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Azure Dee Smiley
University of Indianapolis

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Our Experience: The Voices of Instructors
Teaching a Course on Families
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Abstract
Preparing “highly qualified” special educators that can effectively partner with the parents of students with disabilities is proving to be a daunting task, though widely acknowledged as essential in special education. This descriptive study examines the experience of instructors co-teaching a special education course focused on family-professional partnerships. The qualitative data shared focuses on the experiences of the university instructors. Findings illustrate instructor’s views of teaching a families course, thoughts on delivery methods, as well as perceptions of the impact of such a course on the conceptual change of teachers in regards to families of students with special needs. Implications for the field of special education teacher education are discussed.

A particular challenge in special education teacher education is preparing teachers for the involvement of families in the education of students with special needs, an essential aspect of special education policy and practice. Relationships between families and professionals are often a source of stress for both parties (Summers, Gavin, Hall, & Nelson, 2003). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) has detailed the role of parents in the diagnosis, identification, placement, and discipline procedures for students with disabilities and research supporting the role of family professional partnerships in the education of students with special needs has grown into an extensive body of literature (Carr, 2000; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; Knight & Wadsworth, 1999; Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull, Poston, & Nelson, 2005; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990; Wang, Mannan, Poston, Turnbull, & Summers, 2004). Although special education has devoted much attention to the importance of parent professional partnerships, how to prepare teachers for this portion of their professional responsibility remains unclear (Summers et al., 2005). Additionally, Brownell and her colleagues found that most programs included collaboration with families in their course work, but were not specific about the pedagogy they used to develop these skills (Brownell, Ross, Colon, & McCallum, 2005).

This article specifically explores the efforts of one university in preparing special education teachers for this portion of their practice through the eyes of the professors teaching the family involvement course with the purpose of better understanding the pedagogy utilized and the outcomes achieved from this coursework. This work builds from the foundational belief that professors are the teachers of teachers and understanding their experience is important in understanding the experience of teacher candidates. Historically, links between the achievement of K-12 students and teacher preparation have consistently illustrated the impact of effective preservice teacher instruction, but only recently have research efforts focused on understanding the conceptual change of teacher candidates as a measurable outcome of their professional preparation (Cochran-Smith et al., In Press). In order for professors to model best practice and “walk their talk,” examination of their practice and reflection on their experience is foundational.

The Pedagogy of Professors

University teaching has long been thought of as a solitary endeavor (Anderson, 1996). Yet, as many instructors discover, the benefits of being part of a group can be widespread. Johnston (1997) notes that faculty experience more success with different curriculum, various approaches to teaching, and extended learning for themselves and their students when engaged in collaborative efforts. Unfortunately, Stein and Short (2001) found several barriers for collaboration between university faculties, including negative attitudes, worry of hidden agendas, lack of interpersonal skills, and lack of support from university policy and procedure.

Faculties within schools of education seem to be willing to navigate these waters. Collaboration between faculty members is found in high numbers of education program descriptions; unfortunately many do not describe the nature of the collaboration (Brownell et al., 2005). Given the critical role of collaboration in special education practice and in family-professional partnerships, examining the perspective of university professors engaged in preparing students for family-professional partnerships plays a critical role in understanding a conceptual change in teachers in this aspect of their professional growth. This study describes the experiences of instructors negotiating the importance of personal teaching styles, interpreting loosely defined standards, and the infusion of personal experience in teaching while collaborating with colleagues that may hold different views on these issues.
Technology in Special Education Teacher Education

Schools of education working to fill teacher shortages and continue to produce “highly qualified” special education teachers have found technologically formatted instruction as one way to meet this need (Knapczyk, Chapman, Rodes, & Chung, 2001). In a nationwide study of distance education special education preparation programs, Ludlow, Conner, and Schechter (2005) found that many schools of education had developed distance education programs in an attempt to fill teacher shortages and save resources. Programs focused on teacher education and professional development taught with distance education approaches report high levels of success in educating educators (Rodes, Knapczyk, Chapman, & Chung, 2000). However, Ludlow et al. speculates that distance education programs still may not raise numbers of special education teachers to meet current needs, especially considering the variety of barriers to distance education including the need for expensive equipment, high non-resident tuition and fees, synchronizing schedules across time zones, and program dependence on state and federal funding. Additional research regarding the possibilities of distance education to produce a new generation of “highly qualified” special educators is needed (Finely & Hartman, 2004; Graham & Essex, 2001; Ludlow & Brannan, 1999; Ludlow et al., 2005; Ludlow & Duff, 2002).

The Families Class

At one large mid-western university, assisting special educators in learning how to work with families is addressed in a graduate level course, to be called “the families class” throughout this article. The overall purpose of the course is to enhance student knowledge and skills needed to provide services to individuals with disabilities within family and community contexts. The course began as a summer workshop in the early 1980s and focused primarily on the needs of families with young children. As course enrollment and the need for the professional competencies related to family and community collaboration expanded, the summer workshop evolved into the course as it is currently offered, available on campus once a year with 25-30 graduate students in special education and also from related service areas (i.e., counseling psychology, speech and language pathology, and adaptive physical education).

In the fall of 2003, the families class was offered in four off-campus locations using distance education technology including two-way video conferencing and a web-based component. In addition to these four distance education sections, the course was also offered on campus in a traditional format. A tenure track professor was in charge of overseeing the courses and ensuring that all sections cohesively addressed learning goals of the program and NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) standards.

All sections of the course provided students with an overview of policy and practice in special education related to the role of families within schools and the communities. In order to ensure that the course curriculum addressed the needed professional competencies and to share resources and ideas for teaching the course, instructors met weekly to discuss the implementation of the pre-planned class activities provided by the lead professor. Although course sections had some autonomy in determining activities to be used for each class meeting, they were strongly encouraged to use the suggested activities and assignments. These activities included a semester-long family project, family vignettes and course readings. In addition, students in each section participated in cross-section discussion groups (chats) online that addressed a variety of topics related to special education and families.

Researchers within the school of education at this university decided it would be valuable to gain a deeper understanding of the families class. A research team comprised of seven doctoral students and two tenure track professors examined the course from several perspectives including the experience of students taking the course, families participating in course activities, and instructors teaching the course. One of these tenure track professors was the originator of the course in the 1980s and the other was the current lead instructor for the course. This large scale, unfunded project took place over several years and employed a variety of research methodologies.

In this manuscript, I specifically explore the experience of the instructors teaching the families class. The perspective of instructors from each section of the course provide insight of the course delivery methods and how activities were perceived by instructors who differed in teaching experience and preference. Faculty members, like all teachers, are informed by attitudes and beliefs. These are valuable indicators for understanding the instructional activities used and why. The following questions provide focus to the study: (a) What were the experiences of the course instructors teaching the families class? (b) Did instructors perceive the course (and the curriculum) as an effective way to teach their students about family-professional partnerships? and (c) What course innovations or delivery methods are judged by course instructors as especially effective in assisting students in learning?

Method

In order to capture the complexity of information available and gain insight about the research questions, various perspectives were important to acknowledge. Multiple data collection procedures including interviews and observations were employed. The range of data collection procedures were designed to provide this study with a rich depiction of the context of each participant in the study, as well as ensure that disparate views were adequately represented (Creswell, 1998). Data triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and collaborative research team work sessions were research methodologies utilized as credibility measures for this study to enhance trustworthiness (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Descriptions of
the course, instructor participants, and the research team have been shared to broaden the context and increase reader particularizability (Brantlinger et al., 2005). By analyzing various personal portrayals, this research relies on inductive reasoning to document emerging themes.

Participants

This study includes the voices of all eight instructors of the families class. Participants included two tenure-track professors and two research related outreach center directors, all of whom had doctoral level training in special education, as well as one outreach center staff member with master’s level training in special education. The other three instructors were doctoral students fulfilling the requirements of learning about college-level teaching while teaching the course. In each of the four distance education sections, the graduate students were paired with a professor or center director. The on campus section was taught by the lead professor without a co teacher. Participants were given the option to decline participation in the study, but all chose to be included. Five of the eight instructors had personal experience in a family that included a member with a disability.

Research Team

Since the research reported here is a small part of a larger evaluation study, the research team for this portion of the study was comprised of members of a larger group that had common emerging questions about the role played by the instructors participating in the study. The research team of two doctoral students was sponsored by the lead professor of the families class. This professor also acted as a participant in this study, but did not begin interacting with the study until teaching the families class was completed. All three researchers were Caucasian with middle class origins. Two members of the group were female and the third was male, ranging in age from late twenties to mid fifties. The three researchers all had previous teaching experience within special education and teacher education. Additionally, each member of the research team had family members with identified disabilities which informed their practice. The combination of these experiences gives light to the commitment displayed by the research team about the importance of family-centered practice and the significance of special education teacher preparation (Butera, 1997; Butera, Matuga, & Riley, 1999). The team also had strong feelings about the importance of examining one’s own practice as an essential piece of effective teaching (Finley & Hartman, 2004; Gay, 2003; Graham & Essex, 2001).

Interviews

Instructor interviews were conducted by the same member of the research team mid-semester while the course was being taught. Additionally, all previous instructors for the course, including the course originator, were also interviewed to gain historical perspective on the course and its development. Interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to over an hour in length and were conducted face to face using a discussion format in order to create the opportunity to explore meanings. The instructor interviews were audio taped and transcribed in their entirety. Member checking was employed. Interview transcriptions were returned to the interviewee to check for accuracy and to seek additional response. Instruments used in the study were constructed by the research team in order to specifically target the aims of the research. Interview protocols were used to conduct semi-structured interviews (See Appendix).

Class Observations

A member of the research team conducted two classroom observations in each section of the course. Both traditional on campus courses and distance education formatted class sessions were observed. For the distance education sites, researchers made sure to collect anecdotal field notes from the perspective of both the instructor site behind the camera and the student site watching the monitors. Running field notes of class activities and discussion observed were conducted on the spot, expanded later and then added to the data set.

Data Analysis

Instructor interview data, student comments about the course harvested from course evaluations, and field notes from the class observations were each assembled as separate data sets and examined using qualitative data analysis methods in order to identify themes recurring across individuals and data sets (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Merriam, 1998). Triangulation of these various types of data include a cross validation of the data sources to find regularities and patterns (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). Each data set was read and reread by two to three members of the research team to improve reliability. The research team met weekly to develop a deep understanding of the data. Each member of the team developed themes, questions, and thoughts about the data to discuss during analysis sessions. In addition, this smaller research team also met weekly with the larger group to continue weaving this data into the larger study simultaneously taking place. These intense and multifaceted work sessions took place over one academic calendar year. For the purposes of this article only data from interviews and observations are included.

Results

The research team identified four emerging themes related to the research questions; Family Values, Teachers Teaching Teachers, Fighting the Good Fight: Teaching My Reality, Working Together, and How Do We Get to Them? These themes provide detail about instructors’ attitudes and beliefs about family professional partnerships, their experiences teaching the course, and their overall evaluation of course innovations and effectiveness. Each of the themes illustrates the perspective of the instructors negotiating the teaching of the course.
Family Values

Instructors valued the importance of teachers and schools connecting with families. Universally, they describe the overall goals of the course as vital to the profession. Alfred described the purpose of the course and his desire for students to actively listen to families. He shares,

The purpose of the class is to teach students how to relate to families who have kids with disabilities. The behind the scene issues that may affect the relationship so that they can be effective and involve parents in their strategies to help kids with disabilities improve their behavior or academic outcomes.

Lenny is also aware of the impact families have had on the development of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the need for the strong language about parents. He is concerned that teachers and parents often do not appear to collaborate well and he states, “The language in IDEA talks so strongly about families and parent involvement, but it really hasn’t filtered down.”

However, as a group, the instructors differed in what they viewed as important in the connection between teachers and families. Observational field notes depict a variety of teaching styles that reflect the diverse feelings instructors had about families. Some instructors valued the connection between teachers and families because they thought families had an important role as advocates for their children which could be facilitated by teachers. When discussing his own experiences as a parent Lenny states,

We needed to know about medic-aide, we needed to know about the future. We had always pushed him in reading and writing, but at this point we needed more adult skills. That’s what I am trying to get to my students; if you can’t think of the family holistically and you don’t know that these things are happening in the family, you’re probably not doing all you can to help them. There may be struggles going on that you may be missing, just trying to get people sensitive to each other’s situations.

In contrast, Alfred is concerned with teachers listening to families’ dreams and fostering their growth and often spoke about this in his class. He views families as an important ongoing part of education, not merely as advocates but in a broader sense. He worries that his students aren’t open to new ideas. Compared to the teachers he taught after a while.

One of the first questions we ask is, “do any of you have someone in your family with a disability?”

Ken builds on what his students needed to know about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the need for the strong language about parents. He is concerned about how they can succeed. He feels that his teachers take on the mentality of their students don’t know. More power to you I guess.

Mitch thinks teachers do not like to work hard and are not open to new ideas. Compared to the teachers he taught with a few years ago, he also worries that many of the teachers in his section are not ready to teach. Other instructors sometimes agreed with Mitch’s assessment of their students but they also accounted for this by explaining that the teachers (their students) lacked experience. They explained that it was a lack of experience that accounted for teacher’s lack of family involvement. In reflections about their teachers’ lack of experience Ken thinks teachers have a narrow view of the world and that they need to broaden their perspective. He goes on to explain that teachers often have to make decisions based on small amount of information. Field notes depict students engaged with the vignettes often voicing concern about not knowing the “whole picture” of the case study families. Ken responded to these concerns by conveying that teachers often did not have a whole picture of the students in their classroom. His response acted as a reiteration of the importance of the content of the course in their professional growth.

Because of their view that teachers were narrow in their perspective several instructors believed it was important for the course to include activities that helped teachers examine their own biases, experience or beliefs about families. Lenny
Reported that the way teachers (his students) think about families needed to change and wants the course to have that impact. He says,

“I hope what they take away is one very simple thing; I hope that they challenge their way of teaching and what they perceive as the reasons why families are uninvolved. That to me is the whole key issue. I worry that they still view the presence of families in schools as the criteria for what’s an involved family. That’s a very narrow view. Teachers still feel families should come to them.”

David thinks that teachers are not very supportive of parents and that it is hard to change their preconceived notions. As he puts it:

Sometimes teachers are pretty down on parents and in many cases think that parents are the source of the child’s problem. That the reason the child is disruptive, not cooperative, or not learning in the classroom is because the students aren’t getting the type of support at home, the type of family background that is really going to be beneficial. I think many teachers feel that if only we could get parents to do this or if this student had this type of parent they wouldn’t have any problems and one of the things we are trying to get teachers to do is overcome that attitude.

He thinks that teachers need experience to think about families. He thinks students have lots of experiences to draw upon but he finds it hard to get them to reflect on their experiences. Many of the instructors for this course valued this deeply because they relied heavily on reflections of their own lived experience when teaching the course.

**Fighting the Good Fight: Teaching my Reality**

Instructors often used their own experiences in families to guide their teaching. However, it is noteworthy that about half of the instructors did not report discussing their own family experiences. In such circumstances the overall tone of the class differed. A prime example was Lenny. Lenny teaches the course from his own perspective as a parent of a son with a disability. He explained that students relate to this:

“They know I have lived most of what we talk about and I think that helps draw it out of them. They’re speaking to somebody who has experiences—who tries to make them feel comfortable with their own experiences.”

Lenny’s experiences keep him genuine in his interactions with students. He embodies everything he teaches. Observational field notes depict students in Lenny’s section engaged in conversations and activities with a personal feel. As Lenny shared his own experiences students responded by asking more probing questions and offering more of their own experiences.

When instructors used their personal experience, more students became engaged in class discussions. Like Lenny, Ken and Gail shared personal stories to illustrate their teaching. Ken explained that his experiences as a parent affected his teaching “a ton.” He notes, “As a parent of kids with disabilities what’s important to me is that those kids’ teachers understand not just what their disability is and not just what my child’s limitations are, but also what their high points are.” Ken goes on to add how his experience as a parent impacts his interactions with students, and also his fellow instructors.

“I probably draw on my experience more as a parent then a teacher. I think they know that I am a parent of a child with a disability. This allows me to pontificate a little more. And I’m good at that. I think it gives me the credibility to do that. Gail is in the same situation and I can’t believe how many of us teaching these courses are in the same situation.”

Other instructors lacked parenting experience. Cindy cannot speak from experience, “I have a lot of friends who are parents. I am very cautious to say that I know what it’s like to walk in their shoes.” Cindy has little experience that connects with her students as her own teaching experience is limited. She, along with several other instructors, are teaching this course to fulfill a requirement and strive to remain professionally appropriate. Alfred also feels less personally involved with the course content. He notes, “I’m co-teaching that class as part of my doctoral program requirement, to have some teaching experience.” Mitch also lacks experience that would help him understand parent perspective. Under these circumstances, he struggles to connect with his students and tries to simplify the content. Reflecting on the course, he tells us:

“I would have varied the lessons more from the very beginning…. After a few weeks of relying totally on what was provided to us, I really sensed that the students were getting bored with the format of the lessons. I’ve become a great newspaper clipper. I’ve only been doing this for two months and I already have a box stuffed full of articles I have used in class. They loved that. I was concerned that it was too childish, but they thrived on it.”

As if to make up for a lack of personal experience as a parent, instructors sometimes told stories about their experiences teaching students with disabilities. Alfred notes, “Even though I have experience with families that is a more formal type of relationship, we talked about that and I think it was a very good experience.” This use of personal stories seemed especially powerful but was not universally employed. When asked what affected his teaching of the course, Mitch stated:

“I think probably my own teaching experiences and my father was deaf. So he had an exceptionality in that sense. I can see the impact his exceptionality has had on my family and I appreciate that perspec-
tive, but what I think impacts me most (when teaching the course) is thinking about the vignette and topic for that night so I can vary three hours so they aren’t waiting until they can just get out of here.

The data depicts a variety of philosophies and teaching styles displayed by the instructors. Even given these differences, the instructors were fairly unified on their perception of co-teaching the course and collaborating with other instructors.

Working Together

Instructors reported that they enjoyed co teaching the course. They learned from their co teacher, especially in circumstances where one teacher lacked experience. David shared, “The best part is getting to teach with Lenny. We have developed a very complimentary style and we use that to draw students out… Lenny can speak about the severe disability piece, where my daughter had a learning disability. Her disability really didn’t have the impact on the family the way that Lenny’s son does, so that is a different perspective.” Additionally, Alfred lacked experience teaching and valued the opportunity to share ideas and knowledge. “It’s nice to know that other people are doing the same thing as you and you can discuss.”

While Alfred valued the help he received through co-teaching, some co instructors struggled with differences in personal style and course ownership. Mitch had a sort of “hands-off” attitude to co-teaching. He often questioned the activities that were not his own and personal style was important to him:

But again relating to personal style, the person who is creating those lessons, that was her style, so that’s how she does it. How affective that is for her, it’s hard to say without being in the room and hearing what the students think. It is ultimately none of my business.

Planning meetings provided an opportunity for instructors to collaborate about their teaching. These meetings were not universally valued by the instructors. A variety of opinions were expressed about the planning meetings but overall the meetings appeared to have a different function for different individuals. Ken, Lenny, and David saw the purpose of the meetings as providing instructors with course content and activities that would enable each section to be “on the same page.” Instructors who were inexperienced in teacher preparation valued the fact that planning meetings provided them with strategies about how to teach the course. Instructors with more experience were less likely to value the meetings. However, they also thought the purpose of the planning meetings was to provide a long term goal for the course or to provide an opportunity for collaboration and discussion among colleagues.

I think that it would have been helpful to have time to collaboratively plan the class a little bit more and for all of us to have a long term vision of the class.

These individuals valued open-ended discussions related to the overall course context. Tina thinks the group should not have met every week. She thought the group should have gotten an overall vision of the class. She felt strongly that you shouldn’t be teaching the course if you need a whole lot of information about the content. She enjoyed brainstorming with her colleagues.

The instructors as a group where torn on their views of actual delivery of the course. Some believe the course was framed in a way that met the needs of students and promoted conceptual change, while others did not. Individual instructor assessment on this topic seems to greatly impact their own disposition while teaching the course.

How do we get to them?

Overall, instructors of the course reported enjoying teaching the course for a variety of reasons. All believed that the goals of the course were important and that it was very important for teachers to acquire competencies related to their expanded roles with families and the broader context of schools and families. Their response to questions about the course delivery methods and course innovations were mixed. Three of the instructors questioned the suitability of the use of technology for the course content. All of the instructors expressed frustration with the technology when it failed to operate in some sites on several occasions. However, most instructors acknowledged the value of the technology for its “utility for rural communities” despite the fact that most also explained “I prefer face-to-face.”

Responses to questions about various course innovations were also mixed. Most instructors reported valuing the opportunity to make use of activities that were available including the vignettes and the family project assignments. They also reported that they got “ideas and learned from one another in the planning meetings” but several instructors also reported “It’s nice to know that other people are doing the same thing and you can discuss it, but, at the end, I’m not sure that they (the other instructors) really try anything.”

Overall, there was a good deal of variability in instructor response to assignments and the activities that were provided. Often instructors valued the discussion topics that surrounded the vignette and family projects and reflected about the importance of them. As one instructor described it,

I like what’s done with using stories. I’ve never used stories before. I’m very fascinated by the power of stories and stories get people to take the content of a text and relate it to those stories and connect those to their own life story. I think its necessary…. There’s no better way to feel what you need to feel unless you step into things that are very uncomfortable. It’s risky and for most of these teachers it’s an opportunity to take risks that they probably wouldn’t take otherwise.
This response was not universal, however. One instructor told us, “I think sometimes the discussions that we have in class are important but I’m not sure they really learn anything.” Three instructors mentioned that they thought the activities could be structured more clearly and they objected to the amount of work required by the ongoing online assignments as well as the family project. One instructor told us that it was excessive to expect any instructor to “read more than eight pages double-spaced.” Additionally, three instructors reported that they were not comfortable with the amount of discussion required for the vignettes. One instructor explained that it was important to prepare activities that provided students with variety because students “don’t want to be focused too long on one sort of activity.” Instead of facilitating the discussion about the vignettes, they explained how they varied the assignments explaining:

I had a set of activities prepared and it was really varied. I had a lot of positive feedback, they really appreciated that. I know it’s a lot of work to do that. It is a lot easier to just sit and talk for three hours, but then you bore them to tears and they can’t wait to get out of there.

Observational notes expose a variety of teaching methods taking place. Even though instructors met weekly to discuss the shared curriculum, several sites implemented the curriculum in different ways. According observational notes, students showed movies and given more passive forms of instruction often were not engaged in the course activities. Observers witnessed students leaving the classroom, grading papers, and even talking on cellular telephones during class activities apparently unknown to the instructor behind the camera.

Contradictory, sites that engaged students in dynamic activities such as student led discussions, interactive debates, and problem solving scenarios displayed higher levels of engagement. Students that appeared to be educationally challenged throughout the course session appeared to remain on task. Interestingly, researchers also observed fewer students reporting to class sessions late or leaving early in sites that maintained a consistent level of interactive engagement over the course of the semester.

Discussion

Following trends within special education, this course was taught following a constructivist philosophy, while displaying competency based features through technological means. This aspect of professional development builds on Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (1999) work by encouraging teachers to collaborate in “deliberating about what is regarded as expert knowledge, examining underlying assumptions, and making the lives of families and communities part of the curriculum,” (Bondy & Brownell, 2004). Additionally, the course built on the case study approach described by McLellan (2004), as a means for instructors to “allow learners to actively construct knowledge that has significant real-world relevance.” Following McLellan’s strategy, these stories were coupled with discussion questions intended to help each student deepen their understanding of the family’s point of view and the effects of the community and culture on family functions and perspective. Even though the course adheres to theories of evidence based best practice in teacher education, this study depicts instructors often conflicted about whether the course curriculum and implementation really invoked a conceptual change in their students.

Harry and Klingner (2006) have found that service providers in an inner-city setting allowed their images of families, which were based on negative stereotypes, to affect the educational decisions made regarding their students. Additionally, Losen and Orfield (2002) document several cases in which school personnel verbalized “unabashed negative opinions” of the families of students referred to special education. The findings of this study support this research in a new way. The professors in this study, like the teachers in Harry and Losen’s studies, often responded in similar ways to their students and unintentionally recreated the very practices they are supposed to be interrupting. In the case of Mitch, he believed his students weren’t good teachers. He did not seem to recognize the impact of his own negative perception of his students on his practice, even though as a professor he was teaching this concept to his students. In many ways he and other participants were recreating a cycle of practice that they know from research is not best practice. The notion of “do as I say, not as I do” appears to be alive and well. Given the gravity of these trends in the field of special education and the need for conceptual change of special education teachers engaging with families, the findings of this study, while limited to one university setting, are troublesome and should act as a call to action and reflection for special education teacher educators.

The experience of the participants in this descriptive study urges future research to examine whether or not instructors truly have the knowledge and background to teach a course on families in the context of special education. Furthermore, collaboration between faculty members in schools of education should be examined more deeply to further understanding this professional dynamic and its use in the academy. While literature calls for more dynamic collaborative skills for teachers, teacher educators within special education must begin to explore what perspectives of collaborative skills they are depicting in their university classrooms. Special education as a field must learn from the recent work on conceptual change of Cochran-Smith et al. (in press), and pursue ways to assess the conceptual change we invoke in our students. We in special education teacher education must begin to walk our talk and hold ourselves accountable to the standards we have for special education practitioners.
References


Appendix

Instructor Questions
1. Do you like the format of this class? Why or why not? (Planning Meetings or Technology Aspect)
2. Do you think students are engaged by the course format?
3. Do you feel this class is impacting students’ attitudes and beliefs about families?
4. Is there anything you wish you had done differently so far in teaching this course?
5. Do you feel the Family Project, vignettes, text, and/or discussions were beneficial for your students?
6. Would you change anything about the course chats?
7. Are there any additional resources that you use or would like to have used to enhance the course?
8. What do you feel your students will take away from this class?
9. What do you think is critical about family/professional relationships?
10. Are there any personal or professional experiences involving families that forms your teaching?
11. What were the best and worst parts of teaching the course?