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Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about and Experiences with Parents and Parent Involvement

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Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about and Experiences with Parents and Parent Involvement

by

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Dissertation

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Dedicated, with love, to Andy.

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Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about and Experiences with Parents and Parent Involvement

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Candice Danielle McQueen, Ph.D.
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A review of teacher education literature reveals that preservice teachers are entering the teaching profession with minimal knowledge of how to involve parents in their children's education. Research also indicates that preservice teachers' prior beliefs and experiences play a critical role in the development of their thinking as they prepare to become teachers (Hollingsworth, 1989) while coursework and field experiences contribute to the shaping of preservice teachers' belief systems (Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997). While there exists a large body of research on teacher beliefs and how beliefs affect teacher practice, these studies have not related specifically to if and/or how beliefs influence preservice teachers' practices related to parent involvement. Few studies have focused on beliefs and experiences that have increased preservice teachers' understanding of parents.

This qualitative study investigated six preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about parents and parent involvement and how the preservice teachers' life histories influenced those beliefs, as well as what knowledge and experiences during coursework and student teaching were most salient in their understanding of parents.

The context for this research was directly before, during, and after these six preservice teachers' student teaching semester in which they were placed in both a middle and elementary school setting. This study addressed three questions: (a) What are these preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about parents and parent involvement? (b) What are these preservice teachers' experiences related to parents and what are their interpretations of these experiences? (c) How do these preservice teachers' experiences with parents influence their beliefs about parents and parent involvement?

Using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axial coding process to analyze the data, four major themes emerged: parents should be involved in their children's education; parent-teacher interactions will be negative; parent involvement is not the responsibility of the classroom teacher; and certain parents will not be very involved in their children's education. Implications for teacher education from these findings include addressing proactive parent involvement strategies more thoroughly in teacher education coursework, matching student teachers with cooperating teachers who involve parents proactively, and providing preservice teachers with more opportunities to interact with parents before and during student teaching.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Letter

It was the beginning of another exciting, full school day. I had spent hours planning objective-driven activities in each subject. My lesson plans were finally done and ready to be implemented. I looked around the classroom as I moved into the hallway to gather arriving students. I was so proud of all the projects along the walls and the research papers on the shelves. My students were so lucky to have a teacher like me. I wondered if they knew I had maintained a 4.0 grade point average and was given the highest honor a student teacher could achieve from the university. I figured that the knowledge of my past accomplishments probably did not matter much to them. They knew I was a great teacher because of how hard I worked and how much thoughtful preparation I gave each lesson.

As the students entered the classroom, I immediately began getting jazzed up for the math lesson. I was excited that I could devote a few minutes to polishing up my math lesson while the students independently moved through their morning routine. Suddenly my thoughts on the smoothness of my classroom organization were abruptly interrupted. Mary Dugger approached my desk with a legal-sized envelope with my name on it. I couldn't believe she had broken the routine to give me the envelope. Didn't she remember that all notes were picked up with lunch money as the student roll was called? I hesitantly took the envelope and reminded

her of the routine as I walked her to her desk. I was glad I had returned to my own desk and sat down as I began to read the contents of the envelope.

November 18, 1996

Mrs. McQueen,

I am writing this note at 11:30 at night so I may not sound very coherent – please bear with me. I am thoroughly exhausted from dealing with Mary's homework. Not only has she worked on homework since she got home from school, but she has been crying for the past hour. She started crying after I made her go to bed without completing her homework for tomorrow. I ask you not to penalize her for something I have instructed her to do. You apparently can't accurately gauge the amount of homework you are giving your students, so parents are forced to do the gauging for you! Do you realize that these children are 5th graders – not college students? I am not alone in thinking this. I only wish other parents of your students would speak up – everyone feels overwhelmed. You need to communicate with us about your expectations. We only know what our children are telling us. If you want our kids to succeed – tell us how to help or scale back.

Mary can't possibly finish all the work you are assigning. For example, just tonight she had a test to study for, a project to work on, and computer research to do. I realize you assigned the project two weeks ago, but she has been so overwhelmed with homework every night that she never had a chance to work on it and now it is due tomorrow – the same day as a test. I work all day and then have to come home to a child who is frustrated and overworked. I don't know what to do! You are going to have to slow down. Spend more time on projects in class. Take time to review for tests in class. Stress that grades aren't everything! And, keep in mind that these children have other extracurricular activities they attend at night. Because I work, I can't meet with you to discuss this matter during the day. You can talk with my husband if you would like, but please don't call me at home or work.

Mrs. Sue Dugger

I was completely shocked. I had not seen this coming at all. I spent over a week trying to sort out Mrs. Dugger's comments in relation to what I thought about my own teaching. I dealt with several emotions during that week, including anger, sadness, and pride. Initially, I wanted to defend myself against a scathing attack. Who did Mrs. Dugger think she was? Why did she not try to step into my shoes for a week and teach a classroom full of students? How could she say such things to a person who put her heart and soul into teaching? Then, I began to feel sorry for myself. What had I done to deserve this? Why had I been working so hard? Why didn't anyone appreciate me? Finally, I dealt with my own ego. What if other teachers found out? How was I going to save face with other parents? How could I get out of this mess while still maintaining my exemplary reputation?

The Question

After a week of deliberation, I actually chose not to respond to Mrs. Dugger at all. In fact, I decided to ignore the parent population entirely. Apparently, Mrs. Dugger had made an unsubstantiated general statement about other parents agreeing with her. I had not heard from other parents about homework. I decided that I was hired to teach fifth graders, not deal with parent complaints. I knew I was doing a good job. My test scores were fine and student outcomes on other assessments were excellent. I decided to keep pushing my students while avoiding the issues brought up in the letter.

It wasn't until almost two weeks later that I was forced to confront the letter again. I was called into J. Moore's (the principal) office the week after Thanksgiving to discuss Mrs. Dugger. She had called to talk to J. Moore about the homework problem and had informed him that I had not responded to her note. Mrs. Dugger went on to say that I was not communicating expectations to parents about what I wanted regarding homework or other things for that matter. After his factual description of Mrs. Dugger's phone call, J. Moore began our discussion by asking me about my personal feelings on homework. He listened as I described how I assigned homework based on what I had not gotten to on my lesson plans for the day. I told him that I was not assigning busy work, but assignments that complemented the day's lessons. Moreover, I was using a variety of assignment strategies in order to meet and/or exceed the minimum standards set up by the school district. After my lengthy explanation, he simply leaned toward me and asked, "How are your relationships with your parents?" I was taken aback by the question. As I recall, I said I thought they were okay. J. Moore told me to think about it and see him again tomorrow.

After reflecting on J. Moore's question about parent relationships, I began to explore my experiences in teaching prior to gaining employment. For the first time, I realized my past individual merits and accomplishments were not necessarily indicators of my success in the classroom, particularly with parents. Consequently, I began to discern many of my shortcomings. I recognized that I was struggling with parent relationships and I did not know how to remedy the situation. Internally, I knew why I was assigning the homework, but I did not know how to communicate

that to the parents. I even found myself wondering why I needed to communicate that to them - I was teaching fifth graders, not their parents. In an attempt to find answers, I mentally searched my repertoire of knowledge and skills to access my experiences with parents in the classroom. My undergraduate teaching preparation had been filled with learning theoretical teaching strategies and methods with some practice, but had lacked discussion of how to build a parent involvement relationship. In fact, I realized that I had never even had a class or even a part of a class devoted to dealing directly with adult relationships or communicating with parents. Although my student teaching experience had been very successful, I was teaching isolated lessons in someone else's classroom. I had not personally created the classroom environment or built any connecting and meaningful relationships with the parents. My focus had been on creating stellar lesson plans in order to teach objective-driven lessons. What had I learned about parents?

The Realization

Since this experience during my first semester of teaching, I have learned that I was not alone in my lack of parent involvement preparation. In fact, I was in the majority of teachers who enter the teaching profession (Becker, 1999; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1994) – a majority that has little knowledge about and few experiences with parent involvement of any kind. Fortunately, I acknowledged my deficiencies and worked diligently to correct mistakes I had made with parents, whether overtly or unknowingly, during my first year of teaching. As I taught in the

years to come, I became more and more convinced of the importance of parents in what I was trying to accomplish in the classroom. I discovered that the more I involved, educated, and included parents through simple communication techniques, the more I felt a sense of community in the classroom and the more student achievement rose – regardless of the socioeconomic or education level of the parents. It was not until recently, during my doctoral program, that I discovered the large body of literature that supports my personal experiences.

Parent involvement is widely believed, by the general public as well as by educators, to be the cornerstone of a child's academic success. In fact, Henderson and Berla assert that "the research has become overwhelmingly clear; parent involvement - and that means all kinds of parents - improves student achievement" (Henderson & Berla, 1994, 3). In addition, research reveals that the attitudes and practices of teachers are the two most important variables in initiating and facilitating the process of parents working with schools in educating their children (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1988, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). However, while research shows the importance of parent involvement and supports the idea that teachers are the crucial predictors of parent involvement, the existence of teachers who successfully involve parents is surprisingly minimal (Becker, 1999; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Epstein, 1994).

A review of teacher education literature reveals that very little attention is given to preparing preservice teachers to work with parents. Epstein (1995) reports that "most educators enter schools without an understanding of family background,

concepts of caring, or the framework of partnerships…most teachers are not prepared to understand, design, implement, and evaluate practices of partnerships with the families of their students" (p. 21). Teacher education courses have historically given little, if any, attention to parent involvement (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Epstein, 1991; Foster & Loven, 1992; Lazar & Slostad, 1999). Moreover, parent topics that are included are only discussed on a surface level and do not take into account what teachers already believe about parent involvement (Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992; Tichenor, 1997). As a result, preservice teachers have entered and are continuing to enter the teaching profession with minimal knowledge of how to increase student achievement by involving parents.

Research indicates that preservice teachers' prior beliefs and experiences play a critical role in the development of their thinking as they prepare to become teachers (Hollingsworth, 1989). Additionally, research on the impact of teacher education on preservice teachers' beliefs suggests that coursework and field experiences also contribute to the shaping of students' belief systems (Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997). While there exists a large body of research on teacher beliefs and how beliefs affect teacher practice, these studies have not related specifically to if and/or how beliefs influence preservice teachers' practices related to parent involvement. Studies have indicated that teachers' perceived competence in working with parents is influential in determining the extent to which they involve parents (Katz & Bauch, 1999; McBride, 1991). Based on survey information from teachers in their first three years of teaching, Katz and Bauch (1999) found that teachers who had taken a parent

involvement preparation course during their teacher education program felt confident in working with parents and many were implementing parent involvement practices that had been introduced in the course. However, few studies have focused on specific beliefs and experiences, whether gained from coursework or not, that have increased preservice teachers' perceived competence with and understanding of parents.

Purpose

The present study seeks to not only enlarge our understanding of preservice teachers' beliefs about parents, but also to address the challenge put forth by Renzaglia et al. (1997), when they stated that we must identify the "practices in teacher education that may serve to nurture and develop in preservice teachers beliefs and attitudes that dispose them to value and use particular skills, strategies, and knowledge" (p. 360). In an effort to accomplish these two goals, this study investigates six preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about parents and parent involvement and how the preservice teachers' life histories influence those beliefs, as well as what knowledge and experiences during coursework and student teaching are most salient in their understanding of parents. The context for this research was directly before, during, and after these six preservice teachers' student teaching semester in which they were placed in both a middle and elementary school setting.

Research Questions

This study addresses three questions: (a) What are these preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about parents and parent involvement? (b) What are these preservice teachers' experiences related to parents and what are their interpretations of these experiences? (c) How do these preservice teachers' experiences with parents influence their beliefs about parents and parent involvement?

Significance of the Study

Preservice teachers who feel more confident with parents are more likely to involve parents (Katz & Bauch, 1999; McBride, 1991). Consequently, teacher education programs have a responsibility to help future teachers gain confidence in the area of parent involvement. One way to do this is to identify beliefs, concerns, and preconceived notions preservice teachers have about parents as well as to discover what knowledge and experiences preservice teachers garner in both their education coursework and student teaching that address these concerns resulting in a more confident feeling about involving parents. The present study seeks to gain insight from preservice teachers regarding their concerns about and experiences with parents as they move from teacher education courses through their student teaching. This study will not only add to the growing amount of research focused on how teacher education can contribute to promoting greater parent involvement, but it will also shed new light on the topic by allowing the voices of preservice teachers to be heard.

The subsequent chapters include a review of the literature, methodology, a description of participants and themes, and a discussion of findings and implications. Specifically, Chapter 2 is a review of professional and scholarly literature surrounding the topics of this study. I first discuss the definition of parent involvement as defined in the literature, and then follow this with a summary of the research on the preparation of preservice teachers for working with parents and the large body of literature on the influences on preservice teachers. Chapter 3 discusses methodology, beginning with the design of the study. Next, I introduce the participants and the settings, followed by an explanation of the data collection. The analytical framework used for this study as well as its limitations conclude Chapter 3. Chapter 4, Themes and Findings, discusses the specific steps taken in analyzing the data as well as the themes that emerged from the data and the findings organized by these themes. Lastly, Chapter 5 is a final discussion of the findings, as well as a discussion of methodological considerations, suggestions for further research, implications for teacher education, and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To situate this study, I have divided this review of literature into three main sections: Definition of Parent Involvement, Preservice Teacher Preparation for Parent Involvement, and Influences on Preservice Teachers. The last section, Influences on Preservice Teachers, is the most extensive; therefore, it contains subtitles that divide the influences into three parts as delineated in the literature. These three parts are entitled: Beliefs and Life Histories, Teacher Education Coursework, and Student Teaching Experiences and Cooperating Teachers. Furthermore, the Influences on Preservice Teachers section takes a broad look at influences, but will make connections to influences on parent involvement specifically. I will discuss the literature that has been most informative in developing my understanding of the field and that has been the most helpful in structuring my theoretical framework for this study. All of the topics are examined through a teacher educator's lens in order to situate the study within the literature of teacher education research.

Definition of Parent Involvement

One of the eight national education goals in Goals 2000 states, "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Although I began this study after

the year 2000 and had no evidence that this lofty goal had been achieved, I did know that parent involvement was obviously highly valued by our highest education and political officials – even if the goal had not been realized by the year 2000. Moreover, the term parent involvement has been around for decades in education journals and school improvement research and is sure to be around for years to come as we continue to try to attain the goal of increasing parent involvement in every school as set forth in 1994. Unfortunately, a specific definition of parent involvement was not attached to Goals 2000 and is not clearly delineated in much of the research on the topic. However, for this study, I have narrowed the definition to one that is referenced frequently in the literature.

To adequately define successful parent involvement as described in the literature, I will paraphrase Epstein's (1995) description of parent involvement. She describes parent involvement as a parent-teacher partnership that focuses on increased communication, cooperation, and cohesion between home and school (Epstein, 1995). This partnership is created when teachers have and use communication skills to improve dialogue with parents about how to participate in their children's lives to increase positive attitudes about school generally and academic work specifically. Throughout this study, I will use the terms parent involvement and partnerships interchangeably when referring to the aforementioned definition.

Preservice Teacher Preparation for Parent Involvement

The research literature clearly shows the significance of the teacher in involving parents in an effort to increase student achievement (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Epstein & Dauber, 1988, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). However, the literature also indicates that teachers face barriers as they attempt to form the partnership (Lazar & Slostad, 1999; Leitch & Tangri, 1988; Morris & Taylor, 1998). Most significantly, many preservice teachers have not had the adequate training or experiences to educate them in how to be successful with parents once they are in the classroom (Berger, 1991; Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992). Specifically, preservice teachers are uneducated with regard to cultural differences in their students' family lives, in how to actually communicate and collaborate with parents, and in how to manage their time in order to form parent partnerships (Chavkin, 1989; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Comer, 1988, Delpit, 1995; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Although the literature is clear regarding the problem and many of the practices teachers should implement to be successful, there is little information on what specific experiences, education, and school programs ultimately best influence preservice teachers to actually create partnerships with parents when they are in their classroom.

Most research indicates that preservice teachers lack parent involvement preparation because it is simply not addressed in traditional teacher education programs (Lazar & Slostad, 1999; Rich, 1988). In the 1980's, a six-year study from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) revealed that only 4% of

575 teacher educators surveyed indicated that they taught a complete course related to parents and only 15% reported providing part of a course on parent involvement (Chavkin & Williams, 1988). Since the report was published, numerous researchers in teacher education have endorsed the recommendation to include at least one course for undergraduate education majors in parent involvement. Consequently, during the last decade, an increased number of colleges and universities have added parent involvement courses to preservice teacher education (Brown & Brown, 1992). Young and Hite (1994) conducted a national survey and found that 79.1% of teacher education programs "offer one or more courses that include content dealing with parent involvement" (p. 157).

However, information from the Harvard Family Research Project, which documented the nature and scope of preservice education in family involvement, revealed that much still needs to be done to improve preservice teachers' knowledge of parent involvement (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997). Researchers reviewed state teacher certification requirements, surveyed courses and requirements at accredited institutions, and examined successful models of preservice education in parent and family involvement in preparation of a report in which nine comprehensive recommendations were made. The report noted that teacher education programs fault state departments of education for requiring too much of them, while restricting the maximum number of course units allowed. Because of these demands, parent and family involvement training are often viewed as low priority issues in university teaching programs, regardless of the potential benefits (Shartrand et al.

1997). In response, the Harvard Family Research Project suggested that university teaching programs integrate parent and family involvement themes throughout the curricula, rather than adding additional courses (Shartrand et al. 1997).

Regardless of how parent involvement is implemented in teacher education programs, agreement on what should be integrated across the curricula or included in a parent involvement course has been minimal. While several studies have centered around surveying preservice teachers about what they learned after taking a parent involvement course (Foster & Loven, 1992; Katz & Bauch, 1999; Morris & Taylor, 1998), few studies have focused on preservice teacher beliefs and life histories as a beginning point in creation of a course or related experiences. Moreover, research in this area has not concentrated on if or how preservice teachers' parent involvement knowledge and skills change during their student teaching experiences or if there are other influences on preservice teachers' understanding of parent involvement.

Two studies, however, have promoted the value of gathering preservice teacher concerns and beliefs as information for structuring parent involvement courses. Tichenor (1997) contributed preservice teachers' reflections about parent involvement when she surveyed over 250 teachers at different points in their teacher education program. She did yield important findings regarding preservice teachers' attitudes toward parents, particularly the differences between the attitudes of preservice teachers at the beginning of their coursework and those who had completed student teaching. Unfortunately, because the study was survey-based, it

did not yield information on why the attitudes changed or what specific knowledge, skills, or experiences contributed to the preservice teachers' varied responses.

Similarly, Reeves-Kazelskis, and King (1994) surveyed two groups of preservice teachers (one group in classes with no field-based experiences, the other group in classes using field-based experiences) to compare the concerns between the two groups. They discovered that the preservice teachers in the field-based classes had a significantly lower number of concerns regarding parents than the group who had no field-based experiences. Although the information from Reeves-Kazelskis, and King's study is worthy of notice, it is not extremely useful to university professors as they attempt to structure parent involvement courses and related experiences. The survey does not provide specific information from the preservice teachers about what experiences allayed their concerns or what opportunities they were given to work with parents in their field based experiences.

Although, as noted in the previous studies, the importance of gathering preservice teacher concerns for the preparation of parent involvement coursework has been marginally recognized, the studies themselves have not been conducted in such a way that preservice teachers' concerns have been fully heard, much less validated. Teacher educators must recognize and value what preservice teachers believe and think about parents so coursework and experiences can be systematically designed to address the knowledge and skill gaps that need to be filled (Foster & Loven, 1992).

Influences on Preservice Teachers

In a study centered on gathering preservice teachers' beliefs about parents as well as the experiences in teacher education that either alter or promote these beliefs, one must look to the large body of research about the influences on preservice teachers. I have organized this research chronologically, focusing first on what preservice teachers' initially bring with them to their teacher education program – their beliefs and life histories. Then, I have laid out the research on the influence of the teacher education coursework itself. Finally, because teacher education programs almost universally have a capstone experience called student teaching, I have presented the research about the influence of this experience as well as the influence of the cooperating teachers.

Beliefs and Life Histories

Research suggests that preservice teachers' prior beliefs and experiences play a critical role in the development of their thinking as they prepare to become teachers (Hollingsworth, 1989). In fact, students begin teacher education programs with strong engrained beliefs about school, although they cannot always clearly articulate these beliefs (Hollingsworth, 1989; Lortie, 1975; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Moreover, Calderhead and Robson (1991) suggest that these beliefs influence how students initially approach and then continue to think about teacher education courses and field experiences. In another explanation of this same concept, Kagan (1992) used the term "filtering beliefs" when referring to how preservice teachers'

previously held beliefs about school serve as a filter through which all that is encountered in teacher education is passed and then processed.

To expand on how researchers have pinpointed the role of beliefs in influencing preservice teachers, I will highlight studies conducted by Hollingsworth (1989) and Calderhead and Robson (1991). Hollingsworth (1989) conducted a study that followed and documented 14 preservice teachers' beliefs on how to manage, assess, and use instruction to facilitate student learning from before they entered the teacher education program to nine months later. Before entering the program, Hollingsworth interviewed the preservice teachers regarding their philosophies of education, their educational experiences, their views about children, their description of their current teaching and managerial practices, and their knowledge of reading instruction. She then interviewed and observed the preservice teachers every two weeks in an effort to document any changes and any possible influences from the program. The preservice teachers also kept journals in which they recorded changes in their thinking or influential experiences. Hollingsworth (1989) concluded that preprogram beliefs may interact with both course content and field-based experiences to create varying levels of teaching knowledge. Consequently, teacher educators have the responsibility of discovering preservice teachers' beliefs and then structuring assignments and experiences through which these beliefs can be examined and changed, if needed.

Calderhead and Robson (1991) followed seven primary preservice teachers through the first year of their teacher education program. Before beginning the

program, preservice teachers were interviewed once and then again at three other times throughout the year. Interview questions centered on issues such as why the preservice teachers decided to become teachers, their views of themselves as teachers, their concerns and expectations, and the influences on their thinking about teaching and learning. Additionally, the preservice teachers were asked to write scripts about imaginary classroom scenarios and write their reactions to videotaped lessons. Based on the findings from these data sources, Calderhead and Robson (1991) raised the following questions about the interaction of beliefs, education coursework, and teacher practices:

> The different conceptions of teaching and of professional development held by students can influence what they find relevant and useful in the course, and how they analyze their own and others' practice. But is sufficient account taken of student teachers' existing knowledge in the process of professional preparation? Are students' existing conceptions challenged and developed? Is interaction between students' knowledge and the curriculum of teacher education encouraged and facilitated in preservice training? (p. 7)

In response to their own questions, Calderhead and Robson (1991) said 'no' and suggested that teacher educators gather and use information from their students in preparation of activities that challenge the preservice teachers' beliefs and knowledge base.

Virginia Richardson (1994) described beliefs and the role of teacher educators in the following excerpt from her study of how teacher beliefs affect teaching practice:

> An individual's understanding of the world and the way it works or should work, may be consciously or unconsciously held, and guide one's actions. The teacher or teacher educator is responsible for helping students explicate and examine their beliefs and belief sets, alter and/or add to them. (p. 91).

In recent years, research studies have concentrated on how to best identify beliefs that are closely associated with teaching practice and then how to address these beliefs in teacher education programs (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts & Hernadez, 1991; Richardson, 1996; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Although the challenge remains of how to completely identify "practices in teacher education that may serve to nurture and develop preservice teacher beliefs and attitudes that dispose them to value and use particular skills, strategies and knowledge" (Renzaglia, Hutchins & Lee, 1997, p. 360), several practices have been researched to discover whether they have any effect on altering preservice teachers' beliefs. Kuh (1995) found that informal contact and dialogue with faculty members and peers had a positive effect on altering preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and school. Moreover, Kuh (1995) suggested that preservice teachers generally benefit from deep personal and intellectual discussions about topics introduced in class; however, the impact tends to be greater when the discussion is casual whether during or outside of class.

Renzaglia et al. (1997) described and examined the impact of four types of experiences typically found in a teacher education program on the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of preservice special educators. The four experiences analyzed were: 1) reflective thinking and teaching; 2) program coursework; 3) interactions with faculty; and 4) field experiences and supervision. Renzaglia et al. discovered that frequent and in-depth reflection, whether in the form of a journal writing exercise or a discussion, assisted preservice teachers in continually self-evaluating and refining their thoughts and practices. The authors recommended that teacher educators not only plan frequent opportunities for students to practice reflection, but also model the types of reflection they hope to foster in their students. With respect to coursework and field experiences, Renzaglia et al. suggested that course instructors provide meaningful field experiences in which students are evaluated based on their mastery of applied projects set forth in the course. As a result, faculty would become more like mentors or even coaches who help develop assignments that ultimately become a part of the preservice teachers' classroom practice in the field.

Other researchers have highlighted the practice of teacher educators "thinking aloud" as they wrestle with and confront the dilemmas of teaching (Clark, 1988; Ross, 1987; Weinstein, 1990). After her study of preservice teacher beliefs related to the definition of good teaching, Weinstein (1990) concluded that reflection exercises or "thinking aloud" should be included in every course and should be used by both the students and the instructor when discussing teaching practices and strategies. Ross (1987) suggested allowing students to provide an anonymous critique of their

learning after the instructor has used some type of instructional strategy such as cooperative learning in the course. The instructor would then use the critiques to discuss why the strategy was chosen and to discuss other strategies that might have been more effective.

Preservice teacher beliefs do not appear out of nowhere; they are formed by the many life experiences of each preservice teacher, particularly those experiences related to their schooling. In the research literature, many terms are used to describe these life experiences including biographies (Knowles, 1988); institutional biographies (Britzman, 1986); personal histories (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991); preconceptions (Carter & Doyle, 1995); frames (Barnes, 1992); and life histories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For this study, I will be using the term "life histories" when referring to preservice teachers' previous life experiences.

Education researchers agree that preservice teachers' life histories influence how they view classroom experiences and teaching practices (Carter, 1993; Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Weinstein, 1990). Referring to preservice teachers, Britzman (1986) observed:

> [They] bring to their teacher education more than a desire to teach. They bring their implicit instructional biographies – the cumulative experience of school lives – which, in turn, inform their knowledge of the students' world, of school structure, and of curriculum. All this contributes to well-worn and commonsensical images of teachers' work… (p. 443)

Additionally, Carter and Doyle (1995) use the term ‘preconceptions’ when referring to the experiences and life histories preservice teachers refer to and build on when they enter the classroom as a teacher. Carter and Doyle point out that preservice teachers’ preconceptions are formed over many years and may be difficult to fully understand and address in teacher education.

However, research has shown that, like practices to alter beliefs, specific practices focused on taking life histories into account during teacher education have been successful. Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) state:

> Fortunately for us, the beliefs about ‘good teaching’ that preservice teachers develop out of their personal histories, while highly individualized are not idiosyncratic. Rather, we are encouraged as we discover that by looking carefully at the contents of the belief systems preservice teachers have built out of their personal histories and at the processes they have used to build those systems, we as teacher educators can begin to understand and thus more directly influence how personal histories help to shape the conclusions that preservice teachers reach as they participate in the formal study of teaching (pp. 87-88).

Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) write about their observations of preservice teachers in their courses who benefit from “unscheduled, informal chats” (p. 89) about a particular instructional topic. In particular, the authors note how frequently their students refer to their life histories to help make sense of a teaching strategy or a classroom observation. In response, Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) use this

discourse to question students about their past experiences related to how it may support or negate what they are hearing or seeing while in the classroom. Additionally, autobiographical writing assignments are employed to help students reflect on the framework they bring to their courses and teaching experiences. First, students write their personal histories either as a chronological story or a story developed around themes or critical incidents in their lives. Then, throughout the course, students record their experiences and feelings in journals that the instructors read and respond to periodically. As a result, students get continuous and individualized feedback regarding their concerns and questions. Finally, students are frequently assigned reflective papers related to a given topic or teaching experience. Also, Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) share their own personal histories with their students and explain that their life histories most surely affect their pedagogies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, as yet another reminder of the influence of life histories on classroom interpretations and experiences.

Other researchers have touted the benefits of autobiographical writing in teacher education. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write about the impact of narrative research in their teacher preparation program. They believe that the act of teaching is an "expression of biography and history…in a particular situation" (1985, p. 184). Therefore, they attempt to gather as many stories from their students as possible in an effort to "hear" their students before they structure coursework. Thus, they are building their course assignments and experiences around what their students have already experienced and now believe. In like manner, Carter (1994) and Carter and

Doyle (1995) believe that allowing preservice teachers to tell their stories is the crucial step in making education coursework more effective in changing beliefs. Carter and Doyle (1995) believe students should be asked to write about 'well-remembered events' (Carter, 1994), defined as an incident that the student finds particularly salient, that took place during any of his or her field experiences and then write an analysis of that episode. The writing exercise informs the instructor of not only the students' background knowledge and experiences, but also of the meaningful episodes that should be discussed and built upon in class discussions and assignments.

Although the research literature supports the idea that life histories influence teacher beliefs and that certain practices help preservice teachers recognize this influence and then work to alter their beliefs if needed, some have criticized the use of autobiographical writing and using stories in preservice teacher education. In fact, proponents of these methods are the first to point out inherent flaws. Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) point out "in trying to please us, preservice teachers often reflect salient features of the intersection of our personal histories and pedagogy" (p. 110). In other words, students write what they think the instructor wants to hear, instead of what they may know to be the truth. Carter (1993) also notes that authenticity can always be questioned when using autobiography or salient episode writing because the person who is writing is the only one who knows the true story. However, researchers agree that the benefits of using autobiographical writing in preservice teacher education to address the influence of life histories and subsequent

beliefs should be celebrated in spite of the flaws (Carter, 1993; Doyle, 1997; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

The literature on teacher beliefs and life histories is rich with information that can inform studies about preservice teachers' understanding of parents. As noted, beliefs and life histories influence how preservice teachers come to understand what is presented in their teacher education programs as well as how they interpret experiences in classrooms. Consequently, preservice teachers already have a set of beliefs about parents, whether positive or negative, that are either reinforced or altered by what they encounter in their teacher education programs. As a result, teacher education programs have a responsibility to systematically design coursework, assignments, and experiences that assist preservice teachers in identifying and exploring these beliefs. Only by doing so, will inadequate notions of parents and parent involvement be addressed and then replaced by researched information about parent involvement.

Teacher Education Coursework

Although it is present, research on the influence of teacher education coursework (courses completed prior to student teaching) is extremely limited. Additionally, the literature on the topic tends to read as though the authors are on the defensive against critics who actively deny the benefits of formal coursework on teaching. Interestingly enough, these critics are frequently teachers themselves who claim that they learned how to teach from field experiences, particularly student

teaching – not coursework (Lortie, 1975; Lanier, 1986). In response to this criticism, many teacher educators have stated that it is difficult to clearly delineate between the influence of coursework and field experiences because the two represent not only different ways of knowing, but they also serve different purposes (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Grossman & Richert, 1988). These same researchers also note they have encountered two dilemmas when trying to study the effects of education coursework. First, they have concluded that the purpose of formal coursework is to transmit the knowledge base of the profession; however, they admit that what this knowledge base consists of is unclear. As a result, it is difficult to measure whether coursework has increased the undefined and ever-changing knowledge base (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Grossman & Richert, 1988).

Additionally, in the last decade, teacher education programs have been mandated by federal and state accrediting agencies to put preservice teachers in classrooms earlier and more often throughout their program of study (NCATE, 2002). Thus, field experiences have become such a regular part of individual education courses that the two are inextricably linked. Therefore, because recent literature on teacher education coursework does more often than not include studies on courses that have a field-based component, some of the studies from the late 80's and early 90's to today use the term coursework to be inclusive of field-based experiences that may be a part of the course itself.

Several studies and various reviews of the literature on the topic have suggested that teacher education coursework has no effect on preservice teachers'

teaching behaviors. Clark, Smith, Newby, and Cook (1985) compared the effects of formal teacher education provided within the university setting with other sources of preservice teacher knowledge and ideas (prior beliefs, life experiences, field-based experiences) by reviewing numerous research studies. As a result of their review of the literature, the authors stated that "these studies suggest that a person's teaching repertoire originates from a variety of sources, many of which are tangential to or outside of the [teacher education] program itself" (p. 49). Clark et al. (1985) also conducted their own research study in which their conclusion matched that of their review of the literature. Specifically, they found that first year teachers "rely as heavily on their own ideas in crafting their teaching practices as on their formal training" (p. 52). As a result, Clark et al. concluded that teacher education programs are ineffective, particularly prior to long-term field experiences, such as student teaching and teaching, and that preservice teachers' beliefs usually stay unchanged until they begin teaching starting with the student teaching semester.

Other researchers claim that teacher education coursework is beneficial but that the fieldwork contradicts what is being taught at the university. Zeichner's (1980) and Zeichner and Tabachnick's (1981) reviews of the literature and studies on the influence of the teacher education program on preservice teachers' teaching behavior indicated that field-based experiences, including student teaching, actually helped defeat the goals and purposes of the university coursework instead of supporting them. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) suggest that teacher education coursework actually socializes preservice teachers to expand their beliefs about

teaching practices or to become more liberal in their ideas of good teaching while experiences in schools teach fresh teachers to resort back to conservative teaching behaviors. However, the authors add that teacher education colleges have the responsibility of structuring fieldwork to support the goals of the university courses. In a more recent review of the literature, Zeichner and Gore (1990) also concluded that field-based experiences tend to supercede what is being taught in traditional teacher education courses, even if the two are in direct opposition.

Based on the conclusions of several of the previously cited studies and literature reviews, Dunkin, Precians, and Nettle (1994) set up a study to test the impact of formal teacher education coursework on teacher beliefs and practices. The study consisted of three randomly chosen samples of 20 preservice teachers. Sample one contained preservice teachers in their first year of the teacher education program who were interviewed before they embarked on a three week block practice teaching experience and then again after the practice teaching. For sample two, the authors decided to select another random sample of first year teachers who were only interviewed after their practice teaching to permit testing for practice effects on the first sample. The third and final sample consisted of third year students in the teacher education program who were interviewed to test the effects of the stage in the program on the preservice teachers' beliefs. The participants in each sample were questioned about ways to enhance student learning based on the following four "dimensions of teaching" identified by the authors in previous studies (Dunkin, 1990;

Dunkin, 1991; Dunkin & Precians, 1992): structuring, motivation, encouraging activity and independence, and interpersonal relationships.

Dunkin et al. (1994) found that practice teaching, particularly interspersed between and throughout the coursework, was effective in altering beliefs, particularly regarding the dimension of structuring as a way of enhancing student learning. The authors also noted significant differences in responses between first and third year students in the teacher education program. Primarily, the differences surrounded how preservice teachers view the significance of interpersonal relationships with students. Although Dunkin et al. realized that the differences between first and third year students could be the result of age and maturity level, they stated that "it does seem more plausible that they are at least partly the results of formal teacher education" (p. 407).

In another study designed to assess the impact of teacher education coursework on preservice teachers, Lin, Silvern, and Gorrell, (1998) explored early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of their roles as teachers, of how children learn, and of how to create relationships with children. The researchers compared 298 students' responses to six open ended questions; 188 of the students responded to the questions after their first year of education coursework and 110 of the students responded to the questions after their third year of education coursework and after teaching one week in a kindergarten classroom. Responses to the six questions were coded according to major themes and then descriptive statistics related to the themes were compared between the two groups. If differences were noted, chi-square

analyses were performed to discover if the observed difference between the two groups were statistically significant.

The authors found that the majority of preservice teachers held similar views about teaching and learning regardless of whether they were interviewed at the beginning of their program or at the end, except in a few important areas. While beginning preservice teachers were more likely to view themselves as authority figures in the classroom, ending preservice teachers were more likely to view their relationship with students as a partnership. Also, beginning students saw themselves as solely responsible for their children's learning, while ending students placed some of that responsibility on the students as active participants in their own learning. As a result of these differences, Lin et al. (1998) suggested that the results of this study indicate that teacher education coursework does have an effect on some of the beliefs of preservice teachers, but that more research needs to be done on how to make an even greater impact on the many ingrained beliefs of preservice teachers.

As noted in this review of the literature, most research studies on the influence of teacher education coursework on teacher beliefs and behaviors show small positive effects, if any. However, Grossman and Richert's (1988) research suggests that teacher education coursework does influence prospective teachers in many positive ways, although in different ways, than field-based experiences. Grossman and Richert (1988) conducted a two-year study in which they followed six preservice teachers throughout a year of teacher education coursework and then either student teaching or another type of long-term teaching experience. Based on interviews

throughout the study period and then after the participants' teaching experience, Grossman and Richert (1988) concluded:

> Our findings suggest that prospective teachers acknowledge both coursework and fieldwork as influential. Teachers report that professional coursework has the potential to influence strongly their conceptions of their subject matter for teaching. From the field experiences, student teachers say they learned not only survival skills for classroom life…but also knowledge about students' understanding and misunderstanding of their subject matter (p. 56).

Related to parent involvement, some studies have also shown positive connections between coursework and its influence on preservice teacher beliefs and ultimately teacher practices. Katz and Bauch (1999) conducted a survey of teachers in their first three years of teaching to see if they had benefited from a course they took in parent involvement at the same university. They found that the teachers felt confident in working with parents and were implementing many of the parent involvement practices introduced in the course (Katz & Bauch, 1999). As noted earlier, Tichenor (1997) also found that preservice teachers benefited from coursework specifically about parent involvement. However, these studies do not elaborate on how these courses were organized, what assignments and experiences were most salient to the preservice teachers' understandings, or what beliefs the preservice teachers entered with and specifically how they were altered, if at all, by the coursework. Thus, although coursework has been shown to be an influence on

preservice teachers' confidence in working with parents, its merits need further exploration to fully understand its impact on preservice teachers' beliefs about and practices with parent involvement.

Student Teaching Experiences and Cooperating Teachers

Although some researchers have revealed that teacher education coursework has an effect on preservice teachers' beliefs and teaching behaviors, preservice teachers themselves consistently report that student teaching is the most influential learning experience in their teacher education program (Bunting, 1988; Goodlad, 1990; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Su, 1992) and that the cooperating teacher is the most influential aspect of this component of teacher education (Joyce, 1988; Su, 1992). In the United States and many other countries, student teaching is considered a central component of virtually all preservice teacher education programs (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Although the length of student teaching varies, it is typically a long-term experience in which a student teacher plans and teaches daily lessons with the assistance of a cooperating teacher and usually a supervisor associated with a university (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). In the research literature student teaching has many names; however, for purposes of clarity, I will refer to these long-term field experiences as simply student teaching.

Much research has been done on the general influence of student teaching, particularly related to the incongruence between what preservice teachers expected before student teaching and what they actually experienced. In Cole and Knowles'

(1993) study, many student teachers' expectations of the classroom did not fit what they actually encountered. After a close analysis of journal data, the authors suggested that these student teachers expected the students in their field experience classrooms to be just like themselves as they imagined they had been when they were students. Cole and Knowles (1993) concluded that this finding supports the notion that preservice teachers need to examine their own perspectives and origins during teacher education courses, as well as the contexts in which they were taught and then will be teaching during student teaching. By doing so, preservice teachers will be more prepared for what they encounter and thus more likely to make changes, instead of spending much of their mental energy dwelling on their "shattered images" of teaching.

The majority of studies on the influence of student teaching focus particular attention on the role of the cooperating teacher. Graham (1999) defines a cooperating teacher as "one who cooperates with a teacher education program by allowing a teacher candidate to use his/her classroom to 'practice' teaching students" (p. 524). Thus, by definition, a cooperating teacher appears to be merely an agreeable participant who allows a novice teacher to perform her classroom duties for awhile. However, in study after study, cooperating teachers play a much more important role in the mind of student teachers. In fact, the cooperating teacher has been shown to influence student teachers in a variety of ways – both positively and negatively.

Many early studies documented student teachers' general conformity to cooperating teachers' behaviors and attitudes (Barrows, 1979; Pritchard, 1974;

Tabachnick, 1977). More recently, studies have pointed to specific areas in which cooperating teachers exert much influence over student teachers. Nettle (1998) gathered survey responses from 49 student teachers about their orientation to teaching (affective or task-oriented) both before and after student teaching. These responses were measured against the style of the cooperating teacher each student was placed with during student teaching. Although Nettle (1998) found that the orientations to teaching of the majority of the student teachers remained unchanged, significant changes were present in some of the student teachers. In particular, student teachers whose cooperating teacher had an affective orientation were less likely to follow the general trend (of the student teachers who changed orientations) of moving from affective to task orientation. Nettle (1998) points out that this is particularly important for "teacher educators who believe that teacher education should have a humanising influence…more attention should be paid to the nature of the experiences provided by such teachers" (p. 202).

In Graham's (1999) case study research, she followed one student through his student teaching semester to collect data about his experiences with his cooperating teacher. Graham (1999) discovered that the relationship between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher was initially strained due to the perceived power differential between the two parties. However, the relationship improved as the student teacher and the cooperating teacher began to share their beliefs and life histories with each other. Not only did this informal discussion open many opportunities for meaningful talk about personal preconceptions, but it also helped the

teacher-student relationship feel more like a partnership for both individuals. Consequently, the student teacher was more receptive to the cooperating teacher's comments and more understanding of why the cooperating teacher made the classroom decisions he made which in turn influenced the student teacher to be more reflective about his own teaching practices.

Although preservice teachers overwhelmingly proclaim that their student teaching experience is the most influential part of their teacher education program and that the cooperating teacher is the most important aspect of that experience, several studies question the impact of the experience, particularly its positive impact on altering teacher beliefs and behaviors. Lortie (1975) was one of the first researchers to purport that student teaching plays little, if any, role in changing preservice teachers' beliefs. In an attempt to test Lortie's (1975) claim, Tabachnick and Zeichner (1984) gathered self-reported data from 13 student teachers on a teacher belief inventory as well as information from interviews from the preservice teachers, their cooperating teachers, and their supervisors. Tabachnick and Zeichner (1984) found that the data "overwhelmingly indicate[d] that student teaching did not significantly alter the substance of the teaching perspectives that the 13 students brought to the experience" (p. 33).

Borko and Mayfield (1995) followed four student teachers through their student teaching assignments consisting of four different placements over the period of a year. Primary data sources from the student teachers were interviews and observations designed to examine initial beliefs, experiences during student teaching,

and changes in beliefs after student teaching. From the cooperating teachers and university supervisors, the authors gathered data about their goals for the student teachers, specifically related to weekly conferences in which the cooperating teacher and university supervisor discussed specific teaching skills and strategies. Borko and Mayfield (1995) concluded that these student teachers' beliefs and behaviors were not influenced significantly by either the cooperating teacher or the university supervisor because the discussions between the parties were typically rushed and not very in-depth. Additionally, the authors found that the cooperating teachers and supervisors seemed to place great emphasis on being positive in their interactions with their student teachers in an attempt to build their confidence, which at times did not allow for needed criticism to occur.

Regardless of whether researchers agree or disagree on the impact of student teaching and cooperating teachers on preservice teachers' beliefs and behaviors, the literature reflects consensus regarding the need for quality field experiences and cooperating teachers. Field placements need to be carefully chosen by the university while cooperating teachers need to be well-trained in preservice teacher supervision (Graham, 1999; Weinstein, 1990). Moreover, university personnel need to actually spend time training the teachers they will be using for student teacher placements in how to articulate the complexities of teaching while modeling appropriate strategies (Weinstein, 1990). Specifically, studies suggest that cooperating teachers should be trained in how to give feedback to students (Wheeler, 1989), how to communicate

their personal beliefs as well as the impact of these beliefs on their teaching (Cole & Knowles, 1993), and how to encourage reflection (Graham, 1999).

While studies support the training of cooperating teachers, researchers stress the importance of choosing cooperating teachers who are mentor teachers that fully understand their role as an active member of the student teaching relationship. Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1987) found that “cooperating teachers set the affective and intellectual tone and also shape what student teachers learn by the way they conceive and carry out their role as teacher educators” (p. 156). Additionally, Borko and Mayfield (1995) discovered that cooperating teachers who believed that they could and should have an active role in the process of helping their student teachers learn to teach tended to conduct more frequent conferences and to provide more feedback to the student teachers. Thus, as expected, these cooperating teachers were perceived by their student teachers as more influential than other cooperating teachers.

Because student teaching experiences and cooperating teachers have been shown to have such a significant influence on preservice teachers in a variety of ways, it is logical to seek an understanding of the influence of these two factors on preservice teachers’ beliefs about parents and parent involvement. Unfortunately, no significant research has been done on the impact of student teaching on preservice teachers’ understanding of parents and parent involvement.

Significance of the Literature to the Study

The literature reviewed here covers a variety of complex topics that cannot be adequately addressed in one dissertation. The literature on preservice teacher beliefs alone is overwhelming in its magnitude. However, there seems to be a lack of research related to preservice teacher beliefs about parents and how their life histories and teacher education experiences influence these beliefs, even though research points to the need for increased parent involvement education in teacher preparation programs. The present study adds research in this area and particularly looks at the effects of beliefs coupled with coursework and student teaching experiences on preservice teachers' understanding of parents.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used for this study, which incorporated individual interview, focus group, and dialogue journal data from six preservice teachers from directly before, during, and after their student teaching semester. This chapter discusses the study's design, participants, settings, data collection procedures, analysis, and limitations.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study examines six preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about and experiences with parent involvement upon their completion of education coursework and throughout their student teaching semester. All data for this study was collected from January 8 to May 1, 2002, which spans from before the six preservice teachers began student teaching to just after their student teaching was completed.

Multiple data sources were used in this study including: focus group discussions, individual interviews, dialogue journals combined with informal discussions and observations, analytic memos, and written autobiographies from each preservice teacher. In this chapter, I will describe the design of the study, including sections on the participants and the settings, the methods of data collection, the methods of data analysis, and finally the limitations of this study.

Design of the Study

This study is a qualitative, 17-week ethnographic study of six preservice teachers from the beginning to the end of their student teaching semester. Specifically, the study follows the qualitative design used by Ladson-Billings (2001) in her study of new teachers participating in the Teach for Diversity Program. Just as Ladson-Billings (2001) followed eight participants into their teaching setting to gather information about their understandings of teaching culturally diverse students, I followed the experiences of the six participants while focusing particular attention

on their beliefs about and experiences with parents and parent involvement. The study highlights the themes that emerged from the preservice teachers' expressed beliefs and experiences related to parent involvement.

Rationale for a Qualitative Design

In Erickson's (1986) work, "Qualitative Methods in Research on Teaching," he comments, "What makes such work interpretive or qualitative is a matter of substantive focus and intent, rather than of procedure in data collection…the key questions in [qualitative] research are 'What is happening here specifically?…[and]…What do these happenings mean to the people engaged in them?'"(p. 120). I chose a qualitative design for my study of preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about and experiences with parents because, in Erickson's words, I wanted to enlarge our understanding of "what is happening here" while attempting to uncover what "these happenings mean to the people engaged in them." Moreover, based on Merriam's (1998) description of the five characteristics of qualitative research, the qualitative design was the best fit for my purposes in this study. Merriam's (1998) first characteristic is understanding whatever it is you are studying from the participants' perspective. Second, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Third, the researcher must interact with the participants in the collection of data. Fourth, qualitative research involves an inductive approach, in which themes, categories, and concepts are constructed rather than theories. Finally, qualitative research is richly descriptive as the researcher uses

vivid images rather than numbers to convey information. All of these characteristics inform my selection of a qualitative research format for this study.

Researcher as an Instrument

As the researcher in this study, I served as the key research instrument; thus, all the data I collected and analyzed were sorted through my own lenses and filters. Glesne (1999) and Guba (1981) have recommended that researchers specifically and explicitly reveal beliefs, biases, and experiences that have influenced research topics and questions pursued as well as the manner in which data have been analyzed, interpreted, and presented. In this section, I have done this by providing background information that will provide a context in which to read the study's findings and interpretations.

As described in my introduction, my life history has played a major role in this study, particularly in the topic choice. From my first year of teaching, I recognized the importance of parents in all I tried to accomplish in the classroom. In addition, I recognized my own incompetence level and lack of prior knowledge about and experiences with parents. As a result, I resorted to what I knew about parents from my own parents or from stereotypical notions of parent behavior. Both resulted in general and unrealistic images of parent involvement and expectations. Because I was raised in a white middle class home with two parents, I had idealized notions of what good parenting should look like. Thus, I made many assumptions about how parents should act or what parents should already know when dealing with their

children. As an example of a stereotypical notion I held, I assumed single parents would not be as concerned about their children as other parents because they would be too consumed with either work responsibilities or personal issues. What I found was that all parents had concern for their children, but needed the teacher to facilitate involvement and communication.

During my elementary and middle school teaching experiences, I made many efforts to involve parents in their children's academic lives – usually going well beyond what was required of me (which was minimal) by my school district in the area of parent communication. I met with great success and found myself sharing involvement strategies with other teachers who were either struggling with parent problems or who had been ignoring the benefits of parent involvement because they did not know how to effectively involve parents.

As I moved from teaching children to pursuing a graduate degree and teaching young adults in undergraduate education courses, I realized that parent involvement experiences were conspicuously absent from teacher education programs where I taught. In addition, research supported the absence of parent involvement coursework nationwide. This knowledge coupled with my own parent experiences led me to the research topic choice for the present study.

Participants

The six preservice teachers in this study were traditional college students who entered the university setting directly out of high school, with few, if any, long-term

work experiences. Additionally, these preservice teachers were all students at Kane University (a pseudonym), a small, private, religiously-affiliated (Christian) liberal arts college in the southeast, and were education majors pursuing a K-8 teacher certification license. In this study, the participants mirrored the majority population at Kane University. All six were white females from middle class backgrounds, who ranged in age from 20 to 23 during their last semester at Kane University.

Although I was a faculty member at Kane University during the time of the study, I did not teach or supervise any of the six preservice teachers during the study period. I knew only one of the participants because she was in my one-hour course, Educational Technology, during the semester before the study. To recruit participants, I communicated with Kane University's Director of Field Experiences in the fall of 2001 to obtain a list of all student teachers for the spring of 2002 that were majoring in elementary education and seeking K-8 licensure as well as a list including their supervisor's name. I did inquire if the student teachers were assigned to certain supervisors for any particular reason or if the student teachers had particular commonalities. The Director of Field Experiences assured me that the placement with supervisors was completely random and arbitrary. In an attempt to ensure better communication and more convenience for meeting times, from this group of 25 student teachers, I narrowed the list to any groups of student teachers that were assigned to the same supervisor. Fortunately, one supervisor had seven student teachers, while all the others had only three. In December of 2001, I called each of the seven prospective research participants under the one supervisor and requested

that they attend a meeting to discuss the possibility of their participation in a study about parent involvement. Of the seven, one chose not to participate because she lived over 45 minutes away from campus and would be spending much of her time traveling between home and her student teaching placement. The other six preservice teachers were eager to participate. In fact, three related a high interest in the topic as they expressed that they were "so nervous and afraid of working with parents…we just haven't had any experience dealing with parents." At the initial meeting, we scheduled the focus group times. With the permission of the preservice teachers' supervisor, we scheduled the second focus group during a regularly scheduled supervisor seminar time. I also explained that they would each receive up to $40 for their participation, based on $10 per focus group and interview session they attended.

Participant Summary

The six participants in this study were:

a.) Kara: a 22-year-old from Georgia

b.) Susan: a 21-year-old from Alabama

c.) JoAnne: a 21-year-old from Tennessee

d.) Annie: a 22-year-old from Tennessee

e.) Margaret: a 22-year-old from Georgia

f.) Bell: a 23-year-old from New York

I will introduce each participant using excerpts from her autobiography, statements from my analytic memos, and information on each of the student teaching placements.

Kara's Story

Kara was by far the most enthusiastic and charismatic participant in this study. From the first meeting in which I discussed the study with the preservice teachers, Kara was ready to participate. She smiled from ear-to-ear when I talked about keeping a dialogue journal and coming together periodically to talk about parents. I recorded the following in an analytic memo after this meeting:

> Kara is going to be a very verbal participant. I am thrilled that she is so excited about the topic, but I wonder if she just gets this excited about everything! She commented in the meeting that she is perfect for this study because she gets so nervous thinking about working with parents. She went on to say that recording experiences and thoughts about parents in a journal "will be so much fun – kinda like being little researchers."

Throughout the study, Kara remained excited to be a participant. She had always written more in her journal than any of the other five participants mainly because she tended to write more frequently and in more detail. Moreover, she regularly wanted to discuss her experiences with parents and her cooperating teachers' comments during my visits to her classrooms. As a result, instead of always responding in writing in her journal, I sometimes corresponded with her verbally about her experiences. On the three occasions that I did so, I wrote a summary of our

conversation in my analytic memos' folder as soon as I returned to my car after leaving Kara's classroom.

From Kara's autobiography and from many of our conversations, I learned that she is very close to her family, which consists of her mother, father, and younger brother. In fact, she told me at one point during the semester that she was planning on moving back home after graduation because she wanted to be closer to her brother. Although she moved around a lot as a child because of her father's job, Kara's family had lived in a suburb outside of a large city in Georgia since she was 15 years old. Her father is a salesman and her mother works part time at a church preschool.

Kara attended public school throughout elementary and high school. She described the public schools she attended as "middle class and great academically." When Kara wrote about her schooling in her autobiography, she had very fond memories of achieving academically and socially. In particular, she commented about the influence of her parents on her success level in school, although she also remembered being very self-motivated in school because she did not want to be an "average student."

Prior to student teaching, Kara had many experiences working with children. She had worked with youth at several churches in a variety of capacities, such as teaching children at Bible school, being a church camp counselor, and teaching students as part of inner-city ministry. She had also babysat for several families. When asked about her experiences with parents of these children, she responded that she barely knew the parents of the children she babysat.

Kara's first student teaching placement was at McDonald Middle School (See Figure 1) in 7th grade. She was placed with a well-respected cooperating teacher who had had Kane University student teachers before in her classroom. In one of her early journal entries, Kara wrote that she immediately "fell in love" with her cooperating teacher when she watched her teach. In a later entry, Kara wrote that her cooperating teacher had created a wonderful laid-back classroom environment because her personality was "so right for middle school kids." Specifically, Kara's cooperating teacher was a white, female with 25 years of teaching experiences. She had been at McDonald for about five years, but had been teaching middle school for most of her career. Kara's second student teaching placement was at Grayton Elementary School (See Figure 2) in kindergarten. Kara always had wonderful things to say about Grayton and her cooperating teacher, another white, female who had been teaching about 20 years.

Susan's Story

Susan was the only participant I knew and had taught before this study began. However, although I had taught Susan as one of 15 students in my course Educational Technology during the fall of 2001, I never felt I got to know her well. She was very quiet in class, never asked questions, and rarely socialized with anyone else. Additionally, she rarely interacted with me during class or talked with me informally before or after class although most other students did. The only thing I specifically remember about Susan was that during a final computer presentation for the class,

Susan sped through her talk and quickly sat down before I knew it. She was clearly nervous and shy in front of her classmates. In fact, Susan wrote a lot about her shyness in her autobiography. She expressed that she did not allow others to get to know her until she felt comfortable with them, which she identified as a weakness in her personality.

Susan grew up with two brothers and a large extended family that all lived close to one another in a mid-size city in Alabama. Susan's father was a pilot and her mother was a stay-at-home mom. In Susan's autobiography, she noted that she was particularly grateful to have a mom at home while she was growing up and that her mother was instrumental in helping her with all aspects of schoolwork and activities. Additionally, Susan repeated herself several times in her autobiography as she pointed out how close she was to her family.

Throughout elementary and high school, Susan attended public school. She described her classmates as similar to herself – "we all had real involved parents and we cared about school, even though we didn't have to work real hard to get good grades." When I talked to Susan about the schools she attended as a youth compared to the ones she did her student teaching in, she emphatically emphasized the differences, particularly related to the level of interest the students had in school and the number of "problem students" in the schools where she student taught. From our discussions and Susan's autobiography, I learned that she had little experience working with children of any age level, except on a limited, sporadic basis. When I

specifically asked her about previous employment, she commented that she really had not worked very much.

During student teaching, Susan taught 8th grade math at McDonald Middle School (See Figure 1) during her first placement. She was paired with a 27-year-old white, female cooperating teacher who was in her sixth year of teaching. Susan's personality and teaching style was very similar to that of her cooperating teacher. Both Susan and her cooperating teacher loved math, were very structured, and showed little emotion or enthusiasm in the classroom. Susan thoroughly enjoyed the placement and was sure that middle school was for right her after the experience at McDonald. Susan's second placement was at McWright Elementary School (See Figure 2) in 4th grade. Susan's cooperating teacher was a white female with 28 years of teaching experience. According to Susan, her cooperating teacher was the complete opposite of her in style, personality, and classroom structure. After only a week into the placement, Susan began responding negatively about the experience in her dialogue journal.

JoAnne's Story

Before this study began, JoAnne's reputation as a stellar student based on her initiative and hard work ethic was prevalent all over the education department at Kane University. As a result, I was surprised by my first interaction with her. JoAnne seemed very stoic and non-interested during my initial meeting with the participants in December of 2001. She never showed much facial expression and

seemed very distant during the first focus group session and then did not show up for the last two sessions. I wrote the following in an analytic memo on February 26, 2002 after JoAnne missed a focus group session:

> I am surprised JoAnne missed today. I wonder if maybe she skipped today's focus group because she got somewhat attacked by the other participants in the first focus group session. JoAnne was so firm in her belief that getting parents involved in their children's lives should NOT be a concern for teachers that the others had to speak up and challenge her statements. Maybe JoAnne was hurt by that experience. I get the impression that she is a loner, but that she likes to make the "choice" to be a loner herself – not to have it made for her because others disagree with her.

JoAnne's comments in the first and only focus group session she attended were very interesting in light of what I read about her family in her autobiography. In the focus group session, JoAnne talked at length about how teachers have too many other responsibilities to have to deal with educating parents about how to get involved in their children's lives. She thought that teachers should spend more time educating students about how to be self-motivated. In her autobiography, JoAnne wrote several times about self-motivation and how she had to be self-motivated because her divorced parents were not very involved in her life. She did write that she was close to her elderly and sick grandparents, but never mentioned her own parents in our informal discussions.

JoAnne's demeanor and manner in the classroom was one of structure and organization. Thus, it was not surprising that she wrote about her initiative and planning abilities in her autobiography and in her journal entries. She wrote extensively about how she liked to get lesson plans and projects done early and could not stand procrastinators. In JoAnne's section on her beliefs about children, she wrote that although she thought all children could learn, she knew many had impediments to learning. In particular, she thought most students needed assistance in organizing and "staying on top" of assignments.

During student teaching, JoAnne taught 6th grade at Buckley Paideia Magnet School (See Figure 1) at her first placement. Her white, female cooperating teacher had been teaching middle school for 10 years. For her second placement, JoAnne taught 3rd grade at Grayton Elementary School (See Figure 2). Her cooperating teacher at Grayton was an 18-year teaching veteran who was also white and female.

Annie's Story

Annie, like Kara, was immediately interested in participating in this study. Annie was always very attentive during every focus group session and was constantly wondering if she was writing "enough thoughts and observations" in her dialogue journal. She even called me at one point during her second placement to ask about an interaction she had had with a parent. Although the interaction was fairly minor, a brief conversation about the upcoming field trip, Annie wanted me to know how she handled it and if she should record it in her journal. Again like Kara, Annie was very

energetic and anxious to become a “real teacher.” In her autobiography, she wrote about her many experiences with children, ranging from teaching preschool when she was in high school to teaching Romanian children while on a mission trip.

In her autobiography, Annie also wrote extensively about her upbringing and her “amazing parents” who she said taught her to have a focus on God in all she does and pursues. Both of Annie’s parents work in the medical field as doctor assistants in a mid-size Tennessee city and she has an older and younger sister. Annie lived most of her school years in Tennessee where she attended high school in a middle-class setting. Annie not only was very involved in leadership roles in both high school and college, but she wrote that she loved being a team player and working with people in whatever capacity she could. As a weakness, Annie wrote, “I am terrified of parents because I am a people pleaser and I usually take on more responsibility than I can handle.”

Annie’s first student teaching placement was in 8th grade at Moody Middle School (See Figure 1). She was teamed with two cooperating teachers, a white male and a white female, who had been teaching between 15 and 20 years each. Annie’s second student teaching placement was in 4th grade at McWright Elementary School (See Figure 2) where she was placed with a white male cooperating teacher. He was in his early 30’s and had been teaching about 10 years.

Margaret's Story

Margaret's autobiography was by far the most detailed. She started her autobiography from the day she was born and proceeded to highlight numerous events from every age of her life thus far. It was obvious that she had a lot to say about her family, particularly about her close family relationships with her parents and brother. Margaret's father owns his own business and her mother is now a bank teller after being a stay-at-home mom for many years. Margaret moved around a lot before beginning elementary school in a suburb outside of a large Georgia city. She attended a religiously affiliated private school throughout her school career. Margaret began college at a school close to her home in Georgia, but transferred to Kane University after her freshman year because she felt Kane was a better fit for her academically and socially.

Margaret has had many opportunities to work with children at her church. She wrote about working in the church nursery, teaching Sunday school classes to toddlers, and working as a church camp counselor. During high school, Margaret tutored children in the lower school of the private school she attended. She wrote that this experience led her to pursue a teaching career because she "enjoyed seeing children learn new things." Although she has had many opportunities to work with children, she noted her weaknesses as the following:

> …my creative ability. I have always found it challenging to come up with interesting activities…Another weakness I have found about myself is a lack of confidence in what I do.

Margaret ended her autobiography with this education belief statement:

> My belief for education is that every child can learn and should be given an equal opportunity for a quality education. I believe that all teachers need to be well educated in their specific area of instruction and need to have a desire to teach children.

For Margaret's first student teaching placement, she was put at Britton Hill Middle School (See Figure 1) in 8th grade with a white, female cooperating teacher who had 10 years of teaching experience. Because Margaret's cooperating teacher was in her first year at Britton Hill and in 8th grade, Margaret commented that her cooperating teacher was overwhelmed with the responsibility of all she had to do and learn. Margaret was placed in 3rd grade at Peace Valley Elementary School (See Figure 2) for her second placement. Her cooperating teacher was a white, female cooperating teacher with 11 years of teaching experience in middle school.

Bell's Story

Bell, unlike the other five participants, was from somewhere other than the Southeast. She was from the state of New York and had come to Kane University because one of her brothers had attended the college. Bell wrote extensively about the loving environment created by her parents and four older brothers and its influence on her. In the introduction of her autobiography, she wrote, "When I think about the type of person I want to become, I cannot help but think of the type of people my parents are. The Lord has truly blessed me with these two very

extraordinary people." In particular, Bell pointed to the older brother that had attended Kane University as a strong influence in her life. She wrote, "Phil has recently begun his eighth year of teaching…I have spent many hours in his classroom both observing and facilitating lessons. I have learned so much from him and always look forward to spending time in his room." Moreover, Bell credited her brother's love of teaching as a major reason why she has chosen the profession.

Bell has worked with children in various settings. She was most proud of her college job as an extended day worker at a nearby private school. Bell noted that the job had the responsibilities of getting the students snacks, helping with homework, and interacting with them during playtime. In addition, Bell has babysat extensively for children of many ages, particularly in large group settings, like at church.

Bell listed two weaknesses in her autobiography. First, she felt that her strong New York accent had been a detriment to her. She wrote that she always had to repeat things for other people because they did not understand her, particularly children. Second, Bell wrote, "I am not very good at conflict resolution between adults. I can handle conflicts and problems that arise between children, but I am not skillful at handling conflicts between adults. I just don't know what to do." In her education belief statement, she wrote, "People, including children, should be treated with respect and kindness. A person's socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds should not matter. Everyone deserves to be treated in the same manner."

For Bell's first student teaching placement, she was put at Mary Aniston Elementary School (a K-7 school) (See Figure 1) in 6th grade. Her cooperating

teacher was a white female who had taught exclusively at Mary Aniston for 26 years. Bell was at Peace Valley Elementary School in 3rd grade for her second placement (See Figure 2). Bell's cooperating teacher, a white female, was in her first year at Peace Valley, but had taught 3rd and 4th grade before for eight years at a magnet school.

Settings

Data for this study were collected during a 17-week period beginning January 8 and ending May 1, 2002. Data were first collected on January 8th before the preservice teachers began student teaching on January 14th. During their student teaching, these six preservice teachers were placed in public schools in the southeast county school system where the university is located. The preservice teachers were placed in different schools for each of the two eight week periods. As a result, they practiced their student teaching in both a middle school and an elementary school setting. Because Kane University promotes experiences with diverse learners, at least one of the student teaching placements (for each of the six participants) was in a school that had a student population that was at least 60% minority (primarily, African-American) or had a high percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch. The following section is a more detailed description of each school setting. In addition, Figures One and Two show complete demographic information on each of the schools. The school data included in this dissertation is public

information provided by the county's board of education based on the 2001-2002 school year.

Middle School Placements

Britton Hill Middle School is housed in a new building and has an enrollment of 230 students in fifth through eighth grades. Britton Hill serves primarily African-American students (82.1% of its student population) and is located in an area of the county with several low-income housing projects. In addition, Britton Hill receives supplemental funding because it is classified as a Title 1 school with over 60% of its students on free or reduced lunch. Britton Hill has a parent teacher organization with approximately 125 members.

Buckley Paideia Magnet School is housed in two 70-year-old buildings surrounded by low-income housing projects. The middle school, which resides in its own building, serves sixth through eighth grade students who are 74.1% African-American and 23.4% White. Because Buckley is a magnet school, students apply to attend the school. However, Buckley is an open magnet school, thus all students who apply and can provide their own transportation are accepted up to the 700 student limit. As a result, the majority of the students who attend Buckley are students who live in the surrounding neighborhoods. Buckley's main curricular emphasis as a magnet school focuses on the work of Mortimer Adler and his Paideia methodology; thus, Buckley encourages active participation of learners in hands-on projects that are usually long-term problem solving opportunities. The students at Buckley regularly

conduct group projects in all subject areas and maintain portfolios of their work. Parents of magnet students in the county are asked to volunteer for 18 hours of service at their respective magnet schools, but are not required to volunteer. Buckley boasts a parent teacher organization with approximately 600 members, but did not have data about how many of its parents completed the 18 hours of volunteer service.

Mary Aniston Elementary School is the only school in the county that serves kindergarten through seventh grade students. It also has the distinction of having the highest mobility rate in the county with 60.9% turnover throughout the school year. Mary Aniston has a very diverse population with 38% African-American, 23% Hispanic, and 36% White. Moreover, Mary Aniston is a Title 1 school with 66% of its students on free or reduced lunch. Although Mary Aniston does have a parent teacher organization, it does not have a record of the number of members.

McDonald Middle School changed from a junior high to a middle school 20 years ago so its building is still reminiscent of a large high school setting. In fact, it serves a population of over 700 students, which makes it the largest middle school in the county. The majority of the students at McDonald are White (57.3%) while African-American students are the second largest student population (31.2%). Like Mary Aniston, McDonald does have a parent teacher organization but does not have an estimate of the number of members.

Moody Middle School serves 408 students in grades six through eight. The school itself is located in a middle-class neighborhood located near Kane University. Moody's majority student population is White (63.6%) while African-American

students are the second largest student population (33.2%). Moody maintains a low number of students on free or reduced lunch. Moody has a parent teacher organization with approximately 450 members.

Elementary School Placements

Grayton Elementary School is the largest elementary school in the county with 886 students. As a result, the lawn of Grayton is covered with 10 to 12 portable classrooms because it has outgrown its available classroom space in the 37-year-old building. The majority of the students at Grayton are White (60.4%) while the second largest student population is African-American (29.2%). Grayton Elementary is one of the feeder schools for Moody Middle School; therefore, it also has a low number of students on free or reduced lunch and is located in a middle-class neighborhood. Grayton's parent teacher organization boasts over 800 members with 300 of those members who volunteer at the school on a regular basis.

McWright Elementary School serves about 240 students and serves a majority White population (65.4%) who live in the surrounding mix of low to middle class housing. About 30% of the students at McWright reside in trailer parks not far from the 46-year-old school building. Approximately 40% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch and the school's mobility rate is 38%. McWright's parent teacher organization has about 200 members and only meets one to two times a year.

Peace Valley Elementary School has a very diverse student body with 38% White, 32% African-American, 20% Hispanic, and about 9% Asian. In fact, Peace

Valley has one of the largest Asian populations in the county as well as one of the largest percentages of students who are from a non-English speaking background. In addition, Peace Valley is a Title 1 school with a very large percentage of students on free and reduced lunch (73.2%). Peace Valley has a parent teacher organization but does not have a record of the number of members.

Figure 1: Middle School/Placement One Demographics

	Britton Hill (5-8)	Buckley Paideia Magnet (K-8)	Mary Aniston (K-7)	McDonald (6-8)	Moody (6-8)
Enrollment	230	667	299	702	408
% Race Asian	.4%	1.3%	2.0%	6.4%	2.0%
Black	82.1%	74.1%	38.0%	31.2%	33.2%
Hispanic	.9%	1.0%	23.0%	4.9%	1.2%
Am Indian	.0%	.1%	1.0%	.1%	.0%
White	16.6%	23.4%	36.0%	57.3%	63.6%
% Free & Reduced Lunch Participants	64.7%	39.9%	66.0%	31.7%	22.1%
% English as a Second Language and Non-English Language Background	1.3%	3.4%	28.3%	13.1%	4.9%
% Special Education Part-Time (0-23 hours/week)	11.1%	8.5%	9.0%	16.1%	8.8%
Full-Time (23+ hours/week)	8.5%	.0%	.0%	2.7%	6.9%
% Mobility	32.6%	12.6%	60.9%	25.6%	22.5%

Figure 2: Elementary School/Placement Two Demographics

	Grayton (K-4)	McWright (K-4)	Peace Valley (K-4)
Enrollment	886	237	461
% Race Asian Black Hispanic Am Indian White	7.3% 29.2% 3.0% .0% 60.4%	2.1% 30.8% 1.3% .4% 65.4%	9.2% 32.0% 20.8% .0% 38.0%
% Free & Reduced Lunch Participants	30.0%	40.8%	73.2%
% English as a Second Language and Non-English Language Background	11.3%	4.6%	48.3%
% Special Education Part-Time (0-23 hours/week) Full-Time (23+ hours/week)	 8.9% .6%	 13.8% 5.4%	 8.8% .0%
% Mobility	23.5%	38.0%	33.8%

Data Collection

I personally collected all data during the spring of 2002. Data sources include transcripts from three focus group discussions, transcripts of one individual interview with each preservice teacher participant, dialogue journals combined with informal discussions, analytic memos, and written autobiographies from each preservice teacher. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant during January of 2002, before our first focus group session.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a scheduled and planned discussion method used for the purpose of eliciting responses from a number of people at one time regarding a specific topic (Morgan, 1997). Unlike individual interviews, focus groups allow participants to not only share personal feelings and thoughts on a topic, but they also allow participants to respond to other group members' comments. As a result, focus groups can bring out insights and dialogues that individual interviews cannot (Berg, 1995). I chose focus groups for this study because important and potentially insightful communication and learning processes occur in focus groups as a result of participant interaction. Asbury (1995) is one of many researchers to argue that focus groups produce data rich in detail, as participants' responses help activate forgotten details of experience, that are difficult to achieve with other research methods. Detail was particularly important in this study as I was hoping to capture specific beliefs that preservice teachers have about parents as well as specific experiences that build

preservice teachers' knowledge about parents. Additionally, I was hoping to provide an environment where preservice teachers were likely to share details about what they have and have not learned about parents in their education course work. As the researcher, as well as one of Susan's previous education professors at Kane University, I believed that the focus group environment would encourage the preservice teachers to share thoughts that they might not otherwise share in an individual interview. Specifically, because I knew Susan was very shy when she was the center of attention and was reluctant to interact with me one-on-one when I was her instructor in Educational Technology, I believed the focus group setting would allow her to feel more at ease. Focus group interaction was highly valuable in this regard because it released inhibitions that may have otherwise discouraged participants from disclosing information (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956).

For this study, I facilitated three focus group discussions over a five-month period. Each focus group consisted of the same six preservice teachers, except that one participant, JoAnne, was absent for both the second and third focus group session. As noted by Kreuger (1988), focus groups can and should be used at the preliminary stages of a study to gain initial impressions about a topic. Thus, the first focus group took place after the preservice teachers had completed their education coursework, but before they began student teaching. The preservice teachers had each completed a total of thirteen education courses totaling 40 credit hours in addition to their general education coursework. Kane University does not offer a course on parent involvement, but does address the topic specifically in two courses -

Foundations of Education and Classroom Management. Because Kane University's education department is NCATE accredited, it does adhere to NCATE standards (NCATE, 2002), which promote parent involvement in education.

Race, Hotch and Parker (1994) used focus groups throughout a program they were evaluating to get a sense of changes that occurred at specific intervals. Similarily, because the six preservice teachers spent eight weeks at two schools during their student teaching semester, the second focus group took place at the end of their first student teaching placement but before they entered their second school. The last focus group took place during the last week of their student teaching semester. Gibbs (1997) believes the focus group that occurs after a program has been completed is one of the most important because it allows the researcher to assess any changes that have occurred over the research period.

Individual Interviews

Following the completion of student teaching and the three focus group sessions, I conducted one individual interview with each of the six preservice teachers. Questions for the individual interviews were developed based on the information discussed in the focus groups. Because each participant could not always talk at length or in great detail during the focus group sessions, the interviews were used to clarify and expand on topics that needed additional attention. Moreover, the individual interviews allowed participants to discuss any particular experiences or concerns that they may not have felt comfortable sharing with the group, as well as to

share specific experiences that were not mentioned. Individual interviews were conducted until saturation was felt, meaning no further insight was gained from the addition of new data (Creswell, 1998). Each interview lasted between twenty and thirty minutes.

Dialogue Journals and Informal Discussions

In order to gain a full picture of if and/or how the student teaching experience affected the preservice teachers' beliefs and concerns regarding parents, I used dialogue journals with each of the six teachers. Dialogue journals are notebooks in which two inquirers can freely share thoughts, ideas, observations, and questions regarding some topic, in this case, the topic being researched (Bean, 1989; Goldstein, 1997; Reinerstein & Wells, 1993; Staton, 1988). I used dialogue journals in much the same way as Fishman and Raver (1989) used them to discuss experiences during student teaching. Fishman and Raver's (1989) article details how Fishman (as cooperating teacher) and Raver (as student teacher) used dialogue journals to keep a constant flow of ideas, comments, and concerns open between them. Raver's journal entries began the conversation, but Fishman's responses and additional comments and inquiries kept the conversation going over a five-month period. These entries then served as windows into particular experiences during Raver's student teaching experience. Fishman used these entries not only for immediate reflection as she tried to improve the experience of her current student teacher, but she also reread them as she prepared for future student teachers.

Similarly, I used dialogue journals to open the lines of communication between the preservice teachers and me in order to gain information that served to increase the awareness of preservice teachers' experiences with parents. Although the preservice teachers in the study already kept a log that was required of all student teachers by Kane University, I requested they keep a dialogue journal in a separate spiral notebook for the specific purpose of communication with me about anything related to parent involvement. The preservice teachers agreed to comment on the following in their dialogue journals as it related to their experiences during student teaching: (a) observations of parents and parent involvement at their schools and in their own classrooms, (b) observations of prevailing types of parent involvement encouraged by their school administrators and cooperating teachers, (c) personal exchanges and encounters with parents, (d) personal thoughts and reflections about parent encounters, and (e) questions or concerns about parent encounters.

I used the dialogue journals in three ways. First, I visited each preservice teachers' classroom weekly for the purpose of reading and responding to the journal observations and questions. However, I occasionally stayed and observed the activities of the classrooms (usually as a result of the prompting of an eager preservice teacher who had created an interesting lesson) or spoke with the preservice teachers. I also met and briefly talked to each of the cooperating teachers at different times during my visits. At my request, the preservice teachers were not to reveal to their cooperating what I was researching, but to simply explain that I would be visiting (like the regular university supervisor) once a week for a study I was

conducting. As a result of these weekly visits, I was not only able to gain insight into what the preservice teachers were learning about parents, but I was also able to encourage further observations and reflections by asking additional questions to keep the dialogue in constant motion throughout the semester. Second, I used the dialogue journal as a starting place for additional conversation with the preservice teachers during my visits. Janesick (1999) notes that this aspect of using dialogue journals is one of the most valuable for qualitative researchers because it allows researchers to clarify ideas and comments with the research participants, which ultimately helps triangulate data and pursue interpretations in a dialogical manner. Finally, I used the dialogue journal observations and comments to create and hone questions for the final two focus group sessions. Glesne (1999) notes that "in the process of listening to your [participants], you learn what questions to ask" (p. 69). Thus, the dialogue journal information helped conjure up rich questions as I "listened" to the reflective words of the preservice teachers.

Analytic Memos

Analytic memos are reflective writings that encourage and assist the researcher in interpreting, questioning, and developing possible themes across data sources (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Goldstein (1997) wrote analytic memos at regular intervals during her research as she thought holistically about her data. During the majority of her research studies, Janesick (1999) espoused to regularly use analytic notes to reflect on issues surrounding her qualitative research methods.

Throughout this study, I used analytic memos to clarify what I was observing, hearing, and reading as well as to reflect on my methodology. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) note that using analytic memos allows the researcher to view her data in more complex forms while also helping her make sense of exactly what is going on in the research at a given time. Thus, by using analytic memos, I was not only able to interpret the specific information I gained from both the focus groups and the dialogue journals, but I was also able to begin generating ideas about similarities and differences among the preservice teachers' beliefs and experiences. Ultimately, the analytic memos helped lead me to interpretations about my data as well as insights about my methodology.

Written Autobiographies

Another data source for this study was a written autobiography from each of the six preservice teachers. Kane University requires all student teachers to write an autobiography before student teaching. These autobiographies are used to introduce each student teacher to her cooperating teachers before their initial meeting. Each autobiography must include family history, early childhood experiences, school experiences, meaningful contacts with children, community and job-related involvement, strengths and weaknesses, beliefs about education, and career goals. Because I was aware of the requirement, I requested a copy of the autobiography from each of the preservice teachers. I used these autobiographies to gain insight about each of the preservice teachers' backgrounds, particularly with regard to their

own schooling and parenting experiences. I have included Bell's complete autobiography as an example of this data source (See Appendix).

Data Analysis

As defined by Wolcott (1994), qualitative data analysis is a "systematic procedure followed in order to identify essential features and relationships" (p. 24). As I attempted to identify essential features and relationships in my data, my analysis was an ongoing process throughout the five-month study. I collected and analyzed data simultaneously in an effort to refine, focus, and shape my study as I looked for emerging themes. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out that daily reflection on qualitative data, both narrowly and holistically, will assist the researcher in discovering emerging themes.

In addition to constantly reading and reflecting upon the collected data throughout the study, I coded and analyzed the focus group transcripts, individual interview data, dialogue journal data, and the analytic memos according to a three-stage process proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). During the first stage of analysis, I conducted open coding in which I read and analyzed line by line all transcribed focus group comments and interviews as well as journal comments and analytic memos in an effort to generate initial categories. Then, during the second stage of coding, I identified consistent themes and relationships in each of the four sources. After determining these general categories, I reviewed the data again to locate additional evidence backing up each theme. Strauss and Corbin (1990)

describe this process as axial coding since it involves analysis focused individually around the axis of each category or theme. Finally, during the third stage of coding, I compared the general themes across all data sources, creating broader, more consistent themes. The inclusion of multiple data sources increased the validity of the specific findings and conclusions as well as provided a comprehensive look at the six preservice teachers' beliefs about and experiences with working with parents.

Hebert (1999) used the axial coding system in his qualitative study of the factors that influence achievement and underachievement in gifted black males. He found that this data analysis technique allowed him to pick out specific similarities across all his data sources. Hebert was able to use the unique "voices" of each of his participants while also extracting the commonalities or large themes found among the research participants' experiences. In like manner, the "voices" of the preservice teachers were the foundation of this study as I brought to the surface the unique and common concerns and experiences of these six preservice teachers as they not only contemplated working with parents, but as they actually got experiences working with parents. The themes that emerged from the data are explained in chapter four, with attention given to how the main themes were derived from the coding process.

Limitations

This study, like all research, is not without limitations. First, because of the time constraints and expectations placed on preservice teachers during their student teaching semester, dialogue journal writing was not a high priority of four of the six

participants. On my weekly visits to each participant's classroom, only two of the preservice teachers (Kara and Annie) regularly updated their journals with observations, comments, and questions. The other four had rarely updated their journals from the week before when I visited. In contrast, only one of the six participants (JoAnne) missed focus group sessions and no one missed their scheduled individual interview. As I reflect on the reasons why this occurred, I realized that most of the participants viewed the dialogue journal as another writing "assignment" in addition to writing daily lesson plans and reflections on these lessons as required by the university. The focus group sessions and interview time required no writing and provided a social time that the student teachers seem to crave after being in the classroom with students all day. Also, I based the compensation I paid each participant on the number of focus group and interview sessions attended. For future studies using student teachers, I would either eliminate the writing aspect of data collection or provide additional compensation for greater attention to daily journaling.

The second limitation to this study relates to the voluntary nature of participation. It is possible that the six preservice teachers who agreed to participate in this study have a greater interest in parent involvement than other preservice teachers, resulting in potential bias. In an attempt to address this problem, I randomly chose the prospective participants; however, they voluntarily chose to participate or not. For future studies, a randomly chosen group of student teachers could share their beliefs and experiences with parents in the context of a required component of their student teaching semester, thus eliminating the voluntary nature of participation.

Chapter 4 addresses data analysis and the findings that emerged from the analysis in this study. First, I describe my method of data analysis. Next, I discuss the themes that emerged from the data collected. Then, I present the findings organized using these themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To begin elaborating on the findings of this study, I will first describe my method of data analysis in detail. Following this description, I will describe the major themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Analysis

Data analysis began during the first focus group session as I sat down to write an analytic memo to myself in order to capture the key points of the discussion. From the beginning, I had insights about what the six participants were saying although my insights were not always correct. Because I wrote myself notes about my own understandings, I was able to trace how my own assumptions had changed and developed throughout the semester-long study. In addition, I transcribed the first focus group comments within a week after the session and began reading and rereading this data along with the autobiographies of the six preservice teachers as the second week of the study started. Throughout the study, I used analytic memos to record my thoughts after weekly visits to the preservice teachers' classrooms and after the last two focus group sessions. At the final focus group session, I collected the dialogue journals from the participants and scheduled the individual interviews. I finished the individual interviews during the following week. Then, I paid a transcription service to transcribe the last two focus group sessions and the six interviews.

Stage One

As described in chapter three, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axial coding process to analyze my data. Thus, with the transcripts, autobiographies, dialogue journals, and memos spread out around me, I began the first stage of data analysis by using open coding to make initial categories of my data. I often found myself reading a section of data numerous times, which made stage one particularly time-consuming, before deciding on a code. However, although this process was lengthy, I found that it was extremely worthwhile as I benefited immensely from the constant reading and rereading of data. In fact, the length of stage one actually helped strengthen stages two and three because I had become so familiar with the data. When I had finished this first stage of data analysis, I had identified 42 initial data codes (see Figure 3).

Stage Two

I began stage two only a day after completing stage one. During stage two, I looked for consistent themes that appeared in each of the data sources and then attempted to make early thematic categories based on my initial codes. I initially found this more difficult than I thought it would be. In hindsight, I believe it was more difficult because I had not distanced myself from stage one long enough before entering stage two. Thus, all the codes seemed to overlap with no clear categories emerging. In an attempt to remedy the situation, I took another day away from the data. When I returned to the data, I found that the categories emerged more easily. As part of stage two, I did read and reread the data again at least twice, but found that

I had an excellent grasp of it because of my time spent in stage one. I also listened to two of the focus group sessions again as I worked to group codes together. Ultimately, I determined six major themes (see Figure 4), under which codes would fit.

Stage Three

Having learned from my mistake of beginning too quickly into stage two, I did not begin stage three of analysis until the following week. During this stage, I reviewed the data again to determine whether broader themes were possible. I specifically focused on certain themes that appeared to mesh together, then I reread the data that was attached to the codes under each of these themes. In an attempt to further check if any other codes matched these themes, I reread the data from all other themes before putting any themes together as one broad category. After deciding on four broad themes, each with two or three sub themes (see Figure Five), I used four different highlighter colors to represent each theme. I then highlighted the data that supported each theme based on the original codes. This color-coding helped me tremendously as I wrote about my findings under each of the four themes.

Themes

Four major themes emanated from the data, each containing sub themes within them. From this study, the major themes that emerged were: (a) parents should be involved in their children's education; (b) parent-teacher interactions will

be negative; (c) parent involvement is not the responsibility of the classroom teacher; and (d) certain parents will not be very involved in their children's education. Under the first theme, parents should be involved in their children's education, the sub themes were (1) parents should be involved at home and (2) parents should be involved at school. The theme, parent-teacher interactions will be negative, contained the sub themes of (1) parents will be confrontational and overly involved and (2) teachers only interact with parents about problems. The theme, parent involvement is not the responsibility of the classroom teacher, included the sub themes of (1) parents' desire and initiative determines involvement, (2) parent involvement is a fixed entity that cannot be changed, and (3) teachers cannot involve parents because of time pressures and academic priorities. Lastly, the theme, certain parents will not be very involved in their children's education, included the sub themes of (1) parents of middle school students won't be very involved and (2) inner-city parents will not be very involved.

Parents Should Be Involved in Their Children's Education

The six preservice teachers in this study entered their student teaching placements with definite beliefs about parents. In particular, their belief that parents should be involved in their children's education was present before student teaching and continued throughout their semester-long practice teaching. Although this belief might seem to be taken for granted among most teachers, research suggests that many new teachers frequently enter classroom teaching without clear understandings about

whether parents should take an active involvement role in their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). However, the six preservice teachers in this study realized the parents' important function in both the home and school settings. Although they never verbalized a succinct plan for actively involving parents, the preservice teachers pointed to a variety of ways in which parents could support their own children's education. Specifically, the preservice teachers discussed the parents' role in creating a structured learning environment at home and the parents' role in supporting school activities and functions both through their expressed interest and their presence at these activities.

Parent-Teacher Interactions Will Be Negative

The theme, parent-teacher interactions will be negative, showed itself consistently among all preservice teachers from the first focus group session to the final individual interviews. Although the six preservice teachers espoused the view that parents were important in their children's education, they tended to define their personal interactions with parents in negative terms. Drawing primarily from their life histories and their coursework, the preservice teachers frequently pointed to confrontational and overly-involved parents throughout the first focus group session. Then, they continued to relay stories from their student teaching experiences and from conversations with their cooperating teachers about negative parent interactions, specifically related to parent contact about problems with students.

Parent Involvement is Not the Responsibility of the Classroom Teacher

The theme, parent involvement is not the responsibility of the classroom teacher, began to show itself during the second focus group and was present in all data sources thereafter. The preservice teachers clearly shifted the responsibility of parent involvement away from the classroom teacher in a variety of comments. In particular, the preservice teachers believed that parents' desire and initiative determined involvement, as opposed to anything the classroom teacher could do. They also promoted the idea that parent involvement was a fixed entity that could not be changed. In other words the preservice teachers believed that they would have parent involvement if they taught in a "high involvement" school or would have no parent involvement if they taught in a "low involvement" school. The preservice teachers tended to place these labels on schools arbitrarily. Lastly, the preservice teachers believed that teachers could not involve parents because they simply lacked the time to do so, particularly in light of academic priorities they had to accomplish.

Certain Parents Will Not Be Very Involved in Their Children's Education

Although this theme was not present in the first few weeks of data, the idea that certain parents will not be very involved in their children's education emerged as early as the fourth week of the student teaching experience. The preservice teachers began to make many generalizations about parents from two specific groups. First, the preservice teachers concluded that middle school parents would not be involved in their children's education for a variety of reasons. Second, they used the label "inner-

city" parents to describe either low-income minority parents or parents who had children who were bussed to their respective schools. The preservice teachers believed that the "inner-city" parents would not participate in their children's education.

Figure 3
First Stage-Open Coding
Initial Codes

1. My parents
2. Coursework
3. Teacher workload
4. Teacher responsibility
5. Communication
6. Elementary versus middle school
7. Minority parents
8. Homework
9. Teacher time
10. My cooperating teacher
11. Practicum experiences
12. Problem parents
13. Influence of parents
14. Home structure
15. Field trips
16. School activities
17. Overly-involved parents
18. Parent responsibility
19. Fear
20. Student problems
21. Uninvolved parents
22. School policies
23. School population
24. Negative feedback
25. Specific student stories
26. Parent expectations
27. My school experiences
28. Conferences
29. Phone calls
30. Socioeconomic class
31. Inner-city Parents
32. Bussed students
33. Parent interest
34. Encouragement
35. Discipline
36. Specific parent stories
37. Documentation
38. Frustration
39. Academic success

40. Other teachers
41. My beliefs
42. School involvement

Figure 4

Second Stage-Finding Consistent Themes and Relationships
Early Themes

Theme 1: Parents will be confrontational

- My parents
- My cooperating teacher
- Practicum experiences
- Problem parents
- Overly-involved parents
- Fear
- Negative feedback
- Conferences
- Phone calls
- Documentation
- My beliefs

Theme 2: Parents are important

- My parents
- Communication
- Homework
- Practicum experiences
- Influence of parents
- Home structure
- Field trips
- School activities
- Parent responsibility
- Specific student stories
- Parent expectations
- My school experiences
- Parent interest
- Encouragement
- Discipline
- Specific parent stories
- Academic success
- My beliefs

Theme 3: Teachers have little influence on parent involvement

- Teacher workload
- Teacher responsibility
- Teacher time
- My cooperating teacher

Practicum experiences
Parent responsibility
Uninvolved parents
School policies
Frustration
My beliefs
School involvement

Theme 4: Teachers only contact parents about problems
Coursework
Communication
My cooperating teacher
Practicum experiences
Problem parents
Student problems
Negative feedback
Conferences
Phone calls
Specific student stories
Frustration
Other teachers
My beliefs

Theme 5: Middle school parents are not as involved as elementary school parents
Elementary versus middle school
School population
My beliefs
School involvement

Theme 6: Inner-city parents are not as involved as other parents
Minority parents
School population
Inner-city parents
Bussed students
My beliefs
School involvement

Figure 5
Third Stage-Broader, More Consistent Themes and Relationships
Final Themes

Theme 1: Parents should be involved in their children's education.

- At home
- At school

Theme 2: Parent-teacher interactions will be negative.

- Parents will be confrontational and overly-involved
- Teachers only interact with parents about problems

Theme 3: Parent involvement is not the responsibility of the classroom teacher.

- Parents' desire and initiative determines involvement
- Parent involvement is a fixed entity that cannot be changed
- Teachers cannot involve parents because of time pressures

Theme 4: Certain parents will not be very involved in their children's education.

- Parents of middle school students
- Inner-city parents

Findings

This section will describe the preservice teachers' beliefs surrounding each of these themes. Because the six preservice teachers spoke of issues in such a similar manner, quotes have been included that clearly represent the viewpoints of the participants. In the few cases where a preservice teacher expressed a different perception of a topic, that data has been included to demonstrate even the smallest variation in beliefs. Moreover, if the preservice teachers' beliefs changed in any way from the beginning to the end of the study, these changes have been noted.

THEME ONE: Parents Should Be Involved in Their Children's Education

Although several themes emerged from this study, one theme appeared in all data sources throughout the study. Not only did all six preservice teachers initially believe that parents should be involved in their children's education, they also believed that parents were important in their children's academic success. Even when other beliefs changed as the preservice teachers did their student teaching, this theme remained constant. Moreover, the preservice teachers frequently recounted long, detailed stories of the effects of parent influence on students they worked with during student teaching. In these stories about parent influence, the preservice teachers distinguished between two venues in which parents should actively participate in their children's education – at home and at school.

Parents Should Be Involved in Their Children's Education at Home

The preservice teachers in this study entered student teaching with the belief that parent involvement was important. However, their initial understandings of parent involvement were more complex than those cited in other studies of preservice teacher beliefs about parents (Fero & Bush, 1994; Tichenor, 1997). In particular, the preservice teachers were able to detail a variety of ways in which parents should be involved in their children's education at home. During our first focus group session, Kara talked at length about her belief in the importance of parents.

> I think parent involvement is a very good thing to get. I think students who have parent involvement try harder and usually do better. I think everybody can achieve, and I think you know later in life, high school or whatever, you can look back and see the importance of parents. Now that I am in college, I really see how my parents being involved was important. Teachers I think should encourage parent involvement and try to get parents involved. Parents need to know how to motivate their children to do school work. Parents need to set aside a study time for them. (focus group 1)

Later in the same focus group, Bell added:

> I don't know how kids succeed without parents who communicate with them about school work and what's going on in their subjects. Parents have to know how to help their kids. My parents were the type that didn't necessarily come to every school program, but they knew

> what I was doing in school and they made sure I did my best. When I was little, we read together and then as I got older they helped me with my homework. (focus group 1)

In these two comments, both Kara and Bell communicated three meaningful ideas about the importance of parents. First, they referred to experiences with their own parents as they emphasized the need for parent involvement. Calderhead and Robson (1991) found that preservice teachers used their life histories as a foundation upon which they built their understanding of a teacher's work. Similarly, Kara and Bell drew from their life histories as they attempted to understand and explain the role of parents, particularly related to school and academic involvement. They both specifically acknowledged having parents who stayed abreast of their school work; thus, they themselves believed in the necessity of parent involvement.

Second, the preservice teachers showed an awareness of the effects of parent involvement on student achievement (Clarke & Williams, 1992; Henderson & Berla, 1994). Specifically, Kara's statement, "…students who have parent involvement try harder and usually do better," indicated that she at least had made a connection between the parent input and the student output. Kara and Bell noted the necessity of parents providing a home environment that promoted learning. Studies have shown that parents who set aside a place to study, emphasize reading time, and provide home resources for learning assist students in increasing their achievement level at school (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995; Milne, 1989). Additionally, Solo (1997)

found that families who specifically put learning as a priority and provided conducive conditions for learning at home improved students' attitudes about school.

Third, Kara and Bell emphasized the need for parent involvement in the home, not necessarily at the school building. This is consistent with the broader, more inclusive definition of parent involvement as defined by Epstein (2001, 1995) and Chavkin and Williams (1993) which emphasize the importance of home involvement. Kara and Bell understood that parent involvement was not just about involving parents in bake sales and field trips, it was about actively participating in their individual child's academic life.

Kara and Bell were also able to defend the importance of parents when it was questioned. A somewhat emotionally-charged discussion took place during the first focus group session when JoAnne discussed the importance of teaching students self-motivation as opposed to trying to involve parents. Again, the preservice teachers in this exchange reiterated the importance of the home environment. They demonstrated an understanding of the need for parents to reinforce a child's education at home. The following is the complete discussion initiated by a comment from Bell.

Bell: I was talking to [a substitute teacher] at my job today about something real interesting about parents. She really thinks that schools have to educate parents in some ways – like building character in their kids and how to help them study. She thinks test scores will improve when that happens. [She] really believes you have to meet the needs of the home before student academic stuff can be addressed.

JoAnne: I'm not really sure about that. I don't think schools have a responsibility to teach parents about things – like how to be involved in their kid's lives. I don't see logistically how that will happen. I feel that teachers should work to motivate students and to teach them to be self-motivated. Teach goal setting and independence. Students need to take responsibility for their own education. Students who are self-motivated are going to do better in the long run.

Bell: Yeah, well what if you are teaching them to be self-motivated eight hours a day and then they go home and see the complete opposite? What if they don't get their parents saying the same things? What if their parents are showing that you can sit at home and draw a check and do nothing? Parents need to be an example or it doesn't matter what the teacher is saying.

Kara: True. [Students] need to be self-motivated – I was self-motivated growing up but that stemmed from my parents saying good job, you've done a fantastic job at school on this work. So I think it is important to get the parents involved appreciating their children like they should… As much as I wanted to do things for myself, I loved pleasing my parents. Students need to learn [self-motivation] by first pleasing their parents.

JoAnne: Well, a lot of what I said is based on how I was raised. My parents were not what I would say involved in my education or my sisters. I just wanted

to be a good student. Don't misunderstand me, I think parent involvement is important, but is that my responsibility as a teacher?

As they did on many occasions, the preservice teachers in this excerpt referred to their life histories when discussing their understandings of parent involvement. In fact, JoAnne even admitted that she based her comments about self-motivation on the premise that her parents were not involved and yet she was self-motivated in school. From this statement, it seemed JoAnne did not believe in the effects of parent involvement on student achievement. However, when questioned about her beliefs, JoAnne stated that she actually did think parent involvement was important. Initially, it appeared that JoAnne just made the admission because she was feeling pressure from the other preservice teachers. But, on closer inspection, JoAnne reiterated this belief in other data sources.

> Children want to please their parents even though they don't realize it. I think parents have a tremendous effect on children and how much they achieve…There are always exceptions to this, there are always children whose parents work about 24 hours a day, but the [kids] are internally motivated. I think I was like this. (Journal/March 10, 2002)

> Parents are definitely an influential part of a kid's life, I guess the most influential…I have seen how my students who have involved parents seem more ready to learn at school…(interview)

While these statements give credence to JoAnne's statement about the importance of parent involvement, her comments about the role of the teacher in this excerpt cannot be ignored. Thus, this "scene" from the first focus group session will be revisited as yet another theme emerged from its contents.

As the student teaching semester got underway, the preservice teachers recorded more and more thoughts on the importance of teachers while relating specific student incidents and observances. In a journal entry during Kara's first week of student teaching, she wrote:

> Some of the students in these classes don't seem to care as much about school as some of the others. I really think it's because of the parents. I mean I guess I don't know that for sure yet – I mean I don't have scientific evidence, but I know that some kids talk about their parents more than others. Like one told me yesterday that his mom told him that he better not bring home anything lower than a "C" and if he did then she would cut out his after school activities. He looked like that meant something to him. I know my parents had to set strict study rules for me in middle school and I did better in school because of them. I mean I really think that I made A's and B's because my parents were always interested and made sure I was studying. (Journal/January 9, 2002)

I responded in her journal with the following on January 13, 2002, "I'm glad you are sharing your thoughts and observations with me. Are you seeing other examples of

parents influencing their children's school habits, etc.?" Kara wrote again the following day.

> I am seeing lots of things although subtle – I mean I probably wouldn't see it unless I was looking for it. One of my students with divorced parents has an incredibly involved mom who really helps her son stay on top of his assignments. I know this because I have overheard his conversation with his friends – you know referring to how she checks to make sure he has his homework in his book bag every night and how she helps him get organized. This student is a very good student with a great attitude. I have another kid who has both parents at home but can't get it together. I've heard him say on numerous times that his parents don't care and they don't know what he has to do for school – he even called them clueless one time. I mean I am hearing some interesting stuff – it is just reinforcing what I already believe about the importance of parents, but didn't truly appreciate. Also, I have always thought married parents are better than divorced parents but now I can see every situation is individual.

Kara noted the differences in the involvement of two of her students' parents. The difference is particularly interesting and noteworthy to her because it does not fit her belief that married parents are automatically better parents than divorced parents. However, Kara's identification of how the divorced mother is involved in her child's education is the key discovery in this journal entry. Kara recognized the importance of the mother taking the time and effort to organize her child's schoolwork for the

upcoming school day. Kara noted the difference in the preparation of this child compared to the child who was unprepared and appeared to lack parent involvement.

Although the primary purpose of the dialogue journal was data collection, for some of the preservice teachers, particularly Kara, it produced much self-reflection and awareness. Richardson (1994) noted that preservice teachers beliefs may be consciously or unconsciously held and that teacher educators have the responsibility of helping students bring out and understand their beliefs. By giving Kara the "assignment" of writing in her dialogue journal about her observations and thoughts about parents, she became aware of her unconscious beliefs about parents; thus, she began to consciously appreciate parents' role in student achievement. Renzaglia et al. (1997) found that preservice teachers' who had more opportunities to reflect on what they were hearing and experiencing during their teacher education program were more likely to change their previously held beliefs. In addition, Renzaglia et al. (1997) discovered that interactions with faculty (both formally and informally) were important in changing beliefs. Kara had the opportunity to participate in both as she reflected in her journal and then received weekly feedback in the form of informal comments and questions.

During student teaching, the preservice teachers made many assumptions about their students' parent involvement based on the students' school performance.

> You know I can tell that the kids whose parents are real involved and want progress reports are more excited when they get their grades and they are more into school. They want to make good grades and get

> certificates to show their parents. If they have slightly lower than normal grades they say, 'my parents aren't going to like this,' but I know they are disappointed in themselves too. (focus group 2) (Annie)

> Why do some parents totally want to help their kids with everything while some just don't take any initiative to know what is going on at school? I saw a lot of the "no initiative" parents at both of my placements. I remember one boy who really had it together among so many who didn't want to be at school and never had their homework. I am sure his mom stayed on him. (interview) (Margaret)

Although Annie and Margaret's comments are only assumptions, they indicate yet again their understanding of the importance of parents in ways that are supported by research. Studies show that parents who communicate high, reasonable expectations about school and continually reinforce these expectations with actions have a positive impact on their children's academic achievement (Ford, 1993; Hoge, Smit, & Cris, 1997; Goyette & Xie; 1999).

Parents Should Be Involved in Their Children's Education at School

Although the majority of the preservice teachers' comments about the importance of parents being involved in their children's education focused on parent involvement at home, parent involvement at school appeared consistently throughout the data. While the preservice teachers pointed out parents who were involved in

school activities such as field trips and class programs, they more frequently talked and wrote about their desire for more parent involvement at school functions.

Swick (1991) found that parents assume various degrees of involvement ranging from a passive to a very active approach. While passive parents remain minimally involved in school affairs, active parents are involved on a continuous basis in all aspects of a child's education, especially in school functions and activities (Fero & Bush, 1994; Swick, 1991). Annie noted two parents who she actually called active parents. The following quote is an excerpt from Annie's interview:

> One of my favorite parents is Mrs. Worthy because she takes time to come to school for all the night events, like the PTO meetings and the science fair. She works and I know it is hard for her to be there but she cares about our school. You can tell by the way she knows everyone personally, she's taken the time to get to know them. Her daughter is such a great kid even though she can be a little bossy sometimes. I think it makes such a good impression on your kids when you show participation in something just for them. Oh, Mrs. Pellum is also just like that too. She even brings us lunch every now and then. She comes to eat with her two kids and stops in to visit when she can. Both of these parents are so active in everything. I wish they were all like them.

In contrast, Bell and Margaret commented on the lack of parent attendance at school functions in the school where they both student taught during their second placement.

> Only one of our parents came on our field trip even though we invited all who wanted to come. I think that sends a message to the kids. Our class actually had to borrow a parent from another class to have enough adults on the trip…kids like to have their parents along during elementary school… (focus group 3) (Bell)

> If more parents would come on field trips like these, I think they would learn a lot themselves, like about how their kid behaves. Kids need to know that their parents are interested in what they are doing. (focus group 3) (Margaret)

Research studies support the overall positive impact of parent involvement in the school or classroom setting, although its impact on student achievement has not been directly correlated. However, Epstein (1990) reported better academic success for students whose parents were "…aware, knowledgeable, and encouraging about school…" (p. 105). Epstein (1990) cited direct school involvement as one way to attain these three key elements of parent involvement. Solo (1997) suggested that parents who visited their children's school and kept in close touch with their teachers were more adequately informed of their children's progress and supported school activities more consistently. Moreover, Wallis (1998) indicated that when parents maintained actual classroom involvement, they were more apt to support the functions of the school and their children's academic necessities.

Although the six preservice teachers in this study had not taken a course about parent involvement or received direct instruction on the effects of parent involvement on their children's education, they were quick to point out and recognize the benefits of parents in both the home and school settings. Their beliefs seemed to be steeped in their experiences with their own parents and then reinforced by their student teaching experiences. As a result, they entered and exited the teacher education program with the same beliefs about the importance of parents in their children's education.

THEME TWO: Parent-Teacher Interactions Will Be Negative

The preservice teachers in this study consistently talked about parent-teacher interactions in negative terms. Initially, the preservice teachers discussed their fear of parents. Mainly, they feared that parents would be both confrontational and overly involved in their children's education, particularly in the school setting. As the student teaching semester progressed, they talked and wrote about the actual parent-teacher interactions they either witnessed or heard about from their cooperating teachers. These parent-teacher interactions were generally about problems the teachers were having with students.

Parents Will Be Confrontational and Overly Involved

To illustrate the theme that parents will be confrontational and overly involved, I have included quotes which embody the essence of these preservice

teachers' view of parents. Before Kara began her student teaching semester, she said the following during our first focus group session when asked what her thoughts were about parents as she contemplated her first year of teaching:

> I am terrified of parents. I think I will cry if I have to talk to them. I mean I'm scared because I know how involved parents are in the school system where I went [in Georgia] and I am afraid that if I do something wrong, they will file a motion on me or something, you know. I mean I have no idea how to talk to parents if I needed to – my [own] parents always backed me. Well, my parents supported the teacher but you know my mom could get ugly if she needed to and I am afraid of parents getting ugly and things like that. I want to deal with all those confrontations without crying. (focus group 1)

Carter and Doyle's (1995) term "preconceptions" refers to the experiences and life histories preservice teachers build on as they attempt to understand their work as a teacher. Kara's initial comments painted a complete picture of her preconceptions of parents. First, she clearly stated her fear of parents as well as the reason behind the fear. From her own life history, she experienced the involvement of her parents and then witnessed the involvement of other parents in the schools she attended. Kara remembered her own mother's willingness to confront the teacher and believed other parents would do the same. Second, Kara stated her fear of confrontation, specifically her fear of appearing weak during a conflict. Moreover, she commented twice about the possibility that she might cry when dealing with parents. Kara readily

recognized her emotional tendencies, which tend to parallel her high strung and bubbly personality. As a result, she felt her emotional side would appear when working with parents – whom she already believed would be confrontational.

Kara had clearly already internalized concerns, which were truly fears, about parents before she entered student teaching. In fact, she rarely mentioned parents in our first focus group without referring to her fears. Kara commented later during the same session about the memory of a parent of one of her friends getting angry at her fifth grade teacher.

> Nancy's mother was mad. She came to school for a conference with our teacher, but it didn't help. I remember Nancy saying that her mom made the teacher cry during the conference. I just know that is going to happen to me.

Again, Kara has built on her memories of parents' interactions with teachers and transferred it to her own expectations of parents. Kagan (1992) called this transfer "filtering beliefs" because preservice teachers tend to filter all they encounter and hear about in preservice teacher education through their previous experiences and beliefs. Thus, as Kara contemplated working with parents, she processed what she thought these encounters would look like through the lenses of what she already knew about parent interactions, particularly those related to school. As a result, Kara envisioned parent interactions to be negative and confrontational as well as able to evoke emotion.

Annie also shared her fear of parents in the following:

> My biggest concern, fear really, is a parent coming in and yelling at me, hating something I've done, and me not knowing how to react, and then trying to be calm about it and not cry because I've never had it happen before. Then, I'm afraid of the other extreme parent – the one that is there all the time and then me not knowing how to tell them to back off a little bit. (focus group 1)

Later in the same focus group, Annie referred to parents as a "necessary evil" and a "problem when they're always in your room." Susan shared that she thought parents would come to her about grades and question her system. In addition, JoAnne called parent involvement "something that can really get in the way," while Margaret explained that she thought parents would be one of the most difficult parts of her job as a new teacher because "they can really cause problems if they don't like you or what you're doing." Initially, the comments of the preservice teachers seemed to have originated only from their life histories; however, they made several revealing statements about another source of their beliefs when I asked, "What do you remember learning about parents in your teacher education courses ?" The following are some of their responses:

> I remember in my courses being told to document everything – notes, calls. Be prepared. I always wondered why…it seemed like we had to document because something we said or they said might come back at us. I don't remember anything in any of my courses about how to get [parents] involved at home or at school. I don't even remember anything about how to deal with

them except a little about conferences. (focus group 1) (Bell)

In Classroom Management, I remember I had to be a parent in a skit and someone else was the teacher and we had to have a conference. We talked about being confident and not crying in front of the parent – just keep your cool. I also wish we could have all played the teacher. We would have gotten more out of it…we did practice a [special education] meeting too in a class. The parent was demanding stuff and we had to make some reaction to keep the peace, you know compromise. (focus group 1) (Annie)

That's what we have talked about in class, parent conferences and documenting everything because [parents] are going to come back, they are going to be mad at you and you need to prove that you didn't do anything wrong. We didn't really have any parent contact or involvement information anyway, but the little bit that we did have was negative. And so I expect the parent involvement to be negative. (focus group 1) (Susan)

Documentation – we touched on that. I also remember talking about the difference between private and public early childhood education. I remember the instructor saying parents were a con in private education because they expect so much because they are paying. That's about it.

(focus group 1) (Kara)

Later, in the same focus group session, Kara made reference to documentation again when she said:

> We talked about documentation of phone calls and conferences in case a parent was to come back and deny saying something, you know. I know that this is important because at least two of my classes talked about it. We were never really given any great examples of what that looked like though. (focus group 1)

The preservice teachers' remembrances of parent topics in coursework were obviously sketchy, but their memories do indicate what they found salient when parents were discussed. Unfortunately, their memories do not include positive ways to involve parents as cited in the works of Epstein (2001, 1995) and Hiatt-Michael (2001). Therefore, the preservice teachers' remembrances either reveal that positive parent involvement practices were not discussed or that they were presented in such a way that they were not remembered. Regardless of which of the two is actually the case, documentation and conferencing appeared to be emphasized when parent topics were presented in education coursework. Not unlike how many preservice teachers are prepared, these preservice teachers spent their parent involvement discussion time focused primarily on dealing with negative interactions with parents (Epstein, 2001). In fact, parent conferences and conflict resolution strategies were two of the most frequently covered parent involvement topics in a recent survey of 147 universities with teacher education programs (Gray, 2001). Although these topics are important,

the main focus of parent involvement discussions should not emphasize the negative, just as the primary discussion of any topic should not begin and end with what to do if something doesn't work while never addressing what to do to get it to work.

Although it is conceivable that the preservice teachers in this study only remembered what sounded "scary" to them about parents, particularly in light of their prior beliefs and life histories, Epstein (2001) reported that only a limited percentage of teacher education programs include more proactive and positive parent topics. These topics included such ideas as creating interactive homework with parents, conducting parent workshops, designing and producing home-school newsletters and correspondences, conducting home visits, and planning a concerted year-long partnership effort. In addition, teacher education programs offer few, if any, opportunities for preservice teachers to interact with real parents (Epstein, 2001). Only one preservice teacher in this study referred to an experience during coursework in which she interacted with parents, although indirectly. JoAnne commented on a field experience associated with her reading methods course.

> The thing that I noticed, just through field work, is that some parents tend to be almost overly involved with their children's education. Most of my experiences were at the private school [associated with Kane University], and there were parents coming in and out and almost making a menace of themselves, most of them that were in there were helping their own kids. So I really expect to interact with parents a lot during student teaching. My biggest concern is not upsetting them but also putting my foot down.

(focus group 1)

JoAnne, like the other five preservice teachers, was involved in only two long-term field experiences during coursework. These two experiences each lasted a semester. The reading methods course mentioned here included a thirty-hour teaching component at the private elementary school associated with the university. The other long-term field experience was set in various public schools in which the preservice teachers taught thematic units one day a week for a semester. As a result, the preservice teachers saw only two school settings on a regular basis before student teaching. In the previous quote, JoAnne commented about the amount of parents she had seen at the private school and noted that they were a menace. Unfortunately, JoAnne did not comment on the other school setting in which she had taught. Consequently, her statement reflected that she believed all parents would be like the ones she saw at the private school. JoAnne even said that she expected to interact with lots of parents although all of her student teaching would be in public schools. Obviously, the amount of involved parents in the private school setting was memorable while any parent interaction in the public school was not. However, instead of JoAnne recounting positive notions of involved parents, she talked about the negative aspects of involved parents. Again, these preservice teachers' coursework, even when it included practicum experiences, either did not reflect notions of positive parent involvement or was not memorable.

Like many universities, Kane University does not offer a course specifically on parent involvement, but does attempt to address parent involvement issues in

several of its course offerings (Gray, 2001). Research has shown that this approach, although ideal if systematically integrated across many courses (Shartrand et al, 1997), has not been implemented well (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). In particular, the implementation has been poor because not all professors are equally committed to parent involvement. Many professors who are not as well researched in the area tend to only cover parent topics when everything else has been covered or they give the topic little time and emphasis (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). From the comments of the presevice teachers in this study, it is apparent that parent involvement topics and experiences with parents had not been systematically integrated across coursework. If it had been, the preservice teachers should have been able to recount many ways to proactively and positively involve parents as well as be able to share interactions with real parents (Epstein, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). None of the six preservice teachers in this study could do either one.

Teachers Only Interact with Parents About Problems

During student teaching, the preservice teachers were placed in a variety of school settings. Although the placements were different, many of their experiences related to parent involvement were strikingly similar. In particular, the preservice teachers talked about incidents in which they observed how their cooperating teachers communicated with or involved students' parents. The following are examples of some of their comments:

If you are not doing what you are supposed to then the parents are notified.

> My cooperating teacher holds it over their head if they misbehave or don't have something turned in…she will call the parents if they haven't done something right. (focus group 2) (Bell)

> I am at a very inner-city school. All I ever see from my cooperating teacher is contacting parents for negative reasons on the phone. She told me that some of the teachers at Britton Hill Middle send home progress reports but that she doesn't see why because the parents never read them or send them back signed like they are supposed to…
>
> (focus group 2) (Margaret)

The preservice teachers saw their cooperating teachers do little to involve parents in a proactive manner. They mainly witnessed the teachers acting in a more reactive manner with parents, such as calling when a student had misbehaved, conducting conferences with the parents of failing students, or sending home progress reports to parents of students who had a low class average. In fact, the preservice teachers rarely talked about proactive parent involvement methods, such as creating and sending home class newsletters, calling about positive behavior and accomplishments, inviting parents to school to participate in class or school functions, or communicating with parents about ways they could help their children with school work. Two preservice teachers, JoAnne and Annie, mentioned that their cooperating teachers did make an effort to talk to parents in the car line when parents picked up their kids from school with Annie commenting that her "…cooperating teacher has a

good relationship with the parents because they know he cares about their kids." When I asked Annie how she knew that the parents felt that way, she said that many of the parents talk to him informally before and after school. She added, "…so I know he has set up a very open classroom where they feel comfortable talking to him about how to help their children." (focus group 3).

Preservice teachers not only garnered the idea that parent interactions were negative from what they saw during student teaching, but they also heard it from their cooperating teachers. Kara and Susan, like most student teachers, idealized their cooperating teachers and wanted to conform to their teaching styles and behaviors (Barrows, 1979; Nettle, 1998). In fact, early in Kara's first placement, she wrote, "I think my cooperating teacher is the best. I hope I will be as good a teacher as she is someday" (January 10, 2002). Susan felt the same way, particularly about her middle school cooperating teacher. In our second focus group, she commented that she thought her cooperating teacher "…[was] the ideal math teacher because she knew her subject and was organized." Although Kara and Susan idealized their cooperating teachers, they did not hear many positive comments about parents during their student teaching placements.

Kara wrote the following in her journal a few weeks into her first student teaching placement at McDonald Middle School:

> I sat in on a team meeting today and boy was it negative and heated. My cooperating teacher and the whole team has decided to do away with parent conferences unless it is an emergency. They normally have

> ones with all the parents (that will come) on a set-aside day. They said that they do no good at all. They said that the kids don't change and the parents say 'let's do this' but they don't ever follow through on their end of the bargain. (January 28, 2002)

After reading this in Kara's dialogue journal, I wrote, "Do you have any opinion about what your cooperating teacher and the team said about parent conferences?" (January 31, 2002). On my next visit, Kara had responded:

> I don't think they should get rid of the parent conferences. I'm not in their shoes though. They act like parents cancel all the time. I can see where [the team] is coming from and that they're tired of it.
> (February 4, 2002)

During our second focus group session, which occurred after the student teachers' middle school placement, Kara added the following to our discussion about the importance of parents to teachers:

> My teacher said something to me the other day, it was kind of depressing but at the same time I see where she is coming from. She's been teaching nearly 30 years. She said when she first started out she thought she could change her students, that she could be an awesome influence and great role model for them. But then she realized that she only has them one hour a day, only one hour a day. The rest of the time they have other teachers, but the majority of the time they are with their parents. They are with their parents so much more…their parents are their mentors – they have to be.

(focus group 2)

Later in the second focus group, Kara said her cooperating teacher tended to "use parents as 'we're going to call your parents' when things aren't going real well." She added that she thought her cooperating teacher sometimes saw parents as "annoying and a bother, like she'll talk about how they are stupid and stuff like that, because they do dumb things."

Kara's statements about her first cooperating teacher, who I will refer to as Ms. B, reveal three beliefs Kara received from her about parents. First, Kara clearly understood that Ms. B and other teachers on the grade level team were frustrated with parents. In particular, she heard the teachers say that they did not want to deal with parents anymore because they never did what they said they were going to do. Second, Kara heard Ms. B emphasize the influence of parents when she commented that "their parents are their mentors." Finally, Kara understood how Ms. B "involved" parents (only called when something was wrong) and how she viewed parents (as a bother).

Ms. B's expressed beliefs, when analyzed as a whole, sent Kara one message. Although Ms. B believed parents were the most influential aspects of her students' lives, Kara saw her only involve them for negative reasons. Kara never mentioned that Ms. B sent home memos or positive notes, made home visits, or called for the purpose of requesting direct involvement even though all have been shown to produce better parent involvement and increase home-school partnerships (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Ms. B only showed her frustration with parents and her

reliance on negative parent involvement practices, such as "problem" conferences and phone calls, which research has indicated are not effective in producing desired results if other positive parent involvement practices are not used (Epstein, 2001).

Susan wrote about two parent conferences in her journal during her middle school placement. The following was recorded on February 12, 2002:

> We had a parent conference today with a mom and dad who don't know how to handle their son's behavior. They were both unbelievably naïve about what he is involved in. I know he is definitely into gang stuff and probably drugs, but they didn't think so even after we gave them evidence. After the conference was over, [my cooperating teacher] didn't talk to me about the conference. I really wanted to hear what she thought about it. I think she just gets tired of dealing with these unfit parents who don't have clue. She has even said a lot of them you can't even communicate with.

A few days later, Susan wrote:

> We had another conference today with a mom who is concerned about her son failing math. We gave her some suggestions about what to do with him to bring his grades up, but it may be too late since he has so many F's already. I'm starting to feel like we only give bad news to parents…this must be why we have conferences, so I now know why [my cooperating teacher] really doesn't like to even talk to parents. I mean it can be a real downer. (February 15, 2002)

Susan's cooperating teacher unknowingly had conveyed to Susan that parents were not pleasant to deal with because most interactions with them would be negative. Unfortunately, Susan's cooperating teacher never made a concerted effort to talk with her about parents even after a conference; therefore, Susan never received a complete picture of her cooperating teacher's understanding of parents. As a result, Susan was left to piece together her cooperating teacher's few words and actions into assumptions about parent interactions. Borko and Mayfield (1995) have pointed to the importance of cooperating teachers conducting frequent conferences with student teachers in order to fully explain what they are seeing, hearing, and doing. In Susan's own words, she expressed her desire for such discussions as she wanted to hear what her cooperating teacher had to say about the parent conference.

Although the quotes from Kara and Susan that I have chosen to exemplify the preservice teachers' observations of negative parent interactions from their cooperating teachers were said or written about their middle school placement, the preservice teachers' elementary placements yielded similar data. The following are excerpts from the third focus group:

> Neither of my [cooperating teachers] had much to do with parents. They might call if they had problems and then maybe set up a meeting with the parents. I just saw basically nothing about parents. They just never really talked about them or to them either, I guess. (Susan)

> [My elementary cooperating teacher] could have done better with

> communication. She has a great personality and demeanor. She just didn't take the time to communicate with parents. I saw that cause problems because some, not all, parents wanted to know about certain things and it wasn't passed on to them. She thought it was a good idea to get the kids to immediately call home if they arrived without their homework. (Bell)

> I know I hardly wrote anything in my journal about what I saw about parents or what I thought. I just didn't see anything, really. I wouldn't even know they are alive if it wasn't for sending home progress reports to some of them who need to know their kids are failing. My cooperating teachers at both placements didn't think much of them because they didn't show much care and concern about their kids… (Margaret)

Even in my individual interviews, the data primarily showed poor examples, if any, of cooperating teachers interacting with parents in a more positive, proactive manner. The only preservice teacher who talked at length about positive examples of parent involvement was Kara as she described her kindergarten placement in which her cooperating teacher had parents come in daily to assist with centers. However, Kara did note that the practice was "set in place by the principal because he knew that parents were scared when they first sent their kids to school" (focus group 3).

The preservice teachers in this study entered student teaching with negative ideas about parents, ranging from beliefs that parents would be confrontational to

beliefs that parents would be too involved. From the preservice teachers' own words, they relayed that these beliefs emerged from their life histories or from their coursework and related experiences. As a result, they entered student teaching with beliefs about parents that tended to point out negative extremes. The preservice teachers also entered with little knowledge of how to involve parents in their children's school lives since course discussions, assignments, or experiences on the topic either did not occur or were not remembered. Then when the preservice teachers entered student teaching, their cooperating teachers did not provide positive, proactive examples of parent involvement. Instead, they saw their cooperating teachers involve parents for primarily negative reasons, like conferences about bad behavior, when they involved parents at all or they heard their cooperating teachers talk badly about parents. As a result, the preservice teachers in this study were inundated with the idea that parent interactions were and would be negative from both what they saw and what they heard from the beginning to the end of this study.

THEME THREE: Parent Involvement is Not the Responsibility of the Classroom Teacher

Before student teaching began, the preservice teachers engaged in a somewhat lively discussion. Although I referenced this conversation previously, it needs additional attention here. The following exchange took place during the first focus group:

Bell: I was talking to [a substitute teacher] at my job today about something real interesting about parents. She really thinks that schools have to educate parents in some ways – like building character in their kids and how to help them study. She thinks test scores will improve when that happens. [She] really believes you have to meet the needs of the home before student academic stuff can be addressed.

JoAnne: I'm not really sure about that. I don't think schools have a responsibility to teach parents about things – like how to be involved in their kid's lives. I don't see logistically how that will happen. I feel that teachers should work to motivate students and to teach them to be self-motivated. Teach goal setting and independence. Students need to take responsibility for their own education. Students who are self-motivated are going to do better in the long run.

Bell: Yeah, well what if you are teaching them to be self-motivated eight hours a day and then they go home and see the complete opposite? What if they they don't get their parents saying the same things? What if their parents

are showing that you can sit at home and draw a check and do nothing? Parents need to be an example or it doesn't matter what the teacher is saying.

Kara: True. [Students] need to be self-motivated – I was self-motivated growing up but that stemmed from my parents saying good job, you've done a fantastic job at school on this work. So I think it is important to get the parents involved appreciating their children like they should… As much as I wanted to do things for myself, I loved pleasing my parents. Students need to learn [self-motivation] by first pleasing their parents.

JoAnne: Well, a lot of what I said is based on how I was raised. My parents were not what I would say involved in my education or my sisters. I just wanted to be a good student. Don't misunderstand me, I think parent involvement is important, but is that my responsibility as a teacher?

JoAnne, while admitting that parent involvement is important to student success, was the only participant in this exchange that questioned the role that the teacher should play in involving parents. The other participants seemed to wholeheartedly believe in the need for parent involvement while not questioning the role of the teacher in helping create this involvement. However, as the semester continued, data from the preservice teachers painted a completely different picture of how they viewed the role of the teacher with regard to parent involvement. By the end of the study, most of the preservice teachers tended to be in agreement with

JoAnne in that they proclaimed that parent involvement was not the job of the classroom teacher. Instead, they put the responsibility of involvement squarely on the parents. Out of these discussions emerged three ideas. First, the preservice teachers believed that the classroom teacher did not determine whether parents would be involved, but that the parents' desire and initiative determined involvement. Second, they commented frequently about parent involvement existing as a fixed entity that could not be changed by teacher actions. Lastly, they referred to how teachers couldn't involve parents because time pressures related to academic priorities.

Parents' Desire and Initiative Determines Involvement

The preservice teachers made many references to parent involvement as a function of the parents' desire and initiative. On March 3, 2002, Margaret wrote,

> Some parents want to be involved and some don't. That's it. You can't force parents to help their kids with homework or visit the science fair if they don't want to. It is just one of those things teachers can't control. I wish we could but we can't.

During our interview, Annie said,

> I don't know why parents won't get involved – they are their kids, not ours. They should want to help them succeed in school and show they care. I've seen parents that I knew were interested and I have seen a lot that didn't seem to care what their kids were doing school – just as long as their kids weren't bothering them.

On April 1, 2002, Kara wrote in her journal that she saw the same parents at school asking about their kids while she never saw some parents even though they were the ones who needed to be involved. I wrote back to Kara, "What is your cooperating teacher doing to get these low involvement parents more involved?" She responded,

> I don't know. I haven't seen anything. I've heard her say that they will only get involved when they are good and ready. I don't think she thinks some will ever be active in helping their kids, such as even reading to them at home.

The notion that parent involvement is a function of the parents' desire and initiative is one that is supported by research. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that one of the constructs that determines whether a parent becomes involved in his or her child's education is the parent's construction of his or her role in the child's life. Specifically, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggested that parents' construction of the parent role is likely to be influenced by general principles guiding their definition of the parent role, their beliefs about child development and child-rearing, and their beliefs about appropriate parent home-support roles in children's education. In other words, "parents develop beliefs and understandings about the requirements and expectations of the parent role as a function of their membership and participation in varied groups pertinent to child-rearing" (p. 17). Thus, some parents define their role broadly and become more active in the daily school life of their children while some parents do not view active school involvement as a child-rearing priority.

While Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found that parents' role construction was an important factor in whether parents became involved in their children's education, they also found two other equally important constructs that influenced whether parents become involved or not. These two constructs, 1) parents' sense of self-efficacy for helping children succeed in school and 2) general invitations, demands, and opportunities for parent involvement, indicate that the school and the individual classroom teacher have influence on whether parents become involved in their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In fact, many research studies have shown that teachers who actively promote and educate parents about involvement strategies and opportunities have increased parent involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) reported that the efforts made by teachers to involve parents not only increased parents' desire to participate, but it also increased their belief that they could and should help their children. In addition, these efforts made the parents feel more welcomed at school and more encouraged to help their children at home.

Parent Involvement is a Fixed Entity that Cannot Be Changed

The preservice teachers in this study did not show an understanding of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) last two constructs. Instead they focused on the first construct while holding to the idea that parent involvement was a fixed entity that could not be changed by the classroom teacher. Annie remarked during the

second focus group that "you either have parent involvement or you don't…there's usually not much room for improvement." Susan added, "you are either in a high involvement school or not." Others made similar comments.

> Your school either has lots of involved parents or not. Mine did not have involved parents. I think my cooperating teachers wanted more involvement but knew it was impossible. They were burnt out and frustrated with fighting a losing battle. (interview) (Margaret)

> Parents are just not concerned as a whole; therefore, students are not concerned about school like they should be. I can see why teachers get frustrated to the point where they are not as concerned. It is very frustrating when you do not have parent involvement and that underlying care and concern from the home about the importance of education. You talk all day about getting things that they don't get reinforced with at home. (interview) (JoAnne)

> [My cooperating teacher] wants to work with parents, I think. But she realizes that it can only go so far. Parents have to pick up the ball and run with it. She doesn't understand why they don't get it. [Parents] should be asking about ways to help their kids…parents shouldn't wait for the teacher to tell them. (focus group 2) (Bell)

While these quotes tend to point to the idea that low parent involvement is fixed and cannot be altered, Kara referred to one of her field experiences in several different data sources to express her notion that high parent involvement is also fixed. Kara took a course during her junior year entitled Teaching Reading and Language Arts in which she taught reading three days a week at a private elementary school associated with Kane University. Kara commented that she "saw lots of parents there in the morning talking to the teacher about all kinds of things" (focus group 1). Kara seemed to be impressed with their involvement and their interest in helping out at school. Later in the same focus group, Kara said she wondered if all schools had that much parent involvement but figured they did not since it was a private school. In yet another reference to the field experience, Kara pointed out that she "…didn't see as many parents as she expected…I guess I thought it would be like the school I taught reading in" (focus group 2). Lastly, Kara said the following during our interview after student teaching was completed:

> I really wish I had had more experiences working with parents in schools that have low involvement. I mean I went to a high involvement school and I did my only long-term field work in a high involvement school. They just have parent involvement – it's just natural. They don't have to work for it. It would have been good to see the other extreme before student teaching.

Kara's comment appeared to not only be insightful, but also revealing as to the experiences or lack of experiences Kara had with parents during her teacher education program. From her experiences, Kara believed high parent involvement just occurred

because she never saw teachers having to initiate it. She also admitted that she never saw low parent involvement. Research reveals that teachers whose formal training addressed parent involvement and who felt competent initiating such efforts reported higher levels of parent involvement (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1992; Swick & McKnight, 1989). Unfortunately, by her own admission, Kara saw only involved parents during her coursework but did not see positive examples of teachers working to engage parents with low involvement. She entered student teaching with very few parent experiences at all but even fewer related to public school settings where parent involvement might be more difficult to encourage.

Research also indicates that preservice teachers need more experiences in schools where they work with families that are different from their own, particularly from various cultural backgrounds (Epstein, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In Kara's teacher education program, her one long-term teaching assignment put her in contact with families just like her own – white and middle-class. As a result, she entered student teaching with few, if any, challenges to how she conceptualized parent involvement or what she believed parent involvement should look like. Moreover, the high involvement setting only reinforced what she already believed about parent involvement from her life history. Thus, Kara was left with the belief that parent involvement just happened.

Teachers Cannot Involve Parents Because of Time Pressures

The data also showed that as the preservice teachers progressed through their student teaching, they become more convinced that involving parents was not and should not be the responsibility of the classroom teacher.

> I had no idea teachers had to do so many different things in one day or one class period. I thought middle school would be easier than some of the elementary classes I've observed, but I'm not so sure now. I just don't think teachers can fit in much more than they are doing. [My cooperating teacher] can't possibly focus on communicating with parents with all the other stuff she has to do. (focus group 2) (Bell)

> This school demands a lot. I know parent involvement is not a high priority for [my cooperating teacher] and it shouldn't be with test score demands and just day to day things. She can't do it all. She has told me that parents don't really care anyways. They don't really want to know too much because they are busy too. (focus group 3) (Susan)

By their own admission, the preservice teachers did not enter student teaching with knowledge of how to effectively involve parents, much less knowledge about how to manage their time in order to involve parents or the benefits of involving parents related to academics. As a result, their comments parallel their lack of understanding. However, it seems that their experiences with their cooperating teachers should provide some "on the job" education in how to manage a teacher's busy schedule to

effectively involve parents. Although the preservice teachers were paired with experienced cooperating teachers, they did not receive this education. Research indicates that although teachers, as a whole, acknowledge the importance of parent involvement and express desire for greater involvement from parents, they say they lack the time and training to implement a successful program (Becker, 1999; Connors and Epstein, 1994). The preservice teachers in this study received this same information from their cooperating teachers in both word and deed.

THEME FOUR: Certain Parents Will Not Be Very Involved in Their Children's Education

Early in the study, the preservice teachers spoke of parents or parent involvement in general terms, rarely referring to particular groups of parents. As the study continued, the preservice teachers began to specifically talk about certain populations of parents. Moreover, they typically pointed to a specific parent and then made general comments about the parent population represented by that parent. As a result, the preservice teachers made many generalizations and conclusions about parents based on a small number of actual interactions or observations. In particular, the preservice teachers did not think that parents of middle school students or inner-city parents would be very involved in their children's education.

Parents of Middle School Students Will Not Be Very Involved

After student teaching, I asked Kara about her concerns regarding parents and if they had changed since January. She responded:

> Well, with middle school I'm not as concerned because the parents are not involved. I would like to have the parents involved, but it's not like I'm going to see them a lot and I'm not going to have them in my face a lot, you know, I'll keep them involved, but it won't be as much as I thought it would be. It will be for negative stuff. (interview)

In contrast, in her dialogue journal toward the end of her elementary placement, she wrote, "I can't wait to involve parents like [my cooperating teacher] does. I really think that elementary teachers have a responsibility to keep parents informed about how to help their children." Then, in our final interview, she said,

> [In kindergarten,] I just learned to see parents as teammates, rather than, you know, out to get me if I do one little thing wrong. I loved to see parents and talk to them about their child…I liked to tell them about something their child did that day – to keep them informed and also get feedback from them…And, it's like they look at me, and I just feel wow, they just are really like thank you, I can see it in their eyes and stuff.

Annie responded in a similar manner when I talked with her during our interview. She offered the following during a discussion about what grade level she thought she would like to teach:

> I have always heard how much more parents are involved in elementary school. I did see more, I guess, in the elementary school, but not that much more. In middle school the parent stuff is different too. I mean we didn't seem to really want to involve them as much. I'm not sure they really

cared as much either. (Annie)

Kara and Annie made several discoveries about the differences between elementary and middle school parents that are supported by research. Whereas parents are often actively involved in the elementary grades, many withdraw or become only negatively involved when their children attend middle school and high school (Rutherford, Anderson, & Billig, 1995). The reasons for this are varied, but many times are due to barriers put in place by the parents themselves. Many parents have lost the enthusiasm for involvement that they once had when their children were younger (Chavkin & Williams, 1993). Additionally, some parents lose confidence in their ability to help their children with more difficult subject matter as they enter middle school, while some parents become intimidated by the logistics of the secondary school (ie, more classes, more teachers) (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Rutherford, Anderson, & Billig, 1995) so they choose not to participate at all. Furthermore, many parents, particularly mothers, take on additional work responsibilities as their children grow older (Foster-Harrison & Peel, 1995). The National PTA (1996) has consistently found lack of time as the most common barrier to parent involvement in their children's education. Finally, parents often step back when their children begin middle school, wanting them to gain more personal responsibility (Becker, 1999), sometimes with the additional prompting of their children (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2001).

While parents definitely experience barriers that tend to hinder their involvement in their middle schooler's education, research shows that teachers'

practices to involve parents are critical in determining whether parents get involved in their children's education, particularly at the middle or high school levels (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Research also shows that middle and high school teachers are the least likely to be trained in working with parents in their teacher education programs (Epstein, 2001). What is unfortunate about this is not just that they have no training, but that studies indicate that secondary school teachers need specific training in what types and amounts of parent involvement are most beneficial for their particular age groups because of the changing nature of children's needs (Epstein, 1992). Based on research from Epstein and her team of researchers at The Family Center of Johns Hopkins University, the type of parent involvement that benefits middle school student achievement the most is interactive homework that is created and organized by the classroom teacher to be a joint effort between parent and child (Epstein, 1992). The researchers found that interactive homework directly linked to the school curriculum required students to share and discuss with their families the skills and ideas they were learning in school. As a result, teachers increased their communication with parents, who in turn had more opportunities to communicate with teachers (Hollifield, 1995). Epstein (1992) also found that interactive homework assignments increased the parents feeling of efficacy as they were forced to get involved with their children on an assignment.

On the subject of homework at the middle school level, the preservice teachers in this study had a lot to say. However, their comments did not support the

idea that interactive homework would increase parent involvement. Margaret shared the following during our the third focus group session:

> Normally, I could assign my third graders some homework and get it back the next day. My eighth graders were a different story. [My cooperating teacher and I] about decided to stop assigning homework period because they never brought it back. I know parents took a totally hands-off approach to homework because these kids were eighth graders. They should be able to do it themselves.

Susan added,

> I know the parents of my eighth graders can't help them with their math. [My cooperating teacher and I] expect [the students] to do it on their own, without help. These kids can do it, they are just lazy. (interview)

The most common point of intersection among parent, child, and teacher related to formal learning is homework (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Burow, 1995). In fact, it is one of the few points of intersection at the secondary level. The preservice teachers' comments, however, indicated that their cooperating teachers either did not want that intersection to exist (i.e., 'expect the students to do it on their own') or that parents did not want that intersection to exist (i.e., 'parents took a totally hands-off approach'). Whichever was the case or if both have their merits, the preservice teachers in this study did not gain information about the benefits of interactive

homework and were not shown examples of how homework could be implemented to increase parent involvement in their students' education.

While the preservice teachers did mention seeing middle school parents periodically at after-school functions such as basketball games and the science fair, they were not aware of particular practices their schools or teachers did to involve parents. During the second focus group session, I asked the preservice teachers to share what they thought their schools or teachers did to involve parents. The following are two of the most salient responses:

> I have no idea. I haven't seen anything and [my cooperating teacher] hasn't mentioned anything in particular. The principal is never around so I have no idea what he even does. Maybe he does have some school wide program, but it doesn't look like it. (Margaret)

> Parents are really a non-issue here. This is a middle school. We don't have cutesy little programs where the parents are invited. I do know that all the teachers have to make sure that all their students use a homework log. The students have to record homework from each class in it every day and I think the parents have to sign it. I have wondered about that though. Only a few get it signed but nothing ever happens to the ones who don't get it signed… (Bell)

Much research has been conducted recently on the effects of building strong home-school connections through both school wide programs and teacher-initiated

practices. In their study of partnership building efforts in Chicago secondary schools, Roderick and Stone (1998) found that schools which linked improving student achievement to building strong relationships with families saw the greatest improvement in student performance. These schools focused on academics and on improving access to information about how students are doing, building parents' academic skills, bringing parents and teachers together to share issues and concerns, and building the school's capacity to reach out to parents. Catsambis and Garland (1997) found that parent involvement doesn't have to decline when students reach middle school and high schools. Their study found that schools and teachers who made efforts to shift how parents were involved, from classroom involvement to increased collaboration with teachers, actually increased parent involvement and parent satisfaction. Unfortunately, the preservice teachers in this study left both their teacher education program and their student teaching experience with little or no knowledge about or experiences with these types of initiatives at the secondary level.

Inner-City Parents Will Not Be Very Involved

The preservice teachers in this study targeted another group of parents, inner-city parents, as parents who would not be very involved in their children's education. From their descriptions they used the term "inner-city" in two ways. First, they used it to refer to the students who were bussed from across town to the schools they attended. Second, they used it to refer to any students who were both minority and on free and reduced lunch or who were considered to have low socioeconomic status.

Although all of the preservice teachers tended to have the same opinion of inner-city parents, Susan and Margaret made the most frequent references to their belief that inner-city parents would not be involved in their children's education.

Even though Susan noted few, if any, efforts by her cooperating teachers to involve parents and few interactions with parents of any kind during the semester, she seemed to point out the inner-city parents as the ones who were particularly uninvolved.

> The kids that are bussed into McWright Elementary have no parent involvement. (focus group 3)

> During my 8th grade placement – lots of children were bussed in. Those are the ones that have no parent at home to help them out or anything. Therefore, the parents don't contact us. (interview)

> I think the amount of parent involvement will depend a lot on the type of school I get and the type of parents I have. If I have a very inner-city school, I don't think there's any way, and I may be totally wrong, but I don't think there is any way to involve certain parents because the majority of these parents are not, not good people, they are not even the kind of people I want in my classroom with other children. If I'm in a very nice school that has a lot

> of stable families, I don't know what I will do because I have not seen that, but I'll definitely try to get them involved and have them come to school and speak. (interview)

> It's very stereotypical but from what I've seen in my placements, a lot of the inner city parents are either on drugs or they just don't care about what their child is doing as long as they don't bother them, they pretty much don't want their children therefore they send them to school as a babysitter because they have to send them to school. (interview)

During the final focus group session, Annie, who was placed at the same school as Susan, brought up how much she loved her elementary placement at McWright. She went on to say, "I think it's a really good school. I wouldn't mind my kids going there." Susan immediately retorted,

> I would not want my children to go there. I think it's a lot more inner-city than you think. I know my class had a lot of inner-city children and there's some really rough kids that have a lot to deal with. I just would not want my children to be around that.

Susan, a white middle class female, is representative of the majority of teachers who enter and graduate from education programs in the United States (Zimpher, 1989). Because most preservice teachers are white and middle class, many of them do not have experiences working with minority or poor children unless their teacher education program has provided such experiences. Research, however, indicates that

most teacher education programs do not provide preservice teachers with the education and experiences needed to work with students and families from cultures different form their own (Epstein, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994). As a result, like Susan, preservice teachers hold onto a deficit model of what poor children or children from other cultures can accomplish (Valencia, 1997). Similarly, they cling to deficit models of parents of these same groups.

Susan began with a deficit model of minority and poor parents before she ever began student teaching when she first used the term inner-city to describe them. During our first focus group, Susan said she thought she would have low parent involvement because she was "placed at an inner-city school." Haberman (1995) has argued that terms such as "at-risk" have become code words for students who are perceived by educators and the public to be "problems" in school. Ladson-Billings (2001) pointed out that "status characteristics such as race, class, and linguistic diversity [have] become equated with 'at-risk ness'" (p. 15). Like the term at-risk, Susan used inner-city to label problem children and parents. Additionally, Susan attached race and class to the term. As a result, Susan did not have high expectations for the majority of her students, particularly since she labeled the entire school as inner-city.

Specifically related to parents, Susan did not believe inner-city parents would care about their children, much less want to be involved in their education. Delpit (1995) has written extensively about the need for teacher education to expose preservice teachers to parents and communities that represent different cultures from

their own. She has suggested that teacher education classes invite parents and community members into the university classroom to tell prospective teachers "what their concerns about education are, what they feel schools are doing well or poorly for their children, and how they would like to see schooling changed" (p. 179). Delpit (1995) and other researchers have also pointed to the need for teachers to go out into communities to gather firsthand knowledge about different cultures and home settings. By doing so, preservice teachers would learn that parents of all cultures care for their children and want the best education for their students.

Although Margaret never used the term inner-city, she did refer to the same population of parents as not being involved that Susan talked about in the previous excerpts. Margaret's comments showed that she did not receive positive information about parents from her cooperating teacher nor did she see examples of parent involvement strategies. The first two quotes are from Margaret's journal while the last excerpt is from the second focus group session.

> The kids I have come from such bad areas of town. Most of the kids don't even go home to parents. If we turned in our parents for neglect, 75% would not have a chance. They are not involved at home and not involved at school. [My cooperating teacher] says she can't believe where these kids come from. (January 29, 2002)

> The only time I hear [my cooperating teacher] talking about parents is when she is complaining about why they don't ever seem to care. I

> think she is really fed up, particularly with the kids who are bussed from across town…(March 10, 2002)

> [My cooperating teacher] wants parents to be involved but she knows that where they are coming from is not the environment where they will be involved. Yesterday we had a talk about where they come from and that how they are treated at home rolls over into the classroom. [My cooperating teacher] knew when she came from Martin Magnet School to Britton Hill that parents wouldn't be involved. (focus group 2)

Margaret's comments demonstrated the lack of communication, understanding, and sense of comfort between her cooperating teacher and the parents. Research indicates that many poor parents or parents from diverse cultural settings frequently feel unwelcome in the school setting or feel inadequate with regard to the help and support they can provide their children (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2001). Additionally, racial tension and stereotyping on both sides frequently hinder interactions between parents and teachers. Moreover, studies show that many schools and teachers do little to facilitate parent involvement even in light of the evidence that shows that the degree and quality of the communication from school personnel shape the extent and ways parents interact with their children about school (Epstein, 1996; Roderick & Stone, 1998).

What is most disturbing about the comments from the preservice teachers in this study is that they tended to see parents from different cultures and socioeconomic

levels from themselves as not valuable participants in their children's education. The preservice teachers' comments also indicated that this belief was only reinforced by their student teaching experiences. Instead of the preservice teachers entering their first year of teaching with a variety of ideas about how to involve all parents, they will enter with stereotypes about certain parents engrained further than they were before they student taught.

These findings, when read as a whole, shed much light on these preservice teachers' beliefs about and experiences with parents and parent involvement. Paradoxically, the themes that emerged from the data reveal that although these preservice teachers believed in the importance of parents in their children's education, they also believed teachers had little responsibility in encouraging parent involvement. In addition, while these preservice teachers believed parents would be generally confrontational, they also believed certain parents would not be involved in their children's education. While these findings seem curious at first, they indicate misunderstandings that these preservice teachers held and will continue to hold until they are addressed. Ultimately, the findings from this study provide much-needed information for continued discussion in efforts to improve teacher education.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of these findings as well as a discussion of the implications of these findings for teacher education. In addition, I summarize the study, consider the methodology used, and elaborate on areas for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study of six preservice teachers' expressed beliefs about parents and parent involvement and how the preservice teachers' life histories and teacher education experiences influence those beliefs, developed from my own search for how to effectively work with parents and ultimately how to best increase preservice teachers' understandings of effective parent involvement practices and confidence in working with parents. With the growing amount of research about and emphasis on the impact of home-school partnerships, there exists a need for teacher educators to more fully address parent involvement with their students. One place for teacher educators to begin is with an understanding of preservice teacher beliefs about and experiences with parents in order to identify what practices reinforce or alter preservice teachers beliefs about working with parents. In this chapter, I first summarize the study, then discuss the findings, consider the methodology used, state the implications for teacher education, and elaborate on areas for future research.

Summary

In this study, I collected data from six preservice teachers to analyze their expressed beliefs about parents and parent involvement and how their life histories and teacher education experiences influenced those beliefs. All data was collected from January 8 to May 1, 2002, which spanned from before the six preservice teachers began student teaching to just after their student teaching was completed.

All six preservice teachers had completed their education coursework before they began their student teaching semester in which they taught in both a middle school and an elementary school setting.

The six preservice teachers in this study were all white females between the ages of 21 and 23 attending Kane University, a small private liberal arts college with a Christian affiliation in the southeast. Additionally, the preservice teachers were education majors pursuing a K-8 teacher certification license. With the data collected over the 17-weeks, I analyzed all the data sources looking for major themes that emerged from the participants' own words. Data sources for this study included focus group discussions, individual interviews, dialogue journals combined with informal discussions and observations, analytic memos, and written autobiographies from each preservice teacher. To analyze this data, I used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-stage process of coding and analysis of qualitative data, which guided me through the following three stages of analysis: open coding or finding initial categories, early categories or finding consistent themes and relationships in data sources, and final themes or finding broader, more consistent themes.

From this analysis, four major themes emerged, each containing within them sub-themes. The first theme was parents should be involved in their children's education. Within that theme I found that the preservice teachers differentiated between two places in which parents should be involved, at home and at school. The second theme that emerged was parent interactions will be negative. Within this theme the sub-themes of parents will be confrontational and overly involved and

teachers only interact with parents about problems emerged. The third theme was, parent involvement is not the responsibility of the classroom teacher. Within that theme lay the sub-themes of parents' desire and initiative determines involvement, parent involvement is a fixed entity that cannot be changed, and teachers cannot involve parents because of time pressures related to academic priorities. Finally, the fourth theme I discovered was certain parents will not be very involved in their children's education. Within this final theme were the sub-themes of parents of middle school students will not be very involved and inner-city parents will not be very involved.

Discussion

The findings in this study reaffirmed the significance of prior beliefs and life histories in influencing the beliefs and understandings of preservice teachers. Specifically, the preservice teachers entered student teaching with notions about the importance of parent involvement based primarily on their experiences with their own parents. The preservice teachers' beliefs were then reinforced by their experiences with students during student teaching as they recounted stories about the influence of parent involvement on the education interest and success of students in their classes. Moreover, the preservice teachers were able to specify ways parents should be involved. The data revealed that the preservice teachers could verbalize the importance of parents in creating a conducive home learning environment as well as the importance of parents' presence in school activities. Additionally, the findings

indicated that coursework was not a significant influence on the preservice teachers' beliefs most probably because their coursework did not include a specific course on parent involvement and because the parent involvement topics that were included in various courses tended to highlight reactive aspects of working with parents instead of more proactive, positive parent involvement methods.

Although coursework did not appear to be a significant influence on the preservice teachers' beliefs, the findings showed the clear impact of the student teaching experience and the cooperating teachers in preservice teachers' beliefs and understandings. Unfortunately, this study pointed to the negative influence of these two factors in reinforcing poor parent involvement practices. Because the preservice teachers did not see or experience many examples of positive parent involvement strategies, they were left with several misunderstandings about parents. First, they believed that their interactions with parents as classroom teachers would be negative. While the preservice teachers entered student teaching with the idea that parents would be confrontational and overly involved primarily as a result of their own childhood experiences or discussions of conferences and documentation in coursework, the idea was reinforced by their student teaching experience. In particular, the cooperating teachers' own stories and comments about negative parent experiences solidified the preservice teachers' beliefs about confrontational and overly involved parents. Moreover, when the preservice teachers did hear or see their cooperating teachers involving parents, it was in an effort to convey information about problems students were having, usually related to discipline or grades. Because

the student teaching experience did not provide the preservice teachers with many opportunities for actual parent interaction, particularly positive interactions, the preservice teachers were left with what they had heard from others or had seen as students themselves, but had never actually experienced firsthand.

In addition, preservice teachers held to the idea that teachers do not have the responsibility of involving parents. At the beginning of the study, one preservice teacher vocalized this belief while the others argued that teachers definitely had a responsibility to involve parents. By the end of the study, every preservice teacher had placed the responsibility for involvement squarely on the parents and defended this view by explaining that teachers did not have the time to actively involve parents primarily because of pressures related to academic requirements. As part of shifting the responsibility to the parents, the preservice teachers also tended to label schools as either low or high parent involvement schools. The preservice teachers believed that they could do little as classroom teachers to alter the amount of parent involvement in a school. Thus, if they thought a school had low parent involvement, the preservice teachers believed it would always have low involvement.

Finally, the preservice teachers believed that certain parents would not be very involved in their children's education. Although the preservice teachers did not discuss specific parent groups or parent labels during the first focus group, they were quick to do so as the study progressed. They believed that parents of middle school students would not be involved in their children's education. The preservice teachers made many comparisons between the involvement level of parents of elementary

students and middle school parents based on their experiences in the two settings. In particular, the preservice teachers saw their cooperating teachers involve middle school parents very little. Moreover, when they did observe parent involvement practices at the middle school level, it was for negative reasons ranging from conferences about problem students to sending home progress reports about students' failing grades. The preservice teachers also labeled inner-city parents as parents who would not be very involved in their children's education. Not only did the preservice teachers discount the interest level of inner-city parents in their children's education, but they also made assumptions about how much inner-city parents even cared for their children. When asked for evidence to back up their statements, the preservice teachers tended to quote their cooperating teachers but rarely cited actual firsthand knowledge of failed attempts to involve inner-city parents.

The findings in this study indicated that both preservice and inservice teachers needed more education and experiences related to working with and involving parents. Unfortunately, Kane University is not unlike many universities that do not offer a course in parent involvement or who do not emphasize all aspects of parent involvement across and throughout the teacher education program. While university education accrediting agencies and state agencies are pushing for more teacher training related to parents, universities have been slow to implement changes. Also, while research indicates that parent involvement should be integrated across many teacher education courses, university professors admit that the topic may not be given much attention in an already crowded curriculum.

This study supports the research that indicates that preservice teachers have few, if any, experiences working with real parents before their first year as a classroom teacher. The six preservice teachers in this study had almost no contact with parents before student teaching and only a few contacts during student teaching. Moreover, the preservice teachers were placed with cooperating teachers who although they had many years of experience in the classroom, still lacked positive, proactive parent involvement practices. In addition, the cooperating teachers shared negative parent stories with the preservice teachers and demonstrated an overall resistance to involving parents.

Methodological Considerations

This study, unlike many other studies on the topic of preservice teacher beliefs about parent involvement, was focused on presenting the actual words and experiences related to parent involvement of six preservice teachers as they moved from coursework to student teaching. As a result, their beliefs were investigated as well as their understandings of the experiences that influenced these beliefs. As I consider this research experience I am left with several observations about the methodology used, particularly related to my involvement as the primary research instrument. First, although I had only taught one of the six preservice teachers before the study and had never engaged in conversation about parent involvement with any of them before the study, the preservice teachers still looked to me during the second and third focus group to help them interpret what they were seeing in their student

teaching experience related to parents. Even though I was clearly the research instrument or the information gatherer, the preservice teachers wanted to engage me in conversation about parents in an effort to clarify their thinking or to get my opinion. I found this to be a difficult position to be in since I wanted to help them understand what they were seeing, but also wanted to refrain from influencing their comments. Although I always turned their questions back to them when they asked me a specific question about parents by saying something like, "well, what do you think," I felt I was missing an opportunity to share my own experiences and understandings of parents. In some instances, the preservice teachers themselves would eventually "talk out" their questions and answer in a way I would have answered myself. However, I found that I truly had to restrain myself from making judgmental and ultimately influential comments about some of the preservice teachers' cooperating teachers. Because I was disappointed in the preservice teachers' lack of understanding of parents related to their cooperating teachers' poor examples, I had to make every effort not to influence their comments. I knew the preservice teachers' experiences were not ideal and that many of their experiences were reinforcing negative ideas about parent involvement. Therefore, I wanted to step in and attempt to alter their ideas with my own words, even though I never did.

Although I initially had difficulty resolving my inward tension about not participating in the focus group by answering their direct questions, I was reassured that the participants, by simply participating in the study, still gained valuable insight.

During the third and final focus group session, Kara made the following unsolicited comment:

> I was so glad to have had this experience because the only thing that intimidated me about teaching, the only thing was parents. And it's been so good for me because I was more perceptive because I was looking for it. I have gained a lot through these discussions and I got feedback from everyone about different parent involvement issues…I have enjoyed talking about it because it has made me feel more secure.

Ultimately, I realized that although the study findings were not ideal, the preservice teachers did gain some measure of confidence about working with parents from simply participating in the study.

Another methodological consideration concerns the challenging aspect of interpreting the participants' words while attempting to not portray the preservice teachers' beliefs, their experiences, or their cooperating teachers in an overly negative light. As I analyzed the many pages of data, I discovered the preservice teachers' own beliefs, influenced by the beliefs of their cooperating teachers, often sounded ignorant of much of the research about parent involvement. As I have used their words in my account, I have attempted to demonstrate how their words reflect their miseducation or lack of education in the area of parent involvement, a problem that is not entirely their own doing. As I wrote the findings and my analysis, I reflected on how I would feel about the participants reading my words. I know that the six preservice teachers would recognize themselves in the analysis and would agree that

their comments did sometimes seem ignorant in light of what is known about parent involvement. However, I am sure they would also agree that they had inadequate preparation. As a result, I can honestly say I feel comfortable about any of the participants reading this dissertation, and I hope they will.

Implications for Teacher Education

This study of preservice teacher beliefs about parent involvement has important implications for teacher education programs. The six preservice teachers in this study entered their student teaching placements with definite beliefs about parents. Although their expressed beliefs were diverse, by their own admission, the preservice teachers' beliefs all emanated from either their particular and individual life histories or from their coursework and field-based experiences during their teacher preparation program. Teacher education programs should not only recognize that preservice teachers enter their education program with definite beliefs about parents, but it should also recognize and build on the knowledge that these beliefs can be influenced for good or bad by teacher education experiences. In this study, the preservice teachers expressed a great deal of parent support and parent involvement in their personal schooling experiences to the extent that they assumed that their students' parents would be intricately involved in their academic lives. In many statements the preservice teachers made, they referred to their own parents and upbringing when trying to make sense of parent involvement or the lack of parent involvement during their student teaching. More often than not, they were critical of

parents who were not involved while sharing examples of how involved their own parents were in their academic lives. Teacher education programs should help students explore these misinterpretations or misconceptions before student teaching and then continue the conversation during student teaching. The preservice teachers in this study would have benefited from more open-ended or informal discussion times with their student teaching supervisor or from another teacher education instructor as they tried to make sense of parent involvement during their student teaching experiences.

The results from this study have implications for teacher education related to how parent involvement is addressed in the program of courses. Research points to the influence of including a parent involvement course within teacher education requirements, but research also highlights the need for parent involvement to be discussed across many courses. In this study, the preservice teachers' referred to coursework and field experiences very infrequently when discussion centered on how to positively and proactively involve parents. However, both teacher education experiences were discussed when the preservice teachers talked about negative parent issues (such as, documenting conferences and phone calls about student conflict) or how to handle problem parents. These results indicate that however the parent involvement component is structured within the teacher education program, the focus should be on balancing proactive and reactive parent involvement strategies. The preservice teachers in this study tended to recall more discussion centered on reactive measures as opposed to strategies that help increase parent involvement. Many of

their misconceptions about parents stemmed from their own lack of education surrounding how to involve parents, particularly in how to involve all kinds of parents while also managing their time. Teacher education programs should not only give explicit instruction on these issues, but should also provide real examples of teachers who use positive parent involvement practices during preservice teachers' field experiences as well as experiences with real parents.

In addition to including more explicit instruction related to parents and to providing more examples of positive parent involvement strategies, teacher education programs should provide more opportunities for preservice teachers to interact with real parents. Research has shown the positive effects of both internship opportunities for preservice teachers to work with family and community members in local school districts and home visit assignments in which students visit the parents of students they teach in their field placements (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2001; Power & Perry, 2000). These experiences would not only help preservice teachers gain confidence in working with parents, but they would hands-on examples of positive home-school practices.

Another important implication from these findings is related to the relationship that preservice teachers have with the cooperating teachers with whom they work in their student teaching experiences. Research documents that cooperating teachers have the potential to influence the development of preservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes (Renzaglia et al. 1997). Renzaglia et al. stated that because of this potential influence, care should be taken in choosing and training

cooperating teachers. The findings of this study highlight several challenges present when working with cooperating teachers in a variety of school settings. Because of the potential influence these individuals have on the beliefs of preservice teachers, it would seem ideal to choose experienced teachers who support and demonstrate the philosophies promoted in the teacher education program. However, the teacher education program may not readily know the philosophies of every cooperating teacher used for placements because of the sheer difficulty in obtaining that information for so many teachers. Even if the university asked the cooperating teachers to provide a self-analysis of their parent involvement practices, the cooperating teachers may embellish the information simply because they may not readily recognize their own biases or deficiencies. To counteract this problem, training cooperating teachers through the use of orientation meetings or written materials such as handbooks, would help ensure that the cooperating teachers were aware of the university program's goals for students in the area of parent involvement. It might also be helpful to have specific desired attitudes, goals, and experiences spelled out for the cooperating teachers. Perhaps if teacher education programs made the desired experiences for students explicitly clear, cooperating teachers would be more able and willing to provide those specific experiences and in turn improve their own practices.

Areas for Future Research

This study is a beginning point for many future research studies. Personally, I have a desire to conduct a similar study including the cooperating teachers as active participants. Because this study focused on the expressed beliefs and experiences of preservice teachers, the expressed beliefs of the cooperating teachers were not a data source. A study that also collects cooperating teachers beliefs would likely show similarities and differences in what the cooperating teachers believed and what they actually portrayed to their student teachers. Such information would inform teacher education programs about how readily beliefs translate into action, particularly as related to parent involvement.

Future studies probing more deeply into the beliefs of preservice teachers would also be of interest. By expanding this study to include focus groups and journal entries interspersed within the entire teacher education program, the data would provide more information about the influence of specific courses and field experiences on the beliefs of preservice teachers about parent involvement. As a result, teacher education programs would have an additional understanding of the impact of individual course topics and experiences.

The participants in this study were white female undergraduates who were traditional students majoring in elementary education while attending a Christian university. Future research would benefit from the exploration of a more diverse group, including teacher education students from diverse cultures and religious backgrounds, males, non-traditional students, and students majoring in secondary

education. It is possible that each of these individuals' previous experiences influence their belief systems about parent involvement in unique ways.

Conclusion

While not new, the idea of exploring preservice teachers' beliefs in order to improve the relevancy and effectiveness of teacher education programs is still not widely valued. Additionally, although research shows the significance of perceived confidence as a factor in whether teachers involve parents or not, preservice teachers continue to lack education and experiences that help them gain the confidence as well as the competence they need to effectively involve parents. In this study, I found that beliefs not only have a significant impact on what preservice teachers think about parent involvement, but these beliefs can be greatly influenced by the words and actions of others. If we as teacher educators do not readily and actively attend to these beliefs and the experiences that influence them, then we will continue to produce teachers who do not have the education and skills needed to involve parents.

APPENDIX

BELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Family History

On June 25, 1979, I came into this world and there to greet me were my parents Tom and Claire White. I came as a welcomed surprise for my parents who were anticipating another son. It had been ten years since the youngest of my four brothers were born; yet my parents assumed they would have another boy in the house. My home was filled with love. My parents are the two people that I respect most. The love, respect, support, ant companionship that my parents have given to my brothers and me, as well as other family members and friends, is an example that I strive to reach on a daily basis. My parents live each day in a manner that glorifies God. They do not make major decisions without first thinking about them, discussing them, and most importantly praying about them. The compassion and understanding they show other people astounds me. When I think about the type of person I want to become, I cannot help but think of the type of people my parents are. The Lord has truly blessed me with these two very extraordinary people..

I was not only blessed with wonderful parents, but also four wonderful older brothers. My brothers, Tim, Mike, Steve, and Phil were always looking out for me. "The boys," as I referred to them, came running when I called them as a young child. Although 15, 14, 11, and 10 years separated me from my brothers (respectively), I am close to each one in unique ways. Of my four brothers, Phil and I are the closest. Phil is actually the reason I came to Kane University. Phil transferred to Kane in

1990. In the spring of 1991, I visited him on campus for the first time. I walked away knowing that I too would attend Kane University. I did not think I would be an elementary education major like my brother. Phil has recently begun his eighth year of teaching and his first as a fourth grade teacher. I have spent many hours in his classroom both observing and facilitating lessons. I have learned so much from him and always look forward to spending time in his room.

Since my brothers are so much older than I am, I have experienced several things that some of my friends have yet to go through. One major experience was my brother Steve's wedding a week before my ninth birthday. This was followed two years later by the birth of my niece Helen. I will always remember playing on the floor of the living room when Steve called to tell us of Helen's birth. Becoming an aunt at the age of ten certainly changed my childhood. I can say with complete certainty that I was the only fifth grader in my class to have a niece. I marveled in Helen's growth daily, especially while my brother and his family lived with my parents and me. I was incredibly proud of her when she first clapped her hands by herself, not just for the accomplishment of a six-month-old, but because I worked with her and showed her how to clap her hands. Two years later, Helen's brother Nick was born and a year later my brother Tim's son, Shawn, was born. The most recent addition to my family came in 1996 when my nephew, Mike, came into this world. Each of these precious little lives has been a tremendous blessing to me. I never want to take away the time I have spent with them. Watching these four children grow has become such a big part of my life.

Early Childhood

My early childhood was full of both happiness and sadness. At a young age, I learned what it was like to lose someone close. When I was four years old, one of my grandmothers passed away. A few years later, my other grandmother passed away. The fact that I have suffered the loss of loved ones at an early age has given me a greater appreciation for life. I understand how precious a life is not matter how young or old. I want to enjoy the time I have with my family and friends. These losses helped fuel the biggest anxiety in my life. I have always had the fear that something would happen to my parents while I was in school and that they would not be there when I got home. I still remember standing at the front door waiting for the bus to come and being in tears because of this fear. At school, my teachers had no idea I had that fear. Once I finally made it to school, I was able to put those fears aside and enjoy the school day.

School Experiences

Academic

Throughout elementary school, I was an average student. I always worked hard and did the best I could do. Although I did not make the highest grades in the class, I was proud of myself because I knew I had given my all. When I began college, I decided that I would improve upon my high school grades. I set my sights on graduating from college with honors, and today I am extremely close to doing so. The classes that have always been the most difficult for me have been math and

science. In spite of the fact that I struggle a great deal in these two subject areas, that has never stopped me from trying. I look at math and science as a challenge or obstacle that I am determined to overcome.

Extra-Curricular Activities

I have always been athletic and enjoyed playing sports. When I was in eighth grade, I tried out for the junior high basketball and softball teams. I played on both teams that year, but the following year choose to only play softball. I played shortstop for one year on the junior varsity team. Despite the fact that we only won a couple of games, I loved every minute of the season. The time I spent with my teammates and the friendships that I developed have been lasting. I played on the varsity softball team my sophomore and junior years of high school. Once again, we did not win very many games, but that never mattered to me. I enjoyed playing the sport and being around my teammates and friends. In my senior year of high school, I worked on the school newspaper. For a brief period, I thought about becoming a journalist. The experience of getting a school paper out every two weeks helped me realize that journalism was not for me. During my second year at Kane University, I began working with Student Mission Fellowships. This organization helps to promote missions and mission trips among the student body. I realized then that I really enjoyed working with people.

Leadership Positions Held

While I was on the junior varsity softball team, I served as one of the team captains. During my senior year of high school, I was the news editor for two publications of the school newspaper. I approached both of these responsibilities with determination to do the best I could and welcomed the responsibility with open arms.

Honors Received

For several years in elementary school I received the "Citizen of the Year" award. In high school, I was on the honor roll numerous times and received the "Citizen of the Year" award my sophomore year. As a college student, I have been on the Dean's List various times.

Likes and Dislikes

Overall, I have always liked school. I enjoy the learning process and learning new things. Even though I struggle with math and science I have taken pleasure in those classes. Spending time with my friends is an added bonus to being in school. I do not like teachers who are not personable. It makes it harder to relate to them and learning becomes more difficult.

Meaningful Contacts with Children and/or Youth

In Church

I grew up going to church. I always had fun in Sunday school and children's church (children's classes that meet while the adults worship together). In fact, children's church is where I first interacted with children as a teacher. When I was twelve years old, I began helping with the children's church class for children ages three and four. As I became older, I started working with the older children as well. At the age of seventeen, I had my first Sunday school and children's church classes of my own. I have worked with children ages two to fifteen in these settings for about eight years. The time I have spent in these roles have been invaluable to me. I learned about balancing the teacher and friend role as well as about the importance of teacher preparation.

In the Community

When I was twelve years old, I began babysitting for a family friend. Since then I have spent many evenings caring for children. One of my favorite, yet crazy babysitting jobs was watching the children in my neighborhood. I would watch sixteen children ages two to fifteen for three hours once a month. This experience was my first course in classroom management.

In Schools

During my senior year of high school, I was fortunate enough to take a class in which three and five-year-olds came into the classroom three days a week. My classmates and I were responsible for teaching them two lessons. One lesson was how to make a fun snack and another was reading a story to the children and doing an activity with it. Since coming to Kane University, I have taught lessons in a kindergarten class, a fourth grade physical education class, and a second grade reading and language arts class. I have seen myself change and mature in my teaching style and abilities throughout these experiences. I believe that teaching the reading and language arts class has been most beneficial for me because I spent an entire semester going to the same classroom three days a week. During this time, I was able to see how the students grew as well as how I grew as a teacher.

Other

During this past year, I have worked at Fountain Road Academy as an extended day teacher. I have worked with pre-kindergarten through fourth grade students. My responsibilities have included making sure all the students have a snack, supervising homework completion, and watching them while they play in the gym or on the playground. This job has provided me the opportunity to work with a wide variety of ages.

Strengths and Weaknesses

I work very well with just about anyone. I believe I can relate to children just as well as I can relate to my peers or elders. I treat everyone with the respect and kindness with which I would like to be given. If a friend needs to talk, I am ready and willing to simply listen. I do not waste my time doing unimportant tasks. I am able to separate the things that I need to do from the things that I want to do. I prioritize the things that I must do. English and social studies are my two best academic areas of study. I enjoy reading both literature and history and analyzing what is written. I never considered myself a creative person until I started creating lessons and lesson plans. I found myself taking the concept that was in the teacher's manual and creating my own activity. As I did more and more lessons, I saw that I continued to get more creative.

I feel that my biggest weakness is my accent. I still have a strong New York accent despite the fact that my family and friends in New York say it is wearing off. On several occasions, I have had peers or children ask me to repeat things because they do not understand what I said. Another weakness for me is my tendency to procrastinate. I may have my priorities straight, but I still wait until the last minute to get things done. In addition, I am not very good at conflict resolution between adults. I can handle conflicts and problems that arise between children, but I am not very skillful at handling conflicts between adults.

Philosophy of Life and Philosophy of Education

Beliefs

I believe that God created each and every person for a unique plan and purpose. People, including children, should be treated with respect and kindness. A person's socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds should not matter. Everyone deserves to be treated in the same manner. Students need to be respectful, polite, and intent on doing their part to see that learning takes place. Students need to be attentive, do what is expected of them, and ask for help when needed. Teachers need to love children and love learning. Once a teacher has started her career in the classroom, she needs to be willing to continue her learning through workshops, professional developments activities, and coursework. A teacher needs to be compassionate, patient, and creative. I believe that teachers need to be able to think on their feet and be flexible. Most importantly, I think that teachers need to be models. Teachers need to model appropriate behavior and how to be a lifelong learner.

Career Goals

As a teacher, I hope to have an impact on my students' lives. I want my students to leave my classroom with more than just book knowledge. I hope that they will leave with a better understanding of whom they are and with more confidence. I will consider my career a success if I have students come back, visit me, and tell me

that I positively impacted their lives and helped mold them into better people than they were.

Expectations

I expect fears, tears, struggles, happiness, delights, and small and big miracles as a teacher. I know that the road ahead of me as a new teacher is going to be difficult. I am prepared for anything. One thing I am certain of is that I will approach teaching in the same way I have any other new undertaking in my life – with hope and vigor.

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