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What is This?

Because Wisdom Can't Be Told: Using Comparison of Simulated Parent–Teacher Conferences to Assess Teacher Candidates' Readiness for Family–School Partnership

Joan M. T. Walker[1] and Benjamin H. Dotger[2]

Abstract

This study used text-related, video-based case materials to assess teacher candidates' readiness to communicate with families. Participants ($N = 141$) rated their efficacy for home–school communication and then responded to a description of a classroom-based challenge regarding one student's behavioral and academic performance. Next, they evaluated two videos, each capturing how a teacher addressed the challenge in a parent–teacher conference. Cases offered contrasting models of communication effectiveness along two dimensions: structuring and responsiveness. Finally, candidates chose which model did the better job and justified their choice. Findings revealed that candidates had high self-efficacy for communicating with families but generated a small number and range of strategies for dealing with the situation; could discriminate between the models' effectiveness; and their reasons for choosing one model as best centered on their valuing of structuring or responsiveness and their conceptions of partnership. Content validity and reliability assessments of the research materials are described.

Parental support and involvement in their children's education can have a profound influence on student's academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Jeynes, 2003, 2007), and teachers play a central role in the parent involvement process. For example, the frequency of parents' home- and school-based involvement behaviors is robustly predicted—across cultural, socioeconomic, and developmental lines—by teachers' use of effective parent involvement practices (K. J. Anderson & Minke, 2007; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011). Moreover, the quality of teachers' relationships with parents has consequences for student achievement, motivation, and emotional, social, and behavioral adjustment (Boethel, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007).

Despite the positive impact of family–school partnerships, most teacher education programs fail to help novice teachers develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to engage families as an educational resource (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). For example, in a survey of 60 teacher education programs across 22 states, Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, and Lopez (1997) found that only 23% required that candidates interact with families during fieldwork or student teaching. Furthermore, these researchers found that when family–school relations were addressed, the most commonly used pedagogies may not help candidates construct a deep understanding of the complexity of home–school communication (reading and lectures were used in 90% and 86% of programs, respectively, whereas video and case studies were used by 55% of programs). As Ferrara and Ferrara (2005) have noted,

> Teacher candidates . . . join the ranks of those already teaching and yet [do] not know how to make their classrooms parent-friendly, how to inform parents about what is really happening in the classroom, or how to talk with parents without using teacher language. Overall they will not have gleaned strategies on how to make parents feel and believe that they are truly collaborative partners in learning. (p. 77)

Grounded in models of apprenticeship and social constructivism that advocate situated practice as the best means of promoting meaningful learning (Greeno, 1998; Wenger,

[1]Pace University, Pleasantville, NY, USA
[2]Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Joan M. T. Walker, Pace University, 861 Bedford Road, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA
Email: jwalker@pace.edu

1998; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), innovative models of teacher preparation for family involvement have emerged. For example, Dotger adapted an experiential learning paradigm common in medical education to the context of teacher education (Dotger, Harris, & Hansel, 2008). Through the development of a simulated interaction model (SIM), unscripted teacher candidates participate in a series of increasingly challenging, one-on-one interactions with standardized parents (SPs)—persons carefully trained to simulate the distinct characteristics and attributes of a variety of parents (Dotger, 2010; Dotger et al., 2008). Candidates receive immediate feedback on their performance within the simulation from the SP and from observing faculty members. Moreover, candidates conduct detailed self-evaluations of their performance, supported by their careful review of the video recordings of their simulated interactions and by individual and whole-group debriefing/reflection sessions.

Across 14 different simulations, participating teacher candidates ($N = 526$) have shown advances in professional dispositions and skills. For example, they show significant advances in their *responsiveness* to parents such as ethical and multicultural sensitivity (Dotger, 2010). Postsimulation debriefing data also indicate that simulated interactions expose teacher candidates to, and raise their awareness of, the emotional geographies (Hargreaves, 2000) associated with interactions between teachers and parents/caregivers. Candidates also cite how simulations provide them with insights into the potential of hierarchical power structures between teachers and parents (i.e., political geographies) and ill-perceived boundaries between homes and schools (i.e., physical geographies) that must be navigated in the context of parent–teacher interactions (Dotger, Harris, Maher, & Hansel, 2011). These results suggest that candidates advance in terms of their ability to *structure* a professional conversation with family members.

Across a variety of professions, these two dimensions of *responsiveness* (defined as one's ability to respond to the unique needs of individuals) and *structuring* (defined as one's observance of professional standards and practices) are essential to successfully solving a problem. For example, to enact an effective course of medical treatment, doctors must be able to balance the unique needs and personalities of patients with the structures of modern medicine. Similarly, to enact a plan that best supports children's educational success, teachers must be able to respond to families' and students' specific attributes and needs while observing professional standards. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) characterized this balance between the dimensions of *responsiveness* and *structuring* as "innovation within constraints" (p. 364). Although both dimensions are essential, they are often difficult to quantify and teach.

In the absence of a wealth of research on promising teacher preparation strategies in the area of parent involvement (Shartrand et al., 1997), this study had two goals. First, it repurposed text- and video-based case materials from Dotger's SIM paradigm into a vicarious vehicle for learning more about teacher candidates' readiness for parent–teacher interactions. Second, with an eye toward disseminating both the SIM and vicarious experience model to other teacher education programs, it also took steps to (a) establish the content validity of the repurposed SIM materials, (b) develop a reliable coding scheme, and (c) identify benchmarks for evaluating candidates' performance along the dimensions of responsiveness and structuring.

Psychological Principles Underlying the Study's Design

Experiential learning pedagogies are based on the psychological premise that "wisdom can't be told" (Gragg, 1940). Often, novice professionals acquire important content knowledge in didactic classrooms yet fail to activate and use this knowledge in professional practice. This dilemma, known as failure to transfer, has led some researchers to suggest that education should focus on "low-road transfer," such as the ability to automatically transfer an automated *skill* to a new situation and on "high-road transfer" that involves the deliberate identification of a *principle* that can be applied across many contexts (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999). One way to help novices develop both kinds of transfer is by offering them repeated exposure to realistic problem contexts, exposure that is well mediated in approaches like the SIM paradigm. As Shulman (2005) observed in a talk about teacher education, "Pedagogies of professions are designed to transform knowledge attained to knowledge-in-use, and to create the basis for new kinds of understanding that can only be realized experientially and reflectively."

Yet, direct experience is not the only way people learn. Observational learning can also lead to robust understanding (Bandura, 1997). Thus, with permission from teacher candidates taking part in Dotger's SIM, we repurposed a text-based case and related QuickTime videos of simulated parent–teacher conferences into a vicarious format for teacher candidates at a separate teacher preparation institution. Theoretically, teacher candidates could learn the skills and principles involved in communicating with families (sensitivity, structuring boundaries, and reflection) by observing the successes and struggles of others taking part in simulations. Practically, a vicarious approach offers an alternative model to teacher education programs that lack the resources necessary for undertaking the SIM paradigm.

Observational learning. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1999) emphasizes the role of vicarious experience (observation) of people affecting people (models). Unlike learning from direct experience, observational learning does not require actual enactment of the modeled activities. As Bandura (1977) noted,

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

Among the four processes involved in observational learning, Bandura distinguishes between those that support the *acquisition of knowledge* or behavior and those that support subsequent performance or *knowledge use*. The two processes that account for acquisition are *attention* and *retention*. Attention requires the learner to watch what the model does; often, multiple observations are critical to this process. The second process, retention, means that learners must remember what the model does. Together, the processes of attention and memory create a conceptual representation of the modeled activity, which is a guide for future action.

In the present study, the videotaped SIM simulations functioned as models of effective and less-effective teacher–parent communication along the conceptual dimensions of structuring and responsiveness. Candidates' *attention* to the models was stimulated by asking them to watch the videos and to simultaneously rate the models along several dimensions. To support candidates' *retention* of what they observed, they were asked to recall their observations of the models' behavior during reflective activities and classroom discussion.

The two processes that account for performance are *reproduction* and *motivation*. Reproduction means that learners must have the opportunity to replicate the model's success and avoid the model's failure. Motivation or reinforcement means that the learner must be motivated to enact the appropriate behaviors. That is, awareness of the model's success or failure acts as a vicarious incentive, prompting the observer to reproduce behaviors that were rewarded and to inhibit behaviors that were punished. In the context of the present study, teacher candidates did not enact a reproduction. They did not participate in a subsequent simulation or direct experience before or after observing the models. Thus, the study cannot speak of how the models may have influenced candidates' ability to actually conduct a successful parent–teacher conference. Rather, the study focused on the motivational process, assuming that the observers' future actions were dependent on their understanding of the models' behaviors *and their consequences*. To assess this, after viewing and rating both models, candidates were asked to choose which model did the better job and to explain their choice. These data were expected to reveal an important precursor of reproduction, the ability to perceive and understand causal relations among objects (Tomasello, 2009). That is, it was assumed that if candidates could see how the models' structuring and responsiveness functioned as tools that achieved a goal (i.e., an effective plan of action that supports

student learning and development), they would be more likely to later emulate the models' effective behaviors and refrain from emulating their ineffective behaviors. Again, however, the study did not assess how the models influenced candidates' ability to conduct a parent–teacher conference.

Observation is a central tool in most teacher education programs because it is assumed that by watching the work of others, novices will abstract both important skills and organizing principles necessary for successful teaching. Yet, without a guiding purpose (e.g., what to look for and why) observation can be a weak tool for supporting these kinds of transfer. This leads to the next principle underlying the study.

Comparison as a teaching tool. Comparison is a well-established instructional tool for developing flexible, transferable knowledge. For example, cognitive science research demonstrates that seeking similarity across examples improves preschoolers' ability to learn words (Namy & Gentner, 2002), middle schoolers' ability to learn mathematical procedures (Rittle-Johnson & Star, 2009), and beginning business students' ability to learn negotiation strategies (Gentner, Loewenstein, & Thompson, 2003).

According to Gentner's (1983) structure-mapping theory (Gentner & Markman, 1997), comparison enhances learning because the act of aligning commonalities across two representations or models can prompt the extraction of a "common higher order relational structure that was not readily evident within either item alone" (Namy & Gentner, 2002, p. 6). This mindful abstraction of an underlying principle is the essential psychological process at work during high-road transfer. As Gentner et al. (2003) explained, comparison involves "analogical encoding," which highlights and clarifies a *new* concept or the process of schema development. This type of analogy differs from other uses of analogy as a teaching tool, where comparison is used to facilitate transfer of a well-learned piece of prior knowledge to a new context (i.e., low-road transfer).

Although comparison is a standard educational tool, Rittle-Johnson and Star (2009) noted that "surprisingly little is known about the advantages and disadvantages of what types of things are being compared" (p. 529). They addressed this issue by investigating how three different comparison conditions related to adolescents' learning of mathematics. In the first condition, students compared equivalent problems solved with the same solution (same problems–same solution); in the second condition they compared how different problems were solved with the same solution (different problems–same solution); and in the third condition they compared how one problem was solved with two different solutions (same problem–different solutions). They found that students' conceptual knowledge and procedural flexibility were best supported by the same problem–different solutions condition. The authors attributed this finding to the fact that seeing different problem-solving pathways broadened learners' understanding of how to solve the problem while

also deepening learners' understanding of the problem's basic features. In essence, this condition seemed best at promoting high-road transfer.

Grounded in this work, the present study sought examples of practice that contrasted different solutions to the same problem. Within the SIM paradigm, multiple teacher candidates have the opportunity to interact with the same "Ms. Burton," addressing her questions or concerns from their individual professional perspectives. By reviewing videotapes of these simulations, we were able to select two different models interacting with the same SP, but in distinctly different ways. Specifically, we selected one model that exemplified high structuring and low responsiveness and a second model that exemplified limited structuring but high responsiveness. Each model's balance along these two dimensions resulted in different conversation approaches and paths that unfolded with the SP. The act of comparing these two problem-solving approaches, each with its own strengths, weaknesses, and consequences, was expected to underscore the value of both dimensions: although each dimension is an essential part of a "parent–teacher communication scheme," neither dimension alone is sufficient to achieving a high-quality solution.

Summary

This study repurposed materials from an experiential learning paradigm into a vicarious learning format to assess teacher candidates' readiness for parent involvement. It explored three research questions. First, how confident are preservice teachers in their ability to communicate with parents? Second, what kinds of skills or strategies can they generate when confronted with a common parent–teacher conference scenario? Third, when given examples of professional practice that differ along the dimensions of responsiveness and structuring, what do they regard as "best practice"? As a necessary prerequisite to answering these questions, it also took steps to validate the contents of the research materials and to establish a reliable coding scheme and benchmarks for evaluating candidate responses.

Method

In this section, we first describe the development of the study materials and the content validation process. We then describe the teacher candidate participants and the protocol used to explore our three research questions.

Development of Simulation Materials, Content Validation, and Expert Benchmarks

Development of simulation materials. The SIM is a collection of 27 different simulations that were designed specifically to help novice teachers and school leaders transfer *what they know* into *what they can do*. Twenty of these simulations focus on enhancing the relationships between school

professionals and parents/caregivers. Since 2007, Dotger has conducted interviews with parents, caregivers, veteran teachers, veteran school leaders, paraprofessionals, and community organizers, seeking input from these parties on communications and miscommunications that often occur between schools and homes. The data result in common school–home partnership themes, where teachers or leaders frequently interact with parents around topics of discipline, academic progress, serving students with special needs, curriculum decisions, bullying/harassment, student social/emotional distress, moral/ethical school decision making, verbal and physical school violence, drug/alcohol abuse, and sex/"sexting" in schools. In combination with these scholastic problems of practice, Dotger crafted these simulations to present common demographic variables (ethnicity, socioeconomics, religion, sexual orientation, and gender). Thus, every SIM simulation presents realistic multidimensions. For example, the (standardized) mother who is initially worried that her son is being bullied later indicates that the bullying is a result of the son's perceived sexual orientation. As a second example, the proactive (standardized) mother who positively advocates for her son with autism also indicates her worries and fears for her son's progressions through different school systems.

Using the input of active teachers and leaders, Dotger crafted documents that provide teacher candidates with an "appropriate" amount of background knowledge ahead of a simulated parent–teacher interaction. For example, teachers will sometimes engage in parent–teacher conferences that are scheduled, where the teacher is fully informed as to the intent and objective(s) of the conference. At times, though, teachers find themselves in spur-of-the-moment conversations with parents, where the teacher may have little, if any, background knowledge with regard to the parent's questions, concerns, or problems. Ultimately, the teacher candidate taking part in the simulation is not scripted in any way whatsoever and must enact professional knowledge, skill, and dispositions during her/his interaction with the SP. In contrast to the teacher candidate, the SP is very carefully scripted to present both verbal and nonverbal information. The SPs' specific statements, questions, or concerns—known as "verbal triggers"—are provided in writing and rehearsed during training sessions with the second author. For a thorough description of simulation development, training procedures, and steps to implementation, see Dotger, 2010; Dotger et al., 2008; and Dotger et al., 2011.

It is important to note the purpose and intent of SPs. In medical training, future physicians interact with standardized patients, practicing their diagnostic and communication skills. Although modeled after this medical education pedagogy, the SIM's use of standardized individuals *in no way* suggests that teachers should *diagnose* or *treat* the parents, students, paraprofessionals, or community members they interact with—simulated or not. Instead, the SIM's SPs represent an opportunity for novice school professionals to

practice and enhance their abilities to effectively partner with parents and caregivers. We know that home–school boundaries are emotionally laden (Denzin, 1984), are an uncharted political and ethical territory to the novice teacher (Hargreaves, 2000; Lasky, 2000), and are layered in complexities that range from demographics to individual communication patterns (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Villegas, 2007). Ultimately, though, we know that parents and teachers must effectively interact to serve students well. Effective parent–teacher interactions only occur, though, when the teacher demonstrates perspective taking, shows empathy and understanding, and recognizes the complex dynamic of communicating with a parent or caregiver (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

For this study, we repurposed Dotger's Chris Burton simulation, which is a written description of one hypothetical student's classroom-related behavior, steps the student's teacher had taken to help him make progress, and the teacher's telephone call to the student's parent (Jenny Burton) requesting a parent–teacher conference (e.g., "*Chris Burton is one of 26 students in your 9th grade class. During the first ten days of the new semester, you have assigned and collected four classroom assignments, three of which Chris did not turn in at all . . .*").

We carefully selected two 15-min QuickTime videos of simulated parent–teacher conferences from a bank of videos associated with the SIM paradigm. Each video shows the same female SP engaging with a different female teacher candidate. As stated earlier, the SP was trained to present the same "verbal triggers" and nonverbal mannerisms to both teachers; she was also instructed to change her physical behaviors (e.g., body posture, facial expressions, etc.) in accordance with the teacher candidate's stance; the teacher candidates were not scripted or directed in any way.

Content validation and establishing benchmarks. To establish the content validity of the text- and video-based study materials, we used expert opinion, a standard method of establishing content validity (Carmines & Zeller, 1991). A panel of seven experts in the field of family–school interactions was recruited via a professional listserv (i.e., the American Educational Research Association's Family–School–Community Partnership Special Interest Group). On average, the panel had 14 years of teaching experience in K-12 public schools (M = 13.83, SD = 9.60) and 17 years of experience in higher education (M = 16.75, SD = 7.43). All had advanced degrees and taught courses related to family–school interactions. Six of the experts were Caucasian females above 55 years of age; five of the six women were parents. The one male expert was in his mid-30s and was a parent. All of the experts who were parents had experienced a number of parent–teacher conferences in that role (M = 48, range = 16-100).

Experts completed four tasks. First, to establish the content validity of the text-based case, they read the case and responded to four questions using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all/never*, 5 = *very much/very frequently*): How complex is

this situation? How frequently does this type of situation occur? How much does this situation involve instructional/ curricular issues? and How much does this situation involve social–emotional issues? Results indicated that experts viewed the case as a frequent ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.69$) and somewhat complex ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.21$) situation that involved both instructional ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.98$) and social–emotional issues ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.98$).

Next, to establish the reliability of a coding scheme for evaluating candidate work, we asked the experts, "In your opinion, what are the essential elements of a successful parent–teacher conference?" Their responses were then independently evaluated by two raters (one of whom was the first author). Analysis aligned experts' responses with the categories of a priori coding scheme. Adapted by the first author from evaluations of health care professionals' performance in standardized patient simulations (for a full description, see Makoul, 2001), the coding scheme contains seven categories. The first four pertain to the *sequencing* of an effective conference and include establishing a positive opening, gathering information, sharing information, and suggesting an action plan. The three remaining categories pertain to essential psychological *structures* of a productive conference and include accepting the parent's emotions, maintaining a positive relationship, and managing the flow of conversation. Taken as a whole, these seven categories were expected to represent a balance of teacher *structuring* (i.e., sharing information, suggesting an action plan, managing flow) and *responsiveness* (i.e., establishing a positive opening, gathering information/listening, maintaining a positive relationship, and accepting the parent's emotions; see Table 1 for category definitions and examples). Statements that could not be aligned with the coding scheme were labeled as "other." Interrater reliability between coders across the seven categories was 87%, and the coding scheme accounted for 91% of the data. "Other" statements accounted for 9% of the data (5 of 53 separate statements) and largely comprised a single idea; an ideal conference would involve not only the teacher and the parent but also the student. Although this idea is important in developing a "gold standard" definition of parent–teacher conference communication, it did not appear relevant to our assessment of the quality of parent–teacher communication embodied in our selected videos because (standardized) students were not included in the conference simulation.

To establish the content validity of each video, experts logged on to a secure website, viewed the two videos, and rated each model's performance along the dimensions identified in the coding scheme using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*). Items included the following:

- "This teacher was very successful at getting the conference off to a good start";
- "This teacher was very successful at sharing information about the situation with the parent";

Table 1. Coding Categories Reflecting Elements of Effective Parent–Teacher Conferences

Category	Definition	Exemplary statements from candidates
Opening	Teacher immediately establishes a context for the meeting.	"I would discuss the purpose of this meeting . . ."; "Greet parent with confidence . . ."; "I would start the meeting off warm and inviting."
Gathering information	Teacher asks the parent for pertinent information.	"I would ask questions to generate and gauge Chris' home life and experiences, so that I, as his teacher, had a better idea of his lifestyle outside of school"; "I would elicit her thoughts and ideas on the issue . . ."
Sharing information	Teacher explains the situation from his or her point of view; uses evidence to support explanation.	"Tell her my concerns . . ."; "I would have a chronological log, including documents, to back up any statements that I would make to the parent . . ."
Reaching agreement	Teacher suggests potential solutions to the situation, incorporating the parents' ideas if possible.	" . . . work with the mother to come up with ideas on how to inspire the student"; " . . . develop a plan of action, which included the parent, to benefit the child."
Maintaining positive relationship	Teacher is encouraging, friendly, personable regardless of the parent's behavior.	"Show my appreciations to their efforts and Chris' well-being and success"; "Be positive and say nice things about Chris to make the parent feel better and more relaxed . . ."
Accepting emotions	Teacher expresses empathy for parent's emotional state	"I would listen carefully and empathetically to what she says"; "Be friendly, open minded to listen and understand, accept emotions from parents."
Managing flow	Teacher owns authority, propels the "momentum" of the conversation.	"I would justify my authority in a teacher fashion . . ."; "I would adhere to the half-hour allotment for the meeting by saying . . ."

- "This teacher was very successful at gathering information from the parent";
- "This teacher was very successful at suggesting appropriate next step procedures";
- "This teacher was very successful at maintaining a positive relationship with the parent";
- "This teacher was very successful at accepting the parents' emotions"; and
- "This teacher was very successful at managing the flow of conversation."

Descriptive statistics and results of paired-sample *t* tests for each evaluation category are summarized in Table 2. Analyses corrected for multiple comparisons ($p < .05/7 = .007$). Experts viewed the two videos as significantly different models of parent–teacher communication, with the model in Video 2 rated as more effective than the model in Video 1. Consistent with our characterization of the teacher in Video 2 as a better model of teacher *responsiveness*, experts rated this model higher on the dimensions of gathering information, maintaining a positive relationship, accepting emotions, and managing flow. Their opinions of this model's ability to establish a positive opening to the conference were higher than the model in Video 1 but did not reach statistical significance. Contrary to our expectation that the models differed along the *structuring* dimension, there was no statistical difference in the experts' ratings of the two models' abilities to share information and suggest an action plan.

Next, we asked the experts to choose which model did the better job and to justify their choice. These data revealed differences and similarities between the two models' structuring and responsiveness—information that was not revealed by their quantitative ratings. For example, one expert noted that although the model in Video 1 had an action plan, she had too many ideas and had created them without the parent's input, an approach that contrasted the more responsive and partnership-oriented approach of the model in Video 2. This expert wrote,

The teacher in Video 1 did a lot of talking that marginalized the parent's role in contributing to the plan of action. She appeared nervous and fell victim to overly zealous plans of action that were good but may not be necessary at this phase. The teacher in Video 2 was calm, collected and showed a level of confidence in working with the parent. I got the impression that the parent was more open and trusting of the teacher in Video 2.

This idea was echoed by a second expert, who commented on how the higher levels of responsiveness modeled in Video 2 led to more information gathering and, in turn, a better understanding of the situation:

The Video 2 teacher clearly did a better job in my opinion. She was more responsive to the parent than the first teacher. She listened and adjusted her interpretation of

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Results of Paired-Sample *t* Tests for Expert Ratings of Each Video by Evaluation Category

Coding category	Model 1		Model 2				t(6)	p <
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Establishing positive opening	2.71	1.11	4.14	1.07	1.43	0.98	3.87	.008[a]
Sharing information	3.14	1.07	3.71	1.25	0.57	0.53	2.83	.030
Gathering information	1.57	0.79	3.71	1.38	2.14	1.07	5.30	.002***
Suggest action plan	2.43	0.79	3.00	1.29	0.57	1.27	1.19	.280
Maintain positive relationship	2.14	1.07	4.00	1.00	1.86	0.69	7.12	.001***
Accept emotions	1.43	0.79	3.71	1.38	2.29	1.11	5.43	.002***
Manage flow	2.29	0.76	3.86	0.90	1.57	0.53	7.78	.001***
Total	2.24	0.91	3.73	1.13	1.49	0.55	7.14	.001***

Note: [a]Approached significance.
***p < .007.

the situation and took the student's perspective into account. She was clearly interested in the mother's take on the situation, which is why the mother shared more. She opened more positively than Teacher 1. Saying, I don't really know him or you, so I do not really know what is going on (I'm paraphrasing) was a good technique. She gave the mother a message that she was a "good" mother (came in on short notice, clearly interested in him academically, rearranged) and expressed appreciation.

The contrasting emotional tenor of the videos was expressed this way by a third expert:

The first teacher's words about wanting to help didn't match her affect. The first teacher gave the mom suggestions for what Chris could do outside of school for studying without getting the mom's input first. It seemed that the mom never got comfortable with the first teacher as evidenced by the fact that she continued to hold her body . . . . The second teacher shared the same information, but more obviously pointed out the good qualities of Chris . . . . [She] actively listened more to the mom [and] conveyed more that they could work together to help Chris be successful. The mother's body language changed for the second teacher. She dropped her arms from holding her body.

Pointing to the weakness of the model in Video 2, one expert noted,

While the second teacher provides a more nurturing environment for the mother, she lacks details. She constantly says that it is "early" and that she just does not want Chris's behavior become an issue. She is hesitant and apologetic. In other words, she is the direct opposite of the first teacher.

Table 3. Participant Demographics

Level	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Total
Undergraduate	56	34	0	90
Graduate	9	11	31	51
Gender				
Male	15	14	7	36
Female	50	31	24	105
Ethnicity				
White	55	42	25	122
Black	6	1	2	9
Latino	3	1	0	4
Other	1	1	4	6
Total	65	45	31	

Summary. Having established the validity of the text- and video-based study materials, and a reliable set of benchmarks for evaluating candidate work, we then analyzed how candidates responded to the text-based case and to the accompanying contrasting videos.

Assessing Teacher Candidates' Readiness for Parent Involvement

Participants and procedures. Participants included three cohorts of 141 teacher candidates enrolled in foundation educational psychology courses taught by the first author. All participants were preservice teachers. The graduate students were either career changers returning to college after several years in the world of work or newly minted graduates of undergraduate programs in education or other disciplines. Table 3 summarizes candidate demographics.

Participation took the form of a regular homework assignment. Following a written overview of the task given in class, participants were given the chance to ask questions about the assignment. Later, they received individual emails containing

user names and passwords that allowed them to log on to a secure online system where they would complete the assignment.

Completing the task involved three phases. Phase 1 assessed candidates' self-efficacy for interacting with families in the context of a parent–teacher conference. Candidates used a 6-point Likert-type scale to rate their current ability to interact in several ways with students' family members (rating scale options were 0 = *not at all*, 5 = *every interaction*; α = .89; sample items: "I am able to identify appropriate follow-up or next step procedures"; "I am able to develop a collaborative student-centered plan of action"). Next, they read about a common situation faced by many teachers, asking a family member to visit the school to discuss a student's academic progress and classroom behavior. After reading the case, candidates were asked two questions: (a) "If you were the teacher, what would you need to do to make this conference successful? What strategies would you use?" and (b) "If you were the teacher in this situation, what questions would you ask? What else would you like to know?"

In Phase 2, candidates viewed and evaluated two QuickTime videos that involved two different teacher candidates (i.e., models) interacting with the same SP. Like the experts, candidates watched each video evaluating the teachers' performance along the seven dimensions derived from expert opinion (for a copy of the rating scale given to candidates, see appendix). After watching each video, they were asked to summarize each model's strengths and weaknesses along these dimensions.

In Phase 3, candidates compared their evaluations of the two models and then chose which one did the better job. They were asked to justify their choice in a paragraph and to use specific examples to support their decision.

Results

Candidates' Self-Efficacy and Strategic Knowledge

Candidates' ratings of their ability to communicate with families were uniformly high (*M* = 4.08, *SD* = 0.46, range = 0-5; α for the full scale = .88). Although the number of males and minorities included in the study was small, we examined levels of self-efficacy along demographic variables; there were no significant differences.

Responses to the question "If you were the teacher, what strategies would you use to make this conference successful?" were independently coded by the first author and a second rater. Coders looked for evidence of the seven categories described in Table 1. Strategies were coded only once (for presence or absence; multiple examples of a category were not summed). This coding scheme accounted for 99% of the data; average interrater reliability across categories was >89%. Examples of responses that did not fit within the categories included "I would come to the conference dressed professionally" and "The parents have to have an open mind about their child's learning."

Within the full range of seven categories, some were cited more frequently than others. In terms of responsiveness, almost all candidates stated that they would gather information from the parent (a strategy suggested by 91% of the sample). Two thirds of the candidates said they would try to maintain a positive relationship (68%); however, very few candidates mentioned the value of establishing a positive opening to the conference (suggested by 13%) and accepting the parent's emotions (5%). In terms of structuring, most were aware of need to share information (67%) and establish a plan of action (67%); however, few considered the need to manage the flow of the conversation (4%).

The following is an example of a candidate response that noted the value of both structuring and responsiveness. It represents a comprehensive plan:

> In order to make this conference successful, I would come to the conference dressed professionally and prepared with documentation of her son's work. I would welcome Mrs. Burton with a warm welcome and establish a professional rapport. Developing a positive, comfortable, and appropriate atmosphere during a parent–teacher conference is extremely important for making the meeting successful. During the conference, I would make sure to be attentive to Mrs. Burton by actively listening to what she has to say. I would do this by allowing her to speak without interruption, making eye contact, and portraying positive body language. I would also make sure to demonstrate that this meeting is centered and focused on her son. I would reveal this by explaining that the goal of this meeting is to develop a plan to help her child become more successful. I would end the conference by scheduling a follow-up meeting to discuss her son's progression.

Other examples mention the need to balance being firm (i.e., structuring) and being empathetic (i.e., responsive):

> I would have to be extremely patient, firm but also empathetic. It is important to allow the parent to feel as comfortable as possible rather than speaking in a condescending manner. Another [way] to ensure one's comfort is to explain confidentiality; it's also a form of respect and protection.

> I would bring all of Chris' work and all the assignments he did not do, not just my grade book. I would also take lots of notes on how I can help the student based on the parents' suggestions. Remembering not to place blame or make assumptions.

Table 4. Frequencies and Chi-Square Analysis of Candidates' Perceptions of Each Model's Strengths and Weaknesses

	Strengths					Weaknesses				
	Teacher 1		Teacher 2			Teacher 1		Teacher 2		
	%	*n*	%	*n*	χ^2	%	*n*	%	*n*	χ^2
Establishing positive opening	48	68	50	71	0.40	45	64	12	17	5.92**
Gathering information	18	25	59	83	6.74**	55	77	11	16	6.96**
Sharing information	40	57	28	40	2.18*	37	52	38	53	0.13
Reaching agreement	77	108	23	32	8.10**	20	28	65	91	7.18**
Maintaining positive relations	31	44	60	85	5.08**	34	48	4	5	6.02**
Accepting emotion	13	19	17	24	4.49**	12	17	0	0	4.12**
Managing flow	1	2	7	10	2.07*	13	18	16	23	0.93
Other	13	18	9	12	1.28	33	46	12	17	4.42**
Total		341		357	1.01		350		222	6.60**

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Responses to the question "If you were the teacher, what else would you like to know?" were coded into three categories: requests for basic information (e.g., "Has anything like this happened before?" coded as 1); student-centered questions indicating a desire to understand the student's attributes and interests (e.g., "Is he engaged in any after-school activities?" coded as 2); and partnership-oriented questions aimed at leveraging the parent's expertise ("How do you keep him focused and attentive?" coded as 3). Questions were coded as present or absent by category (i.e., the number of questions asked in each category were not summed). This coding scheme accounted for 100% of the data; interrater reliability = 91%. Sixty percent of the questions were basic requests for information. Student-centered and partnership-oriented questions were asked less frequently (18% and 2%, respectively). Graduate students asked proportionately more partnership-oriented questions ($\chi^2 = 2.48$, $p < .05$), whereas undergraduates asked proportionately more basic questions ($\chi^2 = 3.20$, $p < .01$).

The following is an example of a candidate who asked a range of questions across the three categories: "Does Chris show any interest towards school at home? Did he have attention issues prior to this year? Do you have any advice for me so that Chris can focus more?" This is an example of a candidate who asked several basic questions:

How does Chris act at home? Is he home by himself when you are at work? Has he been tested for any disabilities? Are there any personal problems at home that might concern Chris? Has Chris been like this last year or previous years?

In sum, candidates were very confident in their ability to communicate with families about their students' education. However, when asked to describe how they would approach a parent–teacher conference addressing a common dilemma, they tended to make limited use of a small range of potential strategies. Finally, although they appeared to know the importance of gathering information, the questions they intended to ask did not focus on establishing a partnership with the parent or on understanding the student as a person.

Perceptions of Strengths and Weaknesses

In this phase, we used the two videos of the "Burton" parent–teacher conference to examine candidates' ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of someone else's approach to the conference (i.e., "Now that you've watched how this teacher handled the conference, summarize her strengths and weaknesses"). Two independent coders reviewed candidates' responses for references to the seven codes identified in Table 1. This coding scheme accounted for 93% of the data; interrater reliability = 89%. Comments coded as "other" were either vague (e.g., "the teacher wasn't very professional") or focused on specific facets of the teachers' verbal communication skills (e.g., "this teacher said, 'um' a lot," "she spoke too fast") or appearance (e.g., "she didn't look professional," "she shouldn't have worn sandals"). The number of "other" comments was significantly higher when candidates were identifying teachers' weaknesses rather than their strengths ($\chi^2 = 4.42$, $p < .01$).

Table 4 summarizes frequency counts and chi-square statistics for candidates' references to each of the seven codes when rating the two models' strengths and weaknesses. In general, when commenting on the models' strengths, candidates saw no difference in their ability to establish a strong opening to the conference ($\chi^2 = .40$, $p < .69$). The majority viewed the model in Video 1 as stronger in sharing information ($\chi^2 = 2.18$, $p < .05$) and in reaching agreement ($\chi^2 = 8.10$, $p < .01$). By contrast, the majority viewed the model in Video

2 as stronger in all other areas: gathering information ($\chi^2 = 6.74$, $p < .00$), maintaining a positive relationship ($\chi^2 = 5.08$, $p < .01$), accepting emotions ($\chi^2 = 4.49$, $p < .01$), and managing flow ($\chi^2 = 2.07$, $p < .05$).

When commenting on the models' weaknesses, a similar pattern emerged. More candidates thought the model in Video 1 was weaker in establishing a strong opening ($\chi^2 = 5.92$, $p < .01$), gathering information ($\chi^2 = 6.96$, $p < .01$), maintaining positive relations ($\chi^2 = 6.02$, $p < .01$), and accepting the parent's emotions ($\chi^2 = 4.12$, $p < .01$). A significantly higher proportion of candidates saw the model in Video 2 as weak in the area of reaching agreement ($\chi^2 = 7.18$, $p < .01$). There was no difference in the models in terms of sharing information ($\chi^2 = .13$, $p < .90$) or managing flow ($\chi^2 = .93$, $p < .35$).

In sum, candidates perceived the models as strong and weak in the anticipated areas of structuring and responsiveness. Similar to the prior judgments of experts, candidates viewed the model in Video 1 as high structure–low responsiveness and the model in Video 2 as low structure–high responsiveness.

Candidates' Choice and Justifications

In this final phase, we asked candidates to choose the better teacher and to justify their choice. Like the expert panel, the majority of candidates (62%) chose Teacher 2 (low structure–high responsiveness). Although the number of males and minorities included in the study was small, we examined candidates' choice along demographic variables; there were no significant differences. To get a sense of the rationales underlying candidates' choice, we looked at their justification statements.

For the candidates who chose the model in Video 1, there was consensus that this model did the better job because she had multiple suggestions on how to proceed forward with supporting Chris. The idea or phrase "she had a plan" appeared in almost every response. Several candidates indicated that they chose this model because she had ideas for how she and the parent could work *together*. These perceptions differ from the expert panel's perception that the model in Video 1 marginalized the parent as a partner. Indeed, some experts described this model as "disrespectful" or "insulting" to the parent, and many commented on the fact that although she had numerous ideas about what to do, none of them emerged from consultation with the parent or the student. The following statements from candidates who chose the model in Video 1 demonstrate how some candidates' conceptions of partnership and effective communication center on the teacher's *structuring*. For example, one candidate wrote "to make sure that you do not waste your time and the time of the parent you must have a template of what will be discussed . . . you must have a plan for student improvement." Another candidate wrote,

I chose this teacher because she stated her case, and gave concrete examples of the problem and developed

a plan of action which included the parent to benefit the child. Teacher 1 also justified her authority more in a teacher fashion and her reasons for wanting to meet with the parent seemed more representative of why a teacher *should* schedule a parent–teacher conference.

Analysis of the justifications of candidates who chose the model in Video 2 indicate that they saw this model as more *responsive* and that this dimension was the means by which to establish a partnership with the parent (e.g., "If you have a very harsh personality and are not welcoming then I don't think the parent would be likely to come back to you or keep in touch for any reason"). Like our experts, many candidates also recognized this model's weakness in terms of structuring. For example, "She [Teacher 2] was more welcoming and didn't seem like she was disciplining the parent [but] she shouldn't have said that she doesn't know what the next step should be."

Discussion

Communicating with families is a central facet of the teaching profession, yet few teacher education institutions help candidates develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for family–school partnership. Addressing this void, the present study repurposed materials from an experiential learning paradigm—the SIM—into a vicarious experience format. Specifically, it used a text-based case and carefully selected videos of simulated parent–teacher conferences to explore teacher candidates' awareness and use of two dimensions of interpersonal communication: responsiveness and structuring.

The study contributes to the field of teacher education for family involvement in several ways. First, there are two important contributions that stem from our elicitation of expert opinion: (a) the establishment of a reliable "gold standard" definition of effective family–school communication, which, in turn, can be used to evaluate candidates' performance and (b) the establishment of the content validity of the text-based case and related videos, which can be disseminated as teaching and research tools.

Other contributions stem from what the application of this methodology reveals about candidates' readiness for parent involvement. Application of our research tools to candidates' responses revealed four major findings. First, candidates felt highly confident about their ability to communicate with students' families. Second, their levels of efficacy did not align with their actual skills: when asked to generate a response to a typical classroom-based dilemma that required a parent–teacher conference, candidates made limited use of a small range of effective communication strategies. Third, although candidates had difficulty generating a comprehensive plan of action, they could—with scaffolding from a checklist of behaviors—discriminate between effective and less-effective models of professional practice (i.e., one model that exemplified high structure–low responsiveness and another that modeled low structure–high responsiveness). Fourth, when

forced to choose the better model, most candidates' decision aligned with an expert panel; they chose the low structure–high responsiveness example.

As a snapshot of these teacher candidates' readiness to support family involvement, these findings align with prior research on novice teachers in several ways. First, these candidates' high self-efficacy is consistent with observed increases in general teaching self-efficacy during college coursework (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990). Second, the distance between candidates' high self-efficacy and limited skill/strategic knowledge is consistent with a similar disconnect observed in social psychology research. For example, less skilled professionals often overestimate their ability because they are less able to reflect accurately on what they can and cannot do (Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003). This pattern likely emerges from the fact that teacher candidates have few opportunities to test their skills in this area. As such, these results may reflect the beliefs and skills that candidates take with them into their first teaching positions. Future work might enhance candidates' readiness for parent involvement by bringing their ability beliefs and skills into alignment. This might be done by first asking candidates to rate their efficacy and then perform either a simulated conference or the vicarious task described here. Then, candidates could compare how their performance relates to expert benchmarks and reflect on their current knowledge, skills, and disposition. Such work should also track changes in candidates' self-efficacy in relation to the frequency and quality of their family involvement experiences.

Despite their inability to generate an effective plan, with scaffolding, candidates were able to discriminate between the effectiveness of two models with contrasting strengths and weaknesses. This pattern resonates with a long-established principle in cognitive psychology research: the process of recognition is easier than retrieval (J. Anderson & Bower, 1972). In light of this principle, this pattern might indicate that candidates knew more than they were able to report within the confines of the task. To test this, future work might use multiple tasks—including participation in a simulation—to get a better sense of candidates' actual skill level. A second interpretation of these data stems from cognitive development research and the concept of "skeletal principles" (Gelman & Lucariello, 2002). That is, candidates may have some innate but limited sense of what "good communication" looks like. This interpretation suggests that one fruitful avenue for future work is to make candidates' skeletal ideas more explicit and then systematically flesh them out into a more robust schema via instructional activities, such as repeated vicarious learning experiences or simulations. A third possibility is that candidates were only able to discriminate between the two models because they were given a tool that scaffolded their observations. Future work should test whether candidates can discriminate these dimensions independent of a guiding framework.

Finally, candidates' choice of the better model reveals not only what they value as good communication but also their disposition toward home–school partnerships. Some candidates appear to value structuring as the essence of good communication, whereas others value responsiveness as the essential dimension. It would be interesting to conduct interviews or collect additional individual differences data to determine the source of these preferences and if they are related to candidates' knowledge and skills.

The study's results must be viewed in light of several limitations. For example, the sample of teacher candidates and experts was relatively small and may not be generalizable. Future work should replicate the study's validation procedures and exploratory protocol with a larger and more diverse set of participants. Further, the results reported here pertain to only one case or exemplar situation that requires a parent–teacher conference. To gain a more complete understanding of candidates' readiness, multiple cases with varying levels of complexity and various types of demands must be used.

Theoretically, the study was guided by observational learning theory; however, it only assessed processes of acquisition. Thus, it cannot speak of how the observational task influenced processes of reproduction or candidates' subsequent conceptions of effective communication. To get at this, replications might ask students to reflect on and revise their original ideas in light of what they learned from observing the models. This might give us a sense of how the task affected their ability to generate a good solution.

In addition, to get at the motivational aspect of observational learning and candidates' high levels of self-efficacy with apparently limited skills, future work might immerse "highly confident" candidates first in the vicarious experience and then later in an actual simulation. This design could illuminate how perceptions of confidence, identity, and self-assessments of skill might change as a result of both the vicarious and live experiences. Finally, future work might track candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions by engaging them in multiple vicarious experiences or simulations, coupled with debriefings or coaching plans (see Dotger, Dotger, & Maher, 2010). This design could assess the impact of varied forms of practice (i.e., research conditions) on candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

The heart of this research inquiry rests on the diffusion of a situated learning platform to an alternative video comparison learning platform. Although the purpose of both learning platforms is to help future teachers learn to more effectively interact with parents and caregivers, the fundamental question—"Do students have to experience difficult parent–teacher conferences or can they learn from observing them from a distance?"—calls for additional scrutiny. This study lays the foundation for future work, including validation of other contrasting cases and systematic tests of the benefits of various instructional forms such as vicarious and direct experience. As both the simulation and video comparison platforms advance, they do so from the perspective of *pedagogies of enactment* (Grossman & McDonald, 2008), where novice teachers must engage in, and identify, the practices necessary for strong parent–teacher interactions.

Appendix A

Rating Scale Used by Candidates to Evaluate Video Models

Watch how each teacher approached this conference. Rate her or his performance on each of the seven dimensions below using a 5-point scale: 1= *not at all successful*, 5 = *very successful*. Below each dimension are sample behaviors.

The teacher . . .

1. Opening: Rating (1-5) = _____
    ___opened the meeting with a positive greeting.
    ___stated the purpose of the conference.
    ___shared his/her goals for the conference.

2. Gathering information   Rating (1-5) = _____
    ___asked the parent what she or he hoped to gain from the conference.
    ___asked the parent for pertinent information.
    ___actively listened to the parent (nodded, took notes).

3. Sharing information   Rating (1-5) = _____
    ___effectively used documents or other data.
    ___gave the parent sufficient information.
    ___ provided clear, logical explanations to the parent's questions.

4. Reaching agreement   Rating (1-5) = _____
    ___ identified appropriate follow-up or "next step" procedures.
    ___accepted/used the parent's ideas.
    ___developed a student-centered, collaborative plan of action.

5. Maintaining positive relationship   Rating (1-5) = _____
    ___maintained a positive tone.
    ___praised/encouraged the parent's efforts.
    ___showed interest in the student's well-being and success.

6. Accepting emotions   Rating (1-5) = _____
    ___validated the parent's feelings.
    ____showed empathy for the parent's feelings.

7. Managing flow   Rating (1-5) = _____
    ____justified her or his authority as needed
    ____managed time, kept the conversation "on track"

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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About the Authors

Joan M. T. Walker is an associate professor in the School of Education at Pace University. As a psychologist, she seeks to understand how interpersonal relationships function as developmental contexts. Her research examines parent–teacher interactions, teacher–student relationships, and parent and teacher contributions to child and adolescent outcomes.

Benjamin H. Dotger is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Syracuse University. His scholarship focuses on the design and research of clinical simulations for teacher and school leader preparation, including both general and content-specific simulated problems of practice.