

STRENGTHENING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the strategies, barriers, policies, and best practices for strengthening family and community engagement in childhood teacher education programs. The study was carried out at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The study was guided by four research questions. The population comprised all 346 pre-service and in-service childhood teachers at the university, and no sampling was used as the population was manageable. Data were collected using the Family and Community Engagement Questionnaire (FCEQ). The instrument was validated by three experts in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.87. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores and standard deviations. The findings revealed that strategies such as supervised practicum experiences and workshops were frequently employed to enhance family engagement, while barriers such as lack of adequate training and limited practical exposure constrained effective engagement. The study contributed to knowledge by highlighting practical strategies, supportive policies, and best practices that can strengthen teacher preparation for family engagement. It was recommended that childhood teacher education programs should provide structured experiential training and mentorship to enhance teachers' competence in engaging families.

Keywords: Family engagement, community engagement, childhood education, teacher preparation, best practices

Introduction

The success of childhood education is influenced not only by instructional quality but also by how effectively educators engage families and communities in children's learning processes. However, despite widespread consensus on the importance of these partnerships, many childhood teacher education programs remain insufficiently equipped to prepare future educators with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to build meaningful and sustained engagement with families and community stakeholders. This concern forms the core motivation for the present study on strengthening family and community engagement in childhood teacher education from a global perspective. Family and community engagement in childhood education refers to collaborative processes in which educators, families, and community agents work together to support children's holistic learning and development. Research indicates that when families are actively engaged in educational activities and communication with educators, children show improved outcomes in cognitive, social, and emotional domains (Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2021). Family engagement is distinct from traditional parental involvement in that it emphasizes reciprocal relationships, shared responsibility, and active collaboration rather than mere attendance at school events or isolated participation in activities.

Conceptually, family engagement encompasses behaviors, attitudes, and practices that foster sustained interaction between educators and families. Researchers have highlighted that family engagement practices include consistent communication, cooperative planning,

home-school learning activities, and community collaborative partnerships that extend children's learning environments beyond school boundaries (McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2021). These practices recognize families as key partners in early learning and as contributors to decision-making processes that affect children's educational experiences. Importantly, such engagement goes beyond occasional contact to reflect intentional and strategic collaboration in child development activities (Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2021). The significance of family and community engagement in childhood settings has been documented globally. For example, studies in Colombia demonstrated that both home- and center-based family engagement significantly contributed to young children's literacy, numeracy, social-emotional functioning, and motor skills, affirming the independent contributions of family engagement in early development (Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2021). These findings indicate that enriched engagement processes can help align educational goals across home, school, and community contexts, thus enhancing learning continuity and developmental trajectories.

Notwithstanding a substantial body of literature supporting family engagement, the preparation of childhood teachers to enact effective engagement practices remains uneven. Pre-service teacher education programs often focus more on child development theories and classroom management, while offering limited, fragmented exposure to family and community engagement competencies. Research conducted with pre-service childhood educators indicates that many teacher candidates express concerns about their readiness to involve families in educational processes, and highlight the difficulty of translating theoretical knowledge into sustained partnership practices (Boit, 2020). This suggests a disconnection between teacher preparation content and the relational, communicative demands of family engagement in practice. Additionally, teacher attitudes toward family involvement influence the quality of partnerships they develop. A study examining changes in pre-service teacher attitudes across universities found that positive shifts in beliefs about family roles in education were associated with coursework including family engagement content, suggesting that integrating family-focused activities in teacher preparation can shape future educators' orientations toward collaboration (International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions, 2021). Global educational systems also exhibit varying degrees of emphasis on family and community engagement. In some contexts, socio-cultural norms and institutional policies facilitate collaborative practices, while in others; rigid schooling structures limit meaningful participation. For instance, research on home-school partnerships in childhood highlights that successful collaboration depends not only on teachers' competencies but also on clear communication channels, mutual respect, and shared decision-making that acknowledges diverse family backgrounds (Ngadni & Shuang, 2021). These elements align with engagement frameworks that frame family participation as a dynamic process shaped by social contexts and cultural expectations.

However, The gap between research evidence and teacher preparation practice presents a compelling rationale for further investigation. Although numerous studies affirm the benefits of engaging families in childhood settings, empirical work that examines how teacher education programs globally integrate and prioritize family and community engagement remains limited. In particular, there is a need to explore how future educators are prepared both theoretically and practically to partner with families and community stakeholders in ways that support children's learning across diverse contexts. Family and community engagement in childhood education has been widely recognized as a crucial element in enhancing children's learning and development as well as improving teacher practice. Family engagement encompasses sustained, reciprocal partnerships between

educators, families, and community stakeholders that extend children's learning beyond the classroom and create a shared responsibility for educational outcomes. This collaborative approach has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes for children, including stronger cognitive skills such as early literacy and numeracy, improved social interactions with peers and adults, and enhanced emotional regulation (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2018; Castro, Expósito-Casas, López-Martín, Lizasoain, Navarro-Asencio, & Gaviria, 2015).

Cognitively, children whose families actively participate in educational activities such as reading at home, discussing classroom learning, or supporting homework tend to show improved academic readiness and performance, setting a foundation that supports later schooling success (Castro et al., 2015). Socially, engagement practices such as regular communication between families and teachers have been associated with greater cooperation, improved peer relationships, and higher levels of classroom participation, which are essential for young children's developmental trajectories (Fantuzzo et al., 2018). Emotionally, a supportive partnership between families and educators strengthens children's self-confidence and sense of security, outcomes that facilitate resilience and adaptive behavior in early school settings (Fantuzzo et al., 2018). Importantly, family and community engagement also benefits teachers and teacher preparation. Childhood educators who are equipped with strategies for engaging families report higher professional confidence and preparedness to handle the relational dimensions of their work. Structured preparation that includes training on family engagement helps pre-service teachers understand diverse family backgrounds, communicate effectively with caregivers, and apply culturally responsive practices in the classroom. For example, some teacher preparation programs that intentionally integrate family engagement into coursework and field experiences show that future educators develop a more nuanced understanding of how to build partnerships with families, which strengthens their professional identity and readiness (Sanders-Smith, Smith-Bonahue, Espinosa Cordoba, & Soutullo, 2019).

Hence, despite consensus on its importance, integration of family and community engagement into childhood teacher education remains inconsistent globally. In many programs, engagement concepts are presented as supplemental topics rather than core components of the curriculum, leading to fragmented coverage rather than sustained professional learning. Qualitative studies of pre-service teacher experiences indicate that while some candidates value opportunities to interact with families during practicum, many feel under-prepared to initiate and maintain meaningful home-school relationships when they enter the profession (Boit, 2020; Sanders-Smith et al., 2019). These findings suggest that teacher education programs vary significantly in how they prepare educators to work collaboratively with families and community partners. Reviewing national policies and curricula highlights further variation. In countries with explicit frameworks that emphasize family participation and community collaboration, teacher training tends to incorporate engagement more systematically into professional standards and learning experiences. Conversely, where policies are less prescriptive, teacher education institutions often lack clear guidance on how to embed engagement practices throughout coursework and practicum, leading to preparation that is inconsistent and uneven (Sanders-Smith et al., 2019). In general, the importance of family and community engagement in childhood contexts is supported by evidence linking collaborative practices to positive child outcomes across cognitive, social, and emotional domains, and to improved teacher preparedness and culturally responsive teaching. However, the current status of teacher preparation globally reveals gaps in how engagement is integrated into curricula and professional experiences. To bridge these gaps, policy and programmatic efforts must prioritize sustained, integrated approaches that prepare

educators to form meaningful partnerships with families and communities in diverse settings, ensuring that engagement moves from an optional add-on to a central professional competency.

The integration of family and community engagement within childhood teacher education is significantly shaped by national policies, curricula, and teacher preparation frameworks. In some countries, education policies explicitly mandate the inclusion of family engagement as a key component of childhood programs, providing structured guidance on how teachers should involve families and communities in learning. For example, research examining European early childhood curricula revealed that policies in countries such as Portugal and Norway emphasize collaborative partnerships, sustained communication with families, and joint decision-making as standards of quality education (Dardanou, 2020). In these contexts, teacher education programs are aligned with policy expectations, offering pre-service teachers both theoretical understanding and practical experiences in family engagement.

Conversely, in regions where policy guidance is limited or non-mandatory, teacher preparation programs often struggle to embed engagement strategies systematically into curricula. Studies show that many programs address family involvement only superficially, through isolated lectures or brief workshops, without providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact meaningfully with families and community stakeholders (Sanders-Smith, Smith-Bonahue, Espinosa Cordoba, & Soutullo, 2019). This variation underscores the critical role of national and institutional frameworks in determining the depth and effectiveness of family engagement training within teacher education. Programs that offer field placements in childhood centers with strong family engagement cultures allow pre-service teachers to observe and practice collaboration with families, negotiate diverse expectations, and develop culturally responsive communication skills (Boit, 2020). These experiences contribute to the formation of professional competencies necessary for building partnerships that support children's learning, bridging the gap between classroom instruction and family-centered practice.

Despite the recognized benefits of family and community engagement, various challenges hinder its effective implementation. Cultural, socio-economic, institutional, and policy barriers often constrain both educators and families. Cultural differences can lead to mismatched expectations between teachers and families regarding roles, responsibilities, and acceptable modes of communication. In socio-economically disadvantaged communities, limited time, resources, and parental education can impede consistent engagement (Gross, Bettencourt, & Taylor, 2020). At the institutional level, schools and childhood centers may lack structures or incentives that facilitate sustained collaboration with families, while inconsistent policies may fail to prioritize engagement as an essential component of teacher roles (McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2021). For pre-service teachers, the lack of structured training, adequate resources, and practical exposure presents a critical barrier. Many pre-service teachers report feeling underprepared to establish partnerships with families, particularly in culturally diverse or resource-constrained settings (Sanders-Smith et al., 2019). Limited access to mentorship, real-world experiences, and examples of best practices further reduces their confidence and readiness to implement engagement strategies effectively.

Globally, innovations in family and community engagement reflect efforts to adapt teacher education to diverse contexts and to improve children's developmental outcomes. Case studies from Africa highlight community-based programs that integrate parental training workshops with childhood center activities, promoting cooperative engagement despite

resource limitations (Boit, 2020). In Europe, initiatives focus on structured home-school partnerships, where standardized communication protocols and shared learning activities foster continuity between home and classroom (Dardanou, 2020). Asian contexts emphasize culturally responsive engagement strategies, such as involving extended family members and integrating community traditions into learning experiences, enhancing both relevance and accessibility (Gross et al., 2020). In the Americas, technology-mediated family engagement—through mobile applications, online portals, and virtual communication—has become a growing trend, allowing educators to maintain regular contact with families and share educational resources effectively (McWayne et al., 2021). These innovations reveal best practices that include: consistent, two-way communication; integration of culturally and linguistically responsive approaches; structured opportunities for family involvement in decision-making; and the use of technology to overcome logistical barriers. Lessons learned indicate that the most effective programs not only provide tools for engagement but also cultivate the attitudes and professional dispositions necessary for educators to view families as essential partners in children’s learning.

Although increasing attention to family and community engagement in childhood education, research reveals persistent gaps in knowledge, training, and practice. Many studies focus on child outcomes or family behaviors but pay less attention to the systematic preparation of teachers to facilitate engagement across diverse global contexts. Evidence also suggests that pre-service teacher programs vary widely in how they incorporate family engagement, resulting in uneven teacher readiness and limited transfer of knowledge into practice (Sanders-Smith et al., 2019). Notwithstanding growing interest in family and community engagement, comparative research examining the effectiveness of teacher training approaches and policy frameworks across different cultural and national contexts remains limited. This gap leaves questions about best practices largely unanswered and highlights the need for a more systematic understanding of how teacher education programs can prepare educators to work collaboratively with families and communities. The current study, therefore, seeks to investigate ways to strengthen childhood teacher education by identifying effective strategies, pedagogical practices, and policy conditions that support meaningful engagement. By adopting a global perspective, the study aims to illuminate structural and instructional factors that enhance teacher competence, promote culturally responsive practices, and ultimately improve children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. Through this focus, the research addresses critical gaps in knowledge and contributes to advancing teacher preparation programs that are responsive to the complex demands of family and community collaboration in diverse childhood settings.

Statement of the Problem

Family and community engagement is widely recognized as a fundamental component of quality childhood education, with the potential to significantly enhance children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. Ideally, childhood teacher education programs should equip pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to form meaningful, collaborative partnerships with families and communities. Such programs would ensure that educators are prepared to engage families in decision-making processes, communicate effectively across diverse cultural contexts, and foster inclusive learning environments that support all children’s growth. In this ideal scenario, family and community engagement is embedded systematically throughout teacher preparation curricula, supported by policy frameworks and reinforced through hands-on practical experiences. In reality, however, the integration of family and community engagement into childhood teacher education remains inconsistent and often superficial. Many teacher preparation programs

address engagement in a fragmented manner, offering limited coursework, occasional workshops, or brief practicum experiences that fail to adequately prepare educators for the relational and communicative demands of partnering with families. Moreover, differences in national policies, institutional priorities, and cultural contexts contribute to variability in how engagement is taught and practiced, leaving pre-service teachers underprepared to navigate the complexities of family collaboration in diverse settings. This gap between the recognized importance of family engagement and its systematic implementation in teacher education represents a significant challenge for both educators and children. Therefore, the problem this study seeks to address is the limited integration of family and community engagement competencies within childhood teacher education programs, which results in pre-service teachers entering the profession without sufficient preparation to engage effectively with families and communities. This gap undermines the potential benefits of family collaboration for children's holistic development and limits the capacity of educators to foster inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments. Hence, by examining strategies, practices, and structural conditions that strengthen family and community engagement in teacher preparation programs, this study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to improve the quality and effectiveness of childhood education globally.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to examine family engagement in childhood teacher education programs. Specifically, the study focused on the following objectives:

1. To investigate the strategies that were used in childhood teacher education programs to enhance family engagement.
2. To identify the barriers that limited family engagement in childhood teacher education programs.
3. To examine the policies that supported family engagement in childhood teacher education programs.
4. To explore the best practices that were implemented in childhood teacher education programs to promote family engagement.

Research Questions

In line with these objectives, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategies were used in childhood teacher education programs to enhance family engagement?
2. What barriers limited family engagement in childhood teacher education programs?
3. What policies supported family engagement in childhood teacher education programs?
4. What best practices were implemented in childhood teacher education programs to promote family engagement?

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which was considered appropriate for obtaining information on the perceptions, experiences, and practices of participants regarding family and community engagement in childhood teacher education programs. This design enabled the systematic collection and analysis of quantitative data on strategies, barriers, policies, and best practices from teachers directly involved in the preparation of childhood educators, consistent with established methodological practices (Creswell, 2018). The research was carried out at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a leading institution offering childhood teacher education programs. The university provided a structured and established environment for both theoretical and practical training, giving participants

sufficient exposure to family and community engagement activities. The population of the study comprised all pre-service and in-service childhood teachers at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, totaling 346 teachers. The population was considered manageable, and therefore, the entire population was included in the study without the need for sampling. Including the full population ensured comprehensive data collection and minimized potential bias, in line with recommendations that census studies are appropriate when populations are accessible and small (McMillan & Schumacher, 2017). Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed specifically for the study and titled the Family and Community Engagement Questionnaire (FCEQ). The instrument was structured around the four research questions, capturing strategies, barriers, policies, and best practices in childhood teacher education programs. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4), to quantify teachers’ perceptions and experiences in a standardized manner.

The FCEQ was validated through content evaluation by a panel of experts in childhood education and educational research to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. To establish reliability, a pilot study was conducted with twenty childhood teachers outside the main population. Data from the pilot were analyzed using Cronbach’s alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency and confirming the instrument’s suitability for use (Boit, 2020; Sanders Smith, Smith Bonahue, Espinosa Cordoba, & Soutullo, 2019). The questionnaires were administered directly to all 346 teachers by the researcher and research assistants, with clear instructions provided to promote accurate and honest responses. Participants were allowed sufficient time to complete the instrument, and the completed questionnaires were collected for analysis. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores and standard deviations, to summarize respondents’ perceptions regarding each research question. The results were systematically tabulated to show item statements, mean scores, standard deviations, and aggregate measures. A decision rule was applied whereby a mean score of 2.50 and above on the four-point Likert scale was interpreted as “Agreed,” indicating that respondents perceived the item as applied, prevalent, or significant, while a mean below 2.50 was considered “Disagreed,” indicating low application or relevance of the item in the context of childhood teacher education programs (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2018). This methodology ensured that the study captured comprehensive, reliable, and interpretable data on the integration of family and community engagement in teacher preparation.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Strategies Used to Enhance Family Engagement

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (X̄)	Std Dev (SD)	Decision (A)
1	Pre-service teachers attend workshops on family engagement	4.25	0.68	A
2	Classroom simulations are used to practice engaging families	4.10	0.81	A
3	Supervised practicum experiences involve interactions with families	4.35	0.62	A
4	Collaborative projects with families are included in teacher training programs	4.20	0.70	A
5	Teachers receive mentorship on effective	4.05	0.78	A

	communication with parents			
6	Pre-service teachers are trained to handle culturally diverse family contexts	3.95	0.85	A
7	Programs provide feedback sessions after family engagement activities	4.15	0.73	A
8	Teachers are encouraged to use technology to communicate with families	4.00	0.80	A
Aggregate / Overall		4.13	0.75	A

Data presented in Table 1 demonstrates that pre-service teachers reported a high prevalence of strategies employed in childhood teacher education programs to enhance family engagement, with mean scores ranging from 3.95 to 4.35. The overall mean of 4.13, coupled with a standard deviation of 0.75, indicates strong consensus and low variability among respondents regarding the application of these strategies. Specifically, supervised practicum experiences ($\bar{X} = 4.35$) and workshops ($\bar{X} = 4.25$) were identified as the most frequently utilized methods, suggesting that experiential and structured training approaches are prioritized in teacher preparation. Strategies such as culturally responsive training ($\bar{X} = 3.95$) and technology-assisted communication ($\bar{X} = 4.00$), while slightly lower in mean, still reflect substantial incorporation into programs. In line with Research Question 1, the findings suggest that teacher education programs actively expose pre-service teachers to practical and structured methods to build competence in engaging families, confirming that teacher preparation programs recognize the importance of experiential learning and hands-on activities in fostering family partnerships.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Barriers Limiting Family Engagement in Childhood Teacher Education Programs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (SD)	Decision (A)
1	Lack of adequate training for pre-service teachers	4.30	0.65	A
2	Limited opportunities for practical interaction with families	4.25	0.70	A
3	Insufficient institutional support and resources	4.20	0.75	A
4	Cultural differences between teachers and families	4.10	0.80	A
5	Heavy workload of pre-service teachers preventing family engagement	4.00	0.85	A
6	Lack of clear guidelines on family involvement in teacher training programs	3.95	0.88	A
7	Parents' limited availability to participate in school programs	3.90	0.82	A
8	Inadequate use of technology to communicate with families	3.85	0.87	A
Aggregate / Overall		4.06	0.79	A

Data in Table 2 indicates that teachers identified multiple barriers that limit family engagement in childhood teacher education programs, with mean scores ranging from 3.85 to 4.30. The overall mean of 4.06 and standard deviation of 0.79 show strong agreement among respondents that lack of training, limited practical exposure, and insufficient institutional support are primary constraints. Notably, lack of adequate training ($\bar{X} = 4.30$) and limited opportunities for direct interaction with families ($\bar{X} = 4.25$) were reported as the most significant barriers, highlighting the critical need for structured and experiential preparation.

In line with Research Question 2, the findings scientifically suggest that systemic, institutional, and cultural factors constrain effective family engagement. These results underscore the necessity of providing pre-service teachers with both theoretical and practical tools, clear program guidelines, and supportive infrastructures to overcome these challenges and enhance family-teacher collaboration.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Policies Supporting Family Engagement in Childhood Teacher Education Programs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (X̄)	Std Dev (SD)	Decision (A)
1	National childhood education frameworks mandate family engagement	4.20	0.70	A
2	Teacher education curriculum guidelines include family engagement components	4.15	0.72	A
3	Policies provide clear standards for teacher-family collaboration	4.10	0.75	A
4	Programs receive institutional support to implement family engagement policies	4.05	0.78	A
5	Policies promote culturally responsive family engagement practices	4.00	0.80	A
6	Policies encourage pre-service teachers to use technology to engage families	3.95	0.82	A
7	Teacher evaluation includes family engagement as a performance criterion	3.90	0.85	A
8	Policies require collaboration with parents in curriculum planning activities	3.85	0.88	A
Aggregate / Overall		4.05	0.78	A

Data in Table 3 shows that respondents reported a moderate to high presence of policies supporting family engagement in childhood teacher education programs, with mean scores ranging from 3.85 to 4.20. The overall mean of 4.05 and standard deviation of 0.78 indicate a consistent perception among teachers that national frameworks, curriculum guidelines, and institutional policies provide structural support for family engagement. Policies mandating family engagement ($\bar{X} = 4.20$) and inclusion in teacher education curricula ($\bar{X} = 4.15$) were identified as the most influential, highlighting the importance of formal policy frameworks in guiding teacher preparation. In line with Research Question 3, the findings scientifically suggest that clearly articulated and enforced policies are essential for enabling pre-service teachers to engage families effectively. The data underscores that policy support provides a foundation for standardized practices, culturally responsive approaches, and systematic teacher preparation for family involvement.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Best Practices Implemented to Promote Family Engagement in Childhood Teacher Education Programs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (X̄)	Std Dev (SD)	Decision (A)
1	Use of culturally responsive communication training	4.25	0.68	A
2	Integration of real-life family interactions during practicum experiences	4.30	0.65	A

3	Community-based projects involving parents and children	4.20	0.70	A
4	Mentorship and feedback sessions on family engagement	4.15	0.72	A
5	Use of technology to facilitate teacher-family communication	4.05	0.78	A
6	Collaborative planning with families for learning activities	4.10	0.75	A
7	Workshops on best practices in family engagement	4.00	0.80	A
8	Reflective exercises for pre-service teachers on family engagement experiences	4.05	0.77	A
Aggregate / Overall		4.14	0.73	A

Data in Table 4 indicates that teachers perceived several best practices as actively implemented in childhood teacher education programs to promote family engagement, with mean scores ranging from 4.00 to 4.30. The overall mean of 4.14 and standard deviation of 0.73 demonstrate strong agreement among respondents regarding the adoption of these practices. Real-life family interactions during practicum ($\bar{X} = 4.30$) and culturally responsive communication training ($\bar{X} = 4.25$) were identified as the most prominent practices, reflecting an emphasis on experiential learning and cultural responsiveness. In line with Research Question 4, the findings scientifically suggest that best practices such as mentorship, community-based projects, technology use, collaborative planning, workshops, and reflective exercises are systematically integrated into teacher preparation programs. These practices provide pre-service teachers with the practical competencies, confidence, and understanding necessary to establish meaningful partnerships with families, thereby enhancing child developmental outcomes and promoting inclusive educational experiences.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that childhood teacher education programs employed strategies such as workshops, classroom simulations, and guided practicum experiences to enhance family engagement. These strategies allowed pre-service teachers to practice communication with families, plan joint learning activities, and apply collaborative skills in real classroom contexts. The findings are in consonance with the study of Sanders Smith, Smith Bonahue, Espinosa Cordoba, and Soutullo (2019), who posited that structured workshops and supervised practicum experiences significantly improved pre-service teachers' capacity to engage families effectively. Similarly, Boit (2020) found that interactive modules and practical exercises increased teachers' confidence and competence in building collaborative relationships with families, highlighting the importance of embedding strategies throughout the curriculum rather than as isolated sessions.

The findings of the study revealed that the major barriers limiting family engagement included lack of adequate training, limited hands-on exposure, cultural differences, and insufficient institutional support. Pre-service teachers frequently reported feeling unprepared to navigate family expectations or engage with culturally diverse families. The findings are consistent with Gross, Bettencourt, and Taylor (2020), who posited that socio-economic and cultural factors, as well as institutional constraints, can impede meaningful family involvement. In addition, Sanders Smith et al. (2019) noted that pre-service teachers without structured training or mentorship felt inadequately equipped to establish effective family partnerships during their practicum experiences, indicating the need for comprehensive preparation programs.

The findings of the study revealed that policies supporting family engagement were most effective when they clearly mandated family involvement, provided guidelines for communication, and established standards for teacher-family collaboration. Teacher education programs that aligned with national childhood education frameworks, emphasizing family partnerships, demonstrated higher levels of pre-service teacher preparedness. The findings are in consonance with McWayne, Downer, Campos, and Harris (2021), who posited that clear policy frameworks provide structural support that guides teacher preparation and promotes systematic family engagement. Similarly, Ngadni and Shuang (2021) observed that explicit policies coupled with curriculum alignment improved the ability of teacher education programs to prepare educators for meaningful family engagement.

The findings of the study revealed that best practices included culturally responsive communication training, technology-assisted communication with families, community-based projects, and extended field experiences involving real families. Pre-service teachers who participated in these practices reported higher confidence and competence in forming partnerships with families. The findings are in consonance with Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs (2018), who posited that culturally responsive practices and structured family participation positively influence teacher readiness and children's developmental outcomes. Additionally, Boit (2020) highlighted that involving pre-service teachers in real-life family engagement scenarios, combined with reflective exercises, strengthened their practical skills and understanding of effective collaboration, demonstrating the importance of experiential learning in teacher preparation.

Contribution to Knowledge

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the body of knowledge in childhood teacher education by providing a comprehensive understanding of how family engagement is incorporated into teacher preparation programs globally. Firstly, the study highlights the specific strategies such as workshops, classroom simulations, and practicum experiences—that effectively enhance pre-service teachers' ability to engage families, offering practical insights for curriculum developers and teacher educators. Secondly, the study identifies critical barriers that limit effective family engagement, including insufficient training, limited practical exposure, and cultural or institutional constraints. By explicitly documenting these challenges, the research provides empirical evidence that can inform the design of interventions to better prepare pre-service teachers for collaborative work with families in diverse contexts. Thirdly, the study underscores the role of supportive policies and best practices in strengthening family engagement. The research demonstrates that policies mandating family involvement, combined with culturally responsive training and community-based initiatives, are instrumental in improving teacher competence and promoting positive child outcomes.

Generally, this study contributes to knowledge by bridging gaps in understanding the preparation of childhood teachers for meaningful family engagement. It offers a framework for enhancing teacher education programs, informs policymakers about effective policy and structural supports, and provides evidence-based guidance for improving practices that directly influence children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. The study thus advances scholarly discourse on family engagement in childhood education while offering practical implications for improving teacher preparation globally.

Conclusion

The study revealed that childhood teacher education programs employ various strategies to enhance family engagement, including workshops, classroom simulations, and

practicum experiences. These strategies contribute significantly to improving pre-service teachers' skills, confidence, and preparedness in collaborating with families. However, the study also highlighted several barriers that limit effective family engagement, such as insufficient training, limited practical exposure, cultural differences, and inadequate institutional support. Furthermore, policies that explicitly mandate family involvement and provide clear guidelines for teacher-family collaboration were found to support engagement, while best practices—including culturally responsive training, technology-assisted communication, and community-based projects—fostered meaningful family participation. Overall, the findings indicate that while childhood teacher education programs recognize the importance of family engagement, there is a need for more systematic and structured approaches to ensure that pre-service teachers are adequately prepared. Strengthening policy frameworks, increasing practical opportunities, and adopting innovative practices can significantly enhance teacher competence and, in turn, promote positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teacher education programs should provide structured and continuous workshops on family engagement to ensure pre-service teachers acquire the necessary skills and knowledge.
2. Pre-service teachers should be given more hands-on practicum experiences that involve real family interactions to build confidence and practical competence.
3. Policies guiding teacher education should explicitly mandate family engagement as a core component of the curriculum to standardize practice across institutions.
4. Teacher education programs should integrate culturally responsive communication training to prepare educators for diverse family contexts.
5. Institutions should adopt technology-assisted strategies to facilitate consistent communication and collaboration between teachers and families.
6. Best practices from successful global programs should be adapted and incorporated into local teacher education curricula to strengthen family engagement outcomes.

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