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# Preparing Teachers to Engage Parents

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## **Research Background**

Teacher education has the potential to serve as an important forum for overcoming barriers to the engagement of parents in their children's education. Nevertheless, parent involvement has yet to hold a central role in the teacher education curriculum (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; de Acosta, 1996; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hiatt-Michael, 2001) and in continuing professional development for educators (Moles, 1993). Teacher candidates report the belief that they do not possess the skills to implement parent involvement strategies in the classroom (Tichenor, 1998). Studies of interventions in preservice teacher education have reported improvement in candidate knowledge, attitudes, and skills for working with parents (Katz & Bauch, 1999; Morris, Taylor, Knight & Wasson, 1996).

A consortium of North Texas institutions, which came to be known as the North Texas Partnership for Parent Engagement, responded in 2001 to a call for development of exemplary practice of parental engagement in teacher education from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the Metropolitan Life Foundation. Goals of the consortium included the development and field testing of six online, problem-based modules based on the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Standards (National Parent Teacher Association, 1998) for use with preservice teachers at the EC-4, 4-8, 8-12, and EC-12 levels. The topics of the modules were (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) learning at home, (d) volunteering, (e) decision making and advocacy, and (f) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995, 2001). Each module included (a) learning goals and objectives for teacher candidates, (b) a lesson plan for use by teacher educators, (c) four case studies of first-year teacher interaction with parents, (d) assessments of candidate learning, and (e) a bank of resources for use by teachers and parent educators. The modules may be viewed at [www.unt.edu/cpe/ptec/connection.htm](http://www.unt.edu/cpe/ptec/connection.htm).

The research reported here is based on the first year of field testing of the modules. The authors addressed whether teacher candidate knowledge of parent involvement increased with study of the modules in teacher education classes, how teacher educators reacted to use of the modules in their classes, and what suggestions they had for future development of the modules.

## **Research Methods**

During fall 2002 and spring 2003, six teacher educators pilot-tested five of the modules in 10 classes required in one of the EC-4, 4-8, 8-12, or EC-12 teacher education programs at the participating universities. In the field test, teacher candidates were exposed to only one of the modules selected by the instructor on the basis of the content of the course. Each module was pilot-tested at least once.

Each teacher educator devoted one 80-minute class period to pilot-testing one module. The lesson plans provided included an introductory discussion of the topic, cooperative learning group discussion of one of the case studies, and candidate completion of an authentic or simulated teaching task.

Data collected in the pilot tests included pre- and post-knowledge assessments and written reactions of the teacher educators to use of the modules. The knowledge assessments were

developed from stated goals of the modules and included open-ended questions that were identical for the pre- and post-assessments.

## Research Findings

Table 1 lists the numbers of classes and candidates who used each of the five modules and the percentages of candidates whose scores improved from the pre- to post-knowledge assessments.

**Table 1. Numbers of Classes and Candidates Who Piloted Parent Engagement Modules in Fall/Spring 2003 and Percentages of Candidates Whose Scores Improved**

Module	# Classes	# Candidates	% Improved
Communicating	3	66	76
Parenting	3	58	62
Learning at Home	1	13	92
Decision Making	1	37	78
Collaborating	1	21	86

Teacher educators gave generally positive feedback about use of the modules. In general, the instructors used all four of the case studies provided and added to the lesson plans whole class discussion of small group reactions to the various case studies. Not all instructors reached the part of the lesson where candidates apply their learning by completing an authentic or simulated task and where the post-assessment is administered.

Teacher educator suggestions for improving the modules included (a) adding case studies for all of the EC–12 disciplines to each module; (b) providing more detail in the case studies about the backgrounds of the teachers, the school settings and demographics, and the time of the school year; (c) suggesting ways to spread the lesson plans out over several class periods; (d) showing how the learning objectives for candidates are aligned with the activities; and (e) informing the users how the resource bank items are aligned with the issues raised in the case studies.

Faculty who declined to participate in the pilot test most frequently said they could not find time in their courses for new content. Some faculty who taught courses that include content on family, school, and community felt that their present curriculums offered more depth or that the modules were not culturally compatible with their programs. A grant received from the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education in August 2003 sponsors further work with cultural aspects of the modules.

## Lessons Learned

*The case studies offered flexibility and choice for instructors and candidates.* Use of case studies in the modules enabled them to feature teachers who work at a variety of grade levels

in a variety of schools and teach a variety of subjects. Case studies addressing additional situations of new teachers can be easily added to the modules.

*There is potential for integration of the six modules into teacher education curriculum.* Although implementation of all modules was not possible during the project, feedback from faculty indicated their perception of the usefulness of all six modules and the affinity of certain modules with other key content.

*The order of presentation of the modules is important.* In the pilot test, candidates experienced one module in isolation from the others. Need for prior background was evident in candidate responses to assessments of *decision making and advocacy* which were more appropriate to *communicating*. Although Epstein (1995) specifies an ordering of types of parent involvement, pilot test procedures did not provide for this.

*Teacher educators need more background on parental engagement.* Faculty reactions indicated the need for more instructor background about the purposes of the modules and the knowledge bases supporting parent involvement in the schools. There was a tendency for faculty to extend discussion of candidate reaction to the case studies at the expense of application and critical discussion.

*There is need to consider parental engagement across cultures.* Faculty who declined to participate in the pilot test often cited the role of culture in parent involvement. Recent resources (Goodwin & King, 2002; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001) support their contention that learning about parent involvement must be accompanied by learning about cultural and social capital and values that can bridge relationships across cultures.

In summary, the work of the North Texas Partnership for Parent Engagement has produced a promising curriculum tool that is continuing to be developed for use in initial teacher education.

*For more information visit the North Texas Partnership for Parent Engagement at [www.unt.edu/cpe](http://www.unt.edu/cpe), or email Mary M. Harris ([mmharris@unt.edu](mailto:mmharris@unt.edu)) or Arminta Jacobson ([jacobson@coe.unt.edu](mailto:jacobson@coe.unt.edu)).*

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