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"My assumptions were wrong": Exploring teachers' constructions of self and biases towards diverse families

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ABSTRACT Family engagement in young children's education is widely touted as valuable, but challenging, particularly for teachers in high need, highly diverse schools. Professional development efforts in this area often fall short, in part due to the difficulty inherent in changing teachers' attitudes and beliefs. This study uses Kegan's (1982) Constructive Developmental theory as a framework for understanding teachers' belief changes as the result of course designed to improve family-school engagement.

Introduction

Family-school collaborations are beneficial to both children and families, especially during early childhood (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007), and for children living in poverty (Berliner, 2006; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Students with involved families are more likely to be engaged with school themselves and thus less likely to drop out in high school. Teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward families have a profound effect on the willingness of parents to become involved in schools (Barnard, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007; Hindin, 2010). Family involvement is especially beneficial for students living in poverty. It has been well established by numerous researchers that poverty has a negative impact on academic achievement (Berliner, 2006; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

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However, family involvement in schooling may help to mediate poverty as a factor for poor student achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Unfortunately, while building family-school partnerships is challenging in most contexts, constructing collaborations between schools and high-poverty populations is especially difficult. Multiple systemic factors associated with poverty (e.g., limited transportation, unreliable work schedules) greatly limit parents' abilities to become involved in schools through traditionally acceptable means, such as classroom volunteerism or attending parent meetings (Henderson et al., 2007; Naughton, 2004). Further difficulties arise from cultural and socioeconomic mismatches between teachers and students, because teachers may not recognize the barriers to school engagement that many families face (Bernstein, 1975; Delpit, 2006; Naughton, 2004). In cases such as these, teachers may be even more critical of seemingly uninvolved families for not behaving like the teachers' own families of origin did in their upbringing. This is of increasing concern in contemporary schooling, as teachers remain overwhelmingly White (Feistritzer, 2011), but non-White students now outnumber White students in American schools (Hussar & Bailey, 2014).

Teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward families have a profound effect on the willingness of parents to become involved in schools (Barnard, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007; Hindin, 2010). Schools and teachers have implicit standards for parent involvement that are often unarticulated and focus on a narrow range of parent behaviors (Lareau, 1994), resulting in a disconnect between parents' and teachers' views of family involvement. Parents who disagree with the teacher or overstep boundaries may not be considered good parent partners. Further, teachers may be unaware of ways in which parents support education outside of this narrow range of acceptable behavior (Henderson et al., 2007; Lareau, 1994).

These conflicts between the ideals of the teacher and the abilities and ideals of the parent can have an adverse effect on student outcomes. Teachers' perceptions of the importance that parents place on education have been shown to be positively related to the development of students' academic skills (Hill & Craft, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006). However, if teachers do not understand the value of different manifestations of family involvement, their perceptions of the importance parents place on education will not be reflective of parents' actual attitudes.

Families' understandings of what school involvement looks like may differ greatly from teachers' understandings, and schools may be unwittingly limiting parent involvement. Further, when teachers approach parents expecting a different type of engagement and with different goals than what parents consider appropriate, teachers fail to acknowledge and limit the power of parents (Doucet, 2011). These factors are most prevalent in interactions with low-income, minority families. Thus, teachers must learn to recognize the perspectives of families to better recognize families' contributions, to understand the specific needs that parents may have, and to better support children's learning.

The tremendous range of family compositions and contexts that teachers may encounter makes any universal plan for family engagement difficult, if not impossible. The work of Epstein (2001) illustrates multiple "types" of family engagement and is widely used in structuring courses and professional development in family engagement. However, Epstein's work and similar structures for family engagement are problematic without considerations of disparate family contexts; the framework is not as unbiased as it may appear to middle class teachers (Kroeger & Lash, 2011). The framework, like many expected plans for family engagement, contains ideologies of the dominant White middle class. Teachers need deeper understandings of

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individual children and families to build effective partnerships (Doucet, 2011; Kroeger & Lash, 2011).

This is a study of an online course in family engagement for classroom teachers pursuing graduate degrees in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Early Childhood. The course prompted teachers to consider contexts of the children and families in their classrooms so that they might better understand how to build collaborative partnerships. The course used case studies and online discussion to prompt teachers to consider the multiple perspectives of children and families. In this paper, we consider how the course impacted four teachers.

Cultural Diversity and Teacher Attitudes

Encouraging teachers to be more culturally competent is a longstanding goal of teacher education, yet efforts in this regard often fall short. Numerous authors suggest that reflection, meaningful communication with others, and a deepening understanding of one's own background and beliefs are necessary for teachers to become more culturally competent (e.g., Allen & Porter, 2002; Diller & Moule, 2005; Keengwe, 2010; Lin & Bates, 2010). That changes in knowledge and skill, the traditional foci of education, are inadequate is likely because beliefs about others, and thus the ability to form relationships with others, develop in response to complex transactions of experience over the course of our lives (Allen & Porter, 2002).

A number of authors write about the need for teachers, particularly White teachers teaching children of Color, to understand their own racial identity and privilege in order to move toward multicultural competence and culturally relevant instruction (e.g., Earick, 2009; Helms, 1990; Howard, 2006; Michie, 2004. Howard points out that the process of racial identity formation can be contextualized within Erikson's theory of identity formation, notably, within the stage of "identity versus identity confusion." By describing the universality of developmental stages of identity formation, Erikson's framework "normalizes" young adults' struggles to discern their own identity, racial and otherwise. Such self-awareness is described as the first step toward reaching multicultural competence, and for beginning teachers, the possibility of engaging their students of Color in meaningful ways (Earick, 2009; Howard, 2006).

The purpose of our investigation is to explore how teachers can learn to value and create meaningful partnerships with parents, and conversely, why some teachers seem to neither value nor create meaningful partnerships with families. In this context, it seems clear that developing a core or personal identity is necessary, but insufficient, for meaningful partnerships with families. To understand the transformation of teachers' beliefs about themselves relative to diverse families, we rely on Kegan's (1982) constructivist-developmental theory. Kegan proposes a spiraling ladder of adult development in which both cognitive and affective processes must be engaged as the individual's sense of self and understanding of relationships with others evolves. Beginning in infancy and extending throughout adulthood, this evolution occurs through a series of cycles of differentiation from others versus conceptualizing ourselves as part of a social "whole." Through the lens of understanding ourselves in relation to others, we construct meaning.

Kegan's framework can be applied to teachers, in that they undergo stage-like changes in their perceptions of themselves that he described through a constructive-developmental lens, designated as "constitutions of self." The stages begin with the earliest awareness of individuality and move through complex adult understandings of self. Individuals move through

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Stages 0-2[1] in early childhood and adolescence, entering Stage 3 in adolescence or early adulthood. Stage 4 can occur at any point during adulthood, and Stage 5 is considered an advanced stage not attained by all individuals. Therefore, this study will only address Stages 3 and 4, stages that are usually part of adulthood but that allow the potential for additional development.

Stage 3, the interpersonal stage, represents a shift in focus from internal processes (egocentric processes) to external processes and interactions with others. Individuals learn to coordinate their own impulses with the impulses of others (Kegan, 1982). However, personal conflicts emerge when individuals' own desires do not coordinate with the wants of others. In Stage 4, the institutional stage, the construction of the self moves toward internal processes once again but without losing the empathy and interactional skills learned in Stage 3. However, rather than being ruled by their own wants or by the wants of others, individuals in Stage 4 learn to explore their own perspectives in the context of the perspectives of others and balance the two while taking ownership of their own identities (Kegan, 1982).

Constructions of teacher self-identity help teachers gain a voice and an understanding of what it means to take on the role of "teacher" in the context of other roles and experiences they have had (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). When students have teachers who demonstrate a clear understanding of their own self-identity as teachers, students are often more engaged in academic work (Uden, Ritzen, & Pieters, 2013). More advanced constructions of self (e.g., those used in Stage 4) allow teachers to recognize perspectives other than their own — an important skill for collaboration and the facilitation of family-school partnerships (Rogers & Scott, 2008). It is essential for teacher educators to understand how such nuanced, well-developed constructions organically evolve in order to recognize the current and ongoing development of teachers' constructions of self. Awareness of these constructions allows teacher educators to identify the current state of development of practicing or pre-service teachers and to promote progress towards more advanced stages.

The transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 marks a crucial point in the development of teachers' self-identities. In this transition, teachers surpass the definition of self through identification with one's interpersonal role in society to begin an exploration of one's personal perspectives, authority in one's own life, and ability to take action (Kegan, 1982). Teachers in Stage 3 often discuss their practice through stories, which reflect what they perceive to be valued by others in society (Rogers & Scott, 2008). Teachers exemplify this stage when they seek to make students and families conform to the preformed roles and expectations defined by the school rather than responding to the socio-cultural or contextual needs of the child. As teachers move into Stage 4, they gain an ability to explore their perspectives and reflect on their experiences, which cultivates a willingness to be exposed to perspectives other than their own (Rogers & Scott, 2008). This is a critical element in fostering family-school partnerships.

Teacher education and professional development programs expect teachers to know themselves and their own biases, critically consider the privileges and inequalities in the lives of their students, explore their own perspectives and childhood experiences, and examine perspectives other than their own (Rogers & Scott, 2008): processes that move teachers from interpersonal to institutional selves. However, this may be difficult for teachers, who are likely to feel "in over their heads" with regard to coursework and professional expectations (Kegan, 1994,

[1] Stage 0 is part of infancy and consists of an infant's recognition of objects and individuals outside of himself. In Stage 1 (Impulsive Stage), the toddler comes to understand that objects are subject to his perceptions and can change. In Stage 2 (Imperial Balance Stage), the child recognizes his capacity to change what happens in the world.

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as cited in Rogers & Scott, 2008). Teacher educators will likely encounter resistance from teachers who are not yet ready to transition from Stage 3 constructions of self to Stage 4. As individuals grow and develop in their self-awareness, they often have an emotional reaction, and sometimes strong and painful emotional reactions (Kegan, 1982). Kegan further wrote, "feeling may be the sensation of evolution…the phenomenology…of meaning-making" (p. 169). Thus, an affective response (i.e., a response that arises from emotion) represents the evolution of teachers' self-identity in response to coursework and experiences that challenge their perceptions of themselves.

Current Study

This case study of four teachers in a graduate course investigates how opportunities for individual self-reflection and online group discussion within the course impacted the ways in which they constructed their self-identities in relation to their views of families. In particular, we were interested in exploring how the nature of teachers' engagement with the course materials related to the development of their perceptions of families. Research questions are: 1) To what extent were teachers in the course able to connect to, engage affectively with, and reflect upon material presented in the course? 2) How does this individual reflection change the ways in which teachers view the roles of families?

Method

Study Goals and Participants

The purpose of the study was to examine teachers' self-identities related to their experiences in the Families course through the analysis of case studies of four teachers enrolled in the course. Given Kegan's theories of social constructions of self, we hypothesized that teachers who began the course in Kegan's Stage 3 (interpersonal self) would be able to move into Kegan's Stage 4 (institutional self) by the end of the course due to an increased ability to recognize the context of others.

To identify which teachers were likely to have moved from Stage 3 to Stage 4 and which were likely to have remained in Stage 3, we examined data from teachers who completed the course in Spring 2013 (N = 18). We used discussion forum posts in conjunction with additional data sources to identify teachers who had a high level of affective connectivity to the course (those with the highest percentages of discussion posts containing an affective component), as well as those who did not show evidence of a strong connection to the course via affectivity in discussion posts (those with the lowest percentages of discussion posts containing an affective component). Four of the 18 teachers were identified as meriting further evaluation because they had either the highest (one teacher) or lowest (three teachers) use of affective language in their total number of discussion posts. These teachers' critical incidents, interviews, and course discussion posts were further examined to evaluate their experiences in the course. All four of the teachers showed evidence of Kegan's Stage 3 (the interpersonal self) at the start of the course.

Context and Course Description

The Families course was part of a federally funded project designed to provide multifaceted professional development to pre-kindergarten through third-grade teachers in high-need elementary schools in Miami Dade County Public Schools, the fourth largest and one of the

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most diverse public school districts in the country. The graduate program is intentionally job-embedded (all students are working early childhood teachers in the school district) and provides onsite supports to supplement the delivery of online content. The family engagement course was the second course in the online graduate program and followed a course in culturally appropriate classroom practice. The online portion of the course was supplemented with two in-person class meetings.

The course was designed to challenge teachers to analyze their interactions with families of students they teach and to engage these families in their children's education in more meaningful ways. During the first half of the course, instruction focused on building teachers' understanding of family uniqueness and strengths with an emphasis on the idea that very few families are "traditional" and no two families are alike. In the second half of the course, teachers applied this knowledge to the development of effective family engagement programs for their schools and classrooms.

To facilitate online forum discussions, teachers rotated through assigned roles as "first responder" and "connector" each week. The first responders were assigned to begin forum threads and respond as necessary to their peers' posts as connectors. First responders were instructed to respond to the given questions, reference key points in assigned readings that informed their response, and relate their ideas to their teachings, relations with parents, or relations with students. Connectors (all other students) were instructed to complete at least two responses per discussion thread that either elaborated on a first responder's post with additional information, experiences, or readings or by posing an alternative answer to the original question. The course instructor intervened when necessary to redirect discussion or answer additional questions and facilitated discussion by integrating all opinions into a summary statement at the end of each weekly discussion.

Teachers were given multiple opportunities to provide feedback about the course material by completing brief writing assignments about their experiences in each of the eight modules at the end of each week. Other course assignments were completed on a one-time basis. These included the start-of-course critical incident report, end-of-course critical incident report, and case study projects described below. Teachers also interviewed the community involvement specialists at their schools, created questionnaires to use during their case studies of families in their classrooms, and designed action plans to increase family engagement in their classrooms and schools at the end of the course.

Data Sources

Data for this study came from four sources: online discussion posts, "critical incident" reflections, "family case study" assignments, and post-course interviews.

Online discussions. The case method of instruction was used to enhance the teachers' connection with course material and their ability to apply course concepts to their classroom practice. This pedagogical technique uses realistic and open-ended "case stories" as course readings to encourage teachers to apply strategies and theories of family engagement to course material while engaging in discussion with classmates (Snyder & McWilliam, 2001). Students worked collaboratively through the complexities of the cases, gaining exposure to a variety of perspectives within the context of a classroom learning community. The online discussion forums that served as our data source were completed in this context. Forums prompted participants to interact with their classmates online about a variety of different topics, including

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relating course material to their own lives, reflecting on case story readings, and sharing their own experiences with their peers.

Critical incidents. At the onset of the course, all teachers wrote critical incident reports describing a significant interaction with a parent that occurred at some point over the duration of their teaching careers (Griffin & Scherr, 2010). This assignment, like the case method of instruction, required the teachers to reflect upon and recognize their own assumptions and potentially judgmental attitudes. The critical incident assignment incorporated specific structural components, including a description of the event's context, the significance of the event, and the teachers' thoughts, feelings, and personal concerns they associated with the incident. Teachers revisited their critical incident reports as their final course assignment. In this culminating assignment, they reflected on their initial descriptions of the incident in light of new information gained about families and family engagement.

Case study projects. Teachers completed their own case study projects, including a home visit with the family of a child in their classrooms and a semi-structured interview of a parent or guardian about the child's history and typical behaviors. Teachers used these data, along with classroom observations and conversations with the child, to write their case study of the child and his or her family.

Interviews. We conducted individual post-course interviews via telephone with each teacher within one month of the conclusion of the course. These 30 minute interviews addressed participants' own childhoods, school, and family experiences; initial beliefs about families; if and how their assumptions about families changed over the course; reflections on course assignments; and what they perceived to have gained from the course.

Data Analysis

Online discussion forums were coded using a qualitative data analysis program (NVivo 10). Each teacher's individual posts over the eight-week course (N = 230 posts) were coded for three broad indicators of social presence using a variation of the coding system first developed by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999). The three codes evaluated the nature of teachers' interactions with their peers in the online discussion forums. The codes included affective, interactive, and cohesive language, with affective language being the only code of interest to the present study, because research on social presence suggests that high levels of affectivity are indicative of a high degree of involvement in the course and presence in the course outcomes (Kegan, 1982; Swan, 2002; Tu & McIssac, 2010). If a post contained any such affective content, the entire post was coded as "affective." Under this coding system each post could (and did) have multiple codes.

One researcher coded all forum posts for these indicators. A second researcher coded two of the eight weeks of posts for inter-rater reliability (Week 2 affectivity kappa = 0.96; Week 7 affectivity kappa = 0.82). Researchers examined each individual teacher's posting history over the eight-week course to identify which teachers frequently and rarely used affective language in their forum posts. On average, 33.8% of teachers' posts contained affective language (range = 7.69% to 66.67%). Three teachers' affective posts approximated the minimum (7.69%, 7.69%, and 8.33% of posts containing affective content), whereas only one teacher approximated the maximum percentage of affective posts (66.67%; Table 1). These four teachers' experiences were identified for further analysis based on their markedly elevated or limited use of affective language as indicated in the forum posts.

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Table 1. *Discussion Forum Post Coding with Affective Indicators*

Teacher	Number of Posts Coded as Affective	Total Number of Posts	Percentage of Posts Coded as Affective
Rebecca	1	13	7.69%
Isabel	1	13	7.69%
Lana	1	12	8.33%
Teacher 4	4	15	26.67%
Teacher 5	4	15	26.67%
Teacher 6	3	10	30.00%
Teacher 7	4	13	30.77%
Teacher 8	5	16	31.25%
Teacher 9	4	12	33.33%
Teacher 10	4	12	33.33%
Teacher 11	4	11	36.36%
Teacher 12	5	13	38.46%
Teacher 13	5	13	38.46%
Teacher 14	6	15	40.00%
Teacher 15	4	9	44.44%
Teacher 16	7	14	50.00%
Teacher 17	7	12	58.33%
Sydney	8	12	66.67%

Critical incident reports were open coded by four researchers for the presence or absence of factors related to teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors regarding family-school partnerships. Researchers discussed themes identified during open coding of initial (start-of-course) critical incident reports to create a matrix of 15 themes across four categories. Categories for themes included communication, teachers' beliefs about parents, emotions expressed or perceived, and the status of in-school supports or influences. End-of-course critical incident reports were open coded by the four researchers. Twelve distinct themes were identified within the categories of evidence of global change, communication, relationship formation, self-awareness, in-school supports or influences, and knowledge of capital. Both the initial and concluding critical incident reports of the four aforementioned teachers were evaluated for evidence of change over the duration of the course using the themes and categories outlined above.

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Interviews and case study projects were examined by the four researchers in conjunction with other collected data described above to create as complete a picture as possible of each teacher's individual experience in the course. Researchers identified direct quotations from teachers in the interviews and case study projects that would be representative of affectivity (to align with forum posts) or the themes and categories described in the critical incident reports above. These data were used primarily for the purpose of triangulating the findings from the discussion forum posts and the two critical incident reports in order to provide multiple sources of evidence of teachers' beliefs and attitudes as well as to promote a better understanding of teachers' experiences in the course (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

Results: Case Explorations

Each of the four teachers selected for this case study had a unique experience in the course. Data derived from coursework shows that all four gained knowledge about the importance of family engagement and of the many different ways that families might be engaged in school. However, the extent to which they were willing to recognize their own biases, engage with course material, and reflect deeply on their own experiences varied significantly.

Sydney[2] and Lana

At the start of the course, both Sydney and Lana had openly cast blame on parents for the parents' perceived failure to be involved in their children's schools, and they were resistant to embracing course material in the first weeks of the course. This suggests Sydney and Lana both began the course in Kegan's Stage 3, the interpersonal stage. However, both teachers also demonstrated high affective connections to course material, and over the course of the semester, showed clear shifts in their beliefs and attitudes towards families as well as in their self-identities as teachers.

Sydney: Deep reflections. Sydney grew up in a middle-class, two-parent family in California. She described her parents as very supportive of education, and she noted that she was educated primarily in private schools. She self-identified as multiracial with English as her only language. She moved to south Florida to attend college. Sydney was a kindergarten teacher in her early thirties with ten years of teaching experience. Sydney's background was very different from that of her students, many of whom were Cuban and Central American immigrants.

Across eight weeks of online discussion forum posts, Sydney had the highest percentage of affective scores in the cohort, with 66.67% of her discussion posts including a clear display of emotion or self-disclosure. Further investigation of her course materials and interview data showed a clear difference in her beliefs revealed in her online discussion forum posts and reflections between the start of the course and its conclusion.

Early in the course, Sydney tended to blame communication failures and lack of parent involvement either on the school or the parents themselves. Sydney's tone shifted in the middle of the course, when she began to express frustration that families were not responding to her efforts at communicating with them. Her analysis of the case story readings demonstrated that she had formed a clearer connection between her self-conceptualization as a teacher, her students, and her practices in facilitating family involvement.

> Throughout my teaching career, I can honestly say that I unfortunately have made assumptions about families…. As I read the different [case stories], articles, and the book, I am beginning to

[2] All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

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> think about how I can communicate and reach out to my parents differently. I ask myself what else I can do.
>
> Sydney, Discussion Forum, Week 3

This shift is also evident in Sydney's critical incident report. In this pre-course recollection, Sydney placed significant blame on the parents in the situation for not communicating their needs appropriately:

> At the beginning of this incident I felt like this mother had no idea how to handle her child. I thought the problem was that she did not know how to discipline her son and made excuses for his behavior. I assumed that she and the father had no control at home. I viewed the situation this way because I just could not understand who would allow their child to act like this.
>
> Sydney, Pre-Course Critical Incident Report

But, like her discussion forums, Sydney's final critical incident report reflected a transition from interpersonal to institutional self (Stage 3 to Stage 4). Sydney's post-course report critically examined her own initial judgments in the pre-course report and included statements of what could have been done to help the parent if her judgments had been reserved.

> My assumptions have somewhat changed because having been working with the mom, I now realize how much frustration she is feeling in that it has taken a very long time to get various doctor's appointments with the type of insurance she has. She wants to help her son but the process has been difficult for her.
>
> Sydney, Post-Course Critical Incident Report

Both of these components indicate that Sydney was able to adopt a new perspective after participating in the course, a perspective that allowed her to facilitate more personal connections with her students' families and see herself beyond her prescribed role in the school system.

Sydney's home visit and her written case study also demonstrated continued development from Stage 3 to Stage 4. In her case study, Sydney continued to reflect on her mid-course recognition of her role and limitations in building communication with families, expressing that *she* needed to take initiative to reach out to families to form better partnerships.

> I need to create a better partnership with my families and encourage them to be part of their child's education at home and in school.
>
> Sydney, Family Case Study Project

She also clearly recognized the importance of bidirectional communication between teachers and families with regard to the education of children. When discussing a classroom concern with the parents during her home visit, Sydney asked for their advice rather than attempting to impart her professional knowledge on the parent or exerting status as an expert.

> I greatly appreciated that Student B's mom gave some good suggestions on how to better improve communication with parents. She recommended having quarterly conferences but scheduled when parents can attend after work. I have always scheduled conferences before school or right after school. I realize I need to be flexible and reach out to my families to see what works for them and not just think of my schedule
>
> Sydney, Family Case Study Project

In her post-course interview, Sydney spoke with a great deal of candor about her attitudes at the start of the course:

> I have always been like, yeah, they donate stuff, whatever – but not really, really tried to reach out to them, to be involved in the classroom. I thought they'd be in the way or just want to help their [own] child. So that's kind of how I looked at it.
>
> Sydney, Post-Course Interview

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Sydney recognized that as the course progressed, she began to acknowledge the need to initiate communication with parents and connect the case story readings to her own practice in the classroom. However, Sydney seemed to relate the case stories as part of the course to the children she might have in her classroom in the future rather than children she taught previously.

Lana: Embarrassed by biases. Lana grew up in Pennsylvania in a White, middle-class, two-parent family with extended family nearby. She described her parents as very involved in both her education and extra-curricular activities. At the time of the study, Lana was in her mid-thirties and was a third grade teacher in her sixth year of teaching. She and Sydney taught at the same school and experienced similar cultural disconnects from their students.

Lana had one of the lowest percentages of affective discussion, with only 8.33% of her total discussion posts containing affective statements. In early course discussion forums, she tended to blame communication failures and lack of family involvement either on the school or the parents themselves. She detailed the ways in which she was doing "everything right" to reach out to parents but received little response. In forum discussions about the case story readings, Lana seemed to be confused about the roles of the teacher in the case stories, which suggests she did not fully consider the perspectives of others (in this case, the perspectives and needs of the children). Her interpersonal construction of self as teacher was highly prescribed and traditional.

> My thought is that lack of communication wasn't the root of the problem but what the school was focusing on created a difficult situation. The teacher spent time doing laundry to help with Tim's appearance and the principal indicated that the school was becoming "more of social agency." How could Tim's education be the priority if his hygiene took precedence?
>
> Lana, Discussion Forum, Week 3

In the final two weeks of the course, a clear change was evident in Lana's tone. She openly acknowledged a need for mutual respect, as well as the importance of schools providing social and educational resources to families.

This transformation was also evident in Lana's critical incident report. Her pre-course critical incident report highlighted poor communication. In her final critical incident report, Lana recognized she had been viewing the families of her students through the lens of her own family and personal experiences from childhood. She was much better able to recognize the role of her own background and positionality in her interpretation of the original critical incident.

> Lastly, in the future I will try not to use my own personal experiences to make judgments about the families. Realizing that my upbringing is probably very different than most of my students' experiences.
>
> Lana, Post-Course Critical Incident Report

During the post-course interview, Lana attributed the change in her understanding of her own role in engaging with families to her home visit case study. She chose to visit the family of an African American child in her class and was surprised to discover that the child was the only African American in a White family. Lana had no knowledge of this previously and had been discussing the child's African American heritage with the child at school. Lana discovered that, according to the child's mother, the child felt like an outsider in her own family, and the family was trying to address those feelings. It was a meaningful experience for Lana and one that was recounted at length in her post-course interview, during which she related the case study to her family background in Pennsylvania with the realization that the world of the children she teaches may be very different from her own.

In her post-course interview, Lana recounted the pejorative attitudes and beliefs she held at the beginning of the course and acknowledged they were reflected in the opinions expressed in

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her online discussion posts. She described herself as having been "judgmental" and expressed feelings of embarrassment about prior statements such as the one about doing laundry at school:

> Last year we were blessed with a class of children who were very involved. This year, there's a lack of involvement, lack of homework completion, calling parent and nothing would change. Starting the class, I was like hmm, you know, some parents, they just don't care, they're not involved, they don't think it's important. I'm almost embarrassed to say, but I judged, judged a little bit.
>
> Lana, Post-Course Interview

Lana's initial critique of only situational instead of personal factors in the case story readings served as defensive criticism through which she was able to shift the blame and avoid confronting her own personal biases or feelings. Her embarrassment when confronted with new information in the course that made her uncomfortably aware of her own biases is indicative of initial resistance to transitioning from the interpersonal stage of teacher identity to the institutional stage. Her final interpretation of the differences between her own upbringing and her students' childhood experiences as variances instead of deficits and willingness to engage meaningfully with the families of her students cemented her transition from the interpersonal stage to the institutional stage of teacher identity.

> I think the class helped me realize that there's major differences with the kids, that my normal is not their normal.
>
> Lana, Post-Course Interview

Interpersonal and professional growth. Transitions to the "institutional self" were apparent in Sydney and Lana's increased willingness to connect their practice to the case story readings, reflect on their practice, and critically examine their own judgments. As a result of this more reflective outlook, Sydney and Lana both stressed the importance of reaching out to parents in more intentional ways, listening to parents, and considering suggestions parents make about their children's education. Sydney and Lana were two of only three teachers in the cohort who made specific references to parent partnerships, not just parent engagement, in end-of-course assignments. By changing their self-perceptions from situating themselves as all-knowing experts to partners working in collaboration with parents, Sydney and Lana committed to altering their future teaching practices to reflect their newfound roles in parent-teacher interactions.

Isabel and Rebecca

Both Isabel and Rebecca appeared to be situated in Kegan's Stage 3, the interpersonal stage, at the onset of and also at the conclusion of the course. Their expectations for their own roles and the roles of others were rigid; they had difficulty reflecting on their own actions and viewed the actions of others entirely through their own experiential lenses. As a result, both Isabel and Rebecca framed themselves in a clearly constructed teacher role in which they were an all-knowing entity whose role was to impart knowledge onto the blank slates of others. They had difficulty understanding, even at the end of the course, that parents might have valuable knowledge about their children that Isabel and Rebecca as teachers did not possess.

Isabel and Rebecca both appeared to be unable or unwilling to connect the case story readings to children in their classrooms, even though other participants described clear connections between the case stories used and their own high-need students. They asserted repeatedly that they held no biases and made no assumptions. They framed their online discussion posts as though to be otherwise would make them bad teachers; in consequence, their lack of self-disclosure and introspection caused them to appear judgmental of other teachers who

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revealed more fully about their own experiences. Resistance to development for these two teachers appeared to be linked to the resistance to admit their own flaws as teachers.

Isabel: Judgment-free. Isabel, an American-born child of Cuban immigrants, was a second-grade teacher in her early thirties in her eighth year of teaching at the time of the course. She grew up speaking both English and Spanish but primarily spoke Spanish at home. She saw this as an advantage to her teaching career and was teaching her own children to be fluent in both languages. She believed her cultural and linguistic background made her more sensitive to the needs of the children she taught.

Isabel was selected for inclusion in this study primarily because of her low percentage of affective language use in her discussion posts (only 7.69% contained an affective statement). A review of her course discussions, critical incident reports, written case study, and interview responses showed very little emotional connection to the material presented in the course or to her own experiences through reflection or recollection. Isabel maintained a socially desirable image of herself, never acknowledging that her own actions might prevent parents from becoming more engaged with their children's schooling. She was adamant throughout the course that she had no biases against any child or family and that she was doing everything correctly with regard to family engagement strategies.

Discussion posts throughout the course showed Isabel's reluctance to assume any responsibility for poor parent interactions. In responses to course readings early in the course, Isabel readily noted barriers to involvement at her school that she attributed to external factors, placing the onus of the barriers on the school and entirely out of her control. In mid-course discussion forums, which focused primarily on case story readings, Isabel showed little change her in perceptions of families and their role in building lines of communication with the teacher. She did not connect the case stories to her own experiences; her responses seemed detached and almost clinical. Occasionally, Isabel made a point to clarify that occurrences such as those described in the cases could not happen in her own classroom because of actions she was already taking to promote diversity and connect with families. In end-of-course discussion forums, Isabel demonstrated more insight regarding the roles teachers have in increasing parent involvement but did not connect those roles to herself or her own practice, focusing instead on teachers as a professional group.

Isabel's critical incident report indicated clear expectations for the classification of "teacher" and "parent" roles. In her start-of-course critical incident report, Isabel described a parent as being very angry due to a miscommunication. Isabel stated she was confused and frustrated about this perceived anger. From her perspective, the parent failed to communicate her desires clearly enough, and Isabel did not see herself at bearing any responsibility for the miscommunication. In the reflection component of her end-of-course critical incident report, Isabel looked for ways to fix the observable conflict she had with the parent without considering underlying communication issues. As in her online discussion forums, the solutions Isabel devised highlighted the "failures" of the family and school to communicate effectively. Her resolutions largely consisted of one-way communications in which Isabel would give solutions to the parent, imparting knowledge to the seemingly less informed family from her perceived elevated status as a teacher.

Isabel's responses to parent concerns in her own case study (following a home visit with the family of a child in her class) were similarly one-sided. In her case study, Isabel did confront her assumption that a seemingly uninvolved parent did not care about the education of the child, but this revelation was superficial, as evidenced by the case study's self-congratulatory tone. In

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the case study, Isabel detailed how wonderful the child's mother had felt that the communication with Isabel had been even though Isabel did not appear to know anything about the family prior to the interview. Suggestions to the parent to increase family participation in school activities focused on Isabel giving additional information to the family with no statement about information that she might receive or any indication of a bidirectional, nonhierarchical relationship.

> I also thought I could create a bi-weekly newsletter for our classroom highlighting all the special events at our school and upcoming activities…Creating a newsletter could give parents a two week notice on upcoming events, giving them enough time to make plans to attend.
>
> Isabel, Family Case Study Project

Even in her case study project, Isabel requires that families mold their schedules to hers instead of thinking of ways in which she could reach out to families who may be unable to attend even with two weeks' notice.

Isabel's post-course interview demonstrated marginal development in her constructions of self during the course. In her interview, Isabel reiterated that her status as a Hispanic woman greatly increased her ability to communicate with the Hispanic families served by her school. She restated several times in the interview that she recognized "traditional families are not the norm anymore," and that she was very accepting of all types of families. Again, she declared she had *no* assumptions about families at the start of the course.

> Like I said, you know I didn't really have assumptions from what the family should be or shouldn't be. I think it was more on how I could involve them or why they, I guess it was more why parents weren't involved or why parents were involved
>
> Isabel, Post-Course Interview

However, it was clear she had difficulty connecting the course material to analyses of herself and her practice.

> The one [assigned reading] about the camera, that reading I found interesting but it… I felt it focused too much on the specific ethnic group and didn't really allow for much interpretation outside of that group, because talking about immigrant children, actually the student that I interviewed was not a Hispanic immigrant… I didn't feel it was too relative to my case study and these students that I was working with.
>
> Isabel, Post-Course Interview

Rebecca: The savior. Rebecca grew up as the middle child of a large family in rural Pennsylvania. At the time of the study, she was in her early thirties and had been teaching for ten years. She had recently moved from teaching kindergarten to teaching first grade. She described her family as a traditional, two-parent family who were very supportive of education. As a White woman, she had a very different cultural and linguistic background from the predominantly Haitian population that she taught, though she did speak both English and Spanish.

Like Isabel, Rebecca was included in this study due to a low use of affective language in the online discussion forums. Affective language appeared in 7.69% of her discussion posts. A review of data of Rebecca's experience in the course showed a strong resistance to admitting any responsibility regarding poor family-school communication.

In early course discussion forums, Rebecca detailed the ways in which she was doing everything possible to reach out to parents but was receiving little response from families. Rebecca's reactions to the case story readings in the middle of the course demonstrated a perception of herself as a "savior" for the children of families in her classroom. She described the numerous ways in which she contacted families, often framing her experiences as advice to

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her cohort peers. She adamantly expressed that she never judged children or families, suggesting that even reading a previous year's report about a child would be judgmental and biasing. Rebecca's discussion posts also tended to be self-congratulatory, detailing her many successes in contacting families about administrative procedures.

> I have been given positive feedback from parents who told me that they were happy that the important procedures for school were outlined in the beginning.
>
> Rebecca, Discussion Forum, Week 3

Late-course discussion posts showed little change from earlier discussion posts. Rebecca continued to describe her high level of communication to (but not with) parents. She noted the importance of reserving judgment about families and making connections to families as outlined in the course readings, but she still did not appear to connect course material to her own experiences or those of her students.

Rebecca's critical incident report described her intervention in a domestic violence situation between the parents of one of her students. She spoke to the mother of a student in her class and advised the mother to leave her husband. Rebecca did not, however, contact any resources in either the school or the community that could have supported the family or Rebecca herself. In this critical incident report, Rebecca again painted herself as a savior, this time of the family.

> In my incident I felt I acted in the best interest of the child and the family. I do not think there was any other way I could have proceeded in this case. I only wish I could have seen what was to come in the future, and get more help for Jose's mother so that Jose's father didn't have to be in prison. … I wish I could have protected Jose and his siblings from witnessing that because no child wants to choose between their mother and father.
>
> Rebecca, Post-Course Critical Incident Report

The student's mother was described as overwhelmingly grateful for Rebecca's input. The father in the incident was eventually sent to prison as a result of continued assaults. Rebecca believed her actions in this situation were wholly correct and that she was responsible for essentially rescuing the mother and child without involving other resources or agencies.

Rebecca used this same family for her case study project. The event described in the critical incident report occurred five years prior, at which time Rebecca had the eldest child in the family as a student. At the time of the study, she had the third child in the family in her class. In the case study, however, Rebecca made no mention of the events described in the critical incident report other than to refer to her relationship with the older children and to make a casual reference to the father being in prison. Rebecca described the family in idyllic terms, comparing it to her own large family while also noting the mother's inability to help children with homework because of her limited (sixth grade) education.

The family Rebecca chose for her own case study project was not unlike the case story readings that were shared as part of the course materials in order to promote deeper understanding of extreme family situations. In Rebecca's case study, the family had five children; the mother was severely undereducated; and the father was serving time in prison due to violence against his family. Despite these factors, Rebecca described the family in her case study as "typical."

> When thinking back about the [case stories] from class, many families seemed to be severe cases. The cases were either a mother that was still a child herself overwhelmed with the house full of babies, or a mother who was abused and tried to get help. My experience was that of a family who had a loving mother and great extended family to lean on when needed.

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Rebecca, Family Case Study Project

While Rebecca had frequently explained throughout the course the range of communication strategies she incorporated in her own classroom (newsletters, start-of-year packets, phone calls), she revealed in the interview that her communication attempts were far less effective than she implied in discussion forums. While she had been sending home a great deal of paperwork, parents had not been responsive for reasons Rebecca did not seem to understand, even by the end of the course.

> I would like for them all to pick them up their kids so I can talk to them everyday and to help them with their homework so they know where they need to be and their levels. … Currently I have a behavior plan and I write my initial by their color everyday, and if its not green then I write why it's a different color and parents can respond, but parents don't respond… According to my students, it's because parents work or don't check the folder or an older brother or sister was supposed to do it. And I wouldn't say they don't care, it's the time I hope, because I sent home at the beginning of the year the policy… but I don't know.
>
> Rebecca, Post-Course Interview

Even in the post-course interview, Rebecca revealed she was still using her own background and experiences as a frame of reference for her expectations of parents.

> Like I said, my family was very supportive and involved and attended all the plays and shows, so I think a parent should be involved in every aspect of a child's education, to do homework and to go to the plays and everything.
>
> Rebecca, Post-Course Interview

Rebecca seemed to exhibit a strong resistance to the course material which may have prevented her from fully connecting with the case stories or delving into deeper issues the families of her students were experiencing that might have been limiting their school engagement. Table 2 illustrates the differences and similarities between the four case studies described above.

Table 2. *Demographic Data of Case Study Participants*

	Sydney	**Lana**	**Isabel**	**Rebecca**
Age at time of study	32	36	30	31
Years teaching	10	6	8	10
Current grade level taught	Kindergarten	Third	Second	First
Percentage of forum posts coded as affective	66.67%	8.33%	7.69%	7.69%
Race/Ethnicity	Multiracial/Non-Hispanic	White/Non-Hispanic	White/Hispanic	White/Non-Hispanic
Languages Spoken	English	English	Spanish (1st) and English	English (1st) and Spanish

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Initial stage of teacher identity (Kegan)	Stage 3	Stage 3	Stage 3	Stage 3
Stage of teacher identity (Kegan) at course conclusion	Stage 4	Stage 4	Stage 3	Stage 3
Summative evaluation of course impact on student outcomes	Deeply reflective of own biases; ready to take action	New willingness to engage meaningfully with families	Distances self and experiences from course	Resistant to course; lack of introspection

Discussion

The Families course included multiple pedagogical elements designed to enhance teachers' recognition of perspectives other than their own. Consistent with Kegan's constructive-developmental framework, both cognitive and affective strategies were incorporated with the goal of helping in-service teachers mature in their understanding of themselves in relation to their students' families. This study provides case examples of four participants, two who demonstrated growth in their understanding and two who did not. In keeping with our theoretical framework, indicators of success included affective engagement with course materials and other participants, statements suggesting recognition of families' unique perspectives, and indicators of willingness to engage more effectively with families.

Sydney had comparatively high use of affective language in the online discussions. Relative to Lana, Sydney showed some resistance to course material in the first two weeks of the course as indicated in her discussion posts' lack of internal connection to course readings and personal insight. However, during the discussions of case story readings, she was better able to appreciate the fragile positions of the families represented in the readings. Furthermore, as the course progressed, she was able to connect the cases to her own practice and acknowledged that she had not been as fully understanding of the situations of individual families as she thought she had been at the onset of the course. Sydney's comparatively early recognition of the contexts of others led to highly affective discussion posts throughout the course, as well as her frequent use of affective language in course assignments and in the final interview.

The teachers who were unaware of their biases for a significant portion of the course (Lana, Isabel, and Rebecca) used few affective indicators in their discussion forum posts, although they all exhibited other indicators of social presence (interactive and cohesive indicators) at frequencies similar to their classmates. This indicates that while they were socially engaged in their interactions with their classmates during the course, they were not making as many emotional connections as their peers. All of the teachers read the case stories and other course material as required, and they participated in online discussions in which they gave their opinions of the material, connected it to work associated with the teaching profession, and gave

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suggestions for improvements in future practices. However, Lana, Isabel, and Rebecca's discussion posts remained detached from *personal* connections and were objective and clinical in their recommendations. All three initially approached changes to practice as global changes that should be made to the profession as a whole, not to their individual practices as teachers.

All three of these teachers used face-saving strategies in their online discussion posts to help them project the image of a socially desirable, "good teacher" without recognizing their flaws or shortcomings, as opposed to acknowledging their personal challenges in grappling with course material. Lana, Isabel, and Rebecca all made specific references in their discussion posts to the ways in which they conformed to their internalized roles as teachers. They alluded to the multiple means of communication with parents they used and the promotion of diversity in their classrooms. The image they were attempting to project was that of teachers who did not judge, who did not assume, and who held no prejudices against families or children. It is likely they believed that they were teachers who were without biases, to admit otherwise would have been harmful to their conceptions of self.

In her post-course interview, Lana admitted that her realization of her prior judgments was embarrassing, and her recognition that she had been judging families due to differences in their structures was emotionally upsetting. However, unlike Isabel and Rebecca, she reached a point during the course in which she was able to understand the contexts of others and, through that understanding, acknowledge that others did not necessarily fit the roles she had constructed for them. While Lana's use of affective language in discussion posts overall was rare, her affective language increased greatly in her final critical incident report and her post-course interview, which may relate to her increased willingness to connect personally to the course. With respect to all course participants' conceptualizations of their roles as teachers, it was expected that this course would help teachers progress from Kegan's Stage 3 (the interpersonal stage) to Stage 4 (the institutional stage). This is a difficult transition that necessitates the loss of an externalized structure in which the teachers could see themselves and others in clear roles with well-defined boundaries (Kegan, 1982). The loss of structure that accompanies movement from the interpersonal to institutional self can be so overwhelming that it causes resistance and pushback in those experiencing the shift.

Sydney and Lana both appeared to transition from interpersonal to institutional selves within their roles as teachers as a result of their interaction with course material, online discussions, and interactions with families. Early in the course, both Sydney and Lana expressed a need to fill the teacher role as they had constructed it, which positioned the teacher primarily as the instructor of children. Both expressed a need for parents to fit the role they had constructed for them: receptive to information given, able to support learning in ways that were dictated by the classroom teacher, and largely absent from the school unless their presence was requested. Both Sydney and Lana came from backgrounds more privileged than those of most of the students they taught. They were both aware of this prior to the taking the Families course, but they did not recognize how their backgrounds influenced their ability to understand the perspectives of other families. Both had attempted to communicate with parents of students in their classrooms with minimal success, and both had a moment of realization in the course in which they recognized their own role in alienating families from family-school partnerships and contributing to the poor communication.

Isabel and Rebecca were resistant to making connections with course material or engaging in affective discussions in the online forums throughout the course. They both exhibited markers of Stage 3 (interpersonal self) in that they were primarily concerned with

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parents filling the roles they as teachers had ascribed to them while they, in turn, fulfilled the preconceived roles of "good teacher." Both used stories of their classroom practice and home visits to illustrate the ways in which they were effectively engaging families already without consideration of insight gained from the course. These recollections evidenced their perceptions that they were already doing everything right in regard to family engagement; however, critical incident reports and interview data demonstrated this was not the case. Isabel and Rebecca were both adamant that they had no biases and actively avoided casting judgments on children and families. They were resistant to any element of the course that suggested this might not be the case.

The course was more transformative for some teachers than for others, but it is unclear from current data why this occurred. The reported childhood experiences of Sydney, Lana, and Rebecca were similar in that they all came from two-parent families who were supportive of their schooling. No definitive difference is reflected in their background data that would indicate why there was a difference in the impact of the course among these three teachers.

Isabel had a childhood experience more similar to that of her students than the other three participants. She, like many children in Miami, was from an immigrant family. She did not believe this had a significant effect on her own schooling and considered it to be an advantage when working with parents from similar backgrounds in her school. It may be that she assumed having a shared culture with her students meant she also had a shared perspective, but there is not enough data in the current study to make conclusions as to whether or not this is true of Isabel or other teachers of immigrant backgrounds. This is an area that requires further study.

We expect that experiences gained during the course will affect participants' classroom practice and future engagement of families. Longitudinal data from these same teachers collected at regular intervals over several years will be necessary to assess any long-term classroom effects. At this stage, only the participants' intentions to make changes in their practice are known. All four of these teachers expressed a desire to make some change to the manner in which they reach out to families as a result of this course.

Much of the change planned by Isabel and Rebecca involved application of "tools" discussed in the course (e.g., holding a Science Night, conducting home visits, allowing children to share photographs from home). Sydney and Lana had more transformative experiences during the course, and their resulting plans for the future featured the facilitation of deeper connections with families (i.e., building substantial family-school partnerships and actively collaborating with families about their children's education). It is the hope that the additional coursework and experiences that Isabel and Rebecca will gain as part of their overall graduate program will help them to become less resistant to the recognition of their biases. Additional research following these students in the graduate program as a whole will reveal if this outcome actually occurs.

The context of this study was very unique. The students represented in this study and in the cohort as a whole are not demographically representative of teachers nationally. Two of the four teachers in this study identified as non-White; two of the four were bilingual; and one of the teachers was the child of immigrants. Miami is a unique locale due to both the size and diversity of the school district. Teachers in Miami encounter great levels of diversity, both among their students and among their colleagues. However, the context does make the application of our results to teachers and schools in other parts of the country difficult. There is a need for additional research in other contexts, such as rural and suburban districts or districts in different parts of the country, to assess if the results of this study remain consistent.

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Another limitation of this work is its role as part of a larger project. Students entered this graduate program with the understanding that they would be part of an extensive research project. This gave us a great deal of freedom in collecting data for this study, as students were already accustomed to having data collected in their courses and responding to requests for additional data. As a result, there was no resistance to participation. However, teachers who chose to become participants in the larger project were already fundamentally different from other teachers at their school. They were willing to complete a graduate degree program (and had a strong enough academic record to be accepted into the program), disseminate what they learned to other teachers at their school, form relationships and work with school-level administration, and critically evaluate their own teaching continuously throughout the program. Teachers who were unwilling to enter graduate degree program—and by extension, the larger study—might have been affected differently by the Families course. In future research, we plan to adapt the Families course as a more widely available professional development program that is accessible to a greater range of teachers.

Within the data for this project, we found that teachers, regardless of their beliefs about families or existing biases, were greatly limited in the ways in which they could involve families in school because of systemic barriers within the school and school district. In this study, we were concerned primarily about how teachers' attitudes influenced practice and focused analysis on plans for practice that were possible within existing school policies and norms. At this time, we cannot discount the influence of policy-related barriers beyond the control of the teachers in influencing their family involvement practices and beliefs. This is an issue that is important for understanding how teacher beliefs translate into practice and is worthy of continued study.

Conclusion

Family-school partnerships are difficult even under the most ideal circumstances. At the same time, facilitating effective professional development to change teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices with respect to facilitating meaningful family involvement is daunting as well. Kegan's (1982) constructive-developmental theory provides a foundation for understanding why teachers respond to professional development efforts differently. Inherent in professional growth and development is the understanding that teachers must "work towards an awareness of their identity and contexts, relationships, and emotions … to make a psychological shift in how they think of themselves as teachers" (Rogers & Scott, 2008, p. 733). Kegan's constructive-developmental theory would predict that teachers' capacity to internalize new beliefs, particularly beliefs about relationships with others, depends on their own cognitive-affective growth.

This study demonstrates that a predominantly online graduate course on family engagement utilizing case story readings as part of the case method of instruction was able to help some early childhood classroom teachers recognize their own biases, understand the circumstances of families that may be unlike their own, and grow in their identities as teachers. However, exploring these biases can cause resistance, particularly in teachers who have constructed an understanding of themselves as teachers who are judgment-free. Even for these teachers, though, exploring a range of family circumstances through activities such as reading

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case stories, participating in discussions with peers, actively reflecting on their thoughts, and initiating home visits with students' families has the potential to prompt the beginnings of new self-conceptualizations.

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