

Examining Pre-Service Special Education Teachers' Biases and
Evolving Understandings about Families through a Family as Faculty Approach

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Abstract

This paper centers on a participatory qualitative study in which 22 pre-service special education teachers (i.e., undergraduate students) experienced, wrote about, and reflected upon their perceptions of families of children with disabilities over a semester-long course built on a Family as Faculty (FAF) model adapted from the healthcare profession for special education, teacher education programs. The FAF approach used has been reconceptualized to include three essential understandings (E.U.s): a) families as experts, b) examining positionality, and c) analyzing power relations. In our iteration of FAF, parents of children with disabilities co-plan and teach specific classes within a teacher preparation course on families. The authors examine pre-service teacher responses to FAF-structured experiences. Though many pre-service teachers demonstrated growth in their understandings of family's strengths and their participation in their child's education, there were some who continued to view families through deficit lenses. Pre-service teachers' reflections of families, though well-intended, often used cloaked language revealing underlying assumptions. FAF approaches that take a critical stance can unveil hidden assumptions and assist students with self-awareness and critical consciousness needed as foundations to transform individual and systemic biases.

Keywords: *Family as Faculty, Special education, Teacher preparation, Pre-service teachers, Family empowerment*

Examining Pre-Service Special Education Teachers' Biases and
Evolving Understandings about Families through a Family as Faculty Approach

Novice special education teachers often are overwhelmed by the many roles and responsibilities required by their position including communicating effectively with family members about their child with disabilities (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). Teacher education programs in special education attempt to prepare novice teachers for the complexities involved in this profession. Yet, special education teacher attrition rates nationwide remain historically high, at approximately 13% annually, with special education teachers twice as likely as their general education teacher peers to leave their positions (Williams & Dikes, 2015). One source of stress is lack of confidence interacting and communicating effectively with their students' family members about challenging topics (Billingsley, Israel, & Smith, 2011). Miscommunication and misunderstandings between special educators and family members of children with disabilities are cited as significant barriers (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Compounding these issues are challenges in communication that stem from cultural and linguistic differences. These misunderstandings sometimes result in higher student referrals among historically minoritized¹ students (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010) or misidentification of English Language Learners (ELLs) in special education (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Ortiz, Robertson, Wilkinson, Liu, McGhee, & Kushner, 2011). In addition, teachers unaware of families' work schedules, transportation needs, or unique living situations may assume parents' "lack of involvement" indicates disinterest (Harry, 2008). Moreover, special education teachers may not receive adequate training to learn, first-hand, what it is like to be a parent to or work with a child with specific disabilities (deFur, 2012). Often, limited

opportunities are available through teacher education programs for pre-service special education teachers to interact and communicate with families of children with disabilities before they begin their teaching assignments (Stoddard, Braun, & Koorland, 2011).

Teacher education programs that acknowledge the important role families play in helping pre-service teachers develop a more comprehensive knowledge base about the students they teach are formative in producing agents of change who consider diverse perspectives (Lombos Wlazlinski & Cummins, 2011). In special education, placing value on family members' expertise of knowing and caring for a child with a disability is essential for effective communication on student-centered collaboration teams (Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010). Unfortunately, research suggests that many families of children with disabilities feel isolated from the special education processes that determine educational placement and resources for their child (Turnbull, et al., 2015). Even though parents' rights are specifically safeguarded under special education law, parents and family members who represent a child with a disability often receive conflicting messages from educators about their role in making decisions about the child's education (Rogers, 2002; Ruppert & Gaffney, 2011). However, when special education teachers or other educators understand families' desires, concerns, and challenges they can more effectively advocate for the families' genuine needs (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006). When authentically supported and valued, family members often experience a greater sense of representation, validation, and empowerment in decision-making processes that impact their children's lives (Ochoa, Olivos, & Jiménez-Castellanos, 2011).

This paper focuses on a Family as Faculty (FAF) approach originating from a healthcare model and adapted for special education teacher education programs. The FAF approach in this qualitative study has been further modified and expanded upon by the lead author, Cristina, who

self-identifies as a scholar of Color² committed to integrating voices of historically minoritized and marginalized³ families into the development of curricula and instruction in teacher preparation courses. The other authors include a doctoral student of Color, Josh; a white, female research center project director, Shanna; and a parent (White⁴, mother) of children with disabilities, Michelle, who has been participating in the Cristina's FAF projects since 2016. In this semester-long study, the authors focused on two research questions: Why do some pre-service teachers hold deficit-driven beliefs about working with families of children with disabilities?; Do these understandings change through the deliberate integration of FAF approaches within a 16-week course, if yes, how? In this paper, the authors examine students' written and oral reflections throughout the course to determine how direct interactions with parents of children with disabilities influenced their thinking about working with families, particularly families of Color.

This paper begins with a brief background of Family as Faculty (FAF), its implementation in special education teacher education programs, and ways that it has been reconceptualized to intentionally include historically minoritized and marginalized families. Specific examples of FAF course activities, readings and discussion points are provided to demonstrate concrete ways parents' or family members' expertise is integrated in special education teacher preparation courses to positively impact future teachers' perceptions of teacher-family collaboration. Ways that FAF has been expanded upon is captured in essential understandings that have the potential to shape key components of FAF approaches into an organized framework, as described in detail in a later section. Methods center on thematic analysis using a constant comparative method to examine students' journals, coursework, and one focus group interview. Findings reveal tensions between students' dispositional

understandings of working with families and their desire to improve communication and develop collaborative partnerships.

Family as Faculty Approaches

Family as Faculty as a concept within the healthcare field emerged as a response to poor and ineffective communication between physicians and healthcare staff and families of children with disabilities. The idea that families could teach healthcare professionals ways to better listen to, understand, and support individual family needs gained traction in the early- to mid-1990s (Heller & McKlindon, 1996). Parents and family members of individuals with disabilities were trained to provide important insider information through structured presentations for students becoming healthcare professionals (Johnson, Yoder, & Richardson-Nassif, 2006). By telling their stories, family members' understanding of their child's needs were highlighted as essential knowledge used to facilitate not only more effective communication between themselves and healthcare professionals, but also to ensure better outcomes contributing to their child's overall well-being.

Considering the benefits of FAF approaches, educational professionals have adopted the basic structures of established FAF models from healthcare settings. Specifically, educational researchers from higher educational institutions have integrated FAF approaches into special education, teacher education programs (Harvard Family Research Project, 2000). Family members of children with disabilities have participated in FAF programs as guest lecturers who present first-hand experiences of living with and being parents/caregivers to individuals with disabilities. For some FAF practitioners, family-centered lectures are intentional pedagogical choices to position families' knowledge as important course content for preparing future teachers (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997).

In practice, FAF approaches always center families' strengths and are used to assist future special education teachers to more comprehensively understand the ways that parents and families are involved in their children's lives on a daily basis. Although there is not a set framework or methodological procedure for implementing FAF in teacher education programs there are some common practices across different research studies focused on FAF or similar family-centered approaches. These include: a) positioning parents'/family members' stories as central to course content, b) providing students with direct interactional opportunities to dialogue or listen to parents/families, and c) collecting data systematically to examine the impact FAF or similar approaches have on pre-service teachers' beliefs or understandings of families (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Macy & Squires, 2009; Patterson, Webb, & Krudwig, 2009; Stoddard et al., 2011; Williams, 2012). Through these various studies, researchers have demonstrated that FAF approaches contribute to pre-service teachers' development of a more expansive and compassionate awareness of families' active participation in their children's lives (Patterson et al., 2009). This awareness includes going beyond only seeing family involvement through a 'traditional' lens whereby family members' engagement is assessed by how well their actions and behaviors are aligned to certain school expectations (e.g., volunteering in the classroom, assisting with homework, attending meetings) (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). It extends to alternative forms of engagement centered on the child's well-being that may or may not be 'visible' to educators within school environments (e.g., supporting the child's social-emotional learning needs, caring for the child's health) (Santamaría Graff & Vasquez, 2014).

Our Approach to FAF

As alluded to earlier, there are essential understandings (E.U.s) in our interpretation of FAF approaches that encapsulate our commitment to working with historically minoritized

families to include parents in both the teaching and research aspects of FAF projects we co-design and implement. Though Family as Faculty is more of an approach than a framework, there are some E.U.s that shape the lens through which we understand our work with families that can, in the future, lay the foundation for a comprehensive theoretical conceptualization of FAF. Though we have brainstormed several E.U.s, we share three that reflect our critical⁵ orientation as we consider power dynamics between university students and parents. We realize the need to expand upon FAF as it pertains to families of Color since no research we came across in the educational literature on FAF explicitly focuses on this population, particularly from a critical lens.

E.U.1: Families as experts. One foundational understanding of all FAF approaches is that families are experts of their children. Families' knowledge gained from their lived experiences of being the parent or caretaker of the child with disabilities is not only important, but also is a highly valued resource (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006). In line with this understanding is Section 300.300(a)(2)(iii) of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004) which states that parents are instrumental members in deciding what is best for their child with a disability. To us, this means that parents or family members⁶ are equal stakeholders in educational processes that impact their child and should be seen and heard as significant contributors to the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) as well as to other key documents or interactions that determine implementation of services and resources. Beyond this understanding is that parents are co-collaborators with teachers and other professional staff who are involved in the child's schooling. Their presence, along with the knowledge they bring – specifically about their child with disabilities – should always be considered and valued by

educational professionals regardless of parents' or families' educational background, language difference, race, ethnicity or other identifiers.

For future special education teachers, valuing families as resourceful allies can lead to strong partnerships and a sense of solidarity when advocating for a student with disabilities (Myers, Jenkins Lindburg, & Nied, 2014). FAF approaches, in both healthcare and teacher education, are strategic in positioning families as leaders who teach and provide insightful information to future medical and educational professionals (Igel & Lerner, 2016; Johnson, Yoder & Richardson-Nassif, 2006; Patterson, Webb & Krudwig, 2009). Teacher education programs that implement FAF into courses, field experiences or in other educational spaces have the potential to shift pre-service teachers' dispositional "beliefs" of students with disabilities and their families that are deficit-based to ones that are more asset-based *before* they enter the classroom as teachers (Patterson, et al., 2009). By interacting with families in structured, interpersonal and intentional activities, pre-service teachers are given opportunities to learn from families' knowledge and envision how partnerships can benefit the student with disabilities as well as the communication, decision-making, and goal-setting between themselves and family members (deFur, 2012).

E.U. 2: Examining positionality. Positionality, broadly defined, is a philosophical stance researchers (or practitioners) take to examine their own background in relation to the individuals with whom they are interacting (Hopkins, Regehr, & Pratt, 2017; Hoskins, 2015). Researchers who deliberately acknowledge their own positionality often self-critique and understand the importance of reflexivity when working with others, particularly those with different lived experiences (Mosselson, 2010). "Examining Positionality" as an Essential Understanding of FAF requires researchers and educators to critically examine their own

positionality in relation to the families and communities with whom they are engaged to unpack underlying biases or assumptions that may exist. This examination takes into consideration the reality that families of children with disabilities often arrive to FAF projects with multiple identities (race, ability, class, language, and other identity markers) that complicate and invigorate interpersonal interactions among and between all who are involved (Maher & Tetreault, 1993).

One important aspect of examining positionality in FAF projects is to realize that many teacher candidates in teacher education programs who go on to become public school teachers are predominantly White, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking females. These teachers, most likely, will be in classrooms with students from different racial, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. For these reasons, FAF approaches must be deliberately structured to address the fact that the majority of teacher candidates who will be teaching an increasingly diverse student population are White, non-disabled and *only* English-speaking (The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, 2016). In consideration of these demographic realities, FAF cannot overlook cultural dissonance, in other words, that children of Color and their families are often misunderstood by teachers who are not familiar with the cultural practices and nuances embodied by their students (Lewis Chiu, Sayman, Carrero, Gibbon, Zolkoski, & Lusk, 2017). Further, FAF as a strategic approach assisting future teachers to address specific assumptions about families must take into consideration that, in U.S. schools, English is the predominant language. This fact often reifies, for many, underlying biases about children and families whose first language is not English (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernández, 2013). Students of Color with intersecting identity markers such as dis/ability⁷ and/or language differences are further pushed to the periphery when their White, non-disabled teachers assume

differences of race, language and ability as deficits rather than attributes or strengths (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2013). For these reasons, FAF cannot simply be structured activities between pre-service teachers and families to elicit short-term, “feel good” moments that scratch the surface of complicated, deep-seeded beliefs of how they each see themselves, their respective roles, and their position in relation to one other. FAF approaches must attempt to penetrate the psyche of each person involved to unearth uncomfortable inner truths that invariably impact not only the interrelationships between future teachers and families, but also the overall dynamics between all stakeholders involved, including the researcher or instructor.

An extension of examining positionality is critically-oriented FAF approaches or activities that purposefully aim to develop pre-service teachers’ critical consciousness. Critical consciousness, a Freirean concept, is when a person awakens to the understanding that personal agency and action can disrupt existing inequitable systems that constrain possibilities and limit individual and collective sovereignty (Freire, 1970). Within the context of positionality, the active pursuit of examining the origin of one’s biases begins a self-reflective process that has the potential to change how one views the world. When future teachers have opportunities to trouble deficit-driven assumptions of students with disabilities and their families, particularly families of Color, they begin to realize that many of their worldviews have been influenced by external mechanisms such as familial bias or social media propaganda (Warren-Gordon & Santamaría Graff, 2018). At this point, they can begin to change their narrative of families from deficit to asset-based by understanding how their relational interactions with families can either reproduce negative stereotypes or transform them completely.

E.U. 3: Analyzing power relations. Family as Faculty approaches, as stated above, center families as experts in special education, teacher education programs or courses. By

intentionally repositioning families as leaders or co-educators, power relations between the researcher/instructor, the pre-service teachers, and the families shift (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019). Whereas the instructor generally controls curricular planning, instruction, and overall organization of the course, FAF approaches provide opportunities to reconceptualize who is “in control” of the course content and instruction. Analyzing Power Relations is a third Essential Understanding that requires the instructor, researcher, or person ‘in authority’ to examine existing power relations within the context of the FAF project as related to the college course or program and to make decisions about how families are integrated into the overall FAF structure. Instructors can then decide to what degree they want to transform their courses or teacher education programs to integrate families’ expertise, leadership, insights, and knowledge.

If the former Essential Understandings are seriously considered, families, then, are leaders and co-educators of the activity, course, or programming. For families to have this level of decision-making power, each person’s positionality within the FAF project is examined and addressed. For example, the instructor or researcher must first believe that families are equal stakeholders of the decision-making processes that impact their children with disabilities if families are going to be invited as co-educators and leaders in FAF projects. Pre-service teachers must also be willing to learn from families and to understand that families’ knowledge should be valued and is contributive to the overall well-being of the child/student with disabilities.

Blue Banning and colleagues (2004) suggest being conscious of and proactive against *turfism* or the sense of unwelcome families receive when they enter “territorial” spaces on school sites that *belong* to school professionals. Turfism is why, in our conceptualization of FAF, classes in which parents lead instruction are mainly off-campus in a “space” familiar and comfortable to the parent or family member participants. In this non-university space, pre-service

teachers are positioned as “learners” in relation to the parents or family members who teach them specific content. Uneven power relations that may privilege college students over families can be addressed, on one level, by locating the learning on parents’ turf and actively positioning family members in this non-university/college space as experts.

FAF and other community-engaged (i.e. “family-engaged”) projects that do not take into account existing power relations between higher education representatives, college students, and families – particularly families who have been historically minoritized – may unconsciously reify deficit assumptions that families’ knowledge or background is not as important as teachers’ or other educators’ credentials or degrees (Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg, & Harry, 2017).

Addressing power relations consciously and making decisions to balance unequal power within FAF structures should be transparent and communicated explicitly to all those involved. This responsibility falls on the instructor/researcher who is coordinating FAF projects within their courses or in higher educational settings. This person must ensure that families and pre-service students can safely address discomfort, frustration, and specific issues that arise from their interpersonal interactions and communication. Power dynamics must be constantly examined and addressed so that individuals do not feel silenced, marginalized, or oppressed (Butin, 2015; Mitchell, 2014). The role of the instructor/researcher must be more than just a facilitator of activities. This person must constantly monitor the pulse among and between all participants, make spontaneous adjustments, and intervene when needed to maintain an equitable balance of power for all those involved (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019).

Methodological Considerations

While this paper focuses specifically on the pre-service teachers’ responses, it is important to note that the authors consider this work family-centered research. Researchers

conceptualize this type of research as research for, with or alongside families, rather than research on or about families. Research *for*, *with*, or *alongside* families, in our view, should be co-designed, -conceptualized, and -implemented with families through authentic collaboration. Our rationale for integrating family members as co-researchers in data analysis of FAF projects is to provide consistent opportunities for families to share their expertise and insight throughout all aspects of FAF. If we believe and state that families' knowledge should be valued in teacher education programs and in other educational settings, then we must invite families into spaces where they can assess and evaluate projects that involve and impact them and their children. There are varying degrees to which this collaboration may occur but, at its core, family-centered research should bend to accommodate families' needs in ways determined by family members who are involved in FAF research projects. Flexibility and openness are key elements to integrating these accommodations.

In this qualitative study, we invited one of the participating parents to be a co-researcher to analyze the student data alongside us and provide input, ask questions, and offer a different perspective. This parent, Michelle, had expressed interest in analyzing student data and provided us with her unique, insider understandings and critiques. Because of the time investment required to examine data sources, other parents who had participated in this study were unable to participate as co-researchers at this level. Instead, we captured parent participants' insights and recommendations through follow-up focus groups and individual interviews not included explicitly in this paper.

Analyzing student data with Michelle led to the creation of the three subthemes (Families as Experts/Non-Experts, Positionality Considered/Ignored, and Power Relations Realized/Dismissed) described later. Michelle's perspective was invaluable and allowed the

other authors to view the data through a different lens focused on how a parent of a child with disabilities may interpret specific words, phrases or understandings students (i.e., pre-service teachers) wrote about in their reflections. Michelle's knowledgeable insights actively contributed to the decisions we made as co-researchers in examining and making meaning of data. Where we, as university researchers, missed specific nuances of language in students' writing, Michelle keenly honed in on some of the language she found to be problematic. For example, one student when reflecting upon parent involvement in IEP meetings wrote: "Parents have the right to take part in their child's educational planning if able." Michelle immediately reacted to the words, "if able" by responding: "How does this qualifier *if able* define the teacher as gatekeeper? Should it be the parent or the teacher who determines ability to participate?" (Michelle Foley, personal communication, December 4, 2017).

Michelle's questions led to a comprehensive discussion about power dynamics, gatekeeping, and assumptions that educators have about parents' and families' *ability* to participate in their child's education as well as the nature of "participation" in general. Her guidance enriched each level of coding and, ultimately, informed the codes and subthemes identified.

Methods

In this qualitative study, we examined twenty-two pre-service special education teachers' awareness of and reflections about their perception of families' engagement in their children's education through analyzing reflective journal responses and one student focus group transcript. We used flexible, not rigid, research approaches and methods to account for many factors including family members' input, time constraints, and research parameters that considered FAF Essential Understandings (E.U.s) described in previous sections.

These E.U.s (i.e., Families as Experts, Examining Positionality, and Analyzing Power Relations) served as theoretical framings to assist in, but not dictate, our analysis of codes. We conducted thematic analysis of the data using a constant comparative method resulting in four rounds of coding (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first round yielded 36 initial codes or themes based on open coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), which were collapsed later to 15 codes, then, to 14. Of the 14, we focused on one larger code, “Dispositional Changes,” from which we drew the majority of conclusions to answer the main research questions highlighted in this paper. We applied codes representing the sentiment of each paragraph or data cluster and developed codes identifying patterns within the themes (Creswell, 2013; Hill, Thompson, Hess, Knox, Nutt Williams, & Ladany, 2005). NVivo11® qualitative research software was used for coding themes and reporting prevalence of themes for use in analysis. We tracked the prevalence of themes by the number of referring entities and number of instances. As a research team, we met to discuss the relationships among codes and to combine similar codes into broader patterns or themes. Next, we returned to the original data sources to identify representative examples from observations and quotations from the one student focus group. Last, the entire team, including the parent co-researcher, met to share findings, which resulted in the creation of 14 specific themes for coding all sources of qualitative data. This type of cooperative relationship created better overall understanding of the data and led, to what we observed, were more valid conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

As stated, in the first round of open coding, 36 initial themes emerged. Some of these included “Being Responsive,” “Communication with Parents,” “Interpersonal Relationships” and “Language Barriers.” As part of research team conversations, we discussed what each of these themes meant within the context of the FAF project comparing what we each had coded using

NVIVO software. Through several conversations, we began to collapse the initial coding themes and found that “Advocacy,” “Communication,” “Families as Active Participants (parent involvement)” and “Relationship Building” were salient topics pre-service teachers wrote or communicated about with frequency. This second round of coding was important for assisting us in making connections across and between the initial themes.

As we analyzed themes in the second round of coding, we realized that underlying “Communication,” “Relationship Building,” and other themes was language and descriptors used by the pre-service teachers that pointed to assumptions or biases they internally held about families. Michelle was instrumental at this level of analysis because in her words, “I’ve heard this all before in IEP meetings.” In other words, Michelle read pre-service teachers’ (i.e. students’) reflective entries and found “common misconceptions” students held about families that, often, were reproduced by educators in school settings. Conversely, Michelle, helped the research team uncover students’ nuanced language showing “a mindset shift ... occurring from seeing parents as passive recipients to more collaborative partners” (Michelle Foley, personal communication, December 4, 2017).

With Michelle’s insights, we felt we were moving closer to answering the original questions posed: Why do some pre-service teachers hold deficit-driven beliefs about working with families of children with disabilities? and Do these understandings change through the deliberate integration of FAF approaches within a semester-long course? We decided to enter into a third round of coding to better uncover students’ *thinking* behind some of the statements they wrote about or said. We hoped that this deeper layer of coding would reveal underlying beliefs students held that might shed light on why some carried negative assumptions about families of children with disabilities.

In this third layer of coding, we created a category titled, “Dispositional Changes.” We defined these changes as moments of growth in which pre-service teachers demonstrated a change in thinking. These were ‘ah-ha moments’ and reflections the students shared, openness to ideas students wrote about within the course, and lessons students learned since participating in the course. These changes included what we termed ‘dispositional paralysis’, meaning that, in spite of their interaction with parents during the course, students remained fixed in certain belief systems. Dispositional Changes yielded 170 items. Because this theme was directly related to the research questions asked (e.g., beliefs and changes over time) we were deliberate about documenting the manner in which we reached agreement on these 170 items. These items were strings of words, phrases, sentences, or small paragraphs regarded as ‘data clusters’ (Creswell, 2013). Each of our individual analyses, when compared, showed inter-rater agreement on 145/170 (or 85%) among 4 researchers. Through research team meetings we met, reviewed our codes, spoke through areas of disagreement, then came to 100% agreement on the different understandings of what “dispositional changes” meant within the research project context. At this point, to be more deliberate in our analyses, we made the decision to examine Dispositional Changes through the Essential Understandings (E.U.s) we had determined were critical for consideration of minoritized or marginalized families.

To better understand Dispositional Changes as connected to the research questions and as examined through FAF’s E.U.s, we engaged in a fourth round of coding. Michelle was not able to join us for this fourth round due to employment obligations. However, her influence was present throughout this coding as we thought more critically about the ways students wrote and spoke about families. To revisit, these E.U.s centered on specifically developing FAF constructs that included: Families as Experts, Examining Positionality, and Analyzing Power Relations. We

looked for instances of when students wrote about a) their understandings of parents/families as experts or individuals from whom they could learn; b) their own positionality in relation to the parents, specifically taking into consideration cultural, language, ability, or other identity marker differences; and c) their understanding of power dynamics between themselves, families, or other stakeholders, including students with disabilities. Through these analyses, three main subthemes under “Dispositional Changes” emerged: Families as Experts/Non-Experts, Positionality Considered/Ignored, and Power Relations Realized/Dismissed. As stated earlier, these three subthemes were influenced by Michelle’s direct input. These subthemes were analyzed as positive or negative examples to demonstrate a noticeable range of student responses within each subtheme.

Participants. Twenty-two students at a Midwest University located in an urban center who were special education dual-licensure students enrolled in an undergraduate special education course on families participated in this study. Out of 22 students, twenty were female (19 White, monolingual English speaking, U.S. born; one African American, monolingual English speaking, U.S. born). Of the two males in the course, both were monolingual English speaking and U.S. born. One was White and the other biracial (White/Asian). The majority of students were freshman and sophomores.

Parents of children with disabilities who participated in the FAF project were recruited from two non-profit parent-to-parent organizations in the Midwest State. Cristina had established connections with both organizations who agreed to assist her with recruitment of families and with other support (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019). Approximately 100 families were contacted by email via one parent-to-parent organization’s listserv and by word-of-mouth. Twenty family members responded initially, twelve attended the orientation to the FAF study,

and, in the end, eight parents participated. Seven were female and included four White, English speaking, U.S. born mothers. Of the other mothers who participated, one was African American, English speaking and U.S. born; one was born in Mexico and Spanish/English bilingual; and one was from Nicaragua and spoke both Spanish and English.

FAF structure. The FAF project embedded in the 16-week, special education families' course consisted of four parent-planning sessions and four family-led teaching sessions. This meant that out of 15 classes in a 16-week period (accounting for fall break), four of the classes were led by parents. To prepare the eight parents to lead a university, teacher preparation course, parents were divided into partners or triads and met at least one week before the class they taught. For example, for the first family-led session that occurred in September 2016, three parents met with Cristina for a planning session that took place one week before they taught their class.

During this planning session, parents were presented with an 'open' class schedule of two hours and 40 minutes. Through interactive conversations and under Cristina's facilitation as course instructor, the parents planned curriculum and instruction for that specific time allotment. Parents' only criterion was that, per course standards and per previous discussions with all parents who were participating in this first iteration of an FAF project, certain topics needed to be covered. These included: communication, inclusive practices, transition, and special education laws/policies as applied to families. In the first planning session, parents decided to structure their family-led presentations for class around their perceptions of disability and special education as understood through state law and within their own familial context. Through collaboration and conversation that lasted approximately 2 hours, each of the three parents came to a consensus on content they wanted to present, the format of their presentation, activities they

wanted students to engage in, and a follow up reflective writing assignment. Examples of the content – course readings, activities, and discussion points – are provided in Table 1. Cristina’s role was to facilitate the conversation while allowing parents to drive the decisions around pedagogy. When parents asked for guidance about activities for students, Cristina provided specific recommendations for strategies they could use (e.g., partner share, group share) to better facilitate class discussion.

Important to note, Cristina had secured a small grant for this FAF project. Some of the funds were used to pay parents for their participation. All authors deeply value parents’ knowledge and expertise and, for that reason, Cristina, as the principal investigator of this study and course instructor of record, believed it was vitally important to compensate parents for their time, effort, and commitment as professionals working in a professional and educational setting. She paid them for their time participating in planning sessions and during the family-led sessions in which they taught a two hour and 40-minute class.

As additional insight, the authors acknowledge that it is not always possible to compensate families and community stakeholders monetarily for every research- or teaching-related activity. However, Cristina and the research team believe strongly in an equitable exchange of time and energy, if financial compensation is unavailable. She and a community partner wrote about the ways that “acts of reciprocity” should be a mutually beneficial endeavor in which effort or load is met with a proportionate amount of ‘return’ of service (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019). Within the context of working with families, if payment is not available, then another meaningful exchange must occur. For example, in more than one instance, Cristina has served as a support at IEP meetings for Latino families who have, in different ways, been involved in FAF projects. Moreover, families have requested that pre-

service teachers participating in FAF projects assist them with how to apply specific pedagogical strategies with their children. Exchanges between pre-service teachers and families not only provide helpful support to families, but also begin dismantling misconceptions pre-service teachers may have about families as they work with and get to know family members who may come from different backgrounds.

In addition to FAF course-related activities (Table 1), Cristina created a schedule (see Table 2) that demonstrates the structure of the 16-week course. Essential to note is the fact that the family-led classes were intentionally held at a parent-to-parent organization location. For parents to be perceived as leaders and co-educators, it was necessary to hold family-led discussions on parents' "home" turf that was not part of the university. The pre-service teachers entered into an 'educational' space where parents felt confident holding their ground, teaching their truth, and being seen as experts of their children.

Data sources. Data sources described in this paper are qualitative. These include: journal reflections (for 16 weeks), transcripts from audio/video recordings of parent-taught classes, and one focus group interview with five pre-service teachers after the course was complete. Secondary sources include researcher observational notes, including parent-researcher insights and analysis. Other data were collected such as pre- and post-beliefs surveys and parent interviews but are not included in this paper.

Findings

As described in the methods section, three subthemes under one main theme coded in the third round titled, "Dispositional Changes" were uncovered and examined by using Essential Understandings (E.U.s) tied to FAF. Explained earlier, E.U.s emerged through our conversations during research team meetings as ways to (re)conceptualize FAF approaches that could

intentionally extend and expand to be more inclusive of marginalized families and/or historically minoritized families of Color. Marginalized families extend to family members of children with disabilities who, in many educational settings, experience discomfort, confusion or negativity when attempting to advocate for their child (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). To reiterate, three E.U.s we identified were: a) Families as Experts, b) Examining Positionality, and c) Analyzing Power Relations. These theoretical constructs were connected to literature on critical participatory approaches involving families (Sánchez-Balcazar, Early, Maldonado, Garcia, Arias, Zeidman, & Agudelo-Orozco, 2018; Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). From these constructs we attempted to determine if pre-service teachers' personal beliefs about working with families of children with disabilities changed during the 16-week course. The following three subthemes emerged from our fourth round of coding *Families as Experts/Non-Experts*, *Positionality Considered/Ignored*, and *Power Relations Realized/Dismissed* and are examined in the next sections.

Families as Experts/Non-Experts

As a team, we analyzed 170 items in the thematic area, Dispositional Changes, for moments where students (pre-service teachers) reflected upon and wrote about their experiences learning from, interacting with, and talking to parent co-educators during the family-led sessions embedded in four classes during the 16-week semester. During the fourth round of coding, we found, discussed and agreed upon instances (39/170) where students described families as “experts” (14/39 codes) or “non-experts” (25/39 codes), though, in truth, none of the students actually wrote or said the word “expert” or “experts” in relation to the parents or families to whom they were referring. Instead they used words such as “knowledgeable” or “experienced” in reference to what we, the research team, interpreted as leadership or expertise within the contexts

students described (e.g., “I ... perceive many of the families with special needs to be very knowledgeable”). Also, we observed moments where students verbalized or wrote statements that undercut families’ assets, knowledge, or perspectives. As described in E.U. 1, families as experts meant that family members were seen and understood as leaders who were knowledgeable about their children with disabilities. In juxtaposition, student perceptions not in alignment with this view (e.g., E.U. 1) were coded as “families as non-experts.”

Families as non-experts. What we discovered was that students, as a collective, struggled stating outright that parents or families were, indeed, experts. Considering a range of responses between seeing families as *experts* or *non-experts*, some students – over the course of 16 weeks – remained convinced that expertise within the context of education, specifically special education, resided with the teacher. To us, remaining fixed in the belief that families’ knowledge was somehow ‘less than’ or ‘not enough’ in comparison to educators’ was an example of ‘dispositional paralysis’, a term described earlier. One pre-service teacher’s reflection captured this state of mind:

Like I said previously, I am the teacher, so I am knowledgeable about special education. Therefore, I need to help my students’ parents become more knowledgeable as well.

In line with this statement, other students had never considered parents or families to be experts who could contribute to the child’s overall educational well-being. There was a sense that for families to have knowledge beneficial for the child’s education, the teacher needed to intervene and share his/her/their expertise with them. This understanding is evidenced through other student reflections:

I feel like before having this discussion (as well as other family discussions) I was much more willing to accept that the teachers were the experts and knew what would be best for the child.

It is pertinent that we are educating our parents because that education will quickly turn into advocacy.

In these three examples of parents/families as non-experts, there was a seemingly inherent worldview harkening to what Freire (1970) refers to as the banking concept. This concept, when applied to this specific FAF project, situates parents as unknowing individuals who, like empty vessels, gain information and understanding through knowledge “deposited in them” (Freire, 1970, p. 2) by more educated individuals (i.e., teachers). Families, as non-experts, then become dependent upon teachers who know what to do to best serve their children as described in another student’s reflection:

I had never realized how dependent some parents are on the special education teachers. However, I learned from [FAF parents] that this dependence often comes from the parents’ perceptions of the special education teachers being the “expert.” They look at us, as the teachers, who have studied special education and know how to take care of anything that involves a child with a disability. To them, we have gone to school to master teaching. Therefore, they depend on us to know what to do when it comes to special education and students with disabilities.

In this example, the student is referring to family-led sessions in which parents discussed the complexities navigating the special education system. Some of the parents said in their presentations that, many times during their child’s schooling, they reached out to teachers for support and guidance. For members of our research team, the last sentence was the most problematic. Though this White, female student was beginning to understand the serious responsibility involved in being a special education teacher who, as classroom leader, will be accountable to meeting the needs of her students, her ultimate take-away was that parents “depend on us to know what to do when it comes to special education and students with disabilities.” There was a lingering sense that this future teacher’s default will be to make decisions for the child with disabilities thinking that parents and family members will “depend

on” her and defer to her expertise. This line of thinking contradicts the spirit of the special education law which favors teacher-family collaboration where parents are equal stakeholders whose input should influence decisions impacting their child.

Families as experts. Over time, some students began to shift their understandings of parents’ contributive knowledge and strengths in their child’s schooling and education. At least two students used the term “opinionated” to describe parents who, they felt, were strong and well-informed advocates of their children. One student wrote:

I learned that parents can be very opinionated and knowledgeable about the special education field. Parents want what’s best for their child and are willing to go to extreme measures to make sure they get what they need.

Interestingly, being knowledgeable was loosely equated with doing whatever it took to ensure the child was receiving what they needed. The action of knowing your child and doing whatever it takes was described by another student as being pushy: “Being pushy is a good thing especially because they know their child better than anyone else.” Another student mirrored this understanding and wrote:

I now perceive many of the families of children with special needs to be very knowledgeable and invested in their child’s education. Parents want to work with you, because if you fail the child also fails.

The idea that parent knowledge is somehow measured by how vocal they are (opinionated), how assertive they can be (pushy), and how committed they are to ensuring the child does not fail is reified by an overall student understanding that “expertise” is evidenced by more overt behaviors. What is potentially troubling is that parents/families who do not display these more demonstrative actions may be categorized as not owning expertise of their child or are simply not involved or interested in their child’s education (Lareau, Weininger, & Cox, 2018; Quioco & Daoud, 2006). Consequently, historically minoritized families, in particular, may be

disproportionately affected by educators' negative perceptions of them based, in large part, on superficial observations or assumptions (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Salas, 2004). Only a couple of students in the class (one White male, one White female) took a more self-reflective position that acknowledged the importance of parent co-educators' underlying message which was that to be a strong and compassionate teacher one needed to truly listen to what families had to say, regardless of language, race, ability, economic, education or other differences.

These two students directly referenced how they *learned from* the parent co-educators, particularly from one parent who is from Nicaragua, during the family-led classes:

Student 1 (White female): *You can be a good teacher by becoming an expert at listening and learning from parents/families.*

Student 2 (White male): *[The Latina parent] taught me that I should listen and acknowledge parents. Parents know much more about their children and, in IEP meetings, it is important to listen to parents even if your languages contrast.*

In both examples, the students acknowledge that part of their role as teachers should be a willingness to step back, listen to, and learn from families as a way to recognize their knowledge and insights as important and contributive. The action of *learning from* parents indirectly demonstrates that some of the students involved in the FAF project realized that valuable information and insights from families could be integrated into their teaching and overall understanding of the ways that families can contribute as equal stakeholders in the education of their child.

Positionality Considered/Ignored

For the subtheme Positionality Considered/Ignored, we analyzed moments where students discussed their identity and/or their understandings of identity in relation to the parent co-educators' shared stories and teachings. Out of 170 items in the thematic area, Dispositional

Changes, there were 22 agreed-upon instances where students discussed explicitly (13/22 codes) or ignored completely (9/22) their own positionality. Ignoring in this context meant that students wrote about their views of parents or families without consideration of how their own lived experiences shaped and influenced some of their perceptions of families, particularly historically minoritized families.

In the fourth round of coding under which E.U. 2 (Examining Positionality) was used to frame the analysis, we found the majority of students wrote about a family-led session led by two Latina parent co-educators. The co-educators' discussion centered on perceptions that many U.S.-born citizens have of the "Hispanic" or "Latino culture" (descriptors used by the co-educators). One parent told the story of how she accidentally overheard school officials referring to her on the phone as "the Mexican" when she was inquiring for services for her child. The other parent described her frustration at not being taken seriously because of her Spanish accent even though she is a parent advocate at a statewide parent-to-parent organization well-versed in special education law.

Positionality ignored. Similar to the manner in which we coded for subtheme, Families as Experts/Non-Experts, we also applied Positionality Considered/Ignored as a code to examine a range of student responses. Some of these responses demonstrated concerted, reflexive student growth. Other responses reflected only a slight change in perceptions grounded in inaccurate or deficit-driven assumptions. We coded the following four excerpts as "Positionality Ignored" because the students did not reflect upon why they held specific understandings nor did they explore ways to consider how their perceptions of *difference* were influenced or shaped by assumptions, experiences, or belief systems. The excerpts below were written by White, monolingual female students:

Student 1: *I assumed that Spanish speakers are automatically from Mexico.*

Student 2: *As guilty as I am of saying it, a little part of me did believe that some parents of different backgrounds didn't care about their child's education.*

Student 3: *I have personally struggled with people who speak a language of which is foreign to me... It's easy to assume things like: parents lack effort to learn English, the parents are uninvolved, etc.*

Student 4: *I didn't realize how uninformed certain groups of people from other cultures are about how the special education system works.*

In each of these student examples, students begin to question their perceptions of families, specifically Spanish-speaking families as evidenced by descriptors or qualifiers such as: “*I assumed,*” “*As guilty as I am of saying it,*” “*I have personally struggled...,*” and “*I didn't realize.*” However, embedded within each of these examples are words or phrases demonstrating either complete ignorance of Spanish-speaking, Latinx people: “*I assumed that Spanish speakers are automatically from Mexico*” or deficit-based assumptions related to Latinx families: “*[they] didn't care about their child's education,*” “*parents lack of effort to learn English,*” and “*uninformed.*” Students' statements recognize that cultural and language barriers impact Latinx families. Also, students seem to acknowledge that their assumptions of these families were challenged, at least somewhat, by the family-led sessions. However, students' responses lack deeper reflection about their *entitlement* of owning these views of families. Here entitlement refers to the ability of the dominant group to make choices regarding their life's trajectory as opposed to other groups of people who lose “rights and privileges because of systemic oppression” (Ochoa, et al., 2011, p. 47). Applied to the students participating in the FAF project, entitlement is connected to student privilege as English-speaking, able-bodied, educated, U.S. citizens who are, in essence, judging Latinx families through a white dominant, normative lens. This lens is rooted in Western Eurocentric ideologies that adhere to specific norms favoring the

White race and able-bodied individuals (Thorius, 2019). Who the students are in relation to the Latinx families they are learning about is not fully considered in their reflections. When they write about the family-led session, facilitated by Latina mothers who presented them with a different (and more constructive) point of view about Latinx people, their responses are limited to generalized statements that perpetuate negative stereotypes that are, in our assessment, unconsciously reproduced.

Positionality considered. As a research team, we agreed that “positionality considered” meant any instance or brief acknowledgement that recognized one’s experience as related to another’s. We looked for students’ demonstrated growth through more expansive ways of thinking about others’ lived experiences. Because reflexivity can lead to critical consciousness or ways that students can begin seeing the systemic influences that have historically ‘othered’ many groups of people, we honed in on words or phrases that showed self-reflection or critique. The following examples consider moments of student reflexivity:

Student 1 (White female): *Before this discussion I had some preconceived ideas about the participation of families who I considered to be of an ethnic background... After listening to these bilingual parents, I am ashamed I was so quick to jump to these conclusions and thankful that I heard this seminar before I became a teacher.*

Student 2 (African American female): *Personally, I understand that parents love their children and that love has no cultural boundaries. Just because you are not born as an American citizen does not mean you care any less for your child. However, hearing the firsthand accounts of both these Latina women and, frankly, their racist experiences, showed me that these perceptions do exist and that people do act on them.*

Student 3 (White male): *As an English speaker only, I sometimes struggle to understand exactly what Spanish-speaking families are continuously going through. While I certainly understand it better than I did several months ago, I think that hearing more about this perspective from both the women would have helped me to continue that sort of language empathy.*

In these examples, students, to varying degrees, reflected upon the Latina parent experiences by comparing their own perceptions to what they believed or felt the mothers confronted as Spanish-speakers and immigrants to the United States. Each student, through specific words or phrases, expressed growth in these perceptions as evidenced by: “*Before this discussion I had some preconceived ideas*” or after “*hearing the firsthand accounts of ... their racist experiences*” and “*...I certainly understand it [the struggle] better than I did several months ago.*”

In addition, they directly or indirectly claimed their identity as an attempt to situate their own experience within the context of learning from the parents’ narratives in relation to the parents’ identities. For example, Student 3 explicitly self-identified as “*An English speaker only.*” By doing so, he described his own struggle to understand Spanish-speaking parents. He admitted that by better understanding Latina mothers’ challenges he could benefit by developing “*language empathy.*” Student 1 indirectly located her identity in comparison to bilingual families “*considered to be of an ethnic background.*” Because she was not bilingual and, by race, was representative of the dominant culture, she realized that she held (and was “ashamed” by) deficit-driven perceptions of these families she had assumed did not participate in their children’s education. The shame expressed was indicative of her possible shift toward becoming more critically conscious about the ways her perceptions, seeped in her own belief systems, shaped understandings about “ethnic” and “bilingual” families.

At last, Student 2, who self-identifies as African American, indirectly located herself as an American citizen in comparison to those who are not. As a person of Color, the student recognized that “*parents love their children*” and this love “*has no cultural boundaries.*” *Culture*, in this context, might be interpreted to consider race and ethnicity. However, this

student acknowledged that citizenship as an identity marker was problematic when one does not hold citizenship status. She stated, “*Just because you are not born as an American citizen does not mean you care any less for your child.*” This was a particularly important statement within the context of the family-led session the student is reflecting upon. In this session, one of the Latina mothers articulated that, in her work with families, many times, educators in various school contexts make comments and insinuate at IEP meetings that Latinx parents simply do not care about their children or their education. The student equated this myth with “racist” perceptions that educators and others “act on.” Thus, the student connected the parents’ descriptive narratives of being stereotyped negatively by educators to larger, systemic issues stemming from racist understandings of Latinx families.

Power Relations Realized/Dismissed

The subtheme, Power Relations Realized/Dismissed, considers both E.U. 1 and E.U.2., but focuses on E.U.3, Analyzing Power Relations. In other words, power must be examined in relation to each stakeholder’s (e.g., instructor, family member, student) positionality when parents or family members enter FAF projects as experts and leaders. As discussed in E.U.3, parents are invited as co-educators into FAF spaces where they have status and authority to influence curriculum and instruction in college or university courses. The degree to which they own and exert power, mostly in the form of decision-making, is predicated on the instructor’s (or researcher’s) belief in them as equal partners while recognizing institutional barriers that automatically position faculty or instructors as teachers/instructors of record. There is an intentional balance that must be addressed between the instructor/researcher and parents/families to create an equitable teaching or research partnership whereby mutuality and reciprocity are centered (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019). Reciprocal relationships are essential so that

parents and family members involved in FAF feel valued and know that their contributions to the FAF project or course are considered, acted upon, and are influencing future special education teachers.

Because power relations are intricately woven into the fabric of any partnership, we, as a research team, had to make distinctions between power and positionality as well as how families are viewed by students (either as experts or non-experts). We used Cristina's definition of power to assist in our analysis: "Power refers to the amount of status, authority or decision-making ability one has within the specific circumstances of the partnership. It can be uneven or balanced; vertically enforced or horizontally distributed" (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019, p. 51).

During our examination of the 170 items under Dispositional Changes, we agreed upon and coded 14 instances where power was realized or dismissed. Specifically, we analyzed moments where students acknowledged parents' or families' position or status in educational contexts that the parent co-teachers described during family-led sessions. Sometimes students' oral or written reflections demonstrated an understanding of the ways families are located marginally or centrally within educational settings or interactions. These moments of understanding were coded as Power Relations Realized (6/14 codes). Other times, students – specifically White students – seemed to gloss over their own power, rooted in white dominant privilege. They made statements that dismissed realities or challenges faced by historically minoritized or marginalized students with disabilities and their families. These moments of dismissal were coded as Power Relations Dismissed (8/14 codes).

Power relations dismissed. In the first example, a White female student reacts to a family-led session in which an African American mother of a child with Autism speaks at length about her experience as a "low-income, single mother." The mother describes what it means in

our society to be multiply marginalized at the intersections of gender, race, class, and ability. Her main point is to demonstrate to the students that, in spite of her challenges, she is able to advocate for her daughter and find innovative ways to enrich her daughter's life, especially since her daughter is now a young adult and no longer receives services under IDEA. After listening to the parent, the student writes:

One thing I learned is how hard it is for low income families to handle the disability label, because other people look down on them for it, and they might not get the resources due to lack of money.

Though the student acknowledges the societal and economic challenges individuals face who are low-income: "*other people look down on them... and they might not get the resources due to lack of money,*" she makes an assumption. She equates "*low income families*" with their ability to "*handle the disability label.*" In other words, this White female who has, in class, self-identified as being "middle-class" is using nuanced language to assert that those from lower-income statuses are less able (than possibly others of higher class statuses) to accept their child's disability and, possibly, access resources and information to assist that child in education or in life. Problematizing her statement further, we cannot separate context from her words. Her response is directly connected to her impressions of the African American mother whose family-led discussion she is prompted to reflect upon and write about.

As a research team, in this case and in others, we speculated if race was a factor in some students' reflections. Specifically, we noted that several White students owned certain generalized assumptions about parents of Color and Spanish-speaking families (e.g., lack of involvement or disinterest). In analyzing the student's statement, we wondered if class ("low income") intersected with certain perceptions of race (the African American mother's story). Did this intersection have any bearing on this student's understanding of whether or not certain

families could “*handle the disability label*”? Further, what did it mean to this student to “*handle*” a disability label? Did it mean to be able to accept that the child had a disability or to understand intellectually what the disability label was (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder)? Or, possibly, was the student wondering if certain low-income families were able to cope with the consequences of the label as related to material, social, cultural or economic capital? In her reflection, as in this writing excerpt, the student never questioned her assumption of this mother nor did she explore whether or not her understandings of “*low-income parents*” were rooted in her own privilege or status as a White, middle-class, ‘educated’ student. For this reason, her statement is coded under Power Relations Dismissed.

Additional examples of Power Relations Dismissed are linked to White students’ responses to working with students with disabilities and their families, including families of Color. Drawing from DiAngelo’s (2011) work on white fragility, we, as a research team, discussed the concept of universalism as connected to ways students declared that “we all need to see each other as human beings (everyone is the same)” (p. 59) while not recognizing that, in relation to historically minoritized and marginalized families of children with disabilities, their experiences of living and being in the world are privileged.

We understood universalism to be linked to way that power can be uneven if students, specifically White students, arrive to FAF projects believing that their worldview is the correct or only one. Coming from a perspective supported by white, Eurocentric values that locates whiteness⁸ and able-bodiedness as valued, normative, and ideal, allowed, in our view, some students to position themselves ‘above’ families whose lived experiences differed from this ‘norm’ because of race, class, language, citizenship status or their child’s disability. To us, the students’ statements below reflected a self-positioning *over* others that, many times, manifested

in words or phrases we believed were stated with little to no conscious understanding of power or power relations.

Student 1: *No matter what culture, race, and religion my students come from I will show them love and compassion and do what is best for them.*

Student 2: *I will place emphasis on including all students – including students with disabilities and students from marginalized groups in society.*

Student 3: *Everyone has differences and their own uniqueness and that's what makes the world so great.*

Student 4: *We should go out of our way to treat them like everyone else regardless of their abilities.*

Student 5: *Being a teacher, we are going to want to help everyone in our classroom, but the truth is, we can't save everyone.*

In line with universalism, these statements reflect a hint of moral superiority (e.g., “we can't save everyone”) layered in good intentions (e.g., “I will... do what's best for them”). These “good intentions” are not only *not* inherently helpful, but are also destructive and problematic in their tendencies to advance color-evasive and pathological understandings that ignore socially-constructed, systemic impacts of racism and ableism (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017; Milner & Laughter, 2015). In FAF projects, pre-service teachers entering the special education field believing they can “save” children with disabilities reproduce oppressive practices by assuming not only that they have the power to save, but also that the children (and their families) are in need of saving. Power relations are dismissed, as evidenced through these students' statements, because there is no self-awareness of how their worldviews pathologize, marginalize, and oppress the students and families they are committed to ‘helping.’

Power relations realized. In the next two examples, students acknowledge that existing power structures embedded in social, economic, and educational systems detrimentally impact students with disabilities and their families. In the first example, a White female student reflects upon the ways that families are marginalized at IEP meetings. Her perception of parents' exclusion during these meetings is reinforced by two (married) parent co-educators who describe feeling silenced and unheard, even though English is their first language.

Student 1: Before the discussion, I knew that some families (most families) felt excluded from the IEP process/meeting and from that, they felt as if they did not have a voice. Hearing [the parents] speak, my perception stands strong. They felt excluded the first time they attended an IEP meeting and felt as if they did not have a voice in their child's process.

Here, the student already has a sense that families of children with disabilities struggle being listened to and heard at IEP meetings. Much literature about families trying to navigate the educational system, and, specifically, special education, point to the challenges family members face and the manner in which meeting structure, format, and procedures create exclusive, rather than inclusive environments (Abrams, & Gibbs, 2002; Cobb, 2014; Nespor & Hicks, 2010; Olivos, et al., 2010). Importantly, the student connects feeling “*excluded*” with not having “*a voice*.” This insight aligns with the ways power can be “uneven or balanced; vertically enforced or horizontally distributed” (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019, p. 51). Feeling silenced, in other words, is an outcome of uneven, vertically enforced power that positions certain voices centrally and marginalizes others to the point that individuals do “*not have a voice*.” The student understands that the act of silencing families goes beyond the married co-educators' experience and is more systemic as evidenced by previous knowledge she had accrued: “*Before the discussion I knew that some families ... felt excluded by the IEP process*.” Also, she feels that

her perception of this silencing is validated (e.g., “*My perception stands strong.*”) in listening to the parents and realizing that their story is not an isolated case.

In the second example, a White female student is reflecting on two different family-led discussions. One of these discussions was led by two White female mothers and one White father and the other by two Latina mothers (mentioned earlier). These two, separate family-led discussions centered, to varying degrees, on IEP meetings and the ways in which school administrators and staff create environments that are either inclusive and inviting for parents or not. The student reflects on the latter situation.

Student 2: I also realized that many times parents withhold speaking at IEP meetings because they feel as though they are made into spectators. They feel as though they have a lack of knowledge, are excluded and ill-prepared, and the staff makes them feel unwelcome or not powerful.

Here the student understands that parents’ status at IEP meetings may be viewed as less important than administrators’ or teachers.’ However, she goes further to state that school professionals can go out of their way to make parents “*feel unwelcome or not powerful.*” This insinuates that uneven power relations, vertical in nature, are enforced and imposed upon meetings to minimize parents’ expertise: “*they are made into spectators*” and to devalue their contributions: “*They feel as though they have a lack of knowledge, are excluded, and ill-prepared.*” The reproduction of unbalanced power at IEP meetings has been documented by several researchers (Brantlinger, 2004; Lalvani & Hale, 2015; Salas 2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012; and demonstrates an active (and sometimes unconscious) positioning of parents or families on the periphery as a way to better control the agenda, shorten meetings, or create structural barriers that make it more challenging for parents to be contributive equal stakeholders in the decision-making processes that involve their child.

The student recognizes these dynamics and, in addition, notes that “*parents withhold speaking*” at meetings where they do not feel listened to or respected. This point is especially important in consideration of families’ agency, particularly in moments when families exert their volition, in spite of challenges they confront. For example, in some cases, parents’ and family members’ willful silence is a form of resistance rather than a product of disinterest (Santamaría Graff & Vazquez, 2014). In other words, when power relations are unbalanced, families may reclaim a sense of integrity by actively *not* responding to what they feel is unfair, confusing or oppressive (Ochoa, et al., 2011). This type of agency demonstrates that even amidst structural and systemic power imbalances, families are resilient and find ways to do what is best for their children (Martínez-Cosío, 2010).

Discussion

Cristina initiated this first iteration of the Family as Faculty (FAF) project in fall 2016 because, as a teacher educator of pre-service special education teachers, she grew increasingly concerned about some of the ways they referred to or described students with disabilities and their families, particularly families of Color. FAF seemed a viable approach that could be embedded within the families’ course she taught in the special education program. By intentionally bringing parents into her classes to interact with future special education teachers through meaningful discussions and activities, Cristina hoped that some of the more deficit-driven assumptions students held would shift to positive, asset-based understandings of who the families were and the myriad of ways they were engaged in their children’s education. Cristina wanted to better understand students’ dispositional understandings of families and, more importantly, needed to know if FAF approaches could be the catalyst in transforming students’ thinking (and feeling) about the families with whom they would be working with in the future.

At the heart of this paper we examine whether or not FAF did, indeed, change pre-service teachers' perspectives of families. However, there are other aspects to mention before unpacking our findings. This paper is focused on FAF as a developing framework with Essential Understandings (E.U.s) shaping future project iterations. These E.U.s ground critical conceptualizations of entering into partnership with families. Power is intentionally reframed and redistributed so that parents and family members, within college courses, are viewed, seen and respected as equal stakeholders alongside the faculty member (e.g., instructor). Moreover, FAF is a pedagogical approach focused on curriculum and instruction that deliberately integrates and centers family members as co-educators. Lastly, FAF is a methodological consideration in designing research studies in which family members are invited as co-researchers.

After analyzing the student data, it seems apparent FAF as an approach is a first step toward helping to slowly and positively transform students' deficit-driven assumptions of families. However, thorough analysis of the data seems to indicate that numerous well-planned and interactive experiences positioning all types of families as experts throughout the whole of the undergraduate pre-service teacher curriculum will be required to create the kind of profound transformational change that is needed to fully and positively impact future educators' perspectives and long-term approach to their profession. As to why some pre-service special education teachers carry negative understandings of families, it seems they can become entrenched in deeply held biases that create significant barriers to full collaboration and power-sharing with families. This entrenchment is likely due to a multitude of factors, including but not limited to: current problematic societal norms, the overarching "knowledge disseminator/expert" culture often found within universities and schools of education, past formative experiences of pre-service teachers in their own K-12 environments, students' own personal cultural influences

and life experiences, and perhaps even inherent qualities found in the “altruistic” personality type that is often drawn to and characteristic of some special education professionals.

Regardless of these or other suspected factors, it appears from analysis of the FAF experience that special education pre-service teachers can move from deficit-driven perspectives through “real-world,” consistent, interactive, and constructively honest exchanges with the many types of diverse students with disabilities and their families representative of those they will eventually be asked to serve and work with as professionals. To what extent such experiences must occur to affect lasting change in each pre-service special education teacher is likely a highly individualized measurement, based on a multitude of factors both unexplored and referenced above. One of these factors not explicitly mentioned, but certainly important is time. The attempt to fully transform deficit-driven beliefs about families in a 16-week course appears to be improbable. Yet, for us, not making the attempt is unethical, for once students graduate, they will be interacting with, influencing, and impacting children with disabilities and their families. Ideally, FAF, would be an integrated approach weaved throughout special education and/or teacher education programs over a two to four-year time period. As a long-term program, FAF could assist in dismantling pre-service teachers’ deficit-driven perceptions of families and build critical consciousness aimed at equitable change for students and their families. For us, it seems a reasonable assumption to believe the more meaningful and holistic contacts that occur, the greater the chances of transformative change and lasting impact.

Implications

Moving forward, FAF programs should become integral components in teacher education programs or, at least, in special education courses centered on families or family-related issues. As with any profession requiring complex knowledge, high-level communication skills, and

critical interactions with all members of a society, repeated exposure and “real-world” experiences are necessary to build competence and erode pre-conceived biases or hurdles to future success. Practically speaking, no theoretical introduction to the cultural and psychological complexities of teacher-student-family interactions would be as complete as allowing pre-service teachers to honestly talk with, learn from, and meet representatives of the types of students and families they will be asked to serve.

For family participants, there are perhaps other larger implications and benefits that might be gained from making FAF an integral part of teacher education programs. These positive benefits should not be left unconsidered by universities and colleges interested in provoking positive societal change within the field of education and among the K-12 special education students, families, and communities future teachers will be asked to serve. Power dynamics are always a complex matrix involving every individual in a particular situation. Historically, it has been demonstrated that positive power shifts can be made by profoundly changing the perspectives of the dominant and non-dominant members. For example, laws such as the American Disabilities Act (1990) have guaranteed equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities in public spaces, thus, (re)shaping conceptualizations of equity and inclusivity to benefit *all* people. In addition, in FAF projects that take equitable power relations into consideration, family participants may receive unexpected benefits through their participation leading to greater power-sharing and improved collaboration within special education contexts.

Future FAF projects centered on distributing power among teachers and family members for more equitable collaboration are particularly important in an age where many teachers feel burdened with added responsibilities to improve students’ academics, behaviors, social interactions, and overall well-being (Brunsting, et al., 2014; Samuels, 2018). Family members,

when seen and treated as equal stakeholders in the education of their child, can contribute significantly to assisting teachers in knowing what ‘works’ best. In turn, when family members feel listened to and valued, they may begin to develop confidence in their own abilities to engender positive changes impacting not only their child, but also the larger educational culture (Chávez-Reyes, 2010).

As Michelle shared, *“Being positioned as an expert and being asked to provide instruction to pre-service special education teacher students was a novel and highly empowering experience for some parent participants”* (Michelle Foley, personal communication, July 23, 2019). Specifically, Michelle entered the process feeling both disenfranchised and disillusioned with the special education process based on past negative experiences with her own children in regard to IEPs. Being able to share her experiences, openly dialogue with pre-service teachers, and being consistently respected throughout the FAF study as an equal collaborator, allowed Michelle to “regain self-dignity” and reclaim power in relation to her children’s special education teams (Michelle Foley, personal communication, July 23, 2019). Although data collected about Michelle’s experiences are not explicitly detailed in this paper, Michelle believes this reclaiming of power led to an ability to transform her self-perception as victim of the special education process to a full active participant, capable of making meaningful positive changes and worthy of expecting reciprocal respect from special education staff. This renewed confidence allowed her to approach future interactions with a more open, collaborative, and assertive approach to interactions with educators in a fresh light, moving from *“victim”* or *“soldier preparing for battle”* mentality to *“social activator”* (Michelle Foley, personal communication, July 23, 2019). This shift in and of itself, and its resulting impact on parent communication, if indicative of other parent participant experiences, might in turn lead to more positive

communication within special education teams and thereby may somehow secondarily contribute to current special education teachers seeing families from a less deficit-driven perspective.

Further, within the context of teacher education programs, pre-service teachers who witness this ‘shift’ among the parent co-educators who they are learning from are likely to begin (if even a little) questioning their own deficit perceptions of families and opening their minds (and hearts) to more positive, expansive understandings of families’ expertise.

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Footnotes

¹*Historically minoritized* is a term to refer to individuals of Color (e.g., African American, Asian American, Latinx/a/o, Native American, Pacific Islanders, and multiracial people) who have, over time, been racialized as “less than” in comparison to white people (see footnote 4). Minoritized elicits a larger discussion connected to systems of oppression that locate individuals of Color in the ‘minority,’ even when, by count, they may be in the ‘majority.’

²We borrow from C. E. Matias’ (2016) work and capitalize Color in reference to people of Color who self-identify in this way. Color is intentionally capitalized to emphasize the

importance of identity, heritage, and culture in relation to race, ethnicity, and other identity markers that go beyond skin tone and phenotype.

³*Marginalized* within the context of this paper and in reference to parents/family members of children with disabilities refers to the ways in which dominant societal norms dictate who and who does not have power in specific educational contexts. In this study, marginalized families include those who have been oppressed, silenced, or pushed to the margins when attempting to advocate for their child with disabilities.

⁴We borrow from C. E. Matias' (2016) and Santamaría Graff's (2019) work to distinguish between the White race and whiteness. The White race refers to having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa (US Census, 2010). White, in this manuscript, is capitalized when referring to race. (See Footnote 8 for definition of whiteness).

⁵Critical, in this context, refers to work grounded in critical theory or critical approaches to learning that seeks to confront ideological, political, historical and social forces that oppress or limit opportunities for some while affording privilege to others.

⁶In this paper, when we refer to parents or family members we are using these terms loosely because, "parents" can be non-biological caregivers, siblings, grandparents, or others who are significant in the child's life. Parents and family members or families are sometimes used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

⁷Dis/ability with a slash (/) refers to the social construction of identity, rather than fixed, mutable traits. In this instance, we are emphasizing the importance of intersectional identities that are often marginalized in educational and other settings.

⁸Whiteness is a state of being that goes beyond an individual's racial identity. It is rooted in dominant white, Eurocentric belief systems that value, perpetuate and reproduce norms reflective of specific ideologies or characteristics including but not limited to able-bodiedness, white phenotypical features, English language-dominance, and Christianity.

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- *Michelle Renée Foley has more than 15 years of experience parenting and working with children with special needs. Leveraging her degree in telecommunications from Ball State University and a former career in public relations, Foley works to help other parents and students with special needs to become positive advocates within the disabilities' community. Her particular areas of interest include Asperger syndrome/ASD, dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome, ADHD/ADD, neuromuscular disease, Type 1 diabetes, and chronic medical conditions and genetic disorders.*