Preservice Teachers Listen to Families of Students with Disabilities and Learn a Disability Studies Stance

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> These families must be so sad. I just wonder what they do and if they have any type of normal life.

> I am not sure how I will work with parents. I think they probably look to the school for a lot of help.

These quotes were taken from preservice teachers' papers early in their teacher education program, in which they were asked to describe what they thought about the relationship between educators and families who have children with disabilities. These students were on the verge of an experience, as a part of an introductory class in special education, of spending time with and learning from families who had children with disabilities. This experience is a key aspect of their program, which is designed to (a) help eliminate students' fears and stereotypes about disability, (b) allow students to see families as resources and partners in support of their child's education, and (c) provide an opportunity for students to understand their role as an inclusive educator.

For nearly two decades, researchers have suggested the value of involving families in teacher preparation and practice as a way to help

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improve children's academic and social outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Ferguson & Squires, 1998, Harry, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In her early work on cultural reciprocity between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse families, Harry used contrasting descriptions of teachers' *leaning forward or bending backwards* in their efforts to collaborate. In this article, we take up her visualization of teachers' leaning forward to illustrate what we hoped that our students would do as they actively listened to families describe their experiences. As faculty engage in the work of educating preservice teachers, it is our hope to begin to add a richness of understanding to students' initial reactions of families' being "so sad," needy, or not normal. We hope that students will come out of this experience with a critical understanding of how disability is positioned in our culture as well as a strong commitment to creating space at school where families and children with disabilities can begin to work together as equals with teachers.

The need for partnerships that not only recognize the value of educators and families practicing together but that also recognizes the importance of practice that demonstrates awareness of and values differences has been a part of an educational mandate for over 35 years. In 1975, PL 94-142 (now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* [IDEA]) focused attention on collaboration among families of children with disabilities and those who serve children in schools. IDEA specifies parent participation as one of its major principles and contains guidelines and timelines that indicate how parent participation must include family-school interactions (Osher & Osher, 2002; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005). In fact, according to IDEA, parents are equal members in the individualized education plan (IEP) process (Yell, 2012). Additionally, as Yell, Katsiyannas, and Shiner (2006) noted, when schools are deemed unable to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, "a committee of school personnel and parents develop a two-year improvement plan" (p. 35), which illustrates the increasingly broad impact of parents on the educational process.

Further, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2008) emphasizes the importance of teacher candidates' ability to collaborate with families in addition to colleagues. In their 2008 standards, NCATE required teacher candidates to "communicate with students and families in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to cultural and gender differences" (p. 34), but this is something that teacher candidates continue to report feeling unprepared to do (Hansuvadha, 2009; Palmer, 2002). Their lack of experience with family collaboration has been noticed by families. A study that examined the barriers to collaborative partnerships found that families preferred "professionals

who really listen (and) who keep an open-mind to new ideas" (Defur, Todd-Allen, & Getzel, 2001, p. 28). Thus, the concern is how to facilitate teachers' self-awareness and critical thinking about these interactions and about the impact of social and educational policies and practices in which they play a part.

During this educational experience, students repeatedly used language that illustrated the tension that many families experience when trying to work with schools. Words such as "crusade," "roadblocks," and "struggles" were frequently found in students' writing when they described the families' interactions with the education system. Our analysis of interviews with culturally and linguistically diverse families showed that these tensions were considered disconnected visions, cultural disconnects, and procedural disconnects (Sauer & Kasa, 2011a, 2011b). It is of critical importance that we, as faculty engaged in teaching future teachers, not only impart the strategies necessary to build skillful collaborative relationships but also that we teach students to respond with critical cultural competence in regard to disability in general.

Disability studies scholars have called into question the work of special education researchers over recent decades, noting how we have failed to take on the broader social issues related to disability as one feature of diversity (Danforth, 2008). Disability studies theory challenges the construct of disability as located within a person and positions dis/Ability within a social, historical, and cultural construct (Taylor, 2003). The reason behind the choice to write the word as "dis/Ability" is to draw attention to the social-cultural emphasis and to intentionally avert the dominant deficit orientation that emphasizes the inability of the persons described (see Lunsford, 2005, for further discussion). Disability studies in education provides "advocacy for, as well as the viable approaches for enacting, meaningful and substantive educational inclusion" (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008, p. 447). The near absence of Disability studies in special/inclusive education has allowed the medical/deficit model to dominate educational discourse and to perpetuate the systematic oppression of our students with disabilities.

This article, which concerns an ongoing study, provides a description of how one teacher education program has sought to engage families with children with disabilities and utilize their expertise in the process of understanding special/inclusive education. Our research is part of the effort to develop more reflective, critical teachers who are capable of becoming the inclusive school leaders needed for the 21st century.

Method

This research is based on the archival work of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a face-to-face *Introduction to Special Education* course in the spring semester of 2009, the fall and spring semesters of 2010, and the spring semester of 2011 at a mid-sized western university. All students were seeking general and/or special education licensure and reflected the general demographic composition of the university: 25% students of color, 48% women, and 40% first-generation college attendees. In addition to studying critical disability studies readings, reading autobiographies written by people with disabilities, watching videos on the autobiographical experience of disability, and listening to guest speakers, students were required to spend time in the field with families, teachers, and support personnel whom they observed and interviewed.

A key feature of the course is collaboration between the university and the federally funded state Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC), as part of the "Families as Faculty" program. According to PTIC, 10% of the families with whom they work self-identified as culturally or racially diverse. In most of the introductory course section, the preservice teachers teamed up with families of students with disabilities to learn from them about their school experiences.[1] Using voluntary participation procedures, PTIC recruited families and provided an orientation workshop that included a presentation of the project and the families' and students' responsibilities.

Upon working with the families, we noted the lack of culturally and linguistically diverse family participants and secured additional grant funding to more actively recruit "minority" families. We used snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) through personal connections, offered a meal and accommodated children during the orientation, and provided a small stipend for the families' time. These efforts resulted in a few additional family participants for subsequent semesters. (The difficulty of building relationships between educational personnel and diverse families is a persistent issue, owing to institutional discrimination [Beratan, 2006] and a lack of perceived shared goals of social justice [Lamar-Dukes, 2009], which the authors take up in a subsequent study.)

The program is based on Sarason's work on the value of understanding unique family perspective and experiences (Fried & Sarason, 2002). To enable such an understanding, students were trained to interview families. They were provided with information about students with disabilities, role modeling by the professors and family guests, and an interview guide. If permission was granted, they also were provided

with a digital recorder to be used for transcriptions. The interview guide included the following items:

1. Tell me about your child.

2. Can you describe what has gone well in school?

3. Can you tell me about any struggles you have had?

4. What do you wish everyone would know about your child and your family?

Over the course of three semesters, 98 families participated in the project, and students conducted 125 interviews. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. The students were encouraged to actively listen to families and to use paraphrasing and follow-up questions to clarify understanding. They were discouraged from making it a formal interview; rather, they were told to think of it as a conversation and to allow for families to lead (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Because some situations offered the preservice teachers a chance to converse directly with the children with disabilities themselves and/or their siblings, additional suggested questions were provided, including, "Tell me about yourself, your family," "What kinds of things do you like to do?" and "What advice do you have for me as someone who hopes to become a teacher someday?"

The locations of these interactions varied, from the university classes to the families' homes, schools, and locations in the community. Nearly all of the interactions took place in a mid-sized western city, but a few interviews were conducted via Skype or in the hometowns of the students while they were home for holidays. In some instances, families agreed to have their conversations recorded and transcribed verbatim; these transcriptions accompanied the students' papers. The students subsequently wrote papers about their interactions with families and/or the support personnel, which became the primary source data that we examined for this study.

Data Analysis

Using a disability studies theoretical framework (Connor et al., 2008) and constant-comparative qualitative analysis procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), four sections of archival data that spanned the 2009-2010 academic year and two sections from the spring of 2011 were examined. The qualitative data included the family interviews and observations along with the students' papers based on those interactions. Additionally, researchers examined anonymous course evaluations. Our method followed the approach used by other

researchers who examined preservice teachers' observation notes and reflections to learn about how their experiences might influence a change in attitude (Danforth & Navarro, 1998; Novak, Murrary, Scheuermann, & Curran, 2009). Novak et al., utilized student reflection journals as data and the constant-comparative approach for data analysis. In their study of speech acts focused on the use of *mental retardation* in common parlance, Danforth and Navarro's (1998) undergraduate special education students documented events in their daily lives in which they witnessed a spoken, written, or media reference to *mental retardation*. These students wrote detailed descriptions of the setting, gestures, and exact dialogue followed by extensive reflections for each occurrence. Because they were interested in examining "the meanings encoded in cultural ways of using certain language" (p. 33), Danforth and Navarro did not focus on the number of occurrences but, rather, grouped the samples thematically.

Similarly, in our study, we were less interested in frequency data than we were in learning how the preservice teachers' attitudes and ways of knowing might be influenced by spending time with and interviewing families of students with disabilities. In our repeated readings of our students' papers, we paid attention to what they focused on as well as the words that they used to describe the situations they encountered and the families with whom they interacted. Individually, we took memo notes and developed codes. After several individual readings of the data, each professor-author shared her initial codes with the other, and, using inductive reasoning, we collapsed codes and then came to a consensus on three general themes: (a) preservice teachers' acknowledgment that students with disabilities and their families are complex, unique, and a useful resource, (b) preservice teachers' change in their views and attitudes toward constructs of normalcy, and (c) preservice teachers' understanding that their role included advocacy for inclusive practices.

"Parents really have a lot of knowledge":
Families are Complex, Unique, and a Useful Resource

As noted in the student quotes in the introduction to this article, students entered this experience with a sense of pity for the families and a great deal of hesitancy. Students reported feeling "scared," "very nervous," "unsure of what to expect," and "hesitant to be around disability." Much of this fear seemed to come from the dominant cultural notion of disability as undesirable, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable. After this experience, students reported that they had learned to listen and to get to know individuals with disabilities and their families. Students overwhelmingly commented on the value of getting to know people with

disabilities and their families, even when some had noted their initial fears and anxieties. One student stated:

> Families as Faculty lets a student learn about a disability in a more hands-on way than just learning from a textbook ever could. Meeting Sam, James, and Michael (children with autism) was a great experience and led me to believe that not only should a person be required to attend more than just one SPED class while studying to become a teacher but they should require more interaction with students with a learning disability.

This student keenly recognized the need for more information, more time to learn about disability, and more interaction. Absent from reflections after the visits were the student's initial fears related to disability. Another student noted, "Going over to Colin's to talk more with his mom and to get to know them and their situation a little better was big in easing my fears." Getting to know a student with a disability as a part of a university class is a first step in teaching students to reach out and communicate with families.

As students broke down their barriers and learned to reach out to parents through conversation, they learned that families have a lot to offer when they are working with them to support their children. Student comments included: "I now will seek out families to help me when I struggle . . . parents really have a lot of knowledge," "Man, this family had a ton of ideas!" and "How could I ever be successful without them?"

While participating in this experience, families of children with disabilities were asked to take the lead, design the time that they would spend together, and share all that they thought pre-service teachers needed to know. In this way, students were put in the position of learning from the families. Through this experience, students realized that, to successfully support students with disabilities, the students will need to work with the family, seek their advice, and work together to utilize the student with disabilities' strengths so that they can be a participating member of the school. This move toward a collaborative attitude illustrates the impact of disrupting certain power structures between families and schools.

In addition to the experience of meeting with families, students read autobiographies by people with disabilities. One student, who was already teaching in schools at the time, stated that the experience offered "a rare opportunity to look inside the minds of (her) students and hear the feelings that I'm sure they can relate to." After reading *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone*, an edited collection of autobiographies by Biklen (2005), another student wrote:

They each explain the challenges they face while dealing with other peoples' ignorance and misunderstanding as well as show their sense of humor, imagination, and intelligence. The book helps its reader to better understand how people who have been "classified with autism interpret themselves and the world."

The time spent with families and reading autobiographies allowed students to gain insider information about the nuances and the heterogeneity of experiences among people who share similar diagnoses. From parents, students began to consider the value of working together and what they, as teachers, could gain from parent knowledge. From the autobiographies, students began to understand the experience of disability in a more in-depth manner.

"They are a normal family":
Questioning of Assumptions

The preservice teachers showed a shift in their views and attitudes and many began questioning constructs of normalcy. Several students used the word *normal*, as in "They are a normal family," after their family home visits. One student wrote, "Normal kids, normal family. I am ashamed to admit I did not expect that!" while another noted, "I saw passion, love, intense hope, and drive . . . I did not know that would be there; I will always remember that." These comments illustrate their initial cognitive dissonance between their assumptions about families and what they found once they began to interact with families. In some instances, the questioning of the normalcy construct emerged directly from the parents and the children themselves. One student's observation notes, taken while riding in the car with a family to the child's hippotherapy[2] session, read:

> The mother of an eight-year-old girl with velo-cardio-facial syndrome and Prader-Willi syndrome doesn't like when people make her child seem like "an alien or abnormal." She says (her daughter) is as normal as a kid gets. (The brother) joins in from the back (seat of the car) and exclaims, "Yeah!! She loves Hannah Montana, her favorite food is mac 'n' cheese, she likes the color pink, and wants to be a princess. What normal eight-year-old girl isn't like that?"

This construction of the idea of normalcy is something that is increasingly being challenged by people with disabilities and their advocates. In her oft-cited book, *Claiming Disability*, Linton (1998) explains how the different interpretations of the normal/abnormal dichotomy indicate different values. She describes scenarios in which people who are discussing people with disabilities use categories that rely on abstractions of what constitutes normal, as in "normal children," as though this construct is

absolute, a permanent descriptor of a person or group of persons. Linton explained, "Setting up these dichotomies avoids concrete discussion of the ways the two groups of children actually differ" (p. 24). If we or, in this case, our preservice teachers come to describe people with disabilities and their families as "normal," we are acknowledging them as equal to or more like us than unlike us. This notion of questioning normalcy begins to subvert the power structures that are endemic in school-family dynamics.

In one paper, the student incorporated self-advocate Mooney's (2007) discussions of normalcy:

> Early in the book, Mooney discusses "normal" and the idea of "normalcy." He makes the observation that there are two types of people in the world, people with clean carpets and people without clean carpets. Meaning he spent his childhood with carpets that were animal stained and ill kept, and until late into his adolescence didn't realize that there were people whose carpets were clean all the time. His idea of "normal" when it came to cleanliness of a home was untouched until he was presented with another reality. This parallels most of his life submerged with a "reality" of disability.

The student then wrote at length about one of Mooney's friends, Kent, and how he wasn't considered "normal." He was called "defective," she wrote, "yet when he was performing on stage he excelled." The student then asked the all-important question about how we ourselves construct concepts of normalcy and dis/Ability: "So, when in fact can you consider something a disability?" The presumed answer, that these concepts are created in context, echoes Disability Studies scholars such as Kliewer and Biklen (2007), who explain, "Human behavior, communication, and intent do not have built-in, universal meanings" (p. 2581). This student later wrote about how "society's view on an issue has such a strong hold and influence on what we think ourselves." She understands the value in questioning assumptions, particularly as reflected in her final comment: "We have to constantly reexamine what we think about things especially regarding disability."

When the students used words such as "surprise" to describe how they felt upon meeting people with disabilities and their families, it showed a change in understanding to one in which people with disabilities represent the natural complexities evident in human variation. This change allowed the preservice teachers to see disability in individuals as only one aspect of the person. There was a change in thinking that happened in many of our students once they relinquished control of the environment and interaction. Because their meetings often occurred in the family's home, with the families set up as the purveyor of information or the "expert," the power shifted from the more typical scenario

in which the families are visitors who are seeking information at the schools. This change then enabled the students to re-conceptualize the construct of normalcy.

To illustrate the impact of how preservice teachers conceptualized normalcy anew, we present an excerpt from the narrative of a student in response to a home visit with William (a pseudonym), a young man with multiple disabilities who uses a wheelchair to move and who types to communicate:

> He has several unique qualities which increase your need to be around him. These include his sense of humor, sense of social justice and his knowledge of sport teams and a huge desire to participate in "normal" events such as camping, rafting, youth leadership conference and concerts. He likes to participate is everything that his family does . . . William dislikes being separated from other people and talked down to. He is a very intellectual person who needs opportunities to share his gifts. He believes everyone should be treated fairly despite handicaps, color, gender or anything else that may differentiate. He just wants to be normal and be treated normal. William has wishes just like you and me.

In this excerpt, the preservice teacher began to take note of William's interests and personality characteristics outside of the more common discourse around people with disabilities, especially in the case in which the person has more visible differences. In her final sentence, she addressed an anonymous "you" and includes herself as someone like William, as an equal.

Some students wrote directly about the normalcy construct at length, making connections between their experiences and course readings. One student wrote explicitly about identity and her interactions with a youth labeled with a disability and his family; her section heading was, "Being 'normal'" (quotes in original). She included an excerpt of her conversation with the youth and then asked a question about how social interactions create dis/Ability:

> Asking Peter how he felt about his disability, he said, "It's ok." So then he was asked why having a disability was just "Ok." He answered by saying, "Even though I'm in a wheelchair, I don't want to be." For teachers, this is why acceptance for students with disabilities by their peers is important because the students with disabilities need to feel comfortable going into a general education classroom . . . So, is it because people treat others with a disability differently that makes the students have that desire of being "normal"? As Peter's father said in an interview, "People will always judge Peter and determine certain abilities or lack thereof even though he can do much more than often given credit." Having a disability can leave constraints on how others

> interact and treat their peers who get included into a general education classroom. A person's "greatest desire is to be seen and treated as just another 'normal' student" because they do like to interact with their peers, but the disabilities can "distance you from people" (Low, 1996, p. 6). It is important to stop placing and changing "labels" on students with disabilities so that the attitudes toward the disabled can start changing as well.

That this student focused a section of her paper on the normalcy construct and how teacher attitudes might contribute to undermining a general sense of belonging illustrates a shift from fear and difference as indicative of stigma to a greater understanding of the importance of valuing human diversity.

The following excerpt from another student's paper illustrates a similar emerging awareness. The student wrote about the history of the treatment of people with disabilities and quoted an author who had "broken it down" into seven eras:

> "The era of extermination, the era of ridicule, the era of asylum, the era of hope for education, the era of disillusionment, the era of integration, and the era of technology" (Low, 1996, p. 5). Notice that when looking at the names of these seven eras, people with disabilities have never seen the era of equality, the era of acceptance, or even the era of normalcy. Because of this, (the mother) feels "we need to begin teaching children acceptance of diversity."

Despite students' increasing awareness of the impact of societal values on dis/Ability, many of these preservice teachers continued to show their own social acculturation and stereotypes, as evidenced by comments in which they express "surprise" at the abilities of the people with disabilities whom they encounter and emphasize families' "patience." This opportunity to learn from families and people with disabilities is viewed as a beginning to the journey of unlearning cultural stereotypes that strip individuals with disabilities of complexity and render families of students with disabilities in a position of being pitied.

The Teacher's Role in an Inclusive Context
The preservice teachers in these classes seemed to have learned that their role involves being inclusion advocates. One aspect of this role became evident in the way that they referred to children with disabilities. There was an overwhelming conscientiousness with regard to students' descriptive language when writing or talking about people with disabilities. In ways similar to that of the students in Danforth and Navarro's (1998) study, our students frequently commented on their increased awareness of the differences between the person-first

language of families and school-based discourse whereby students were often referred to as "SPED students" or other acronyms based on disability labels.

In class, students came to stop themselves or classmates mid-sentence to reconsider how they were describing a person's impairment. For instance, when one student began to describe her interaction with a child labeled with autism, the student said, "I was watching an autistic kid." Then she paused, seemed to reflect as she searched for the words, and finally resumed her story, but this time recasting the child as a student first: "When I was watching a student with autism . . . " Class discussions about changing attitudes in regard to person-first language and the underlying assumptions that words reveal ensued. In addition to alerting students to current APA guidelines that require the use of person-first language, we referred to autobiographic writing to examine this notion of language preferences. One example can be found in an online discussion in which the moderator, herself a person with a disability, responded to a letter from another person with a disability who found the idea of reclaiming older language such as "gimps" or "crips" disrespectful (Byzak, 2011). "In principle, I support person-first language," she writes, "as it arose from within our own community—unlike such euphemistic garbage as "differently-abled" and "special needs."

It is not surprising that there is a lack of agreement within groups of people labeled with disabilities in regard to language preferences, but dominant discourses are increasingly being questioned. One example is the recent responses to Minnesota congresswoman Michelle Bachmann's assertion that a vaccine that protects females against cervical cancer caused a woman "to become retarded." While the medical community questioned the accuracy of her statement, those in the disability community questioned her understanding of the social impact of her language. Especially concerning, explained Peter Burns, a national disability group spokesman, is the fact that Bachmann was a member of Congress when they passed Rosa's Law, in 2010, which officially removed the use of "mental retardation" in all federal legislation.

The analysis of students' papers suggests that they began to see themselves as having to take the issue of using person-first language into both school settings and personal and public conversations if they were to become allies with the families and their children with disabilities. A student acknowledged the change in emphasis from the impairment to the person, noting the "heavy implications." The authors understand the complexities of language preferences and readily acknowledge that some people with disabilities themselves elect to not use person-first language. In response to student queries about these inconsistencies,

we engage them in discussion that might reflect what Disability Studies scholars refer to as "teaching the tensions" of a disabled identity (Chen, Kudlick, & Kirchner, 2004).

As part of the students' emerging sense that their role as teachers would involve questioning language use in schools, their writing suggested that they were adopting a role as inclusive advocates for the children with disabilities. The following example of a student's writing shows an increased willingness to teach all students, regardless of their abilities, and that this student came to view inclusion as not just possible but as a moral imperative:

> We are not here to only teach them [students with disabilities], they are here in our path to teach us as well—to be more compassionate people, to value difference, to heed patience, and to remind us that if we get stuck in a rut, mix it up a little, there are endless possibilities for gaining insight. I learned I need to be accessible to the student through keeping an open mind about their potential and ways to achieve it and accessible to the parent through communication. Problems were solved with a "How" and not "Why" attitude; families have a "can do" attitude.

That the students picked up on these orientations, and that how they perceived situations would have an impact on how successful inclusion would be for their future students, is important. In other words, these students seemed to learn from families how their own attitudes would lead to behavioral outcomes that would directly influence the success (or failure) of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

In their role as inclusion advocates, several students identified families' unique knowledge as tools for assisting them when supporting their students in inclusive classrooms. For instance, one student stated, "Listening to families can be a way to gain insight into reaching students." Another student observed an elementary classroom in which there was a new fifth grade girl from Spain who had Down syndrome. He wrote about the teachers' reliance on the child's family and how they worked together "to really understand" that her sometimes-troubling behavior "was not deviance but confusion." This student witnessed a positive collaborative experience between a school and a family to what he called "create that crucial missing connection" that the child needed to show her talents and learn in an inclusive school context.

The understanding that inclusion is something that benefits all students can be seen in the following excerpt from a student paper based on family home visits with a young man with multiple disabilities (described above):

> They treated William as an equal and as one of the boys, entitled to

all the experiences they were having. He had teacher aides in school, but his middle school aide was not only his aide, but was an asset to the entire school. He was a catalyst in making the school handicap accessible and changing the attitudes of teachers towards special needs children. William was fortunate to have many experiences of positive, problem solving challenges in school enriching his life and others . . . The principal refused " . . . to place a futon in the library for William to stretch out." This was a small accommodation for William, but would also have been used for all students.

Another student reflected upon the need for schools to increase access to materials and resources for "all students [because] everyone can benefit from adaptations, tools, technology and more books in the classroom." After their family interactions, the students began to see that students with disabilities were *assets* to inclusive classrooms. Further, they were able to analyze classroom experiences and notice when efforts to accommodate could be made to increase student participation, membership, and learning.

Discussion

Qualitative analysis of the archival data from six sections of an *Introduction to Special Education* class shows that preservice teachers came to appreciate families' willingness to share their personal stories and increasingly valued their knowledge. From the analysis, three themes emerged: (a) preservice teachers' acknowledgment that students with disabilities and their families are complex, unique, and a useful resource, (b) preservice teachers' change in their views and attitudes toward constructs of normalcy, and (c) preservice teachers' understanding that their role included advocacy for inclusive practices. The preservice teachers expressed a greater understanding of the complexities of families' experiences, which they shared with one another through class discussions. They also indicated a greater understanding of the uniqueness of the within-the-family construct and its inherent complexity. In addition to the insights gained from family visits, the students increased their understanding of individuals with disabilities from the reading of autobiographical works that offered them an understanding of disability as a social construct.

In his historical review of the relationships between families and schools, Ferguson (2008) cautioned researchers and practitioners against generalizing families as "monolithic" in their responses to having a child with a disability. He emphasized the importance of acknowledging how complicated and varied families can be and noted how their constructions

are "certainly influenced by class and other demographics. Probably most important, parents responded to their children's needs in a local context of the programs and supports available to them" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 57). The preservice teachers in this study showed they were greatly affected by their interactions with families and that their understanding of the complexities of disability increased.

Overall, students' writing showed a shift in thinking away from the dominant deficit-based model in which families are not valued or welcomed into schools to a perspective in which students with disabilities and their families were viewed as "normal." After interacting with families in contexts in which the families were located in positions of knowledge and power, these preservice teachers began questioning constructs of normalcy and how the structures and practices in schools, along with the wider social and cultural discourse, played a role in creating disability. Some students struggled with the dominant discourse and practices within educational structures that seemed to devalue families or their children. However, why more students did not indicate cognitive dissonance remains unclear and suggests that further interrogation of assumptions are needed.

In regard to the students with disabilities themselves, preservice teachers seemed to benefit from direct interactions and repeated informal conversations. The students explicitly noted the impact of "getting to know" students with disabilities and their families on their attitudes, describing the experiences as "eye-opening." In addition to articulating an increased awareness of how language use reflects orientations (e.g., relocating the disability from within a person to a social interaction), students expressed change toward greater "comfort" with and "confidence" in their abilities to work with students with disabilities and their families.

With the understanding of students with disabilities and their families as complex, knowledgeable, and more "like me" than different, the preservice teachers emerged as more critical thinkers who questioned labeling and exclusionary educational practices. Several students realized that students with disabilities benefitted from inclusion and wrote about the importance of advocating for students with disabilities and their families.

These findings sound optimistic, and we realize the possible influence of our positions as professors upon our students' writings and discussions, for which they were likely concerned about their grades or with openly contradicting what they thought we might want them to say or write. However, some of the data we examined included anonymous course evaluations that echoed these sentiments. We did not explicitly assign Disability Studies theoretical readings in these introductory

courses, although both professor-authors talked about disability from this framework. Further, the selected families who participated in the Families as Faculty program and the self-advocacy tone of the autobiographies that the preservice teachers read seemed to support several of the tenets of Disability Studies, such as privileging the voices of people labeled with disability (Connor et al., 2008). That said, the study was limited by some of our data collection procedures in that we did not collect specific demographic data about the families or our students. Additionally, the design of this study did not include a formal pre-post component; thus, we were unable to more explicitly determine how this course played out in terms of changes in the teachers' daily practice.

Upon review, as teacher educators, we now see how our coursework should include explicit Disability Studies instruction, such as described by Ware (2008) in regard to her work with teachers, who experienced Disability Studies incorporated into the General Education Language Arts curriculum. Gill (2004) similarly calls for incorporating Disability Studies throughout K-12 curriculum to challenge the realization that "a significant portion of our instruction is filtered through various paradigms and understandings of how the world operates," which, in turn, directly affects not just the content but also a teacher's pedagogy. Ferguson and Ferguson (2006) suggest that teachers find the "proper attitude" in their efforts to collaborate with families through the use of a Disability Studies frame. These researchers indicate that explicit work in Disability Studies needs to be done in K-12 school contexts, allowing for "counter-narratives" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001) to emerge, which lead us to conclude that all of our preservice teachers need preparation in these critical theoretical and pedagogical approaches to learning.

In Sarason's expansive work in education, he explains how school patterns of interactions, procedures, and rules reflect assumptions that are not often clearly articulated (Fried & Sarason, 2002). He argues that, for increased understanding between schools and families to emerge, power relationships need to be acknowledged. To bring these issues to the fore, more overt discussions about power imbalances could occur in teacher preparation courses. Notably, the results of our study suggest that the involvement of diverse families in teacher education programs facilitates preservice teachers' understanding of the complexities of the intersection between disability and other marginalized groups and our role in the social construction of disability (Sauer & Kasa, 2011a). What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which the change in preservice teacher attitudes results in substantive and longitudinal change. Follow-up studies with the students as practicing teachers are needed to determine the long-term impact, if any, of these interactions with families.

Although family involvement is mandated by legislation in IDEA and proven effective for student achievement, teachers continue to report feeling underprepared to understand the diversity of the families of their students with disabilities and the complexities involved as a means to effectively communicate and collaborate with these families (Hansuvadha, 2009; Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Palmer, 2002; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). To address these issues and to facilitate teachers' increased critical thinking and awareness of their role in perpetuating social exclusion in schools for students with disabilities, we suggest that those of us in teacher preparation more thoughtfully take up Disability Studies in our coursework. Although our study describes how opportunities to work with and listen to families early in teacher preparation seems to mitigate some of the fears and misunderstandings that preservice teachers might have toward families, further examination into the long-term impact on these students, once they enter the profession, is warranted.

Note

[1] There have not been enough families recruited to enable all students in all sections to pair up with families. In some cases, students found families on their own or interviewed teachers or other support personnel.

[2] Hippotherapy is the use of horses in physical, occupational, and sometimes spech therapy for individuals with disabilities.

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