

Family Coursework Requirements in NASP-Approved School Psychology Programs

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Abstract

Given that family involvement contributes to student success and improves home-school relationships, school psychologists are expected to form collaborative relationships with the families of students with and without disabilities. It is unclear whether graduate programs require coursework to prepare future school psychologists to understand family systems, foster family involvement, or engage collaboratively with families. This paper analyzes family coursework requirements in NASP-approved school psychology graduate programs in New England using a content analysis procedure. Implications for school psychologists' preparation to engage in home-school partnerships are discussed.

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Introduction

Background on family engagement. In line with Bronfenbrenner's well-known ecological theoretical perspective (1977), interactions between home and school greatly influence a child's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes. This relationship is often referred to as family engagement, or the shared responsibility of school staff and families to support the learning, development, and health of children (CDC, 2021). Family engagement has further been described as the family behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and skills that support student learning (Fan & Chen, 2001). Terms such as 'parental engagement,' 'parental/family involvement', and 'home-school collaboration' are often used interchangeably with family engagement and reflect the same concept.

When families and schools collaborate to support children, there are significant benefits for all involved. A recent meta-analysis by Sheridan et al. (2019) examined the impact of family engagement efforts on student social-behavioral competence and mental health outcomes across 117 studies. Factors considered to comprise a child's social-behavioral competence included their prosocial behaviors, peer relationships, self-regulation (e.g., compliance), and externalizing concerns (e.g., aggression), while mental health outcomes included internalizing concerns (e.g., anxiety), self-esteem, and emotional regulation (e.g., coping skills). This review by Sheridan et al. (2019) revealed that family engagement efforts were effective in improving students' social-behavioral competence and mental health functioning. Earlier studies have shown that family-

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school engagement improves students' academic outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001), contributes to positive attitudes toward school and learning, and reduces students' need for intensive services such as special education (Christenson & Reschly, 2009). Additionally, family involvement helps families increase their self-efficacy for supporting their child's learning and leads to more positive interactions between families and schools (Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Jeynes, 2011).

Not only is family engagement critical for all students, but it is legally mandated for caregivers of students with disabilities per the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) during educational decision-making. Family caregivers play an essential role as the primary source of support for millions of children with disabilities. Nearly 17 million caregivers provide care to children under the age of 18 with disabilities, with over half (55%) of these caregivers providing care for their own children (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP, 2009). The law indicates that these caregivers must be members of their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and have opportunities for meaningful, active participation throughout the decision-making process (IDEA, 2004).

National Association for School Psychologists. The National Association for School Psychologists (NASP) outlines professional best practices in school psychology, and reviews/approves school psychology graduate programs to indicate which programs provide quality graduate education in school psychology with comprehensive content. NASP's *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* includes the NASP Domains of Practice and represents the group's official policy regarding the delivery of school psychological services. The Practice Model includes ten domains of practice, several of which emphasize home-school collaboration as a key aspect in the delivery of comprehensive school psychological

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services. For example, Practice Domain 7 outlines the role of school psychologists as far as Family, School, and Community Collaboration, and reads as follows (NASP, 2020):

School psychologists understand principles and research related to family systems, strengths, needs, and cultures; evidence-based strategies to support positive family influences on children's learning and mental health; and strategies to develop collaboration between families and schools. School psychologists, in collaboration with others, design, implement, and evaluate services that respond to culture and context. They facilitate family and school partnerships and interactions with community agencies to enhance academic and social-behavioral outcomes for children.

Additionally, Domain 2 of the NASP Practice Model, which pertains to consultation and collaboration services, states:

School psychologists understand varied models and strategies of consultation and collaboration applicable to individuals, *families*, groups, and systems, as well as methods to promote effective implementation of services. As part of a systematic and comprehensive process of effective decision making and problem solving that permeates all aspects of service delivery, school psychologists demonstrate skills to consult, collaborate, and communicate effectively with others.

NASP Domain 8: Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations (2020) mandates that:

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School psychologists have knowledge of individual differences, abilities, disabilities, and other diverse characteristics and the impact they have on development and learning. They also understand principles and research related to diversity in children, *families*, schools, and communities, including factors related to child development, religion, culture and cultural identity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, socioeconomic status, and other variables...School psychologists demonstrate skills to provide professional services that promote effective functioning for individuals, *families*, and schools with diverse characteristics, cultures, and backgrounds through an ecological lens across multiple contexts...

Further, NASP Domain 9: Research and Evidence-Based Practice (2020) indicates that school psychologists must “apply research as a foundation for service delivery and, in collaboration with others, use various techniques and technology resources for data collection, measurement, and analysis to support effective practices at the individual, group, and/or systems levels.” Finally, NASP Domain 10 outlines standards for the legal, ethical, and professional practice of school psychology and states that practitioners must “provide services consistent with ethical, legal, and professional standards; engage in responsive ethical and professional decision-making; collaborate with other professionals; and apply professional work characteristics needed for effective practice as school psychologists” (NASP, 2020).

Despite the research base on family engagement and its emphasis within the NASP Practice Model, it is unclear whether school psychology graduate programs require coursework designed to explicitly train future school psychologists to understand family systems, foster family involvement, or effectively engage in family-school collaboration. The purpose of this

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research study was therefore to explore whether NASP-approved school psychology graduate programs require family-related coursework so as to prepare school psychology graduate students to form and effectively engage in family partnerships. The present study was guided by the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How many NASP-approved school psychology graduate programs in New England require one or more courses with the term “family,” “families,” “parent(s),” or “parenting” in the title?
- **Research Question 2:** Among NASP-approved school psychology graduate programs in New England that require one or more courses with the term “family,” “families,” “parent(s),” or “parenting” in the title, what types of family- or parent-related coursework are required (i.e., what content is covered in these courses)?

Methods

Data collection. The NASP website includes a list of their approved school psychology graduate programs in each state across the country. School psychology programs were included in this study only if they were present on NASP’s list of approved programs. Additionally, only programs in states in the New England region (i.e., Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island) were analyzed. A total of 13 school psychology programs were included in this analysis (N=4 in CT, N=1 in NH, N=6 in MA, N=2 in RI). There were no NASP-approved programs identified in Maine or Vermont. No restrictions were made based on whether programming was full-time, part-time, or online.

Data collection took place during the month of March 2021. After identifying the 13 NASP-approved school psychology training programs in New England, the author of this study

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searched the identified school psychology graduate program websites for their program requirements, course syllabi, and program handbooks to identify any family-related courses required. Information gathered on each program included: type of degree offered (if NASP-approved only), number of family courses required, title of family-related course(s), and course descriptions of family coursework. Courses were identified as being family-related if they included the terms “family,” “families,” “parent(s),” or “parenting” in the course title.

Data analysis. Data analysis took place during the last week of March 2021 using a content analysis procedure. Content analysis is a method of examining qualitative data (e.g., written descriptions) for the presence of certain themes, concepts, or terminology (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saldaña, 2011). Data analysis also included determination of the number and percentage of school psychology programs in New England with required courses with key family terms in the course title.

Identified family-related courses were subsequently categorized according to the type of content included in the course. Using an inductive method that allowed themes to emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), the author read course titles and descriptions and identified themes that represented the content included in each course. The author attempted to locate course syllabi on the program websites in order to analyze their content, but none were found.

Results

Out of the 13 NASP-approved school psychology programs in New England, only two required trainees to take a family-related course with the term “family,” “families,” “parent(s),” or “parenting” in the title (15.38% of all included programs). These were Plymouth State University in New Hampshire and Rhode Island College in Rhode Island. Plymouth State

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University (2021) offers two school psychology programs: The Educator Specialist (Ed.S.) degree in School Psychology for students who enter the program with a master's degree in a closely related area (e.g., special education, counseling), and an Ed.S. program completed in conjunction with a master's program (ME.d.) for students entering the program without a master's degree. Only students in the Ed.S./ME.d. program are required to take a family-related course as defined in this study. This course is titled SY 5300: Foundations and Multicultural Aspects of Parenting.

The School Psychology Program at Rhode Island College (n.d.) provides offers a C.A.G.S. (i.e., Specialist) degree, which allows school psychology practitioners to work in educational settings. Students receive a master's degree in Counseling after successful completion of their second year in the program. According to their program handbook, Rhode Island College's School Psychology Program has full NASP accreditation through 2022.

Graduate students in the program are required to take one of two courses: *SPED 534:*

Involvement of Parents and Families Who Have Children with Disabilities, or *CEP 544: Family Counseling Theory and Practice*.

Table 1

Required Family Coursework by Program

State/School	NASP-Approved Degrees Offered	# of Family Courses	Title of Course	Course Description
CT				
Fairfield University	M.A./6th Year	0	--	--
Southern Connecticut State University	M.A./6th Year	0	--	--

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University of Connecticut	M.A./6th Year	0	--	--
University of Hartford	M.A./6th Year	0	--	--
Total Required		0		
MA				
William James College	M.A./CAGS	0	--	--
Northeastern University	M.A./CAGS	0	--	--
Tufts University	M.A./Ed.S.	0	--	--
University of Massachusetts-Amherst	Ed.S.	0	--	--
University of Massachusetts-Boston	M.A./Ed.S. & Ph.D.	0	--	--
Worcester State University	Ed.S.	0	--	--
Total Required		0		
NH				
Plymouth State University	Ed.S./ME.d.	1	SY 5300: Foundations and Multicultural Aspects of Parenting	Focuses on developing competency in a variety of areas surrounding parenting education including the following: understanding of parental issues and concerns within diverse family systems, understanding the dimensions of parenting from birth to adolescence, family, literacy, and knowledge of multicultural perspectives in parenting. This course addresses U.N. resolutions A/52/13 A Culture of Peace and A/53/243 A Program of Action for a Culture of Peace. (Only required for ME.d. program)
Total Required		1		
RI				

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Rhode Island College	M.A./CAGS	1	SPED 543: Involvement of Parents and Families Who Have Children with Disabilities CEP 544: Family Counseling Theory and Practice	SPED 543: The problems, attitudes, and roles of parents and other significant persons in the lives of children with disabilities are examined. Special education teachers and other educators develop techniques for professional and parent interaction. CEP 544: Current family counseling theories and methods are introduced. Class instruction includes lectures, demonstrations, and family simulations. (Only one course required)
University of Rhode Island	M.S.	0	--	--
Total Required		1		

After reading the course titles and descriptions (provided in Table 1), the present author identified themes that represented the content included in each course. Six broad categories emerged from the data, as depicted in Table 2: 1) consultation/collaboration, 2) family systems, 3) family lifespan development, 4) family counseling/therapy, 5) multicultural family perspectives/diverse families, and 6) family attitudes/concerns/needs. Of the three family courses identified in this study, only one (SPED 543 at Rhode Island College) had language in the course description describing consultation or collaboration (i.e., “Special education teachers and other educators develop techniques for professional and parent interaction”). This course also addressed family systems and family attitudes/concerns/needs. *SY 5300: Foundations and Multicultural Aspects of Parenting* at Plymouth State University covered the most ground as far as themes identified, with language in the course description pertaining to family systems, family lifespan development, multicultural family perspectives/diverse families, and family attitudes/concerns/needs. Rhode Island College’s *CEP 544: Family Counseling Theory and Practice* was found to only cover family counseling/therapy based on the course description.

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Table 2*Content of Required Family Coursework*

Content Themes	Plymouth State University	Rhode Island College	
	SY 5300: Foundations and Multicultural Aspects of Parenting	SPED 534: Involvement of Parents and Families Who Have Children with Disabilities	CEP 544: Family Counseling Theory and Practice
Consultation/Collaboration		X	
Family Systems	X	X	
Family Lifespan Development	X		
Family Counseling/Therapy			X
Multicultural Family Perspectives/Diverse Families	X		
Family Attitudes/Concerns/Needs	X	X	

Discussion

Family engagement is critical for all students, legally mandated for parents/guardians of students with disabilities, and promoted as best practices by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). The findings of this study indicate that the majority of NASP-approved graduate school psychology programs in New England do not require students to complete any family-related coursework, despite NASP's emphasis on family engagement in their Practice Model and clear evidence of the importance of home-school collaboration. Fewer than 16% of the programs examined required a family-related course, and no programs required more than one course. While Rhode Island College offers two family-related courses, school psychology graduate trainees are only required to take one. At Plymouth State University, students entering

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their school psychology program with a master's degree are not required to take family coursework.

Conceivably, knowledge of family systems/needs and effective ways to collaborate with families from various cultural backgrounds would help prepare school psychologists to develop effective family partnerships. However, school psychologists may not receive adequate preparation in their graduate programs if they have not been required to complete any family-related coursework. Further research is needed to determine if and how family coursework impacts self-efficacy for family collaboration or amount of time spent collaborating with families among school psychology practitioners. Future research may also look at family coursework in other regions across the United States and look for differences in states/regions with more or less programs requiring family coursework. States or organizations like NASP may consider holding programs accountable for training school psychology students to work with families by requiring family coursework in order for approval.

Results of this study should be considered in light of several limitations. For example, the author was unable to access full course syllabi, and therefore only analyzed the content of brief course descriptions. This study should be replicated, ideally using full course syllabi to determine if some content included in the coursework was missed. Given that this study only looked at NASP-approved programs in New England, the results cannot be generalized across all school psychology training programs.

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