

# Special Education Teacher Preparation for Family–Professional Partnerships: Results From a National Survey of Teacher Educators

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Kathleen B. Kyzar<sup>1</sup>, Tracy Gershwin Mueller<sup>2</sup>,  
Grace L. Francis<sup>3</sup>, and Shana J. Haines<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

Family–professional partnerships (FPPs) are an important, federally mandated part of the American education system that benefit all students, but especially students with disabilities. Although special education teacher preparation programs offer a viable and sustainable way to enhance FPPs, little is known about the degree to which these programs address FPPs within their curricula. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which special education teacher preparation programs address FPPs. A total of 113 special education faculty members across 52 institutions responded to a national online survey addressing this topic. Results indicated (a) a disconnect in the value and implementation of FPP-related knowledge and skills at the program and individual faculty levels and (b) patterns of inconsistent FPP-related content coverage across undergraduate and graduate offerings as well as across FPP-specific and non-FPP-specific coursework. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

## Keywords

teacher preparation, disability, family, collaboration, partnership

We define family–professional partnership (FPP) as a

. . . relationship in which families (not just parents) and professionals agree to build on each other’s expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals. (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015, p. 161)

FPPs are grounded in trust and are influenced by home–school communication practices, professional competence, and the demonstration of commitment, advocacy, respect, and equality on the part of both families and special education professionals (Blue-Banning, Summers,

Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2015). Activities undertaken through FPPs include (a) determining and meeting needs; (b) obtaining services and supports; (c) monitoring services and supports; (d) connecting home, school, and community; and (e) advocating for systems improvement (Haines et al., 2017).

<sup>1</sup>Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, USA

<sup>3</sup>George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

<sup>4</sup>The University of Vermont, Burlington, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Kathleen B. Kyzar, College of Education, Texas Christian University, Box 297900, Fort Worth, TX 76129, USA.

Email: k.kyzar@tcu.edu

The value of FPPs in the American education system has been recognized in both policy and educational research for the past four decades. Federal education regulations outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (P.L. 109-446) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (P.L. 114-95) encourage equality and joint decision-making in the family-professional relationship to address students' educational needs. Family participation is a key principle of IDEA, which affords families the right to request an initial evaluation for disability determination and special education services, consent to or refuse special education services, and participate in their child's evaluation and Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meetings (Zuna & Kyzar, in press). Furthermore, scholars within the special education field have linked FPPs with factors associated with student outcomes, including school culture (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008); family well-being (Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Kyzar, Brady, Summers, Haines, & Turnbull, 2016) and parental advocacy (Burke & Hodapp, 2016); stronger teacher instructional techniques and efficacy (Haines, McCart, & Turnbull, 2013); and postschool outcomes such as competitive employment (Francis, Gross, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2013).

Yet, despite its notable advantages, many barriers prevent FPPs from flourishing. Barriers often reported in the literature include families' lack of knowledge about special education services and their rights under IDEA (Fish, 2008), language and cultural barriers (Wolfe & Durán, 2013), and breakdowns in communication between families and professionals (Mueller, 2015). Educators' use of professional language and jargon in their interactions with families, and within the IEP process in particular, creates a power imbalance between educators and families and is therefore a barrier to FPPs (Elbaum, Blatz, & Rodriguez, 2016; Simon, 2006). In addition, teachers' lack of perspective-taking skills, or considering issues from the families' point of view, in their interactions with families impedes FPPs (Bezdek, Summers,

& Turnbull, 2010; Peck, Maude, & Brotherston, 2015).

A key source for enhancing FPPs is educator professional development, and a small but important body of research documents the positive effects of teacher education coursework on special education teacher candidates' mastery of FPP-related competencies. Fults and Harry (2012), for example, found that a course designed to "teach students how to work with a diverse range of families of young children with special education and health needs" (p. 31) resulted in students' enhanced understanding of family-centered principles and responsiveness to diversity. Murray, Curran, and Zellers (2008) examined the effects of an undergraduate course for preservice special educators that involved multiple opportunities for interactions with families and a parent co-instructor. Results suggested a pre/post change in students' attitudes about families; after completing the course, students were more likely to view parents as partners in the educational decision-making process.

Yet, courses such as the ones assessed by Fults and Harry and Murray et al. do not appear to be widespread. Markow, Macia, and Lee (2013) conducted a national survey of general and special education in-service teachers and reported that 73% ( $n = 240$  elementary teachers;  $n = 229$  middle/high school teachers) identified FPP as one of the most challenging aspects of their jobs, and studies investigating the degree to which teacher preparation programs incorporate FPP content have yielded discouraging results. For example, in a national study of early childhood/special education (EC/SE) teacher preparation programs, Chang, Early, and Winton (2005) found that only 57% of EC/SE teacher preparation programs include a course that addressed FPPs, a rate that is, arguably, not sufficient given that family-centered practice is foundational to EC/SE service provision (Epley, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010). Meanwhile, Epstein and Sanders (2006) surveyed the deans and department chairs within 161 schools, colleges, and departments within institutions of higher education. Results indicated that only 7% strongly agreed that newly

graduated teachers were prepared to work with families.

The apparent lack of preparation for FPP on the part of special education teacher preparation programs may stem from the lack of FPP-specific educator standards. Among the four states represented by the current author team, the percentages of FPP-related standards ranged from 4.2% in Texas (nine out of 213 standards) to 11.4% in Vermont (four out of 35 standards). These counts are conservative as they encompass broadly stated collaboration standards that include but are not specific to families. For example, teachers in Texas should be able to “design, implement, and evaluate instructional programs that enhance an individual’s social participation in family, school, and community activities” (“Special Education Grades EC-12 Standards for All-Level Teaching Certificate,” p. 9). Although this standard embeds FPP-specific knowledge and skills, it is not unique to FPP, and therefore its coverage across programs may vary. On the whole, in the absence of robust and comprehensive FPP-specific teaching standards, the decision to cover FPP within higher education coursework will be inconsistent as it will be dependent largely on the values, priorities, and resources of individual faculty members.

In sum, over four decades of educational policies have outlined the significance of FPPs, yet mounting research has indicated that, in practice, they are far from optimal. Given the important role institutions of higher education have in enhancing teachers’ FPP-related competencies, research on the extent to which and how special education teachers are prepared for FPP is important. Yet, currently, the literature includes reports of isolated methods and strategies, and it is largely qualitative in nature. Research has not identified how FPP competencies are covered within preservice curricula, resulting in unaddressed questions such as the following: Do special education teacher preparation programs include stand-alone FPP courses, or do teacher educators infuse FPP content within existing courses? If the latter, to what extent are key FPP competencies covered within the

various types of existing courses (e.g., assessment, instructional methods)? Identifying the specific FPP-related knowledge and skill competencies that are currently covered in teacher preparation programs could inform efforts aimed at improving teacher preparation for FPPs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which teacher educators address FPPs within their coursework, using a random, national sample of university-based faculty situated within special education teacher preparation programs. To our knowledge, this is the first study to document the state of special education teacher preparation for FPP. Our research questions included

1. What perceptions do teacher educators have about the value of FPP preparation within the special education field in general, within their department, and within their own teaching/courses?
2. To what extent do teacher educators cover FPP-related content within FPP-specific (i.e., FPP content comprises 50%+ of entire course) versus non-FPP-specific special education coursework (i.e., FPP content comprises <50% of entire course) across undergraduate and graduate instructional levels?
3. What are the patterns of FPP-related knowledge and skills content coverage in FPP-specific versus non-FPP-specific special education coursework across undergraduate and graduate instructional levels?

## Method

### Participants

Study participants included 113 faculty members instructing in a special education teacher preparation program within 52 U.S. institutions of higher education. Most participants (61.9%) reported working in public universities as tenured or pre-tenured faculty (77.0%). A majority of participants reported teaching

courses related to high incidence disabilities (89.2%; e.g., specific learning disability, emotional-behavioral disorders) and low incidence disabilities (75.2%; e.g., intellectual disability, sensory impairments). Forty-three participants (38.1%) indicated they had a leadership role within their department as the chair or coordinator of the special education program (refer to Table 1 for complete participant characteristics).

### *Teacher Preparation for Family–Professional Partnership Survey*

*Survey description.* Data were collected utilizing the Teacher Preparation for Family–Professional Partnership Survey (TP-FPP) survey. Prior to having access to the first TP-FPP survey question in Part 1, participants were informed of the purpose of the survey and of how FPP is defined for the purposes of the survey. The TP-FPP definition for FPP is as follows: “family-professional partnerships are defined as relationships in which families and professionals ‘build on each other’s expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members’” (Turnbull et al., 2015, p. 161).

Survey questions consisted of dichotomous yes–no questions, open-ended response questions, and Likert-type-scale questions and were divided into four parts: (a) FPP-focused courses, (b) non-FPP-focused courses, (c) perceptions and experiences related to FPP in teacher preparation programs, and (d) demographic information. Participants completed the four-part, 46-question survey online via Qualtrics survey software. All questions were voluntary.

Part 1 of the survey assessed the presence or absence of a course in the participant’s teacher education program devoted largely (50%+ of content coverage) to FPP content. If present, participants were asked to identify if they were the current instructor of the FPP-focused course. Participants who responded “no” to this question were routed to Part 2 of the TP-FPP survey. Participants who

responded “yes” were routed to additional questions about the course. They were asked to indicate if the FPP course aligned with licensure or teacher certification in their state. They also identified the coverage of FPP-related knowledge and skills content via a closed-ended check-all-that-apply question format. There were 11 knowledge items and nine skill items. Knowledge items included theory relevant to FPP, policy relevant to FPP, current trends in family demographics and diversity in family structure, approaches to parenting, culturally responsive FPP practices, family life cycle, challenges in the family system, abuse and neglect, characteristics of families of children with disabilities, characteristics of families of English language learners, and characteristics of families immigrating to the United States and/or families who are refugees. Skill items included engaging families in their children’s learning at home and school, taking care of oneself (e.g., mindfulness), perspective-taking, advocating for children and families, treating families with respect and equality, communicating with families, leading/facilitating meetings, sharing evaluation results, and planning and implementing positive behavior interventions and supports. An open-ended “other” option was also available, providing participants with the opportunity to write-in FPP knowledge and skill coverage not included in the list. Each of these questions was presented in parallel form for graduate- and undergraduate-level coursework so that participants could adjust their responses based on the types of learning activities they included at different instructional levels.

Part 2 of the TP-FPP assessed the extent to which and how FPP content was covered within courses participants taught that devoted less than 50% of coverage to FPP content. Participants were presented with the following list of nine course options: introductory content, instructional methods (e.g., literacy, math), assessment, behavior, transition to adulthood, policy or law, technology, collaboration with other professionals such as co-teaching, and “other.” Participants chose one of the following options for each of nine

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics ( $N = 113$ ).

| Characteristic  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| <b>Geographic location</b>  |           |            |
| Northeast   | 29        | 25.7       |
| Southeast   | 32        | 28.3       |
| Midwest   | 25        | 22.1       |
| Southwest   | 13        | 11.5       |
| West  | 13        | 11.5       |
| Missing   | 1         | 0.9        |
| <b>University type</b>  |           |            |
| Public university   | 70        | 61.9       |
| Private, nonprofit  | 26        | 23.0       |
| Liberal arts college  | 9         | 8.0        |
| Private, for-profit   | 7         | 6.2        |
| Missing   | 1         | 0.9        |
| <b>Position appointment</b>   |           |            |
| University faculty, tenured or pre-tenured                                      | 87        | 77.0       |
| University faculty, clinical position   | 5         | 4.4        |
| University faculty, adjunct   | 6         | 5.3        |
| Other <sup>a</sup>  | 13        | 11.5       |
| Missing   | 2         | 1.8        |
| <b>Years of experience</b>  |           |            |
| 1 year or less  | 10        | 8.8        |
| 2-6 years   | 35        | 31.0       |
| 7-15 years  | 37        | 32.7       |
| 16 or more years  | 29        | 25.7       |
| Missing   | 2         | 1.8        |
| <b>Teaching load per fall semester<sup>b</sup></b>                              |           |            |
| One to two classes  | 31        | 27.4       |
| Three classes   | 30        | 26.5       |
| Four classes  | 39        | 34.5       |
| Five classes  | 6         | 5.3        |
| Six classes   | 5         | 4.4        |
| Missing   | 2         | 1.8        |
| <b>Program emphasis<sup>c</sup></b>   |           |            |
| High incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, behavior)             | 97        | 85.8       |
| Low incidence disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability, sensory impairments) | 85        | 75.2       |
| Special gifts and talents   | 32        | 28.3       |
| Other <sup>d</sup>  | 11        | 9.7        |

<sup>a</sup>Thirteen participants indicated that their position would be described as “other”—a non-tenure/tenure track university faculty such as visiting faculty and lecturer positions ( $n = 4$ ), program or center director positions ( $n = 4$ ), center director ( $n = 2$ ), coordinator position ( $n = 2$ ), and department chair ( $n = 1$ ).

<sup>b</sup>Course load numbers did not differ significantly for the spring semester course loads reported.

<sup>c</sup>Percentage does not equal 100% and frequency count does not equal 113.

<sup>d</sup>Nine of the 11 participants specified the “other” area in which they taught as follows: autism ( $n = 4$ ), early childhood/special education/developmental delay ( $n = 2$ ), “special education law” and “classroom management” ( $n = 1$ ), “problematic behavior” ( $n = 1$ ), and “English as a New Language, poverty and homelessness” ( $n = 1$ ).

course options: (a) “I do not teach a course that covers content of this type,” (b) “I do not cover FPP content in any session of this

course,” (c) “I mention families, but I do not cover FPP content explicitly within this course,” (d) “I embed FPP content within a

few sessions of this course,” (e) “I embed FPP content within most sessions of this course,” or (f) “I embed FPP content within all sessions of this course.” Participants who indicated that they embedded FPP content within a few, most, or all sessions of any course were directed to a series of questions in a similar pattern as those included in Part 1: (a) FPP-related knowledge and (b) FPP-related skills coverage. The knowledge items included eight of the 11 items from Part 1, excluding those that are highly specific to an FPP course: approaches to parenting, family life cycle, and abuse and neglect. Skill items included seven of the nine items from Part 1, excluding taking care of oneself (e.g., mindfulness) and perspective-taking. Similar to Part 1, each of these questions was presented in parallel form for graduate- and undergraduate-level coursework.

For the current study, we recoded the Part 2 TP-FPP data to align with a 5-point Likert-type scale for the eight course types (excluding “other”) such that the items described in (b) through (f) (described previously) received a code of “1” (i.e., no FPP coverage in any course session), “2” (i.e., FPP is mentioned but not explicitly covered), “3” (i.e., FPP is embedded within a few course sessions), “4” (i.e., FPP is embedded within most course sessions), or “5” (i.e., FPP is embedded in all course sessions). The data associated with participants choosing option (a) were recoded as missing and were not included in the data analysis for the current study.

Part 3 of the TP-FPP survey assessed participants’ perceptions and experiences related to FPP content coverage within teacher preparation generally, as well as specifically within their program. This portion of the survey asked participants to respond to eight items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 5 = *strongly agree*) in which participants rated their perceptions of the importance of FPP content in teacher preparation programs, their satisfaction with the degree to which FPP is addressed in their program, and their perceptions of the emphasis placed on FPP content in their respective programs.

Part 4 of the survey collected demographic information such as geographic location within the United States, nature of position (e.g., tenure-line, adjunct), length of time in position, and teaching load each semester.

**Survey development.** Two members of the author team developed the initial TP-FPP protocol using Qualtrics survey software based on literature searches identifying gaps in research-based knowledge on the extent to which and how family-specific coursework is included within special education teacher preparation programs. Research-based recommendations for online surveys outlined by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) informed the initial survey design. The remaining two members of the author team (who both maintain FPPs as their primary areas of research) and one additional FPP scholar/teacher educator reviewed the initial protocol. We revised the survey based on the feedback from these three experts and then asked additional three university faculty members (tenured and pre-tenured) in special education teacher preparation programs to complete the survey and provide feedback. The feedback from these respondents informed the further refinement of the tool, which comprised the TP-FPP survey distributed to respondents for this study.

## Procedures

**Sampling.** In this study, we utilized survey research design and multistage sampling procedures (Fowler, 2009). After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, we obtained The IRIS Center’s (2017) comprehensive list of 949 special education programs within U.S. institutions of higher education with state-approved special education teacher preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. At Stage 1 of the selection process, we generated a random 10% sample (1/10 probability of selection) from the full list of 949 programs using SPSS (version 23). The resulting sample consisted of 91 randomly selected programs. (SPSS randomly selects an approximate, not exact, percentage

of the full sample.) At Stage 2 of the selection process, we included all faculty members within 91 programs (i.e., 1/1 probability of selection). The information on The IRIS Center list included the name, state, and type (e.g., small, private, faith-based) of the institutions, but it did not include faculty contact information. Consequently, graduate assistants searched the 91 program websites to identify department chairs and special education faculty contact information (i.e., names and postal/email addresses). In cases where contact information on the program websites was unclear, the graduate assistants called the university programs to obtain contact information. The graduate assistants identified chair or dean information for all 91 programs and faculty information for 85 of the 91 programs. We divided the list of 91 programs equally among the author team and emailed the department chairs to inform them of the study and request confirmation of the faculty contact information identified from the websites. One week after sending the initial email, we sent follow-up emails to department chairs who did not respond.

As a result of this email communication, we received confirmation of faculty contact information from 50 of 91 department chairs (54.9%). Eleven of the 91 programs were removed from the list for the following reasons: (a) lack of special education teacher preparation program at their institution ( $n = 4$ ), (b) inability to attain faculty contact information ( $n = 3$ ), (c) need to receive IRB approval from the institution ( $n = 1$ ), (d) institutional closure due to a recent hurricane ( $n = 2$ ), and (e) institution being a part of a consortium instead of a stand-alone teacher preparation program ( $n = 1$ ). Of the remaining 80 programs, our faculty distribution list consisted of 171 faculty names for whom we had confirmed postal and email contact information and 189 faculty names for whom we had unconfirmed contact information ( $N = 360$ ). The number of faculty at each program ranged from 1 to 15.

**Data collection.** Following recommendations made by Dillman et al. (2014), we mailed an

invitational and informative postal letter to all 360 university faculty members in our sample, informing faculty that they would receive an email with a link to the TP-FPP survey within the next week. We followed up 1 week later with an email that referenced the postal letter invitation and included a personalized link to the TP-FPP survey. We sent two email follow-up requests to recipients who did not complete the TP-FPP survey within 1 week (first reminder) and 10 days (second reminder) after the first email contact. We sent all emails through the Qualtrics survey software system.

A total of 360 university faculty members spanning 80 institutions received email invitations to participate in this study. Of those 360 invitations, three emails were returned as undeliverable. Therefore, in all, 357 university faculty members received personalized links to the TP-FPP survey. One-hundred and ninety-nine faculty members did not respond. Of those 199, over one half ( $n = 102$ ) were from institutions in which the department chair did not confirm faculty contact information. The remaining 158 faculty members responded to the survey request. Four of the respondents clicked the “opt out” link included within the body of the survey email message and therefore did not start the survey. Of the 154 remaining respondents, 21 indicated that they were not eligible for this study because they were not instructors in a teacher preparation program leading to special education licensure or certification; due to the routing logic built into the TP-FPP survey logic, these 21 respondents did not have access to any of the remaining questions. Of the remaining 133, 20 respondents (15.0%) did not complete Parts 3 and 4 of the TP-FPP survey, which comprised approximately one third of the overall survey. As we will describe in the forthcoming data analysis section of this article, the data associated with these 20 participants were removed from the data set. The total number of participants for the study was 113. The rate of response return was 37.3% ( $113/357 = 31.7\%$ ).

Participants represented 52 unique institutions spanning most major geographic

regions of the United States (see Table 1). There were multiple respondents from 34 of the 52 institutions represented (range: 1-7;  $Mdn = 2$ ;  $M = 2.79$ ). Because the focus of our research was on understanding perspectives and instructional practices related to FPP at the *instructor level* (rather than program/department or institution levels), we retained all data from institutions in which there were multiple respondents. As FPP-related coverage will vary according to course type (e.g., introduction course vs. assessment course vs. policy course), it is likely that participants from the same program/department would approach FPP-related content coverage differently and therefore offer distinct answers to the questions on the TP-FPP survey. Indeed, as a key question of this study is the extent to which FPP-related content is covered in eight different types of non-FPP-specific coursework offerings, retaining these participants was important in accomplishing the study aims.

**Data analysis.** To prepare the data for analysis, we first exported the data set from Qualtrics to SPSS (version 23). We then identified and coded all missing values that were missing by survey design to account for the survey skip logic, as well as nonresponses to options whereby respondents could check all options that apply. In some instances, a nonresponse on one question prevented respondents from viewing other questions. For example, if respondents answered “no” to the question “Do you currently teach the course in your program that is largely devoted (50%+) to FPP?” they would be prevented from viewing the 14 FPP-specific coursework questions that followed. Therefore, we coded missing data on subsequent questions because of an earlier nonresponse as missing by survey design. The nonresponse to the earlier question, however, remained as missing due to nonresponse. Therefore, all remaining missing observations were missing due to nonresponse on the part of the participant. After preparing the data for analysis, we observed that out of 133 respondents (refer to response rate information in the data collection section, described previously),

20 respondents (15.0%) did not complete the final third section of the survey and there was a total of 8.6% missing information in the entire data set.

To determine whether the pattern of missing values was missing completely at random (MCAR), Little’s MCAR test (Little, 1988) was conducted. The null hypothesis of Little’s MCAR test is that the pattern of the data is MCAR and follows a  $\chi^2$  distribution. Using an expectation–maximization algorithm, the MCAR test estimates the univariate means and correlations for each of the continuous variables. In the current study, there were six continuous variables located at the end of the survey. The results revealed that the pattern of missing values in the data was MCAR,  $\chi^2(14) = 14.26, p = .430$ . Given that the missing data were MCAR, the 20 respondents who did not complete the survey were removed from the final analysis. The final data set consisted of 113 recorded cases, which included 100 cases with missing data (88.5%). Out of 208 numeric variables, 105 contained missing data (50.5%), which amounted to a total of 3.3% missing information in the data set. We analyzed data resulting from the closed-ended response questions only. We utilized descriptive statistics, namely frequency counts, and SPSS (v. 23) for all analyses reported.

## Results

### *RQ 1: Perceptions About the Value of FPP Preparation*

Overwhelmingly, participants agreed or strongly agreed (96.5%) that FPP would be a key responsibility their teacher candidates would have upon graduation. Although two thirds (72.6%) agreed/strongly agreed that teacher preparation programs should dedicate at least one course for FPP content specifically, fewer were satisfied with the amount of FPP content covered in their department’s program (54.9%) and with the time (54.9%) and depth (49.6%) of coverage in their own courses. Refer to Table 2 for the percent of participants who agreed or strongly agreed



**Table 2.** Participants' Perceptions About the Value of FPP-Related Teacher Preparation ( $N = 113$ ).

|   | Agree or<br>strongly agree<br><i>n</i> (%) |
|---|--|
| Perceptions about teacher preparation for FPP within the special education field  |  |
| One of the key responsibilities our teacher candidates will have when they graduate is to partner with families.  | 109 (96.5)                                 |
| Teacher preparation programs should include at least one course designated specifically for FPP content.  | 82 (72.6)                                  |
| Perceptions about teacher preparation for FPP within participants' departments  |  |
| On the whole, faculty members within my program value the importance of FPP in early childhood and/or K-12 settings.  | 98 (86.7)                                  |
| I am satisfied with the amount of FPP content that is covered in my department's teacher preparation programs(s).   | 61 (54.0)                                  |
| In my department, decisions about the coverage of FPP content in our teacher preparation program(s) are considered as important as decisions about the coverage of other content areas (e.g., literacy, math, assessment). <sup>a</sup> | 62 (54.9)                                  |
| Perceptions about teacher preparation for FPP within participants' courses  |  |
| I am satisfied with the time I have to cover FPP content within the courses I teach.  | 62 (54.9)                                  |
| I am satisfied with the depth of FPP content I cover within the courses I teach.  | 56 (49.6)                                  |

Note. Percentages were calculated based on the full sample ( $N = 113$ ). FPP = Family-professional partnership.

<sup>a</sup>Item had missing data of  $n = 1$ .

with value-related statements about teacher preparation for FPP within the special education field, within their department, and within their own courses.

### RQ 2: Extent of FPP-Related Content Coverage

**FPP-specific courses.** Slightly less than half of the study participants ( $n = 55$ , 48.7%) reported that their departments' teacher preparation program included a course devoted largely (50%+) to FPP content. Of those 55 participants, 15 (13.3% of the full sample) reported that they were the current instructor of the FPP-specific course in their program. All 15 participants indicated that the FPP-specific course they taught was aligned with teacher licensure or certification in their respective states.

**Non-FPP-specific courses.** Over half of participants reported teaching a course that devoted less than 50% of content coverage specific to FPP (e.g., assessment, instructional methods, introduction to special education) at the

undergraduate ( $n = 72$ ; 63.7%) and graduate ( $n = 67$ ; 59.3%) levels. In completing the TP-FPP survey, participants were not asked to specify if their course had mixed undergraduate/graduate enrollment, so the data represent mutually exclusive instructional-level categories: undergraduate versus graduate. Tables 3 and 4 include the *M* and *SD* statistics in ascending order documenting the extent to which FPP-related content was covered in eight unique non-FPP-specific course offerings at the graduate and undergraduate levels. The course types included represent those that are typically included in special education teacher preparation programs.

Across all eight course types, the range of mean scores at the undergraduate and graduate levels was similar: 2.78 to 3.58 at the undergraduate level and 2.84 to 3.65 at the graduate level. This suggests that at the lowest end, FPP-related content is infused at a level that *approaches* a few course sessions and, at the highest end, FPP-related content is presented within approximately half of the course sessions (i.e., range of a few to most course sessions). Across all eight course

**Table 3.** FPP-Related Content Coverage in Non-FPP-Specific Coursework at the Undergraduate Level ( $n = 72$ ).

| Non-FPP-specific undergraduate course               | $n$ (%) <sup>a</sup> | $M$ <sup>b</sup> | $SD$ <sup>b</sup> |
|---|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Instructional methods <sup>c</sup>                  | 46 (63.9)            | 2.87             | 1.05              |
| Assessment  | 43 (60.0)            | 2.98             | 0.99              |
| Technology  | 31 (43.1)            | 3.00             | 1.13              |
| Behavior  | 51 (70.8)            | 3.16             | 0.88              |
| Introductory content                                | 55 (76.4)            | 3.22             | 0.81              |
| Policy or law                                       | 40 (55.6)            | 3.23             | 1.00              |
| Transition to adulthood                             | 36 (50.0)            | 3.42             | 0.97              |
| Collaboration with other professionals <sup>d</sup> | 52 (72.2)            | 3.58             | 1.02              |

Note. FPP = Family-professional partnership.

<sup>a</sup>The  $n$  for each course type represents the number of participants indicating that they taught the course. Percentages reported for each course type were calculated based on the subsample of participants teaching undergraduate coursework ( $n = 72$ ), not the full sample of  $N = 113$ .

<sup>b</sup>The scale used to calculate the  $M$  and  $SD$  statistics for each course type was a 5-point Likert-type scale as follows: 1 = I do not cover FPP content in any session of this course, 2 = I mention families, but I do not cover FPP content explicitly within this course, 3 = I embed FPP content within a few sessions of this course, 4 = I embed FPP content within most sessions of this course, and 5 = I embed FPP content within all sessions of this course.

<sup>c</sup>Examples given for "Instructional Methods" were literacy and math coursework.

<sup>d</sup>Examples given for "Collaboration with Other Professionals" were co-teaching and working with paraprofessionals.

**Table 4.** FPP-Related Content Coverage in Non-FPP-Specific Coursework at the Graduate Level ( $n = 67$ ).

| Non-FPP-specific graduate course                    | $n$ (%) <sup>a</sup> | $M$ <sup>b</sup> | $SD$ <sup>b</sup> |
|---|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Instructional methods <sup>c</sup>                  | 37 (55.2)            | 2.84             | 1.04              |
| Technology  | 26 (38.8)            | 2.88             | 1.18              |
| Introductory content                                | 50 (74.6)            | 3.10             | 0.65              |
| Assessment  | 34 (50.7)            | 3.24             | 0.99              |
| Behavior  | 34 (50.7)            | 3.24             | 0.99              |
| Policy or law                                       | 38 (56.7)            | 3.26             | 0.92              |
| Transition to adulthood                             | 28 (41.8)            | 3.36             | 0.83              |
| Collaboration with other professionals <sup>d</sup> | 46 (68.7)            | 3.65             | 0.95              |

Note. FPP = Family-professional partnership.

<sup>a</sup>The  $n$  for each course type represents the number of participants indicating that they taught the course. Percentages reported for each course type were calculated based on the subsample of participants teaching graduate coursework ( $n = 67$ ), not the full sample of  $N = 113$ .

<sup>b</sup>The scale used to calculate the  $M$  and  $SD$  statistics for each course type was based on a 5-point Likert-type scale as follows: 1 = I do not cover FPP content in any session of this course, 2 = I mention families, but I do not cover FPP content explicitly within this course, 3 = I embed FPP content within a few sessions of this course, 4 = I embed FPP content within most sessions of this course, and 5 = I embed FPP content within all sessions of this course.

<sup>c</sup>Examples given for "Instructional Methods" were literacy and math coursework.

<sup>d</sup>Examples given for "Collaboration with Other Professionals" were co-teaching and working with paraprofessionals.

types and across both instructional levels (i.e., undergraduate and graduate), on average, the most likely rate of FPP-related content infusion was at a level of "a few course sessions" (as contrasted to none, most, or all sessions). Regardless of instructional level

(undergraduate or graduate), on average, instructors of methods coursework included FPP-related content at the lowest rates; instructors of transition to adulthood and collaboration courses included FPP-related content at the highest rates.

### RQ 3: Patterns of FPP-Specific Knowledge and Skills Coverage

*FPP-related knowledge.* Participants indicated the type of knowledge covered in their FPP-specific and non-FPP-specific courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels (see Table 5). Overall, FPP-specific courses included knowledge items at higher rates than non-FPP-specific courses. Seventy-five percent or greater of participants teaching FPP-specific courses reported including all eight FPP-related knowledge indicators (four items were reported covered by 90% or greater of participants). Participants teaching non-FPP-specific courses had a wide range of coverage across the eight knowledge items; FPP-related theory was covered at the lowest rates (26.4% at the undergraduate level and 31.3% at the graduate level) and content related to families of children with disabilities was covered at the highest level (86.1% at the undergraduate level and 85.1% at the undergraduate level). Across FPP-specific and non-FPP-specific courses, FPP-related knowledge was covered at similar rates across undergraduate and graduate offerings.

In addition to the items included in Table 5, the 15 participants who taught FPP-specific courses had access to three additional survey items related to knowledge coverage; the three items and the frequency with which these participants reported coverage are as follows: (a) approaches to parenting ( $n = 9$ , 75.0% for undergraduate coverage;  $n = 6$ , 60.0% for graduate coverage), (b) family life cycle (e.g., developmental stages such as moving from having a child in elementary school to having a child in middle school;  $n = 12$ , 100.0% for undergraduate coverage and  $n = 8$ , 80.0% for graduate coverage), and (c) abuse and neglect ( $n = 10$ , 83.3% for undergraduate coverage and  $n = 5$ , 50.0% or graduate coverage).

#### *FPP-related skills*

Participants indicated the type of skills covered in their FPP-specific and non-FPP-specific courses at the undergraduate and

graduate levels (see Table 5). Similar to the FPP-related knowledge items, FPP-related skills were covered at higher rates within FPP-specific courses compared with non-FPP-specific courses. Within FPP-specific courses, however, skills related to engaging families in their children's learning at home and at school were covered almost two times as much in undergraduate offerings as contrasted to graduate offerings. Furthermore, skills related to sharing evaluation results and planning/implementing positive behavior interventions and supports were covered at 1.25 times higher rates within undergraduate offerings than within graduate offerings. For non-FPP-specific courses, skills were covered at roughly equivalent rates across undergraduate and graduate offerings, but the range of skill coverage across all six FPP-related skills items was more limited than the range for FPP-related knowledge items, suggesting that, on the whole, skills are covered more frequently than knowledge within non-FPP-specific coursework.

In addition to the items included in Table 5, the 15 participants who taught FPP-specific courses had access to two additional survey items related to skill coverage; the three items and the frequency with which these participants reported coverage are as follows: (a) skills related to taking care of oneself (e.g., mindfulness practice, self-compassion;  $n = 9$  for undergraduate coverage and  $n = 4$  for graduate coverage) and (b) skills related to perspective-taking, such as empathy ( $n = 12$  for undergraduate coverage and  $n = 9$  for graduate coverage).

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to comprehensively examine FPP-related content coverage within U.S. university-based special education teacher preparation programs utilizing a random sample of university programs. Based on the results of our study, it appears that teacher candidates' exposure to FPP-related content in non-FPP-specific courses will vary according to the type of course in which they are enrolled, and that for most

**Table 5.** FPP-Related Knowledge and Skills Covered in FPP- and Non-FPP-Specific Courses.

|  | FPP-specific courses<br><i>n</i> (%) |                    | Non-FPP-specific<br>courses<br><i>n</i> (%) |                    |
|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---|--------------------|
|  | UG <sup>a</sup>                      | Grad. <sup>b</sup> | UG <sup>c</sup>                             | Grad. <sup>d</sup> |
| FPP-related knowledge  |                                      |                    |   |                    |
| Policy relevant to FPP such as IDEA or ESSA provisions related to family rights  | 12 (100.0)                           | 9 (90.0)           | 54 (75.0)                                   | 54 (80.6)          |
| Content related to families of children with disabilities  | 12 (100.0)                           | 9 (90.0)           | 62 (86.1)                                   | 57 (85.1)          |
| Culture and/or culturally responsive practices for family–educator collaboration   | 12 (100.0)                           | 9 (90.0)           | 55 (76.4)                                   | 51 (85.1)          |
| Challenges in the family system such as poverty, homelessness, and natural disasters   | 12 (100.0)                           | 9 (90.0)           | 51 (70.8)                                   | 43 (64.2)          |
| Current trends in family demographics and diversity in family structure, such as single-parent or same-sex families  | 11 (91.7)                            | 7 (70.0)           | 52 (72.2)                                   | 35 (52.2)          |
| Theory relevant to FPP, such as Family Systems Theory or Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory  | 10 (83.3)                            | 8 (80.0)           | 19 (26.4)                                   | 21 (31.3)          |
| Content related to families of English language learners   | 9 (75.0)                             | 8 (80.0)           | 42 (58.3)                                   | 39 (58.2)          |
| Content related to families immigrating to the United States and/or families who are refugees  | 9 (75.0)                             | 8 (80.0)           | 23 (31.9)                                   | 23 (34.3)          |
| FPP-related skills   |                                      |                    |   |                    |
| Engaging families in their children’s learning at home and at school (e.g., parent leadership, homework completion, information about school approaches to instruction and behavior)       | 11 (91.7)                            | 5 (50.0)           | 43 (59.7)                                   | 46 (68.7)          |
| Skills related to advocating for children and families (e.g., connecting families to community resources, encouraging parent leadership)   | 12 (100.0)                           | 8 (80.0)           | 58 (80.6)                                   | 52 (77.6)          |
| Skills emphasizing interactions that consider families as equals in the collaborative relationship and/or skills emphasizing interactions that treat families with dignity and respect     | 12 (100.0)                           | 9 (90.0)           | 55 (76.4)                                   | 52 (77.6)          |
| Skills related to communicating with families (e.g., body language and listening behaviors)  | 12 (100.0)                           | 9 (90.0)           | 47 (65.3)                                   | 42 (62.7)          |
| Skills related to leading or facilitating meetings with families (e.g., parent teacher conferences, Individualized Education Program, Individualized Family Service Plan, or 504 meetings) | 11 (91.7)                            | 8 (80.0)           | 54 (75.0)                                   | 48 (71.6)          |
| Skills related to sharing evaluation results   | 10 (83.3)                            | 6 (60.0)           | 38 (52.8)                                   | 36 (53.7)          |
| Skills related to planning and implementing positive behavior interventions and supports   | 9 (75.0)                             | 6 (60.0)           | 44 (61.1)                                   | 36 (53.7)          |

Note. “UG” refers to undergraduate-level coursework. “Grad.” refers to graduate-level coursework. FPP = Family–professional partnership; IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; ESSA = Every Student Succeeds Act.

<sup>a</sup>Percentages were based on the total number of participants who indicated they taught an FPP-specific course at the undergraduate level ( $n = 12$ ).

<sup>b</sup>Percentages were based on the total number of participants who indicated they taught an FPP-specific course at the graduate level ( $n = 10$ ).

<sup>c</sup>Percentages were based on the total number of participants who indicated they taught a non-FPP-specific course at the undergraduate level ( $n = 72$ ).

<sup>d</sup>Percentages were based on the total number of participants who indicated they taught a non-FPP-specific course at the graduate level ( $n = 67$ ).

non-FPP-specific course types, FPP-related content is covered within only *a few* course sessions. In particular, it is discouraging that FPP content is, on average, infused within policy/law, assessment, and behavior courses at such low rates given the heavy emphasis IDEA places on parent participation, especially within assessment for disability identification and special education eligibility (Zuna & Kyzar, 2018), and the key role families play in ensuring that the behavioral expectations set at school are also consistently applied in the home (Dunlap & Fox, 2007). Arguably, teacher candidates would benefit from access to FPP-related content in their preservice behavior coursework given research suggesting families and educators of students with problem behavior experience unique challenges. For example, there are higher levels of parental stress among families of children with problem behavior, and lower levels of teaching experience and training among teachers of students with problem behavior, as compared with parents and teachers of students without problem behavior (Billingsley, Fall, & Williams, 2006; Mackler et al., 2015).

On a positive note, the most common skills addressed in non-FPP-specific courses—communicating with families, interacting with families as equals and treating families with dignity, advocating for children and families, and engaging families in their children's learning at home and at school—are critical indicators for ensuring family participation in IEP meetings (Mueller & Vick, 2019; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Therefore, although it appears that teacher candidates receiving FPP-related preparation in non-FPP-specific courses may not be as adequately prepared, on the whole, for FPP as their counterparts who take a stand-alone FPP course, the skills they do learn are among those that should be highly prioritized for effective FPP-related practice.

Interestingly, in this study, we documented the rates with which skills such as taking care of oneself (e.g., mindfulness practice, self-compassion) and perspective-taking (e.g., empathy)—FPP-related skills that have received little attention elsewhere

in the special education teacher preparation literature—were covered in FPP-specific courses. Emerging research suggests that taking care of oneself, including being able to maintain mindfulness during issues of disagreement with families, could affect teacher performance (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013). Meanwhile, perspective-taking has also been touted within recent research as an essential skill used during issues of disagreement, including resolving conflict with families (Mueller, 2017).

### *Implications for Practice*

Results from this study suggest several key considerations. First, given the low levels of FPP content coverage in special education teacher preparation programs, faculty should evaluate the extent to which FPP-related content is covered within non-FPP-specific coursework and, if relevant, identify barriers to FPP-related coverage such as time, professional development, or other resources. Second, while our sample size for FPP-specific coursework was limited to 15, this study suggests a trend of more consistent and robust coverage of FPP-related knowledge and skills competencies in FPP-specific coursework than was present in non-FPP-specific coursework. To help ensure that preservice educators receive adequate and balanced exposure to FPP-specific knowledge and skills and thus are prepared for their roles upon graduation, teacher educators might benefit from utilizing guidelines for program and course planning that outline key FPP-related competencies. These guidelines should build on established FPP competencies such as those included in the Council for Exceptional Children's (2015) Standards for Professional Practice and the Division for Early Childhood's (2014) Recommended Practices. In addition, FPP guidelines should be reviewed to ensure they are grounded in current research, including the following key areas: (a) understanding the family unit (Seligman & Darling, 2007; Turnbull et al., 2015); (b) respecting family culture, values, beliefs,

and practices (Francis, Haines, & Nagro, 2017); (c) partnering with families throughout all phases of special education service provision (i.e., assessment for identification and eligibility, implementing IEP goals and objectives, supporting self-determination, and planning for transition to adulthood; Kyzar, Haines, Turnbull, & Summers, 2017); (d) using family friendly practices to partner during education meetings (Dabkowski, 2004; Mueller & Vick, 2019); and (e) supporting families through student life transitions (Francis et al., 2013; Gooden & Rous, 2018; Ju, Zhang, & Landmark, 2018).

To further ensure a balanced and robust coverage of FPP competencies, the guidelines could be a part of a suite of resources for teacher educators that include recommended linkages between the FPP guidelines and specific program coursework. To help ensure student mastery, the guidelines could be paired with assessments/rubrics at both the programmatic and individual faculty member levels. Indeed, the aforementioned strategies and research are not new to the field of special education. Rather, the results of the current study suggest that it is the explicit and consistent application of these competencies that is missing within teacher preparation, especially within non-FPP-specific coursework.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Given the emphasis on FPP within IDEA and other education laws, and the importance of FPP, it is necessary to continue this line of inquiry. Future research should seek to explain results of this survey that suggest a disconnect between teacher educators' perceived value of FPP and their perceived time/resources for delivering FPP-related content. Specifically, investigating barriers prevent teacher educators from covering FPP-related competencies in their coursework to the extent that they prefer. Furthermore, future research should seek to replicate this study utilizing a larger sample of faculty who teach FPP-specific coursework to determine whether the current results, which suggest a trend toward stand-alone FPP courses as more robust offerings of

FPP-related competencies, are generalizable to the larger population of university faculty instructing in university-based special education teacher preparation programs.

This research should also include teacher candidate outcomes to document which method (stand-alone vs. infusion) results in enhanced teacher candidate knowledge/skills. Given our findings that FPP knowledge and skill competencies are covered at varying levels of intensity among the eight types of non-FPP-specific coursework, future research should include a group design that tests for potential differences in teacher candidate learning outcomes as a function of the type of non-FPP-specific course(s) completed. Research of this nature would provide valuable information for teacher educators seeking to design programming that leads to optimal learning outcomes for teacher candidates, and it would set the stage for experimental/quasi-experimental studies aimed at examining the effects of specific assignments and instructional strategies on teacher candidates' mastery of FPP-related competencies.

While in this study we focused on the extent to which teacher candidates have access to FPP-related knowledge and competencies in their teacher education coursework, a key consideration involves the extent to which and how university faculty members themselves—those offering the courses—are prepared to cover FPP-related content. Philosophies about FPP can vary widely along a continuum of family–educator relationships that are characterized by equality and mutual respect (e.g., FPP) to relationships that are characterized by a power imbalance in favor of the professional (e.g., parent involvement). At the outset of the TP-FPP survey, we offered participants an explicit definition of FPP, but it is not possible to confirm that all participants' understanding of FPP aligned with that definition as they answered the TP-FPP survey questions. So the question becomes, “How do teacher educators in the special education field define and operationalize FPP within their teaching?” The results of such a study would establish an important benchmark for research agendas aimed at

improving the quality of FPP-related content coverage within special education teacher education programming. Should researchers, for example, find that most university faculty align with a parent involvement orientation, perhaps the focus of FPP-related teacher education research agendas shifts from an exclusive focus on professional development aimed at the preservice level to agendas that are multilayered, addressing both teacher candidates' and university faculty members' professional learning needs.

### **Limitations**

This study has limitations worthy of discussion. First, although we used multistage sampling procedures, the results of this survey may not be representative of the population of university faculty who teach within special education teacher preparation programs. Due to the absence of demographic data on teacher educators within university-based special education programs at the national level, we are unable to compare the characteristics of our sample and the general population and are therefore unable to document potential bias in our sample. Furthermore, due to nonresponse, we removed 20 participants from the data set after documenting that the data associated with those participants' nonresponses were MCAR. Second, the number of participants who reported instructing FPP-specific courses was substantially smaller than non-FPP-specific courses. We offer comparisons between these two approaches using percentages and frequency counts to help ensure readers consider the disparate sample sizes when interpreting study results. Third, within the context of this study, we did not assess the extent to which FPP-related competencies are covered in learning experiences outside of traditional coursework, such as supervision courses or seminars. Fourth, to align with study purposes, we retained all data from institutions that had multiple responders; while most respondents had only one or two departmental colleagues who also participated in this study, readers should be aware of the possible influences departmental/institutional culture and

resources have on participants' viewpoints and practices, and thus on the study results. In addition, it is possible that participants teaching more than one relevant course were thinking of multiple classes rather than one specific course in offering their response. Finally, as previously discussed, we are not able to confirm that participants shared a common understanding of how FPP is defined and conceptualized. Inconsistencies, if present, could have influenced the study results.

### **Conclusion**

Partnering with families is an important aspect of teacher preparation programming given its strong grounding in special education policy and practice. Yet, despite this emphasis, researchers have highlighted a gap between educator expectations and actual educator practice. To our knowledge, this is the first survey designed specifically to examine special education teacher preparation for FPPs. Results provide an overview of faculty perspectives about the value of FPPs within teacher preparation and of the depth of knowledge and skills addressed in both FPP-specific and non-FPP-specific preservice coursework. Given the importance of FPPs related to student outcomes, we hope this study ignites educators and researchers to further explore this area of study in both practice and research.

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### Author Biographies

**Kathleen B. Kyzar**, PhD, is an assistant professor of early childhood education in the College of Education at Texas Christian University. Her research interests include family-professional partnership measurement, the relationship between family-professional partnership and family outcomes, and the application of family-professional partnership practices within multitiered systems of support to promote positive student learning outcomes in early childhood settings.

**Tracy Gershwin Mueller**, PhD, BCBA-D, is a professor of special education at the University

of Northern Colorado. Her research interests include strengthening family-professional partnerships, conflict prevention and alternative dispute resolution in special education, students with behavioral challenges, and effective teacher preparation.

**Grace L. Francis**, PhD, is an assistant professor of special education at George Mason University. Her research interests include transition to adulthood and family support policies and practices that result in a high quality of life for individuals with significant support needs.

**Shana J. Haines**, PhD, is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont. Her research interests include understanding and improving the experience of refugee families and their children with the American school system, inclusive school reform, and innovative teacher education.