



VOLunteer Teacher Spirit (VOLTS): Amplifying Family and Community Engagement in Teacher Preparation

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Overview

Community institutions, such as museums, libraries, and afterschool programs, are important partners in preparing educators for family and community engagement. These institutions can support preparation in a variety of ways. For instance, they can serve as innovative field experience and service-learning sites where teacher candidates can engage with families. They can also become partners in building coursework that develops teachers' capacity for equity-focused family and community engagement from a community perspective.

In the project described here, teacher educators from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville partnered with three community institutions to design modules for teacher educators who wish to embed the Family Engagement Core Competencies¹ into their existing educator preparation courses. Named VOLunteer Teacher Spirit (VOLTS) the modules are flexible and tied to the university's vision of the "volunteer spirit," which is characterized by a passion for promising social change through conscientious service. For this reason, the modules were created to help teacher educators prepare teacher candidates both through coursework and clinical experience to form deep partnerships with families based on listening, valuing, and honoring family strengths.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The University of Tennessee

Centro Hispano de East Tennessee

For the Love of Reading

Muse Knoxville, a children's Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, & Math (STEAM) museum

The Innovation

The project focused on two main activities:

- **The co-creation of family engagement learning modules:** Four teacher educators, who focus on racial, linguistic, and social justice in their STEM, literacy, and ESL education research and teaching, collaborated with the three community organizations (Centro Hispano, For the Love of Reading, and Muse Knoxville) to design three family and community engagement modules. These organizations are committed to promoting literacy and STEM education for Black and Latinx children. The three modules aligned to the key elements of NAFSCE's Family Engagement Core Competencies: "Reflecting to Engage", "Connecting and Collaborating with Families", and "Connecting and Collaborating with Communities".
- **Events to glean feedback on drafted modules from families and caregivers:** Over 30 families and caregivers from the three partner sites provided feedback on the modules. Family and community partners helped generate content for the modules and provided important feedback on how to best prepare teacher candidates for family and community engagement. These connections were made through in-person events and online meetings.

Outcomes

More resources become available for teacher educators to use and amplify the voices of families and communities in their coursework.

The modules created over the course of the project are available at: <https://tiny.utk.edu/volts>. The website provides access to a variety of activities and resources, along with guidance for teacher educators to use and adapt the modules for their own contexts. In particular, the modules provide direct quotes, images, and videos from families that teacher educators, who may not yet have family and community connections, can use to bring the voices of families into their courses.

Teacher educators and staff from community organizations increased their knowledge of family and community strengths and needs.

Over the course of the project the teacher educators and staff from the three community organizations increased their knowledge of family and community strengths and needs. For example, at one project site, families expressed the desire to be continually involved in their children's education, and for teachers to see them as partners and a resource in their children's education. As one family member said, *"the teacher should know that they are a part of our family for the year that they are teaching our child, and we should be able to call on them and them call on us for help."* In relation to educator preparation, families and caregivers unanimously agreed that in-depth activities that required *(continued on page 4)*



What Does Co-Creation Look Like in Action?

Module 1: Reflecting to Engage

To create Module 1, *Reflecting to Engage*, Dr. Clara Lee Brown, Associate Professor of English Language Learners Education, and Dr. Francheska Starks, Assistant Professor of Literacy and Cultural Studies in Education, partnered with museum staff at Muse Knoxville. Families from local schools came to the museum for an evening of fellowship and fun. Families ate a meal together and read the book *Dream Street* by Tricia Elam Walker. After reading the book, children created their own "Dream Street" from popsicle cleaners, clay, and other hands-on material, while adult caregivers discussed literacy at home and school with Brown and Starks. Groups discussed their hopes for their children, ways they wanted teachers to partner and communicate with them, and ways they saw themselves engaged in the educator preparation process. Information was then used to inform the module construction.

Module 2: Connecting and Collaborating with Families

To create Module 2, *Connecting and Collaborating with Families*, Dr. Frances K. Harper, Associate Professor of STEM Education, worked with For the Love of Reading to brainstorm ideas for STEM and literacy engagement with families. Seven mothers who identified as either Black or Latina joined Harper and doctoral students for a family math walk near a local community center. Mothers and university partners visited sites around the community center, talked about mathematics, and took photos to share their mathematical observations with the larger group. Immediately following the walk, they looked at each photo together and shared the mathematical connections that they noticed and brainstormed ideas for how to encourage children to notice and make their own math connections, such as on a community mural or a basketball court.

Following these math walks, Harper used one image to create a family math activity that a teacher might send for families to do mathematics together in the home while leveraging community knowledge. Harper and a doctoral student met with the seven mothers again (via Zoom) to ask for their

feedback on the activity. Mothers provided suggestions for how to revise the activity to make it more accessible and engaging for families, and they shared ideas that teachers might consider as they prepare to invite families to do math walks with other families. Partners from For the Love of Reading provided additional feedback on adapting the community walk activity to focus on literacy.

Module 3: Connecting and Collaborating with Communities

To create Module 3, *Connecting and Collaborating with Communities*, Dr. Janine Al-Aseer, Director of University-Assisted Community Schools & Clinical Assistant Professor recruited community partners from various nonprofits and service agencies across Greater Knoxville. She convened a group of 12 representatives from health, early childhood, community schools, the university student body, afterschool agencies, and nonprofit leadership who have experience interfacing with families in a variety of contexts. Using a one-pager outline, participants were recruited by email for a luncheon to develop and discuss Module 3. The community partner group was very vocal about their desire:

- For new teachers to make connections to community partners;
- For new teachers to be aware of the things they were doing to engage families and communities;
- To be seen as allies in the classroom and beyond;
- To be seen as a place to support and celebrate the work of teachers especially given the challenges the profession is currently facing.

Once the modules and activities were complete, Centro Hispano convened a focus group with 10 Spanish-speaking Latino families and two bilingual staff members that work closely with English Learner students in afterschool programs. In preparation for this focus group, a one-pager about the VOLTS project as well as the outline of all the activities proposed in Module 3 were translated into Spanish. The focus group was held entirely in Spanish and included an overview of the VOLTS project and its purpose to increase an emphasis on family engagement at each stage of the teacher candidate preparation process. Families provided invaluable feedback that was infused into the revised modules.



1: Reflect to Engage



2: Connect & Collaborate with Families



3: Connect & Collaborate with Communities



The teacher should know that they are a part of our family for the year that they are teaching our child, and we should be able to call on them and them call on us for help.

(continued from page 2) conversations with families were very much preferred over any activities that emphasized asynchronous or internet-based learning activities, such as searching online for community resources. The language barrier between teachers and non-English speaking families presented a challenge and it was not fully addressed how student teachers should overcome that challenge in order to engage in face-to-face engagement with families for the more in-depth activities.

Families increased their knowledge of community resources.

An unintended outcome of this project was the effect it had on families and caregivers themselves. For example, several families said that it was their first time visiting The Muse, where they learned about free and discounted programs through The Muse and their local libraries that they planned to join. Families were able to connect, meet, and spend time with each other, learning from one another during the group discussions. Opening the space for conversations about literacy allowed people to see they are not alone, especially those who shared their struggles around literacy in schools.

Concluding Thoughts

Taken together, this project demonstrates the benefits and opportunities of co-constructing coursework for educator preparation programs with families and community partners. Specifically, the project resulted in the development of three modules that are now widely available to teacher educators to embed into existing courses. It also resulted in teacher educators increasing their understanding of family and community strengths and needs as well as families and caregivers increasing their knowledge of community resources. Next steps for the project include implementing, testing, and revising the three modules with teacher candidates in different courses.

¹National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE] (2022). Family engagement core competencies: A body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for family-facing professionals. <https://nafsce.org/page/CoreCompetencies>

The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) is the first membership association focused solely on advancing family, school, and community engagement. Our mission is advancing high-impact policies and practices for family, school, and community engagement to promote child development and improve student achievement. This research-to-practice brief was developed as part of NAFSCE's Family Engagement and Educator Preparation Impact Project, the goal of which is to fund local innovations in testing components of the Educator Preparation Framework for Family and Community Engagement. We wish to acknowledge Dr. Margaret Caspe and Elia Hilda Bueno for their research and writing support. You can learn more about NAFSCE's work at: www.nafsce.org/edprep.