Addressing Students' Beliefs to Enhance Family-Professional Collaboration in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education Preparation

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ABSTRACT
Preservice educators' attitudes and beliefs towards families can have a profound impact on family-centered practices (FCPs) and family-professional partnerships (FPPs); unfortunately, negative beliefs about families can surface during preservice early childhood preparation and can be a challenge for faculty in higher education to address. This article shares promising instructional practices (e.g., projects, assignments, teaching methods) that have been shown to reshape preservice educators' existing beliefs about families. In addition, these instructional practices aim to cultivate positive perspectives in preservice educators by aligning with the recent joint policy statement from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S Department of Education on inclusive early learning programs (2023) regarding engaging families as full partners. The purposes of this article are to: (a) briefly summarize the literature on relational FCPs and FPPs, (b) describe the connection between beliefs about families and their contribution to strengthen or hinder relational FCPs and FPPs, and (c) present instructional practices that faculty can use to support preservice EI/ECSE students' constructive beliefs about families. Examples of instructional practices are organized and presented as: in class activities with families (e.g., guest speakers); in class activities without families (e.g., role playing); and out of class activities with families (e.g., attending an Individualized Education Program [IEP] meeting). By integrating these instructional practices, faculty can equip preservice educators with necessary skills and attitudes to build authentic connections with families, which can lead to improved outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families.

KEYWORDS
Early childhood, family-centered practice, inclusion, partnerships, preservice

Across settings, ages, and grade levels in education, families are their child's first and most important teachers; they are experts in a unique position to offer valuable information about their children with education professionals (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS] & U.S. Dept. of Education [U.S. DOE], 2016). Various theoretical frameworks, evidence-based practices, and developmentally appropriate practices make this realization especially evident when working with families of young children with disabilities or developmental delays in early intervention (EI) and early childhood special education (ECSE). The recent policy statement on inclusion in early childhood programs (U.S. DHHS & U.S. DOE, 2023) emphasizes the need for inclusive early childhood programs to ensure each family's goals for their children with disabilities are considered. Given the needs of young children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities, EI/ECSE professionals must possess confidence and competence to effectively work with young children and their families.

Despite the expertise that families bring to collaborative interactions with EI/ECSE professionals, research suggests that faculty in EI/ECSE preparation programs experience challenges to prepare preservice teachers to collaborate

with families (McCorkle et al., 2022). Curricula used to teach preservice EI/ECSE professionals to collaborate with families vary in the pedagogical methods and depth of exposure to family-professional collaboration content across courses (Kyzar et al., 2019), as well as the number of opportunities available to students to interact with families (Evans, 2013). While some studies suggest pedagogical methods such as case studies, parent interviews, and developing communication materials to teach content on family-professional collaboration, the number of evidence-based pedagogical methods available to inform faculty instruction in this area is low (Francis et al., 2021).

Faculty may also encounter challenges regarding EI/ECSE student beliefs about families. For example, research conducted with students in preservice teacher programs suggests that, even before beginning their careers as educators, preservice teachers can develop negative assumptions, stereotypes, and deficit-based views about families (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017; Santamaría Graff et al., 2020). Students may also be exposed to teachers who complain about their students' families during field experiences (Francis et al., 2021). A teacher's beliefs about families are impacted in part by their training and field experiences (Hindin & Mueller, 2016). This makes it crucial for preservice preparation programs in EI/ECSE to address negative beliefs about families, such as assumptions, implicit biases, stereotypes, judgment, deficit-based views, and blame. It is equally important to enhance students' positive beliefs about families, which entails recognizing family strengths, increasing empathy, and demonstrating open-mindedness.

The IDEA (2004) mandates that professionals provide families with meaningful opportunities to participate

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as members of their child's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or IEP team (Sec. 300.322). As a result of this legal mandate, the ability to collaborate with families is a required competency that preservice EI/ECSE students must be able to demonstrate prior to entering the field (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Division for Early Childhood [DEC] Recommended Practices, 2014). It is the role of EI/ECSE preparation programs to provide meaningful experiences to enhance student learning on evidence-based family-professional collaboration practices, such as family-centered practices (FCPs) and family professional partnerships (FPPs; McCorkle et al., 2022). When opportunities to interact and collaborate with families are implemented in coursework alongside direct instruction, preservice EI/ECSE students will be better prepared to collaborate with families effectively and positively. Research spanning decades has shown that when family-professional collaboration is positive, there are several short and long-term benefits for children with disabilities, including: reduced

family stress (Burke & Hodapp, 2014); increased parental competence and confidence in supporting their child's development (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007); increased family quality of life (Summers et al., 2007); increased family satisfaction with services received (Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; Kurth et al., 2019); an increased likelihood of inclusive educational placements for the child (Miller et al., 2019); and positive social emotional and academic child outcomes (Smith et al., 2020). The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of relational FCPs and FPPs, summarize connections between preservice EI/ECSE student beliefs and ways they strengthen or hinder relational FCPs and FPPs, and describe a variety of instructional methods aimed at fostering positive beliefs about families. The instructional methods, activities, and projects described are designed to supplement instruction focused on FCPs, FPPs, and implicit biases in university coursework.

RELATIONAL FCPS AND FPPS

The literature on FCPs (Dunst et al., 2007) and FPPs (Blue-Banning et al., 2004) provide guidance on family-professional collaboration within EI/ECSE that can be incorporated into preservice preparation programs. A FCP approach is defined as "treating families with dignity and respect; information sharing so families can make informed decisions; family choice regarding their involvement in and provision of services; and parent/professional collaborations and partnerships as the context for family-program relations" (Dunst, 2002, p. 141). These practices are made up of two categories, relational and participatory (Dunst & Trivette, 1996). While both relational and participatory practices are crucial for preservice EI/ECSE students to know and be able to apply,

FIGURE 1: Activities to Support Relational FCPs and FPPs in Preservice Teacher Coursework

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES WITH FAMILES	IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES WITHOUT FAMILIES	OUT-OF-CLASS ACTIVITIES WITH FAMILIES
Family as Co-Instructors	Interactive, Collaborative Activities	Interviewing Families
Families as Students	Community Based Projects	Community Mapping
Families as Guest Speakers	Recorded Home Visits with Student Reflections	Service Learning
Families as In-Class Activity Participants		

the practices that make up the relational component of FCPs are of particular interest. Relational FCPs include practices that build positive relationships with families, such as active listening, compassion, empathy, respect, and taking a nonjudgmental stance (Dunst et al., 2002). Additionally, components of relational FCPs include positive beliefs and attitudes about families, especially views that pertain to parenting capabilities and competencies (Dunst, 2002).

Similar to relational FCPs, FPPs also emphasize the need to build positive relationships with families to enhance collaboration. The characteristics that make up FPPs include communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). According to Blue-Banning and colleagues, active and nonjudgmental listening are emphasized within the

area of communication, and respect encompasses accepting the family where they are and exhibiting a nonjudgmental attitude toward the family. Although FCPs and FPPs are distinct concepts, there is a degree of overlap regarding the need for positive beliefs about families. A key consideration in EI research is that positive beliefs about families (e.g., viewing families as equal partners, valuing family expertise, adopting a strengths-based lens) can influence professionals' abilities to develop authentic connections with families (Park & Turnbull, 2003; Trivette et al., 2010).

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES USED IN PRESERVICE PROGRAMS

All studies cited in this section specifically examined the impact that instruction, activities, and assignments had on

preservice students' beliefs about families. We included studies that have used empirical designs to assess the impact of these methods on student beliefs. The studies described span from 2001-2023, and as such represent a variety of ideas that we hope will serve as sources of inspiration to faculty to inform their instruction. The instructional methods are categorized into three areas: in-class activities with families; in-class activities without families; and out-of-class activities with families (see Figure 1). To our knowledge, no studies describe out-of-class activities without families.

In-Class Activities with Families

Integrating families into courses serves several purposes and yields multiple benefits. The primary purposes of this approach are twofold: first, to increase the number of opportunities students have to practice interacting and collaborating with families; and second, to provide an opportunity for EI/ECSE students to apply what they have learned about FCPs and FPPs. Since the classroom is a safe space for students to make mistakes, learn, and engage in reflective practice, integrating families is a beneficial way to support student confidence to interact with families. It is important to note that the activities described in this section require an extensive time commitment from families. Compensation for family members' expertise, time, and participation should be provided if possible.

Family as Co-Instructors

One impactful approach to include families in coursework is *Family as Faculty* (FAF) (Collier et al., 2015; Patterson et al., 2009; Santamaría-Graff & Boehner, 2019; Williams, 2012). In FAF, families play an active role in co-planning and co-teaching a course in special education, allowing them

to share their expertise, experiences, and insights directly with preservice students. Recent studies on FAF have also examined the impact of incorporating cultural humility (Santamaría-Graff & Ballesteros, 2023) and placing families in a position of power (Santamaría-Graff, 2021) on student dispositions. Findings from both qualitative studies suggest that most preservice students showed increases in self-awareness with regard to biases and prejudices they held about families. Many were also able to identify oppressive circumstances that families with intersecting identities faced. Of note, Santamaría-Graff and Ballesteros (2023) found that some students did not come to the realization that their actions or words could perpetuate inequities, though the authors note that the students were at the beginning stages of learning this content. Collier et al. (2015) found that the FAF approach continued to have positive effects on preservice students' beliefs about family-professional collaboration three years after course completion.

Similarly, studies have included families as co-instructors who help plan and deliver instruction alongside faculty (Murray et al., 2008; Robinson & Sadao, 2005). In Robinson and Sadao's study, the authors asked families to serve as consultants to provide input on course curricula and interact with students (e.g., families served as audience members and provided feedback on student group presentations). Both the FAF and co-instructor approaches place families at an expert level, which helps students recognize the valuable expertise and knowledge families bring to IFSP and IEP teams.

Families as Students

Alternatively, families may participate as students alongside preservice EI/ECSE students (Curran & Murray, 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2013). In this approach, family members are recruited by faculty and asked to join the class for the purpose of sharing their experiences and knowledge with students. Studies that utilized this approach stated that participants did not need to pay tuition because they were not considered students enrolled at the university. However, the family member participants were actively involved in the course by attending class meetings, completing readings, contributing to in-class discussions, and participating in small group projects with students.

The studies evaluating the families as students approach found that EI/ECSE students benefited from hearing families' viewpoints on different topics. This approach places families in a role as equals with students in the class, which has potential to address power differentials. In addition, hearing family members' perspectives provides EI/ECSE preservice students with opportunities to develop empathy, understanding, communication skills, and respect in their interactions with families.

Families as Guest Speakers

Families invited to share personal narratives and expertise as guest speakers requires less time commitment than the previous two strategies. Studies that have evaluated this approach intentionally recruited families representing diversity in their experiences, family composition, disability severity, and backgrounds as much as possible (Collier et al., 2015; Kim & Vail, 2011). Allowing families the opportunity to practice telling their stories prior to presenting to preservice EI/ECSE students is recommended (Collier et al., 2015; Prosser, 2009). Including several families as guest speakers throughout the semester is also recommended, as one guest speaking experience is not enough to change preservice students' dispositions toward families (Epstein, 2005).

Families as In-Class Activity Participants

Families can participate in one-time in-class activities, such as simulations. Simulations can take several forms, such as role play scenarios with volunteer family members who act as IEP team members (Werts et al., 2002). For example, Mueller and colleagues (2019) recruited family members and school professionals as volunteers to participate in an IEP simulation activity. Preservice students read a vignette about a student, then sent procedural safeguards, a meeting invitation, and communicated with a volunteer family before the simulation. Students then engaged in simulated IEP meetings in rotating small groups which allowed students to observe their classmates' simulated meetings.
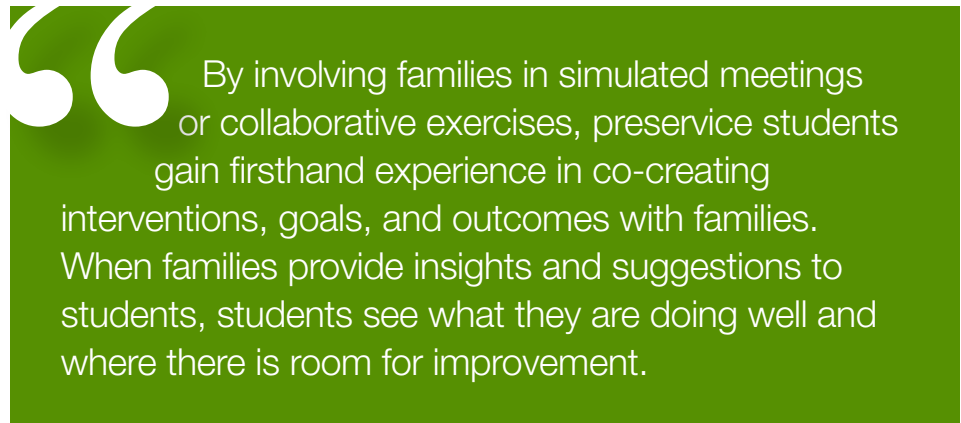
We recommend allowing family members to provide feedback to the simulated meeting groups, which could be in-person or video recorded to accommodate family schedules. This project could also be adapted as a simulated IFSP meeting with families of young children receiving EI services under Part C of IDEA (2004) recruited as volunteers. Reflection opportunities on relational FCP and FPP characteristics would be beneficial for students to make connections between their theoretical knowledge and application to the simulations.

Putting It All Together: In-Class Activities with Families and Student Beliefs. Beyond their immersive nature, in-class activities with families actively shape beliefs by providing preservice students with real-world examples that challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about families and

support the development of FCPs and FPPs. Having experiences to engage with families directly allows students opportunities to witness the unique strengths and challenges families face within EI/ECSE. By involving families in simulated meetings or collaborative exercises, preservice students gain firsthand experience in co-creating interventions, goals, and outcomes with families. When families provide insights and suggestions to students, students see what they are doing well and where there is room for improvement. The in-class activities with families described foster an understanding of diverse family experiences and can be used as an opportunity to challenge pre-existing beliefs and deficit-based lenses about families. This, in turn, encourages a more empathetic understanding of family dynamics, decisions, and perspectives. To revisit the findings from Santamaría-Graff and Ballesteros (2023), a 16-week semester was insufficient time for students to fully develop to critically conscious change-agents, even with multiple opportunities to interact with families. We recommend faculty embed opportunities to engage with families across courses in preservice programs to support students in achieving this higher order thinking.

In-Class Activities Without Families

Faculty may have limited direct access to families for several reasons. Despite constraints, there are methods that faculty can incorporate into instruction to enhance preservice EI/ECSE students' beliefs about families to support their proficiency in relational FCPs and FPPs. These approaches may be particularly relevant for junior faculty who are new to their university, those who lack funding to compensate families for their involvement, or faculty seeking activities to serve as a starting point for

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students prior to engaging in activities directly with family members.

Interactive, Collaborative Activities

In-class activities that focus on family-professional collaboration without families present include role-playing, value clarification exercises, viewing and discussing videos, and case studies (Carr, 2000). Carr's (2000) qualitative study described the impact of a course titled *The Exceptional Family.* Examples of course activities included case studies and videos that depicted rural families with children with disabilities. These activities were used to support preservice students in being able to identify family needs and priorities. As a result, students expressed increased empathy, compassion, and understanding of families, and indicated they would try to be nonjudgmental when approaching value conflicts, all of which align with relational FCPs and FPPs.

Identifying Community-Based Resources

Preservice EI/ECSE students can engage in projects to research community resources relevant to families of children with disabilities (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Carr, 2000). This exercise equips students with valuable insights they can use to connect families to essential community support

networks and resources. Bingham & Abernathy (2007) found that researching community resources gave preservice students a more holistic understanding of available family supports and resources that included extended family members, neighbors, and friends. Carr (2000) required students to use the internet to identify and compile available resources. Carr also described an activity that involved exploring a family's completed ecomap, which is a visual for identifying a child and family's support systems and network. This exploration was followed by a class discussion on resources available to families in rural areas. Since the community-based resources identified will be unique to each family, we suggest requiring preservice students to explore ecomap examples for several families. Multiple opportunities would likely expand student experiences and knowledge of community resources that are unique to diverse families' strengths and needs.

Recorded Home Visits with Student Reflections

Utilizing video recorded home visits of a child and family receiving EI services offers a unique opportunity for students to view relational FCPs and FPP characteristics in action. In Keilty and Kosaraju's (2018) study, students viewed two recorded EI home visits

with families and responded to Likert-scale items (e.g., *Recommendations/strategies addressed the priorities of the family*) and open-ended questions (e.g., *What went well?*). These questions enabled students to critique family-professional interactions, reflect on what went well and what they would do differently, and observe nuances in verbal and nonverbal interactions. When the authors analyzed students' reflection responses, relational FCPs were observed including building and sustaining a friendly, trusting relationship with families and utilizing active listening approaches. The authors note that it is likely more beneficial to show students a recording of an ideal home visit that demonstrates all recommended EI home visiting practices.

Putting It All Together: In-Class Activities Without Families and Student Beliefs. In-class activities provide a starting point for students prior to direct engagement with families or a resource for faculty when access to families is limited. Identifying community resources has the potential to increase the strengths-based lens about the communities where families of young children with disabilities live. Capitalizing on the assets and the wide range of learning opportunities available to families in their communities has the potential to address various stereotypes that can lead to negative beliefs. Value clarifications and role-playing exercises can be intentionally utilized for students to identify unknown prejudices and increase their self-awareness (Carr, 2000). In addition, Keilty & Kosaraju's (2018) activity on critiquing recorded EI home visits according to relational FCPs and FPP characteristics introduced students to family-professional collaboration during home visits, while showcasing how relational FCPs and FPP components can be applied in natural environments. These activities

can serve as tools to analyze diverse family scenarios and step into the shoes of families and professionals, both of which require students to experience different perspectives and understand the many factors that can influence family-professional collaboration.

Out-of-Class Activities with Families

Busy families may wish to share their knowledge and expertise without the significant time commitment required to co-plan and co-teach courses. Offering experiences out of class to engage with families supports EI/ECSE students to engage with families at times that are convenient for the family. The activities described here require creativity and setting expectations for preservice students at the beginning of a term for out of class time.

Interviewing Families

Interviewing families of children with developmental delays or disabilities is an immersive approach that provides preservice students with insights into diverse family perspectives. Faculty conducting these studies emphasized the importance of connecting students with families from varied cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or gender identities. For example, George & Kanupka (2019) required students to interview fathers of children with disabilities. Results from this qualitative study suggest that students recognized unique barriers fathers encountered when collaborating on IEP teams. Findings also suggest that the interview experience challenged and helped the preservice students recognize stereotypes they harbored about father involvement in raising a child with a disability.

An assignment such as this could be especially beneficial for preservice EI/ECSE students. For example, one study found that father involvement

was viewed as important by EI providers, but they were unsure how to increase father involvement (Curtiss et al., 2021). We recommend that faculty who wish to have preservice EI/ECSE students interview families provide students with an interview guide or guiding questions for students to use specific to relational FCPs and FPPs. In addition, recruitment could expand on cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and gender identity diversity to include families representing diversity in socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and family structures (e.g., foster families, single-parent households).

Community Mapping

Another recommendation that is similar to identifying community-based resources is to engage in community mapping activities. Community mapping involves identifying community-based activities and settings that can serve as natural sources of learning opportunities for young children with disabilities while enhancing family outcomes (Dunst et al., 2001). Ordoñez-Jasis & Myck-Wayne (2012) assigned students a community mapping project during practicum. In this study, preservice EI/ECSE students engaged in community mapping by asking families to share priorities, concerns, and resources specific to their child's needs. The students then identified community resources located within a specified radius of their practicum setting (e.g., nonprofits, libraries). Students gained additional insight about available resources by talking to professionals (e.g., teachers at practicum) as well as a member of the community. The students compiled the artifacts, resources, and information they found, and also reflected on how their knowledge of these resources impacted their ability to develop trust and mutual respect with both families and school personnel.

Service Learning

Service learning provides students with real-world experiences by combining community service with academic instruction. Service learning has been shown to reduce students' biases (Dunn-Kenney, 2010) and allow preservice EI/ECSE students to confront stereotypes, fears, and prejudices (Hampshire et al., 2015). Engaging in service learning allows preservice EI/ECSE students to participate in a project addressing a need or problem in the community. There are several opportunities for preservice EI/ECSE students to reflect and address real-world challenges in special education and demonstrate their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. Hampshire et al. (2015) provided EI/ECSE students with a choice between five service-learning sites (e.g., a homeless shelter or Head Start program) which students participated for 15 hours in a semester. An example of a service-learning project included developing family-friendly information on the process of early identification under IDEA in a Head Start program. When designed in ways that maximize student engagement with families, service learning has the potential to directly influence preservice students' beliefs about families. For example, Novak and colleagues (2009) found that students who participated in service learning in their *Collaboration and Consultation* course went from viewing families as subordinate to teachers to viewing families as caring, competent partners who were equals on their child's team. Additionally, the authors found that this experience helped students realize that families may have priorities or values that differ from theirs as professionals.

Putting It All Together: Out of Class Activities with Families and Student Beliefs. Out-of-class activities involving families, such as interviewing, community mapping, and service learning, offer valuable opportunities to support preservice EI/ECSE students' beliefs about families. These activities create opportunities for students to interact with families in authentic contexts and can also challenge stereotypes students may hold about the areas where families live, family experiences, or family belief systems. The ability for preservice students to apply their theoretical knowledge to real-life situations outside the classroom will also prepare them for future collaborative interactions in EI/ECSE settings.

CONCLUSION

This article underscores the role instructional methods, activities, and projects can play in supporting preservice EI/ECSE students to foster positive beliefs about families while allowing opportunities to apply relational FCPs and FPPs. The three primary instructional methods described included: in-class activities with families, in-class activities without families, and out-of-class activities with families. Instructional activities provide preservice students with opportunities to interact with families, engage in reflective practice, and develop positive beliefs about families. Ultimately, influencing preservice teachers' attitudes and beliefs about families holds the promise of equipping preservice EI/ECSE students with the essential skills and positive attitudes necessary to establish authentic connections with families. By doing so, they will increase trust families place in them as professionals and be better able to actively listen to families; this will allow them to provide individualized suggestions and utilize practices that better align with families' priorities and concerns for their children with developmental delays or disabilities. We explored the published literature with depth to provide comprehensive recommendations for faculty in preservice training programs to support their existing direct instruction in the classroom on relational FCPs and FPPs. However, we recognize that there may be instructional activities and strategies being implemented by faculty that are not documented in research. We would like to make a final recommendation and call on the field to consider additional research that documents the instructional strategies faculty are using in their coursework focused on student application of FCPs and FPPs in EI/ECSE preparation. In turn, this would improve training experiences for preservice EI/ECSE students by supporting them to best serve the needs of young children with disabilities and their families.

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