

PRAC 2021-2022 Assessment Grant Final Report

Developing an instrument to improve teacher candidate implementation of equitable practices in classrooms

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Summary

In the Division of Education at IUPUC, we prepare teacher candidates to enter into the teaching profession. We were informed by low scores on end-of-the-program Benchmarks that measure the understanding of the learner and their community inclusive of fostering a reciprocal relationship with families. Analysis evidenced that direct input from these two groups would advance the measures outlined in our Teacher Education Program. As part of and near the close of their teacher preparation, candidates serve as student teachers in a local classroom as a part of their clinical experiences. As teacher educators, we value sustaining relationships with learners, their families, and the community as an essential component of teaching. As a key area of interest in the teaching profession, measuring the impact of collaborative family and teacher-community involvement on children's educational performance is tantamount to good teaching (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). To address this gap, this project developed an instrument to measure teacher candidate effectiveness pertaining to their efforts in sustaining relationships with families and the community.

Initially, we set out to develop an instrument to measure how student teachers include families in their teaching practices. In the development of this instrument, we found that families define "inclusive" in different ways, and that most families feel excluded from the classroom or from knowing student teachers who are placed with their children. This made it difficult to develop an instrument to measure a practice that appears to only be accessible if the gatekeeper (mentor teacher in the room) has already established a welcoming and reciprocal relationship with families.

Methods

We invited families from the 27 classrooms where student teachers were placed to participate in a focus group to determine how families feel included in classrooms and how to choose the questions for a pilot survey to be sent to all of the families from those 27 classrooms. Families were invited via their classroom teacher's email communications. We conducted three

45-minute focus groups on Zoom, two in English and one in Spanish with three participants in each group. The focus groups narrowed our research questions and provided specific, targeted questions with a scale to elicit responses in a Google form (see attached survey). We sent the survey to all of the teachers in the 27 classrooms and asked them to distribute these surveys via electronic communication with families.

Analysis

In the initial focus groups, we found that Spanish-speaking families and those who identified as immigrants from India defined an inclusive classroom as receiving targeted and explicit direction for their child’s academic growth. However, families who identified as white indicated that they feel included when it is clear that the teacher likes their child and cares for their child. These differing expectations for creating inclusive, welcoming, and reciprocal relationships supported a unified survey to elicit feedback from families. It is in how the family interprets “inclusive, welcoming, and reciprocal” that will determine how they respond. Therefore, using explicit examples in the survey questions could differentiate between various inclusive practices.

The survey results are inconclusive, as there were only 28 respondents for the English survey and only one respondent for the Spanish survey. With 27 potential classrooms, we expected a larger response. However, it is clear that relying only on the classroom teacher for access to the families means that we assume that each teacher has an inclusive, welcoming, and reciprocal classroom space. It is possible that many families never received the invitations to participate.

Question	Classroom Teacher	Child	Student Teacher	Other option
How were you FIRST informed that a student teacher was in your child’s classroom	42.9%	35.7%	10.7%	10.7%

We had anticipated a difficulty in recruitment might be reflective of teacher practices pertinent to communication with families. If parents are reporting that more than one third of them learned of the placement of a student teacher from their child and not, from correspondence with their teacher, it is likely that efforts by the student teacher to communicate with families may face barriers when limits exist within the field experience setting. Such limits intimate a lack of knowing the family background and parents’ definition of what school means to them. Regardless of the initial findings based on limited participation, a window of insight highlights a privileged space occupied by Euro-centered families' perception of teacher-child relationships and the perception of what school means to children of color and/or multi-ethnic backgrounds.

These latter positions underscore an anticipation that school offers an entrance to advance in the social strata deemed typically designed for white middle class families -a common, meritocratic norm adhered to by school culture. The survey also indicates that families feel like their children and the family system itself are respected, however families report that student-teachers are not eliciting feedback or including them on decisions made about their children. This analysis offers us an opportunity to include qualitative questions to better understand parents' survey responses regarding inclusivity.

Challenges

The challenges in developing and implementing this survey center on access and communication with families. Administering the survey to families without direct communication with them made it difficult to recruit in larger numbers. We were also dependent on whether or not teachers had strong relationships with families and if they cultivated regular communication in variant ways beyond standard newsletters in English and electronic methods. The survey sought demographic information at its outset, which is noted to be a deterrent for participants. It is possible that we curtailed potential participants by asking questions about their identity and the identities of their children at the forefront rather than at the end of the survey, inclusive of making it optional. However, given the variance in definitions of inclusiveness during the focus groups, which were based on national origin and primary language, these questions necessitated ways to identify differences in responses to the student teachers, all of whom identify as white and English-speaking.

Changes to Address Challenges

As a means to increase respondent participation, it will be important to distribute paper surveys inclusive of online surveys, class dojo and other communication apps used by the individual teachers. As well as attending school events publicly when families are present including the utilization of potential variant voice-over, multi-lingual, and visual representations of the questions to ensure that all facets of family members of varying educational and cultural-linguistic backgrounds may participate freely. We will also add two required qualitative questions to identify specific experiences of inclusivity and exclusivity. This would have been foregrounded by having initial conversations with each individual teacher before sending out the surveys to advance and establish partnerships to enhance communication of our purpose and to understand a teacher's method of family correspondence. We plan to send out surveys again in FA22, where only five classrooms will be involved. This will allow us to determine how each classroom teacher sends out information so that we may tailor it to meet their needs as well as permit us to manage distribution within a reasonable number of settings. This will permit us to invite the student teacher in the process of data collection, since there will be a small number of student teachers expected in the fall of 2022.

Project Accomplishments

This project made clear that InTASC expectations for teacher candidates to develop reciprocal relationships with families was highly dependent on the classroom culture already developed by

the mentor teacher. Using this data can support the design of an evaluation process for choosing mentor teachers to support candidates in developing strong habits of inclusion. Through our focus groups with parents, we identified multiple perspectives on equity and inclusion and will continue to explore these practices as perceived by parents. We will implement this instrument again in the fall and evaluate our results after implementing the changes noted above. Another source of information that we did not expect to learn from this project was the ways in which parents value student teachers in the classroom. Often, student teachers are perceived to be a burden on the school and teachers as multiple individuals spend time mentoring and supporting them. However, according to parents, these student teachers are seen as important participants in their children's lives and parents would like them to spend more time in the classroom and participate in after school events, like open house and parent teacher conferences.