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Engaging Community Stakeholders: Redesigning a Teacher Education Program in Early Childhood Special Education

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Overview

For nearly 10 years, Bank Street Graduate School of Education has engaged in an inquiry process to ensure that the graduate school programs in Teaching & Learning and Leadership align with the social justice mission of the College. A key component of this work has been to examine programs of study to understand how well they prepare graduate students to develop lenses in four key areas: racial consciousness, supporting multilingual learners, development and disability, and creative and experimental spirit. In 2022, after years of studying programs, as well as enrollment trends and other data related to the health and sustainability of the Graduate School, Bank Street transitioned to a period of revision whereby teacher educators began to apply learnings to programmatic redesign. The College began this process with the Early Childhood Special and General Education programs, as these are among the largest, most highly sought-after degrees. However, as teacher educators began to engage in program redesign, teacher educators realized that key voices had been missing: that of children, families, and educators in the field.

The purpose of this innovation was to gather the perspectives of families, children, and educators to shape the program redesign effort. This project therefore had two aims: 1) to examine the process of centering the voices of families, early childhood educators, and young children with disabilities in the redesign of a graduate school early childhood special education program, and 2) to explore the perspectives of these various stakeholders on what they believe early childhood educators need to know and be able to do when working with young children with disabilities.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Bank Street College of Education

Bronx Community Charter School

Bank Street Head Start

The Innovation

The innovation featured two main activities:

- **Family, educator, and child focus groups:** The innovation team conducted focus groups with three groups of collaborators: families, educators, and children. During the family focus groups, families of children with IEPs shared what they believed early childhood special and general education teachers need to know and be able to do in order to effectively teach their children and engage families. During the child focus groups, children between the ages of three and seven were asked to talk about a teacher they really liked, and what they enjoyed doing with their favorite teachers. They were also invited to draw a picture about their favorite teachers. At the Head Start site, ten children were invited to create their favorite teacher through artistic expression (clay, drawing, painting, puppet-making). The researcher then engaged in follow-up individual conversations with each child as they played during center time. Finally, six early childhood educators participated in two focus groups on ZOOM about what they felt novice teachers in early childhood special and general education needed to know and be able to do.

- **Program mapping:** The innovation team took the main ideas that families, educators, and children shared and mapped them onto the overall curriculum sequence for the existing program in Early Childhood Special and General Education at Bank Street College. They then took this document back to the educators and teachers for a second round of focus groups. In these focus groups, participants reviewed the document and shared reactions, what they thought might be missing, and anything that they felt should be changed, elaborated upon, or removed. Participants' ideas were further used to revise the mapping document.

Outcomes

Families and educators believe that teachers must develop deep knowledge of development and its relationship to the social context.

During adult focus groups, families and educators both spoke about different areas of development that they saw as critical to serve the children in their respective communities. Both groups said that knowing how to teach to the whole child, and also knowing that academic skill is tied to social-emotional support, should be essential capacities that are incorporated into any graduate school programs for early childhood special and general education. Educators especially shared that learning to observe young children nonjudgmentally across multiple developmental domains was one of the greatest skills they took away from Bank Street, as it assisted them with centering children's strengths and meeting them where they are in the classroom. In addition, both families and educators also spoke about the



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importance of understanding young children's development within the particular social contexts in which they live. Families shared concerns they have that educators do not always know how best to address critical social issues – such as Black Lives Matter or gender inclusivity – in ways that are

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developmentally appropriate for young children or culturally relevant to the families. Educators and families both spoke about the importance of understanding how cultural, linguistic, and class differences in given communities might also shape the developmental trajectories and behaviors that teachers encounter in the classroom to ensure their practice is culturally relevant and sustaining.

Strong family-educator and educator-child relationships are critical to teacher success.

Families emphasized repeatedly that the best experiences they had with their children's early childhood special and general education teachers was when they had regular, open communication with the educators. They shared stories of teachers who made themselves readily available to the families, who communicated consistently about their child's progress, and who made them feel like they were true partners in the education of their children. Several family members told stories of educators who worked with the family to create plans that would address certain challenges that either the educators or the families were experiencing

For the families, regular, open, and consistent communication lent itself to a meaningful partnership between home and school.

with their children. The families described these interactions as building bridges between home and school, which recurred as an area of importance to the families. When the families were less than pleased with their children's educators and service providers, lack of communication and relationship-building were often central to their dissatisfaction. For example, a couple of families spoke about how they never knew who their child's service providers were or what they were doing with their child until the IEP meeting rolled around.

For the families, regular, open, and consistent communication lent itself to a meaningful partnership between home and school. The families spoke about specific educators whose regular communication with the family allowed there to be

consistency between home and school for their children. They also shared their appreciation for the educators who listened to their concerns and incorporated the families' interests/desires for their children into services and instruction. Additionally, some educators had taken into account the strategies families use at home and incorporated them into their practice. The families saw these moves as essential ways that bridges could be built between home and school, as families and educators worked in true partnership to support the child.

Educators must come to know the nuts and bolts of teaching, how to navigate the special education system, and develop meaningful plans for children with IEPs and their families.

Educators all shared that there were many practical, tangible skills that they felt they did not know when they first entered the field of early childhood special education. Of note was a lack of confidence when it came to understanding how the special education system worked and how to adequately advocate for children with IEPs and their families. One educator recommended that early childhood special education programs incorporate a course on advocacy that focuses on understanding the special education processes and being able to communicate processes and systems to families in accessible ways.

Families conveyed a similar desire when reflecting on the kinds of educators who they felt made meaningful impacts on their children. They shared stories of educators and service providers who would adhere to developmental checklists or a set plan that was discussed in an IEP meeting. The families felt it was important for teachers and specialists to be able to revise the plans or veer away from checklists in order to address the real needs of their children. Educators

Participants from both stakeholder groups talked about the "meeting before the meeting" and how helpful it can be if educators know how to prepare families for critical special education meetings.

and families alike shared stories of walking or being walked through key meetings (such as the Turning 5 Meeting, IEP meetings in general, etc.) in ways that helped to ease families' anxieties about their children's education. Participants from both stakeholder groups talked about the "meeting before the meeting" and how helpful it can be if educators know how to prepare families for critical special education meetings, which are often structured in ways to make families feel powerless.



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Children believe teachers should be kind and playful.

Children shared through their artistic and verbal expression the following things they appreciate about their teachers. For pre-school age children, they like when their teachers let them use tools/materials that they like, have choice time, feel like their teachers like them and when their teachers help and play with them. For elementary school age children, the children like when their teachers give them opportunities to play and explore their interests, when their teachers take them outside to play, engage in hands-on projects and exploration (e.g., "Smashing Day" where children were able to use hammers, screwdrivers, and work gloves), play games with them, hug and comfort them when they are feeling sad, and say nice words to them (like "Thank you").

Family insights and values positively influence the redesign of foundations, methods, and specialization courses.

Appendix I shows the ways that information from the focus groups were embedded into the redesign of the scope and sequence of courses offered in foundations, methods, and specialization. Family and community knowledge was particularly instrumental in informing the two courses specifically focused on family and community engagement (e.g., Early Childhood Practicum 1: Observing a Child Through Family/Cultural Contexts and Early Childhood Practicum 2: Collaboration with Families and Colleagues about the Cycle of Assessment, Planning, and Instruction). After reviewing the mapping matrix both families and educators added a few further insights and ideas. For example, educators believed there could be a stronger emphasis on communicating with families using multiple modes of communication (email, phone, apps, video, photos, etc.), ensuring accessibility for families (not just children) so that all of the communication they receive isn't just written or verbal communication along with knowledge about family structures, and how to best communicate with and support varying structures (an example given was if family members are separated but co-parenting). Families believed there could be more emphasis on providing tips for families to implement at home and speaking with families about instructional approaches and strategies to ensure they align with values and practices of the home (e.g., family member does not allow screen time at home, but the child's speech therapist gives the child screen time as a reward as opposed to using other areas of interest that the child does pursue at home) as well as communicating with the entire family/caregiving unit. Even if there is only one family member that teachers see regularly, it does not mean that there are not others who are involved and invested in the child's education.

Concluding Thoughts

This project demonstrates that families and educators believe that it is important for teachers to develop an in-depth understanding of child development and how it relates to different social environments. Additionally, trusting relationships and communication between educators and families as well as between educators and children is key not only to student achievement, but to teacher success. To better prepare teachers, they must know the ins and outs of what it entails to be a teacher, how to navigate the special education system, and develop meaningful plans for children with IEPs and their families. Next steps for this project include continuing to analyze focus group interview data and putting together a presentation for its Department of Teaching and Learning to incorporate findings into program redesign.

Appendix I.

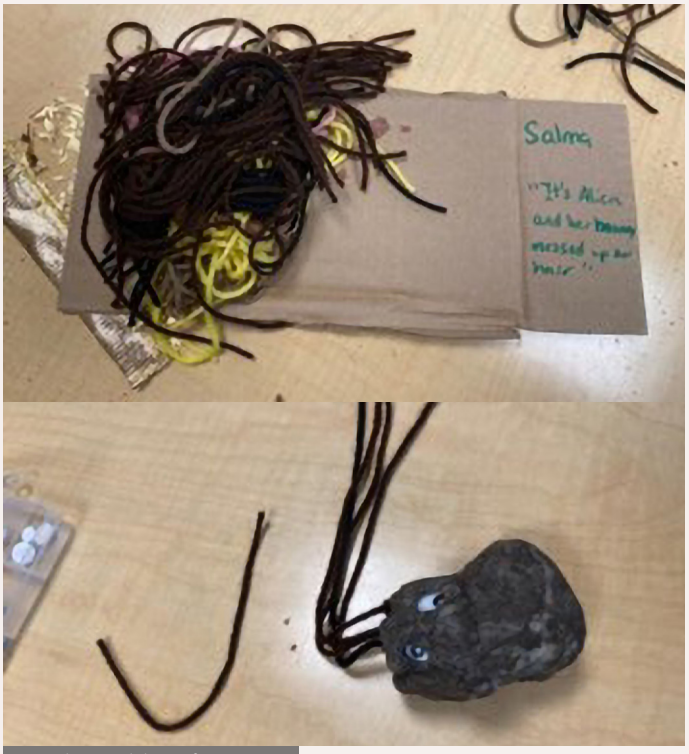
A Map of Family and Educator Focus Group Ideas onto The Foundations, Methods, and Specialization Courses in Bank Street Early Childhood Special and General Education Dual Certification Programs

FOUNDATIONS COURSES

Child Development, Language Acquisition and Learning in a Linguistically Diverse Society, Foundations of Modern Education, Developmental Variations

Ideas from Focus Groups

- **Child Development:** More on 0-3 child development and hands-on experience working with infants/toddlers
- **Learning Differences:** More on different kinds of learning differences and what children might need in a wide range of environments (e.g., understanding the variability that can exist within a single disability category; possibly steering students to focus on particular disabilities since it may be difficult to become expert on all disabilities and their many variations in a short period of time)
- **Current events:** More current events and family context on children's development and lives



Artwork created during focus groups

METHODS COURSES

Curriculum in Early Childhood Education, The Teaching of Reading, Writing, and Language Arts in the Primary Grades, Science for Teachers, Math for Teachers, Arts Workshop for Teachers OR Music & Movement, Language, Literature, and Emergent Literacy, Supervised Fieldwork (1 year)

Ideas from Focus Groups

- **Curriculum:** Keep the curriculum course
- **Classroom Management:** More emphasis on classroom management, establishing a classroom community, developing routines and consistency, and developing meaningful relationships with individual children that allow educators to know exactly what approaches benefit each child
- **Differentiating Behavior:** More on differentiating behavior and language depending on the child, and ensuring accessibility for all children (UDL, backwards planning, working with an interdisciplinary team)
- **Assessment:** More on developing and implementing assessments when teaching lessons
- **Technology:** More on incorporating educational technology
- **Transitions:** Expand information on how to get to know a child before the year begins from previous teachers/ service providers, the family (e.g., through home visits), and observing the child.
- **Social-Emotional Learning:** More on how to learn to think holistically about education (not just academics) with more emphasis on social-emotional learning, including crisis intervention and how to cultivate children's interests and creativity offering children multimodal learning experiences
- **Professional Stance:** Support early career teachers to remain motivated, have stamina, and love the work of teaching and develop self-reflective skills, humility, a learner's stance, a stick-with-it attitude, flexibility, and creativity, and knowing how to ask for help when unsure of what to do, accepting the journey of trial and error and that we all make mistakes

SPECIALIZATION COURSES

Education of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Play Techniques for Early Childhood Settings, Supporting Emergent Language and Literacy for Children with Developmental Variations (birth-2nd grade), Early Childhood Practicum 1: Observing a Child Through Family/Cultural Contexts, Early Childhood Practicum 2: Collaboration with Families and Colleagues about the Cycle of Assessment, Planning, and Instruction, Early Childhood Assessment

Ideas from Focus Groups

- **Curriculum:** Must keep Observation & Recording/Practicum 1, Collaboration with Families (Practicum 2), Play Techniques
- **Systems Thinking:** Understanding the ins and outs of the special education system and related services; Add a course on advocacy or embed advocacy more explicitly throughout program knowing what is within a teacher's role/locus of control and who the other players are that might need to be brought in Negotiating with key actors to ensure children receive the services they need, Direct experience observing in different kinds of special education settings
- **Understanding Individualized Education Plans (IEPs):** Trial and error when supporting individual children with IEPs - being able to adjust a plan after it's been implemented if it doesn't work for the child Relatedly, implementing plans and measuring progress towards goals in ways that do not demoralize children with IEPs, Creating IEP goals and incorporating them into curriculum planning
- **Interprofessional Collaboration:** Collaborating effectively with paraprofessionals, other adult colleagues, such as related service providers or co-teachers, and school leaders
- **Communicating with Families:** Being able to work with a wide range of communities and being able to communicate about services & IEPs in ways that the family will understand depending on family background with diplomatic communication, and the ability to have difficult, genuine, authentic and caring conversations. Communicating with families through a range of modalities to ensure maximum accessibility. Communicating regularly with families (1-3 times a month) and making sure everyone is on the same page about what the child is working on (not just telling parents what isn't going well, and more reports than just the annual IEP meeting). Communicating with the entire family/caregiving unit, even if it is just one person that school personnel typically see (it does not mean the other[s] are not also involved). How to have the "meeting before" or the "meeting after" the meeting (e.g., conversation before the IEP about what child does well and what they'll have to discuss in IEP)
- **Building Relationships with Families:** Showing empathy to families and remembering that they too are learning their child and are engaging in a daily practice of trial and error as caregivers, building authentic, close-knit relationships and knowing how to work effectively with different kinds of families and family structures
- **Supporting Family Learning:** Providing tips and strategies for families to try at home in order to support their child, supporting families to use the language of school at home, speaking with families about the approaches and values of the home to ensure practices used in school align and practice creating parent/family workshop



Artwork created during focus groups

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.