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# Preparing Teachers for Family Centered Services: A Survey of Preservice Curriculum Content

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## Abstract

A family-centered approach is recommended as best practice in the field of early intervention. However, recent research suggests that some professionals in the field do not always implement familycentered services. This study investigated the content taught to pre-service early intervention/early childhood special education students regarding family-centered services. Eighty-two faculty members from institutions of higher education across the U.S. rated the importance of and the extent to which they taught five categories of content associated with family-centered services. Content associated with Knowledge of Families, IFSP/IEP Skills, and Respecting Diversity were taught significantly more than Communication Skills and Knowledge of Team Work. All five categories of content were taught to at least a moderate degree and each category was rated as moderately important to crucial for students. The categories rated as most important were also taught most extensively.

In order to assist families in their efforts to cope and adapt to the unique challenges of having a child with a disability, early childhood educators and early interventionists have been encouraged to provide familycentered services. Family-centered services are recommended as "best practice" in both early education and early intervention (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1996; Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). In addition, the social validity of family-centered practices has been demonstrated by a high degree of parental satisfaction with services when professionals implement a family-centered approach (McNaughton, 1994; Romer & Umbreit, 1998).

Family-centered service broadens the scope of intervention services beyond the child to include family members and involves these family members in determining the goals of the early intervention program and needed services for the family (McWilliam, Ferguson, Harbin,

Porter, Munn & Vandiviere, 1998). Family-centered services are based on values and practices that (a) acknowledge the importance of the family system on children's development, (b) respect families as partners and decision makers for their child and family, and (c) support families in their role of caring for and educating their child (McBride, 1999).

Until recently, most early intervention/early childhood special education training programs have been primarily child-focused (McBride & Peterson, 1997). Implementing a family-centered approach requires teachers to take on new roles and learn new skills, different from what traditional early childhood professionals have been taught in the past. A family-centered approach for teachers requires a fundamental shift from working directly and exclusively with the young child to collaborating with families by providing a variety of supports and services that are responsive to the

needs and priorities of each individual family. In order to provide family-centered services, teachers working with young children with disabilities must have competence in several domains in addition to the skills needed for working with children. These domains include (a) understanding families (Iglesias & Quinn, 1997; Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993), (b) developing and implementing Individualized Education and Family Service Plans (IEPs/IFSPs) (Sileo, Sileo, & Prater, 1996), (c) respecting intercultural/familial diversity (Garland & Frank, 1997), (d) communication skills (Minke & Scott, 1995; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997), and (e) teamwork (Buysse & Wesley, 1993). This shift in focus from "child" to "child and family" means that personnel preparation programs must provide content and experiences that allow future early childhood special education teachers to learn the philosophy and principles of family-centered services.

Substantial data indicate that current early intervention practices fall short of expectations for family-centered services. In a survey designed to examine practices in working with families, early intervention personnel in the last decade described only a moderate focus on families and a discrepancy between typical and ideal practices with families (Bailey, Buysse, Edmondson, & Smith, 1992). The family-centeredness of IFSPs also has been examined as a measure of the extent family-centered services are practiced by early intervention personnel (McBride, Brotherson, Joanning, Whiddon & Demmitt, 1993; McWilliam, et al.1998). Results of these studies showed that although more family-related than child-related concerns were identified by program personnel, more child-related than family-related goals were written in the IFSP and that professionals may not be committed to or knowledgeable about family-centered practices that place the emphasis on building the capacities of families (McBride et al., 1993). Mahoney and Filer (1996) also reported that family concerns not directly related with the developmental well-being of the child were emphasized far less than child-related concerns in IFSPs. Finally, a significant discrepancy has also been noted between parents' and professionals' perceptions of the

professionals' competence in working with families. Gettinger, Stoiber, Goetz and Caspe (1999) reported that professionals rated their competence in working with families significantly higher than did parents in their study. The authors found that although 40% of parents surveyed reported that additional training in family issues for practitioners was needed, no professionals recommended additional training in this area for themselves. Studies such as these demonstrate that a gap between recommended best practice and current practice may exist with regard to family-centered services.

This gap between recommended best practice and current practice may exist for a number of reasons. Professionals studied to date may have resisted change or have not comfortably adopted a family-centered philosophy in their practice. Secondly, well-intentioned practitioners who have been surveyed may confront strong barriers on the job to implementation of family-centered services. Limited time and support as well as large case loads may keep some early interventionists from providing the quality of family-centered services they wish and believe is appropriate. Finally, one explanation may be that personnel preparation programs have not adequately prepared students to implement family-centered services on the job. It may be that preservice programs for early interventionists are not teaching the content that the literature suggests is necessary for implementing a family-centered approach. Bailey and his colleagues (Bailey, Simeonsson, Yoder, & Huntington, 1990) found that the typical student in special education in the 1980's received only a few hours of training in working with families. Students in the 1990's continued to rate their ability to work with children as significantly higher than their ability to work with families (Bailey, Palsha & Simeonsson, 1991; Winton & DiVenere, 1995).

In a survey by Gallagher, Malone, Cleghorne and Helms (1997) special educators ranked family systems/involvement as their top future training need. Based on the survey results, the authors concluded that institutions of higher education are not producing the number of fully qualified personnel needed to meet the needs

of the early intervention labor force. Several other authors have suggested that institutions of higher education are not adequately preparing early education and intervention personnel to implement family-centered services (Bailey, Palsha & Huntington, 1990; Hanson & Lovett, 1992; Rousch, Harrison, Palsha & Davidson, 1992; Winton, 1996). Based upon a review of the literature regarding professional roles and responsibilities in early childhood special education, Buysse and Wesley (1993) suggested that personnel preparation programs need to change in order to equip professionals with the consultation and team-building skills necessary to work effectively with families and other professionals. Gettinger and colleagues (1999) concluded that a need still exists for more effective training in working with families at both the preservice and inservice level for early intervention professionals.

Students who do not receive adequate training in how to work with families or who have not had meaningful contact with families of young children with disabilities during their college training may not feel prepared to work with families. In order to implement family-centered services, students need to have an understanding and internalization of the values and principles that define family-centered services. For example, early childhood special educators (ECSE) will need to relinquish sole control of a child's intervention program and move toward a team-based and family empowerment philosophy where family expertise is nurtured and valued if they are to implement family-centered services (Hanft & Feinberg, 1997; Winton & DiVenere, 1995). Thus, it appears crucial that ECSE personnel preparation programs emphasize teamwork, communication, and family systems models in their training programs.

If ECSE teachers are being inadequately prepared by their preservice personnel preparation programs, the factors impeding the desired training outcomes must be identified in order for change to occur. It may be that students are not being taught the principles and practices of family-centered services. Content specific to family-centered principles and practices need to be included in preparation programs if ECSE majors are to implement these

practices once they reach the field. Prior research has documented the extent to which family-focused courses are included in early childhood and mild/moderate special education teacher preparation programs. Knight and Wadsworth (1998) collected data from 101 institutions offering degree and/or certification programs in ECSE or mild/moderate areas of disability. More than 83% of the university/colleges contacted reportedly addressed family issues within existing general special education courses; however, only 1 to 2 hours per semester were actually spent on the topic of family issues. No data were reported regarding the amount of clinical experience these students received with families.

The effectiveness of ECSE teachers in meeting the needs of the children and families they serve is likely to be influenced by the extent to which they were trained adequately in their preservice personnel preparation programs. Of special significance is the preparation of these educators to work with families and implement family-centered services. There is general agreement among those involved in early intervention/early childhood special education personnel preparation that institutions of higher education are not effectively meeting the personnel needs for early intervention (Winton, 1996). However, no published research to date examines content currently being taught to these future professionals. By understanding *what* preservice students are being taught, insight can be gained into why a gap exists between recommended best practice and current practice in the area of family-centered services.

The purpose of this study was to determine the content taught in current college preservice programs designed to teach family-centered services to early childhood special education students.

## Methods

### *Instrumentation*

An eight-page written survey was developed specifically for the purpose of this study. Based upon a review of available literature, five con-

tent categories were selected for the focus of the survey. These categories represented recurring themes in the literature on recommended components for understanding and practicing family-centered services. The content categories included (a) *Knowledge of Families* (8 items), (b) developing and implementing individual family service or education plans (*IEP/IFSP Skills*) (6 items), (c) *Respecting Diversity* (4 items), (d) *Communication Skills* (7 items), and (e) *Knowledge of Team Work* (6 items). Each category contained four to eight items that more specifically reflected that content category. A complete listing of the categorical items can be found in Appendix A.

Field-testing of the survey was completed in a three-step process. First, local university faculty teaching early childhood education and early childhood special education courses reviewed the survey for format and ease of completion. Second, nine faculty participating in a state-funded *SCRIPT* project (i.e., Supporting Change and Reform in Interprofessional Preservice Training in early intervention) provided feedback on survey content and format. Finally, two faculty who teach courses in family-centered services from two different Midwestern universities completed the survey and provided information about time needed (approximately 20 minutes) and challenges associated with completing the survey. Feedback from these various sources prompted the authors to use a 4-point Likert scale in order to promote faculty commitment to a more specific degree of content importance and attention by respondents.

The first two sections of the survey solicited faculty and institution demographic information including faculty departmental affiliations, offerings of a course specifically addressing family-centered services and whether such courses were designed for undergraduate and/or graduate-level students. A total of 31 Likert items (each on a 4 - point scale) were then presented to assess the extent to which faculty addressed specific content in the ECSE program (1 = Not at All to 4 = Extensively) and how important faculty felt each content item was in regard to understanding family-centered services (1 = Not at All to 4 = Crucial).

## **Participants**

University/college instructors associated with early childhood special education (ECSE) preservice teacher preparation programs in the United States were recruited for participation in this study. First, a list of colleges/ universities preparing early childhood special educators was obtained from *The Database: Directory of Programs for Preparing Individuals for Careers in Special Education* published by the National Clearinghouse for Professionals in Special Education (1999 Edition). All listed programs indicating a specialization in early childhood special education, early intervention, or related titles (i.e. preschool disabilities) ( $n = 157$ ) were contacted via telephone in order to determine the faculty member who taught the family-centered services course or the majority of the ECSE courses for that institution. A survey was mailed to this identified faculty member. Seven programs were removed from the pool of potential participants at their request. Ten additional faculty members, not listed on the national directory, were included in the pool after they responded with interest to an email message sent to all faculty members in the U.S. participating in federally- funded *SCRIPT* projects between 1997 to 2001 (P. Winton, personal communication, January 13, 2001). This list likely included many of the faculty already identified in the national Clearinghouse Database. In the end, a total of 160 surveys were sent to faculty members nationwide.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Survey packets were mailed directly to the faculty member identified through the phone calls made to each potential participating institution and the *SCRIPT* emails; two follow-up contacts were made via mail to all respondents who had not returned completed surveys at two and four weeks after the initial mailing. Eighty-two surveys were completed and returned for a return rate of 51%.

## **Results**

### **Participant Demographics**

Faculty respondents worked in public (79%) and private (21%) institutions with enrollments

**Table 1.** ECSE Faculty Respondents

Respondent's Home Department	N	%	Departments Offering a FCS* Course n
Special Education	39	48	25/39
Education	23	28	16/23
Unified Early Childhood	6	7	3/6
Family & Consumer Sciences/Human Development	6	7	4/6
Other	6	7	2/6
Unknown	2	3	
Totals	82	100	50

\* FCS = Family-Centered Services

ranging from 1,119 to 52,000 students. Table 1 presents a summary of participating faculty. Faculty respondents most often indicated that their early intervention (EI)/early childhood special education (ECSE) training program was housed in either the special education department or education departments (including curriculum and instruction and teacher education) (total  $n = 62$  or 76%). An EI/ECSE curriculum focus was also reportedly housed in departments of unified early childhood (early childhood education and special education) and family and consumer sciences/human development. The remaining respondents stated that a department not listed on the survey housed the EI/ECSE program; these included departments of educational psychology and social work.

All respondents ( $n = 82$ ) indicated that their institution infused the principles and philosophies of family-centered services in a variety of courses/practica (range: 1-14 credit hours) throughout their programs. The number of field experiences which reportedly infused family-centered service content ranged from zero to ten. Fifty respondents (61%) indicated that an independent course on family-centered services was taught at their institution. Of the institutions that did offer such a course, 16 (32%) indicated they offered an undergraduate course, 22 (44%) indicated they offered a graduate course and 12 (24%) indicated they offered a course for both undergraduate/graduate credit. Departments of education and special education were noted most often for offering an independent course in family-centered services. The family-centered service courses ranged from 2 to 8

credit hours, with most respondents (82%) indicating 3 credit hours per course. Family-centered service courses were offered once a year by 69% of the respondents, twice a year by 25% of the respondents and three times per year by 6% of the respondents. Nearly all (96%) of the 50 respondents indicated that the family-centered service courses were offered as on-campus courses but 27% indicated that these courses were also available via distance education at their institutions.

A family-centered service course was required for EI/ECSE majors in 85% of the programs offering such a course and for 32% of the early childhood education programs. The last time the family-centered service courses were taught, respondents indicated that speech/language pathology majors were enrolled in 30% of these courses, psychology majors in 26%, occupational therapy majors in 17%, physical therapy majors in 15%. In addition, 43% of the courses recently offered had other, unknown majors enrolled. EI/ ECSE and early childhood education majors were enrolled in 87% and 47% of these courses, respectively.

### *Content Taught*

Table 2 provides a summary of the faculty ratings in regard to the extent each content category related to family-centered services was currently being addressed in their ECSE program. Using the 4 point scale with 1 = Not at all, 2 = Minimally, 3 = Moderately, 4 = Extensively, faculty reported mean ratings of 3.20 to 3.55 for each area. All the content categories

**Table 2.** Means and Standard Deviations for the Extent Categories of Content are Taught

Category	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Knowledge of Families	3.47	.42	.75
IFSP/IEP Skills	3.51	.47	.86
Respecting Diversity	3.55	.53	.84
Communication Skills	3.23	.58	.91
Knowledge of Team Work	3.22	.65	.90

were reportedly addressed by the institutions surveyed, either as infused content in existing courses, or in an independent course, or both. Mean ratings suggest a moderate degree of attention to all categories.

Individual topic items within each content category were rated independently but collectively were found to share a good degree of similar attention in the program. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each category to determine the internal consistency of the topics within each category. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the five categories of content ranged from .75 to .91 indicating that items within each category had a high level of internal consistency and were closely related to one another.

Category means were compared using a two-tailed ANOVA. Results of the ANOVA ( $F(4, 271) = 15.97, p < .001$ ) suggest that there were in fact significant differences across the five categories of content in how extensively the categories were taught. The assumption of sphericity was violated and therefore the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used when evaluating the significance of these findings. Due to the number of pairwise comparisons being made the possibility of making a Type 1 error increased and, therefore, a modified Bonferroni adjustment was made and a nominal alpha was set at  $p < .001$ .

Pair-wise comparisons ( $t$ -tests) showed that the three primary content areas taught in the EI/ECSE programs were *Knowledge of Families*, *IFSP/IEP Skills*, and *Respecting Diversity*. Content related to *Knowledge of Families* was reported as taught significantly more than *Communication Skills* ( $t = 4.60, p < .001$ ) and *Knowledge of Team-*

**Table 3.** Means and Standard Deviations for the Faculty Ratings of Importance of Categories of Content

Category	M	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Knowledge of Families	3.74	.33	.75
IFSP/IEP Skills	3.83	.29	.82
Respecting Diversity	3.86	.30	.78
Communication Skills	3.70	.40	.89
Knowledge of Team Work	3.53	.51	.90

*work* ( $t = 3.82, p < .001$ ). *IFSP/IEP Skills* was also reportedly taught significantly more than *Communication Skills* ( $t = 5.96, p < .001$ ) and *Knowledge of Teamwork* ( $t = 4.88, p < .001$ ). Similar findings were noted for *Respecting Diversity* being taught significantly more than *Communication Skills* ( $t = 5.77, p < .001$ ) and *Knowledge of Teamwork* ( $t = 4.71, p < .001$ ). Other pair-wise comparisons including *Knowledge of Families*, *IFSP/IEP Skills*, and *Respecting Diversity* were not significant.

### Content Importance

The means and standard deviations for faculty ratings of importance for each of the five content categories are presented in Table 3. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for ratings of importance ranged from .75 to .90 indicating a high degree of internal consistency among the items in each category.

Comparisons of these category mean ratings were made using a two-tailed ANOVA to determine if differences existed in the importance faculty place on particular categories of content. Results indicated a significant difference exists in the importance faculty place on the five categories of content ( $F(3, 250) = 17.04, p < .001$ ).

Responding faculty reported the greatest importance for content associated with *Respecting Diversity* ( $M = 3.86$ ), *IFSP/IEP Skills* ( $M = 3.83$ ), and *Knowledge of Families* ( $M = 3.74$ ), with no statistically significant differences in the ratings of importance for these three categories. Faculty placed significantly more importance on content about *Respecting Diversity* however, than content related to *Communication Skills* ( $t = 4.03, p < .001$ ) or *Team Work* ( $t = 5.79, p < .001$ ). Fac-

**Table 4.** Correlation Coefficients Between the Extent Content is Taught and the Importance of Content

Extent Taught	Importance				
	Knowledge of Families	IFSP/IEP Skills	Respecting Diversity	Communication Skills	Team Work
Knowledge of Families	.402*				
IFSP/IEP Skills		.451*			
Respecting Diversity			.455*		
Communication Skills				.495*	
Knowledge of Team Work					.555*

\*  $p < .00$

ulty also placed more importance on teaching *IFSP/IEP Skills* ( $t = 5.95, p < .001$ ) and on *Knowledge of Family* ( $t = 4.20, p < .001$ ) than on content related to *Team Work*.

Faculty mean ratings for both the extent the five categories of content were taught and the importance faculty placed on the five categories of content resulted in the same ranked order (*Respecting Diversity, IFSP/IEP Skills, Knowledge of Families, Communication Skills* and *Knowledge of Team Work*). Although the order of the mean ratings by faculty was the same for both the extent content was taught and its importance, mean faculty ratings of importance were generally higher than the mean ratings for the extent that particular categories were taught (see Figure 1).

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationships between these sets of mean ratings. Moderate ( $r = .402$  to  $.555$ ) and significant relationships were noted across all matched category analyses. As shown in Table 4, correlation coefficients indicate that faculty were most extensively teaching the categories of content that they also ranked as the most important.

### *Course vs. Infused*

There was not a significant difference between responses from faculty who offered an independent family-centered service course (in addition to infusing content across the ECSE curriculum) and faculty who only infused content into existing courses in terms of the extent that the categories of content were taught ( $F(1, 76) = .25, p = .62$ ). This implies that students who only receive information about family-centered services as part of other courses receive

the same extent of training in the five categories of relevant content as those students taking a separate course on family-centered services, in addition to receiving content in courses where family-centered content is infused.

### **Discussion**

More than one half the 160 known U.S. institutions preparing EI/ECSE teachers are reportedly teaching content that the literature suggests is essential for implementing family-centered services. The return rate (51%) in the present study, although not poor, may be limited by the fact that surveys were distributed in the late spring when faculty may be at their busiest. Faculty who did not complete the survey may have responded similarly or differently than those who did and subsequently changed the results of this study. In addition, the 4-point Likert scale used in this study may have been insufficient for identifying the true extent to which individual faculty members currently teach and value specific content relative to family-centered services. Additional research may be needed to address the number of hours faculty actually spend on specific topics in order to completely understand the degree to which students are being taught specific content related to family-centered services at the preservice level. Despite these limitations, the results offer useful information about what many faculty value and are addressing in their efforts to introduce prospective ECSE teachers to a philosophy of family-centered service.

Five categories of content relevant to family-centered services are reportedly taught to at least a moderate degree by the 82 faculty participating



in this study (mean rating = 3.22 to 3.55 on the 4-point scale). However, individual faculty responses for specific content items ranged from a rating of 1 (Not at All) to 4 (Extensively) indicating that individual programs may provide more or less instruction on specific topics than the mean rating of "moderate" may imply. Therefore, not all EI/ECSE students may be receiving adequate instruction in all areas, while other students may receive extensive instruction in many areas related to family-centered services.

Three content areas associated with family-centered services: *Respecting Diversity*, *IFSP/IEP Skills*, and *Knowledge of Families* reportedly receive primary attention by faculty in ECSE training programs. These content areas are reportedly taught to a significantly greater extent than *Knowledge of Team Work* or *Communication Skills*. Furthermore, the ECSE faculty rated *Knowledge of Team Work* and *Communication Skills* as less important for inclusion in the study and training of family-centered services. If newly prepared professionals are to implement family-centered principles and philosophies, they require extensive instruction in several areas, including content related to teamwork and consultation, both of which require sensitivity to parents' and professionals' communication interactions. The professional's ability to appropriately use culturally sensitive communication skills, effective interviewing techniques, active listening and problem-solving processes have been identified as critical for engaging parents as active team members. Respecting the contribution that parents and the child's natural environment make to the child's development, and empowering parents in their role as the primary decisionmaker for their child with disabilities can positively impact the outcomes of early intervention programs and the long-term benefits to children and families (Dunst, Trivette & Johanson, 1994; Gettinger et al., 1999; Rush, Sheldon & Hanft, 2003). These content areas require more attention than they historically have been provided in ECSE programs (Buyse & Wesley, 1993; Gallagher, et al., 1997) in order for students to master the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to implement a family-centered service model. It may be that time constraints or other barriers prevent faculty

from addressing this content to the extent desired. However, the lower faculty ratings given for importance to *Knowledge of Team Work* and *Communication Skills* could explain the gap often reported between recommended and current practices in early intervention programs. Despite the appeal and dedication to involving families as equal team members and decision-makers, professionals who reportedly provide families with few meaningful choices and only limited roles in decisions regarding their child's and family's IFSP (McBride, et al, 1993) may in fact be students of programs that failed to provide adequate content/practice related to needed communication skills with parents and professionals from other disciplines (Bailey, Palsha & Huntington, 1990; Rousch et al, 1992). Students may require multiple exposures over time or different instructional approaches to adequately learn the more applied content associated with the topics of *Team Work* and *Communication Skills*.

In addition to being taught the content necessary to implement family-centered services, new EI/ECSE professionals must learn to transfer what they have learned to the workplace. One cannot assume that because an individual has been educated about recommended best practices, that they will implement the training in their job settings. Professionals need ongoing opportunities to refine and adjust their skills as they begin to implement family-centered services. In the present study faculty reported the infusion of family-centered principles in as many as 10 practica but also as few as 0. The percentage of faculty reporting specific numbers of practica was not reported leaving the possibility that some students obtain multiple opportunities to practice family-centered principles and teamwork and communication skills in applied settings while others receive very few field experiences. Sexton et al. (1996) has suggested that students need to see familycentered services used in the field and then receive additional support and feedback regarding their own implementation in order to become effectively family-centered. Wesley and Buyse (1996) call for greater use of community-based experiences for students in early intervention training programs in order to en-

sure that personnel are skilled in practices that would be most appropriate to the communities in which they most likely will work. The present study hints at continued need to address the practical application of family-centered services in pre-service training programs.

There was not a significant difference between faculty who reported offering an independent family-centered course and faculty who (only) infused content into existing courses in terms of the extent that the categories of relevant content were taught. It may be that infusing family-centered services content into existing coursework is just as effective for teaching students about family-centered principles and philosophies; however, further research would be needed to determine if students receive the same extent of instruction under both of these conditions or if faculty only perceive that the same extent of instruction occurs whether or not an independent course is offered. Future research could examine the total number of clock hours spent on various content topics across a curriculum, methods of instruction, choice of class activities/assignments and student outcomes in order to make a more thorough comparison. A related issue may be that faculty find it difficult to estimate the extent certain content is taught in various courses and this may have led to faculty in the present study overestimating or underestimating the amount of time spent on specific content in their infused curriculum, and/or their independent course.

Faculty responding to this survey rated the same content areas as "most important" as the areas they rated as the "most extensively" taught. As one might expect, the moderate correlations between the importance and extent-taught ratings were significant, ranging from .40 to .56. However, these correlations were surprisingly low when one considers the fact that faculty likely spend the most time teaching the content that they feel is the most important. It may be that time constraints associated with teaching college courses prevented faculty from addressing all content to the extent that they desired. Furthermore, some content may require extensive instruction in order for students to gain full understanding of the material, thereby

limiting the time available for other content areas. Future, in-depth, qualitative investigations may provide a broader understanding of how faculty prioritize what is being taught and how they choose the methods they will use to teach the content and evaluate student learning.

The current study indicates that many EI/ECSE students are getting content related to family-centered services in their preservice programs. Previous research which indicated a gap between recommended and current practice might have investigated professionals who did not receive training on family-centered services at the preservice level. It may be that new professionals (recent graduates of the past 5–10 years) who have been trained in family-centered principles and practices *are* applying what they have learned but that the field of early intervention has not yet felt their full impact. In other words, new EI/ECSE professionals entering the field may be applying the concepts of family-centered services just as they had been taught, but experienced professionals have not yet adopted a family-centered perspective, resulting in a (albeit possibly narrow) gap between recommended and current practice when systematically studied in recent research. Longitudinal studies may be needed to determine the impact of newly trained professionals on the field of early intervention and their long term ability to continue family-centered practices. Finally, the current study only explored the family-centered services content taught at EI/ECSE teacher training programs; early intervention professionals other than teachers (i.e. physical, occupational, speech therapists) may be receiving more or less training at the preservice level and may be included more or less in past studies of current practice of family-centered services.

Personnel preparation plays a central role in the realization of a family-centered approach for early interventionists (Winton & DiVenere, 1995). Once the necessary content needed to appropriately prepare personnel to work with young children with disabilities and their families has been outlined, it is essential that faculty also consider the appropriate methods for teaching that content. Given the shift in roles

and responsibilities for early intervention/early childhood special educators from child-focused to family-centered and from direct service provider to consultant, it is critical that faculty select methods that best serve the intended outcomes for advancing students' attitudes, skills or knowledge relative to quality family-centered services (Buysse & Wesley, 1993; Winton, McCollum & Catlett, 1997). Research is needed to assess what instructional strategies are currently and commonly being used and which result in the desired outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Institutions of higher education are endeavoring to prepare preservice teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will allow them to implement a family-centered approach (Winton & Catlett, 1999). The current study demonstrates that a number of university/college programs preparing EI/ ECSE teachers view *Families, Diversity, IFSP/ IEPs, Team Work and Communication Skills* as very important areas of study and are including this necessary content to at least a moderate degree in their current training programs. Attention to topics associated with an understanding of *Team Work* and relevant *Communication Skills* for family-centered services currently receive less attention than the other topics, but the impact is unknown. Further research is needed to explore the specific time commitments given to each content area, the strategies used to assure desired learning outcomes and application to practice, and the longitudinal influence of preservice training as students assume employment in family-centered programs.

### **Appendix**

#### ***Content Categories Related to Family-Centered Services***

##### **Knowledge of Families**

- Systems/Ecological theory
- Families as systems
- Diverse family cultures & systems
- Impact of disability on family functioning

- Families with child birth through 2 years with disabilities
- Families with child 3 through 5 years with disabilities
- Families with child 6 through 21 years with disabilities
- Parent rights/involvement options

##### **Individualized Family Service Plans/Individualized Education Plans**

- Identifying and utilizing the strengths and resources of family members
- Targeting family-identified concerns and priorities
- Coordinating services for and with families
- Utilizing existing/natural family routines/environments
- Supporting family as primary decisionmaker
- Adhering to ethical practices

##### **Respecting Diversity**

- Respect for various cultural/familial beliefs, values and practices
- Awareness/reflection of own cultural and family values and biases
- Respect for the family as the focus of early intervention services
- Respect for the family as a competent resource

##### **Communication Skills**

- Utilizing culturally sensitive communication skills
- Utilizing appropriate interviewing strategies
- Implementing negotiation skills
- Employing effective listening skills
- Using appropriate question types
- Using appropriate explanation types and strategies
- Applying problem-solving process

##### **Knowledge of Team Work**

- Inter-disciplinary roles and responsibilities of various professionals associated with early intervention
- Inter-agency roles/responsibilities
- Discipline-specific roles and responsibilities
- Team models and team functions
- Principles of role release
- Models of consultation/collaboration

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