Collaborating with a Latina Immigrant Parent in a Special Education Teacher Preparation Course: A Family as Faculty Snapshot

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I am a special education faculty member teaching a special education course on families to 18 preservice special education teachers (PSETs). I have secured a grant centered on collaboration between PSETs and Latinx families of children with disabilities to implement strategies beneficial to the overall academic and personal well-being of children with disabilities in the local community. I am using a portion of the grant monies to provide family members with an honorarium and childcare to participate in four Family as Faculty (FAF) workshops embedded within the 16-week, semester course. For background, FAF is a healthcare approach adapted for special education teacher preparation programs focusing on the strengths of families of individuals with disabilities (Harvard Family Research Project, 2000). In FAF, family members are *co-educators* whose knowledge of their child is contributive and their expertise invaluable to course design, teaching, and/or FAF-related research (Santamaría Graff, 2021).

In this moment, I am meeting with Lety (pseudonym used), a Latina immigrant parent of a child with Down syndrome who is a co-educator of this course as well as an advocate for Latinx families of children with disabilities. Lety and I are discussing our experiences with the first of four family-centered workshops embedded within the course we have co-designed. Lety is direct with me about her concerns. She observes that, despite our efforts at co-creating an authentic space for families and PSETs to collaborate, some families feel frustrated rather than supported by the interactions that occurred in Workshop 1. In Spanish she expresses (translated and paraphrased for meaning):

I want the parents to understand that teachers also get frustrated … due to lack of training, due to not knowing how to understand a culture that is not theirs or navigate a system or a culture they have never been exposed to. That is something both parents and teachers need to understand. And that frustration [families feel] is because they want to see results now. And no, that's a process. It is something you construct little by little … The important thing here is to emphasize the part that we are dealing with … working with two different cultures, two different languages, and, at the same time, trying to find a common point where … the two cultures have balance that is reflected in the benefit to the child in school.

In this brief snapshot, there are layers of complexity that speak to specific challenges related to collaborative efforts between families and PSETs as well as the structures created to facilitate these efforts. The purpose of showcasing this moment is to demonstrate the importance of collaboration between me, a university instructor, and Lety, a Latina parent. Through Lety's insights, we will unpack some of these layers in relation to Workshop 1 considering: *(a) How is collaboration used in FAF approaches to prepare PSETs to center families' cultural and linguistic repertoires (or funds of knowledge) in ways that are beneficial to families of children*

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with disabilities? and *(b) As university/college instructors how do we confront uneven power relations that may inadvertently marginalize families?*

Collaboration in Family as Faculty

FAF approaches adapted for special education programs have traditionally focused on PSETs' improved communication and collaboration with families of children with disabilities (Patterson, et al., 2009). In alignment with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates the right of parents to participate in educational decision making regarding their child with a disability, families within FAF are recognized as important stakeholders through activities that are constructed to (re)position them as leaders and experts of their children. Collaboration is essential as PSETs gain important experiences *learning from* families. In turn, families are offered several opportunities to practice advocating for and communicating important information about their child. Family members are invited to share their experiences, and, through their stories, offer genuine learning moments for PSETs to actively listen, to make authentic connections with family members, and to shift any deficit-based understandings they may hold about families to more asset-based ones. This 'shift' is important within the context of this FAF 'snapshot' as all 18 PSETs who took the families' course self-identified as White within a special education program serving local, urban districts with high percentages of Black, Latinx, and other minoritized racial/ethnic student populations.

FAF Planning & Considerations

Here, we return to Lety's statements. The crux of her concerns centered around cultural and linguistic differences between the families and PSETs. As a representative family member of the Latinx disability community, Lety felt a responsibility toward the Latinx family members who she helped to recruit for the FAF project. These families were from various Spanish-speaking countries including Mexico, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Having worked with these family members through two Spanish parent-to-parent, local organizations that she either led or was affiliated with, Lety had learned from them that their hope in participating in the FAF project was three-fold: they wanted: (1) to be listened to (and respected) by educators, (2) to access resources for their children, and (3) to learn how to better advocate for their children's needs.

Collaborating with Lety

Based on the families' desires, Lety and I met several times before the course began to make decisions about what should be covered in the workshops. Initially, we went over the basic framework of the course syllabus which consisted of course standards that we needed to integrate into the four FAF workshops. We discussed how to structure the workshops so that Latinx family members would feel listened to even though many were developing English proficiency. To address the language barrier between PSETs and the Spanish-speaking families, part of the grant money was used to pay professional interpreters who attended the four workshops. In addition, we collaborated with the Spanish Department whose Chair recommended several students to assist during the workshops with interpreting and translating.

Though beyond the purview of this "snapshot", it is important to mention that as part of the FAF framework I was developing at the time, I thought about the power dynamics between Lety and me (parent-faculty member/educator) and between the families and PSETs (parent-future teacher) constantly. I analyzed these dynamics through a critical lens considering systemic educational practices, such as privileging academic knowledge over families' epistemic wisdom,

and took intentional steps to co-create the most equitable discursive and participatory structures possible with Lety. In my relationship with Lety this meant that I listened more and spoke less. I actively integrated her ideas into the workshops based on her insider knowledge of the Latinx families and their children. And, most importantly, I let go of having to be 'in charge' of every decision.

As I let go more and more, I was able to invite Lety in as co-educator to the degree that she was driving many of the decisions regarding the FAF workshop design. Importantly, Lety provided invaluable insight about ways to center families' funds of knowledge, though she used the word "fuerzas" (strengths) to describe families' capital and resources. She recommended focusing on *cultural competency* which she defined as the ability to "descub[rir] las fallas ... y descub[rir] las fortelezas de cada uno y tratar de encontrar un punto en común" [discover the faults ... and discover the strengths of each person and try to find common ground]. As we collaborated, I drew from my experiences using participatory action research (PAR) methodologies in family-centered research.

With PAR in mind, we co-created an action plan for the workshops that encompassed interactive activities between the family members and PSETs. For PSETs we wanted them to listen and learn with families. Our ultimate goal for the family co-educators was for them to have a space to generate mini-action plans focused on their self-identified challenges pertaining to their child's schooling that they could try out incrementally across the workshop series and beyond.

Figure 1: Overview of Workshops: Developing an Action Plan

Family as Faculty Action Plan (Overview)
Workshop 1: Getting to Know Each Other 1. Family members sharing, preservice education teachers (PSETs) listening and asking the following questions while "scribe" takes notes. 2. Everyone shares the following information by answering: (a) What is your name?, (b) Where are you from?, (c) Where does your family live (where do you call "home"?); (d) What do you want to learn? (e) What do you hope to get out of these workshops? 3. To begin developing short- and long-term family-driven goals, family members share relevant information about their child: (a) name of child, (b) Hopes & dreams you have for your child, (c) information you want to share about your child, (d) Challenges or areas to improve in, (d) Positive things occurring for your child at home, in school land/or in the community, (e) How does your child learn best? (f) What does your child like to learn about?, and (g) Goals for your child (academic and overall well-being)
Workshop 2: Centering & Expanding In your groups, you will go over the goals (and.or objectives) you began to create in Workshop 1. Have your goals changed or expanded since Workshop 1? Please explain. 2. Were you able to meet all or some of these goals/objectives thus far? Please describe. 3. Do these goals/objectives need to be changed or adapted in the next few weeks? What do you suggest or recommend? 4. At this point, what needs to get done? What is each person's role in meeting the goal/objective? 5. Is the group's communication good/effective? How can you stay in touch better? How can you communicate better?
Workshop 3: Solidifying Goals In your groups, you will go over the goals (and/or objectives) you have been working on. 1. Write down the goals/objectives you have collaborated on and have decided to work toward. 2. Describe what you have done, thus far, to meet these goals/objectives. 3. What have been the ways you have been accountable to each other in working toward these goals? 4. What have been the challenges/constraints and the rewards/affordances in working toward and/or meeting these goals? 5. Is there anything that needs to be adapted or changed at this point to meet the goals? 6. What are the final steps in making sure your group achieves the short- and/or long-term goals you have collaborated on?
Workshop 4: Implementing & Completing Goals In a large group (whole class presentation), you will discuss how you have implemented and/or completed the goals. 1. Describe how you collaborated together to center the family-driven and self-identified goals? 2. What was the goal? What was the action plan you created to meet this/these goal/s? Describe different roles and responsibilities. 3. What specific actions were taken to meet the goals related to the individual with disabilities' academic and overall well-being? Constraints? Affordances? 4. How do you plan to maintain continued communication? Describe. 5. Are there goals or objectives that were not achieved? Do you have a plan to address these? 6. Other insights, perspectives?

FAF Workshop 1

At the first FAF workshop, held at a local non-profit organization for families of children with Down syndrome, over fifty people attended including the 18 PSETs, the 22 Latinx family

members, the 2 professional interpreters, the Spanish Department student interpreters, and others including faculty members, graduate students, and staff from the non-profit. Workshop 1 was scheduled for 2 hours and 40 minutes (See Figure 2).

- Twelve groups of 4 – 5 people were formed. They consisted of one or two family members, one or two PSETs, one graduate student from the special education program (for additional support), and one or two Spanish/English student interpreters.
- Once in these groups, Lety and I assisted group members in establishing specific roles (Figure 3).
- Then, through several activities aimed to build trust and to honor the families' backgrounds and strengths, we led the groups through preliminary questions that could support families in developing their respective action plans (Figure 4, Preliminary Questions).

In Workshops 2 through 4, family members would have opportunities to continue to identify and develop specific actions they wanted to take during the semester and beyond to assist their child with academic and personal goals. The action plans were family-centered and family-driven.

Figure 2: *Workshop 1 Schedule**

Family as Faculty: Workshop 1 Schedule

5:30: Doors open, snacks and refreshments (sign in)

6:00 - 6:20: Introduction to the project; workshop purpose

6:20 - 6:50: Icebreaker

6:50 - 7:00: Using respectful communication - "person-first"

7:00 - 7:30: Meet your group members (some questions)

- Name
- Where are you from?
- Where does your family live?
- What do you want to learn?
- What do you hope you will get out of these workshops?
- Other questions?

7:30 - 7:40: Short Break

7:40 - 8:20: The parents begin to share relevant information about their child. Some themes/topics:

- Name of child
- Child's strengths
- Hopes and dreams you have for your child
- Information you want to share about your child
- Challenges or areas to improve in
- Positive things occurring for your child in the home, at school or in the community
- How does your child learn best?
- What does your child like to learn about?
- Goals for your child
- Short-term goals; long-term goals
- An action plan to accomplish these goals

8:20 - 8:35: Large-group share out

8:34 - 8:40: Plan how you will stay in touch with your group members: Group Me, What's App, Facebook, email?

Figure 3: *Group Roles & Responsibilities*

Roles
Discussion Facilitator: This person makes sure that each person has the prompts and that the conversation is staying on task.
Notetaker/Scribe: This person is keeping notes of what is being said at the table.
Timekeeper: This person keeps an eye on the time. Working with the observer, this person reminds each speaker that he/she has 3-5 minutes per turn.
Communication Observer: This person makes sure that each person is being understood, that the words are being articulated slowly (for comprehension), and that everyone is on the same page.

Figure 4*: Workshop 2 Activity Informed by Lety's Insights*

Workshop 2 - Activity 2
In your groups, you will be sharing your ideas, perspectives, and insights around questions related to your lived experiences and backgrounds with education and schooling. Please take time to actively listen to one another before responding. Each person should receive an equal amount of time to share, if they choose to. You can respond to any question/s you choose. Describe your overall experience as a student in schools, particularly as a young child and adolescent. • What was the role of the teacher in the schools you attended? • In the schools you attended, what was the educational experience for students with disabilities? Describe. • (For PSETs): What is the role of the special education teacher in you home country? How is it similar or different from the role of special education teachers in the United States? • (For PSETs): What is your definition of "parent/family" involvement or engagement in schools? • (For Family Members): What does parent/family involvement or engagement look like in schools in your home country? How is it similar or different from family engagement in U.S schools? *** • What have you learned with your group members so far that has been beneficial? • What are the strengths of this group? • What are some concrete ways we can improve group communication? • What are some ways we can intentionally build trust and strengthen our relationships within this group? • What are some concerns about or questions for the group you would like to share?

Lety's Concerns

Though this "snapshot" cannot cover all details encompassed in Workshop 1, what was clear was that some groups collaborated better together than others. Importantly, I created space to listen to Lety's concerns for the purpose of *learning from her*, an 'insider' and expert representing the voices of the Latinx families. Her concerns focused on the groups where family members and PSETs had challenges with communication, despite the interpreters present.

Lety's primary concern was cultural dissonance between some family members and PSETs. PSETs struggled "*not knowing how to understand a culture that is not theirs or navigate a system or a culture they have never been exposed to."* She revealed that this dissonance was not overt, but rather communicated through body language. She also was privy to information

that families shared with her that I had not been aware of or had not seen during the workshop. For example, some family members did not feel listened to because a few PSETs were busy texting under the tables and not giving them eye contact. In addition, Lety felt that some of the student interpreters lacked the necessary language proficiency to convey nuances between languages as well as content knowledge specific to special education terminology. Poor interpretation led some family members to feel misrepresented and thus disrespected.

Our Response

In response to Lety's concerns, we took action to mitigate the reproduction of negative experiences for the families in subsequent workshops. Together, we addressed the PSETs about their nonverbal behaviors and practiced with them ways to be more engaged and responsive, particularly as PSETs needed to develop patience listening to responses in Spanish and waiting for the English interpretation. In addition, we had the professional interpreters work more closely with the student interpreters to teach them ways to navigate communication pitfalls such as not "translating" directly but rather listening to the meaning behind the families' words. Finally, to (re)center families' cultural and linguistic repertories, we restructured workshop activities to focus on specific questions addressing some of the issues related to dissonance between some PSETs and family members (Figure 4).

Learning from Lety

To *learn from* Lety throughout the FAF workshops meant confronting the way my own positionality as a scholar/practitioner and as an outsider among Latinx immigrant families impacted my ability to fully understand the families' frustrations despite my best efforts to do so. Collaboration in this specific context translated to actively listening to Lety and trusting her decisions. By centering her funds of knowledge and expertise, we, in turn, restructured Workshops 2 through 4 to strengthen families' opportunities to share their cultural and linguistic repertoires with PSETs and, ultimately, had greater success in implementing strategies beneficial to the overall academic and personal well-being of their children.

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