. As categories were refined and the data collection process proceeded, themes and patterns were identified (Glesne, 1999). With the emergence of themes and patterns, codes were developed using different descriptive key phrases (Glesne, 1999; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the coding process, the researchers sought to develop a set of categories that provided a reconstruction of the collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and supported the identification of similar and differing perspectives during data analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Trustworthiness and Credibility. Trustworthiness and credibility were verified through member checks (participants reviewing their transcripts as well as the researchers’ summary of the transcripts), audit trails (reviewing the process and system used), peer debriefing, and reviews (external review of transcripts to validate themes). The inclusion of multiple data collection sources increased our confidence in the research findings (Glesne, 1999), and employment of several types of data collection strategies throughout the course of the study provided a system of checks and balances (Patton, 1990). According to Glesne (1999), these strategies increase the likelihood that the phenomenon of interest is understood from a variety of perspectives.

RESULTS

As a result of the content analysis relative to the research questions, three themes representative of the participants’ responses emerged. They were as follows:

1. Participating in an FCPM training program changed program participants’ attitudes and beliefs about working with a diverse group of families.
2. Providing participants with multiple opportunities to interact with families of children with disabilities assisted them in understanding and implementing family-centered practices in their professional positions.
3. Linking field experiences with seminars assisted in building participants’ confidence and competence in utilizing family-centered practices on the job.

Theme 1

Participating in an FCPM training program changed participants’ attitudes and beliefs about working with a diverse group of families.

Prior Beliefs. More than 70% of the participants indicated that they had a limited understanding of family-centered practices prior to their enrollment in the graduate studies program. For example, Participant 19 stated, “Prior to the project, I thought I was the professional and parents just brought the kids to school.” Specifically, the participants came to realize that the professional was to be child-centered, as illustrated by the following statement from Participant 15:

It’s not that I didn’t value families before, but I focused on the kids and I was focusing on doing interventions that I thought were the best for the kids. . . . I don’t think family centered is just focusing on the family, it’s twisting those thoughts around to what’s best for the child as well, and when it comes right down to it, the family is the expert on that.

Other participants discussed their lack of skills related to family-centered practices, offering such statements as “My skills were very limited” (Participants 17, 18, and 20), “I was intimidated by parents prior to the program” (Participant 13), “My skills were nonexistent or immature” (Participant 16), and “I found myself judging more before” (Participant 22).

Six participants stated that they knew about family-centered practices prior to the program, but their graduate studies validated their beliefs about family-centered practice: “My skills were pretty well honed but not perfected” (Participant 1), “The program allowed me to have the language I needed to articulate what I already knew was important” (Participant 3), and “I think it solidified what I already knew. It certainly made me a stronger advocate on behalf of families of children with disabilities” (Participant 4). Participant 5 stated that “I could interact well with families prior to the program, but I learned how really important it was to take family-centered practices to the next level,” Participant 7 said, “I was just able to expound on what I knew and bring it a little bit further after the project.” Of these six participants who entered the program with an understanding of recom-
mended practices, three were parents of children with disabilities. Parent members indicated that their own family experiences, rather than their undergraduate programs, shaped their understanding and use of family-centered practices.

With respect to undergraduate experiences, all participants indicated that there was little mention of family-centered practices and that they had limited contact with families. Although a few participants recalled taking a family course or a practicum placement with some relevance to their understanding of family-centered practices, only five participants stated that they had contact with families in their student-teaching experiences, and that contact was minimal.

When asked to identify their attitudes toward families upon completion of their undergraduate program, 20 participants reported that they tended to view families through the lens of their personal life experiences rather than through theories or experiences derived from their undergraduate programs. For example, Participant 6 noted, “The way I was brought up taught me how to treat people, like being kind and compassionate.” Participant 7 said, “Growing up in a family that was involved in my education helped play a part in how I treat families today,” Participant 11 stated, “I think that my family created sensitivity and helped me learn to respect families,” and Participant 16 noted, “I think coming from a strong family background and having two parents at home and family activities that I valued very much is why family is important to me now.”

**Postproject Beliefs.** Graduates indicated that the FCPM program provided them with a paradigm for collaborating with a diverse group of families. Participant 12 described her experiences as follows:

> I think about this today and on a regular basis, how I can go into a home or meet with a parent as a 26-year-old Caucasian woman who is living a middle-class lifestyle and try to help them feel like I understand and could be supportive. I have to always think about how families might perceive me. We had a pretty diverse experience, working in rural and urban areas, and with single parents and two-parent homes, and with a variety of socioeconomic levels, just a good range of experiences. And now I always think about whether I could be a barrier to a family and what their [sic] perception of me could be.

Participants stated that program experiences helped them develop skills for working with families, transforming how they interacted with families on the job. Participant 1 came to the realization that family-centered practices had to do with her, not the family: “Now I know it has everything to do with me and it is under my control.” Participant 17 indicated, “I have a whole different perspective now. I thought that I was the professional and that was all that mattered. Now I know that I need to be a partner with the family to best meet the needs of the family and the child.” Participant 3 stated, “Now I know legally what is required to do, and I even have the vocabulary to articulate that.”

**Theme 2**

**Providing participants with multiple opportunities to interact with families of children with disabilities assisted them in understanding and implementing family-centered practices in their professional positions.** All of the participants recalled the intensity of family involvement in their graduate program. They reported that they could remember parents as panel members, guest speakers, co-instructors, instructors, and cohort members, as well as the numerous course assignments requiring them to partner with families. All of the participants discussed the impact on their job performance of having families involved in the graduate program. Participant 10 described it as follows:

> We were with families in our classes, as students, as speakers, as teachers, in the field, and we worked together with families on projects. They were everywhere, and now I think about what they said and how they felt when I work with families.

Participant 6 recalled, “It is like you couldn’t do anything without having a family or family member asking you why you are doing or saying what you are saying. I think about that a lot in my interactions with parents.” Participant 9 responded, “In almost every class there’s an assignment that requires some involvement of families. Parents were in absolutely every component of the project, which I think just helped reinforce the importance of family-centered practices.” Graduates recalled two panels that influenced their use of family-centered practices. The fathers’ panel was a forum in which fathers of children with intensive special needs shared their experiences. The siblings’ panel involved school-age children who had siblings with intensive disabilities. In discussions, these panelists addressed their feelings about and experiences with their brothers and sisters. Participant 6 said, “Seeing the dad’s perspective and the siblings’ on how they view their sibling and their child and their importance was really neat. You don’t always get their perspective.” Participant 7 felt that “the sibling panel really changed the way I did things when I go into homes and when I meet families, and then the siblings also need to
be accounted for, and at times they are forgotten as part of the family.”

All of the graduates discussed the impact of the parents’ presentations on their understanding of family-centered practices. The stories parents shared provided opportunities to learn about life experiences related to having a child with intensive special needs and how the parents work with professionals. Participant 20 stated that “the family stories told the good, the bad, and the ugly.” Participant 22 exclaimed, “Wow! You’re just amazed what these people went through, and they have so much to offer. It was amazing to hear all that they went through, and how they get through it. I just found that really awesome—how well these parents did with all that they had to deal with.”

Because each of the three cohorts included as a member a parent of a child with intensive disabilities, participants were in daily contact not only with the parent in their cohort but also with the parent in either the cohort 1 year ahead or 1 year behind them. All participants discussed the impact of having a parent of a child with intense disabilities as a cohort member. In fact, Participant 7 described the inclusion of this parent as a “watershed experience that brought to life the concept of family-centered practices.” Participant 5 stated, “It opened your eyes and made all of the philosophies that we learned in classes and in the whole project come to life.” Several participants discussed these parents’ role in providing a different perspective than the one often presented by educators: “I think there’s two sides to every story, and we were able to hear both sides instead of always getting just the education piece of it. Getting the parent’s piece and seeing where the parents are coming from was very valuable” (Participant 6). Almost half of the participants stated that experiences involving cohort members who had children with disabilities heightened their confidence level with respect to working with families in the future. Participant 17 noted, “I can’t say I lived her experience, but I lived next door to it for 2 years. It was the most real experience and closest I have ever been to a parent of a child with a disability.” Participant 20 believed that “the experience of having a parent in my cohort definitely persuaded how I feel today about family-centered practices. We heard what she was going through and even got to meet her son. I think it was a plus for sure.” Participant 21 found that the experience provided her with “a huge benefit. We got to experience along with her [the parent] the different things she was going through at the time as it was happening with her child.”

**Theme 3**

Linking field-based experiences with regularly scheduled seminars designed to reflect on these experiences assisted in building the participants’ confidence and competence in utilizing a variety of strategies on the job. Participants reported that upon graduation they felt more confident in implementing family-centered practices. They attributed their sense of competence to experiences provided throughout their preservice program, including opportunities to apply knowledge and practice emerging skills during field placements. Participant 16 described it as follows:

> You can only learn so much in a book, but being able to actually do what you learn out in the field, like interaction with the family and talking with them and working with them, well, that was what helped me to work well with families now. . . . I feel pretty confident about what I am doing.

Participant 14 stated that she developed confidence in working with families through the experience and the exposure in doing it over and over. The more I worked with families, the more confident I got. The courses helped me know what to do, but the experiences are where I gained the confidence in implementing family-centered practices. I feel good about working with families as partners in my job now.

According to Participant 15,

> I learned important strategies in my coursework, like the MAPS [McGill Action Planning System; Forest & Lusthaus, 1989] process and how to write an IFSP and IEP, but being out in the field with parents and parents and more parents and actually implementing what I learned in the classroom in the field is why I know what I am doing now in my job.

Participant 13 revealed how field experiences affected her:

> Field experiences played a huge role in my understanding of family-centered practices. The time I spent with families of children with a variety of disabilities shaped what I think about families and family-centered practices by just seeing how other professionals interacted with families.

Participants were able to determine whether or not family-centered practices were being used in their field experiences. In addition, they indicated that the weekly seminars that accompanied the field experiences provided them with a safe environment to address discrepancies
between recommended practices and the ones they experienced. Participants stated that they would bring up concerns about their placements, such as how to handle a situation in which they overheard families being talked about in a negative manner in the teacher’s lounge or how to introduce a new idea to a teacher or another professional. In these seminars, the professor used a problem-based instructional model to facilitate discussions and problem solving.

Participant 8 offered an example of how the seminars were organized. She described her experience during a home visit with a professional as exemplary. However, after they left the home, the professional “would just tear the family apart.” She presented the scenario to the seminar group, who then brainstormed strategies for handling similar situations in the future. Participant 13 echoed these same sentiments: “I didn’t notice a lot of strength-based language in the field, but we talked about it in seminar.” All participants described their seminar experiences and the practice of reflecting on these experiences as beneficial to their current use of family-centered practices on the job.

**DISCUSSION**

This investigation examined the effects on the perceptions of program graduates of an early childhood special education teacher preparation program designed to (a) embed family-centered content throughout the curriculum and (b) involve families in the instructional process. Specifically, we focused on their perceptions regarding using family-centered practices on the job. Results indicated that the FCPM prepared candidates to use a family-centered philosophy and family-centered practices in providing intervention services to young children with disabilities. The findings of this study extend the results of previous investigations in several ways. First, this investigation focused on the overall impact of a family-centered preservice model in preparing graduates to use family-centered practices in comparison to their undergraduate preservice experience and with respect to responsibilities experienced in their current work positions. Second, this study identified pedagogical practices and family involvement activities in preservice education that encouraged the participants to use family-centered practices on the job. Several factors limit the extent to which findings from this study may be generalized to other samples of preservice graduates. These are (a) a potential bias in relying solely on participants’ perceptions to determine the impact of the FCPM and (b) a limited overall sample size.

**Impact of FCPM on Beliefs and Practices**

An analysis of the participants’ responses suggested that preparing preservice candidates to utilize family-centered practices on the job is a complex process requiring the active involvement of family–faculty partnerships throughout the instructional process. The majority of the participants reported they had limited experience in working with families from diverse backgrounds prior to participating in the FCPM graduate studies program. Participants stated that upon graduating from their undergraduate program, they felt intimidated by parents and lacked the confidence necessary to partner with families. Although similar findings were reported by Foster and Loven (1992), an analysis of the participants’ responses in this study provides insights into how they constructed a framework for working with families. In the absence of acquiring a family-centered philosophy and skill set during their undergraduate preservice experience, participants tended to incorporate beliefs, traditions, and dynamics demonstrated vis-à-vis their own family as a referent model for understanding and interacting with families. In essence, practices and beliefs valued within their own family unit shaped their perceptions of the families with whom they worked.

The findings of this investigation indicate that multiple experiences with a diverse group of families throughout the graduate-level preservice experience appears to have developed participants’ awareness of their cultural biases regarding thought and action (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) and instilled a sense of competency in participants with regards to working with families who exhibit differing beliefs, values, and practices. An analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that program graduates expressed confidence in providing specific family-centered practices identified in the literature as necessary prerequisites for effective family–professional collaboration. In other words, they recognized that families are valued team members, understood and respected diversity among families, accepted and supported families in the choices they made, and provided multiple opportunities for families to participate in their children’s education (Bishop, Woll, & Arango, 1993).

**Value of Multiple and Diverse Opportunities With Families**

An analysis of responses indicated that all of the participants attributed the intensity and variety of family involvement in their preservice program as a factor in their use of family-centered practices on the job. These results support Tichenor’s (1997) findings regarding the impact that multiple interactions with families have on family-centered attitudes, knowledge, and skills, with equal importance given to providing knowledge about model practices and opportunities to practice skills in different contexts. Repetition provides preservice candidates with opportunities to develop proficiency, thus enhancing their confidence in utilizing practiced skills more naturally (Bricker, 1993).

Singular family-centered instructional events seemed to have affected job service delivery. All participants ac-
knowledged the impact of the father and sibling panels in terms of heightening their awareness of the diversity of values, beliefs, and visions among families as well as the variance in the roles and responsibilities each individual within the family unit has. The power of a single encounter with families also has been reported by Moles (1993).

Of particular interest to us was the prominence participants assigned to their cohort members who were parents of children with intensive disabilities in influencing job performance, a finding not evident in other investigations. Participants unanimously underscored the significant role parent-members played in shaping attitudes and influencing their use of family-centered practices. The literature has indicated that higher education cohorts have the potential to provide members with a contextual family framework, allowing them to express opinions and share experiences freely (e.g., Radencich et al., 1998). Multiple instructional and noninstructional interactions among members foster interpersonal collaboration and promote the use of teaming and conflict management skills (Ewell, 1997; Radencich et al., 1998). Inclusion of a parent-member within a cohort appears to have an added value of providing members with opportunities to not only better understand families but also practice using job-related skills with actual consumers. An explanation of the power of the parent-member in sustaining the participants’ use of family-centered practices on the job may be attributed to the FCPM program design of five semesters, which resulted in what Beck (1994) described as achieving sustainability in a relationship.

**Value of Linking Field Experiences and Supervision**

In reference to the impact of field-based coursework on the participants’ use of family-centered practices, an analysis of responses suggests that the pedagogical organization of practicum and internship experiences and the diversity of community-based partners were critical factors. Weekly seminars co-facilitated by early childhood special education faculty member and parent dyads used a case-study format to process field experiences. Preservice candidates submitted weekly reflective journal entries describing significant field experiences, both positive and challenging, for review by faculty members. Two to three critical incidents cited in the entries were selected for discussion, with the submitting preservice candidate assuming responsibility for presenting the case study and facilitating a related problem-solving discussion. These seminars not only validated the participants in their perceptions of appropriate versus inappropriate practices but also empowered them to identify strategies for strengthening services, even under less than desirable conditions.

A reoccurring theme expressed by participants was the multiple opportunities that they had to practice family-centered skills in the field experiences. The FCPM required candidates to spend 1,200 hours in a variety of community-based programs, some of which involved families as consumers, such as inclusive preschool and primary programs, and others that portrayed parents as service providers delivering parent-to-parent services. A review of the participants’ responses indicates that acquired information and skills were the result of opportunities to participate in both education and parent programs. For example, participants compared differences between professional and parent perspectives and values on topics such as IEP meetings and inclusion. Skill in understanding multiple perspectives is an asset for professionals who interact not only with families but also with professionals from different disciplines.

Too often, preservice faculty are challenged to identify community partners who demonstrate practices that are developmentally and exceptionality appropriate. The results of this study, however, suggest that carefully constructed field experiences in which (a) opportunities to interact with schools and parent programs and (b) accompanying seminars that create a safe climate for preservice students to “unpack” and discuss events may be effective in preparing preservice candidates to understand and utilize family-centered practices despite exposure to less than desirable practices they may have observed in educational settings.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Scant outcome evidence that evaluates the impact of family-centered preservice instruction on graduates’ work practices has been reported in the professional literature. Although the findings from this study suggest personnel preparation programs can prepare candidates not only to use family-centered practices but also to sustain their use of such practices, it should be considered as an initial effort in this investigative area. Given that program graduates’ perceptions are but one measure of preservice program success, and that perception reflects only the perceiver’s views and beliefs, it would be helpful if future investigations also measured the views and beliefs of other key stakeholders, such as program administrators and parents. Given the fact that the literature repeatedly has reported limited use of family-centered practices in early childhood special education service delivery, investigations designed to use the perceptions of program administrators as a means to confirm graduates’ use of family-centered practices should also measure their attitudes toward and understanding of the construct of family-centered service delivery. Without confirmation of such understanding, findings may be tainted.

A second area for future research involves families whose children are receiving services from professionals trained in family-centered service delivery. It would be interesting to compare the families’ and graduates’ percep-
tions regarding use of family-centered service delivery. Although quantitative measures would allow researchers to compare family groups, thus providing insight into how diverse groups of families perceive service delivery, it also would be beneficial to employ qualitative measures designed to capture the families’ experiences from an in-depth perspective. Another avenue for future investigations focuses on identifying systemic evidence that family-centered practices are valued and embedded in direct and consultative service delivery, such as measuring the degree to which program polices and procedure reflect such practices.

A final area for future research consideration focuses on the involvement of families in the development, implementation, and evaluation of preservice instruction. Involving families throughout the preservice experience is costly, in terms of both time and finances. It would be interesting to determine if there is an optimal level of involvement (i.e., a point at which the cost of resources do not justify the return).

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study, we recommend that preservice programs committed to preparing candidates skilled in using family-centered practices involve a diverse group of families throughout the instructional process. Family involvement must be embedded in content-based coursework as well as in seminars designed to strengthen preservice candidates’ confidence and skill in using family-centered practices in the field.

REFERENCES


Evaluation of a Family-Centered Preservice Program


