Reimagining Teacher Education for Family Engagement: A Response to the 2020 Health and Socio-historical Context

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Abstract

Family engagement is critical to student achievement, and the essential importance of family-school partnerships has become even more evident during the current sociohistorical context inclusive of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. As such, it is imperative that pre-service teachers (PSTs) are equipped to build effective relationships in a virtual environment with families from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and histories. In this paper, we highlight our role as teacher educators in ensuring that PSTs know how to forge authentic partnerships with families, and how to continue developing these necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities even during these challenging times of social distancing, often in a virtual environment or setting. We discuss this in the context of how we shifted a critically reflective, process-oriented, relationship-focused face-to-face (F2F) family engagement course that uses experiential learning, to a fully online course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for teacher educators are discussed.

Key words: teacher education, family engagement, school-family partnerships

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the essential aspects of our public education system, including how schools engage with families. In communities across Virginia, the connections between home and school have been lifelines for many families during the pandemic, particularly as families navigate online learning and plan to meet their needs related to food insecurity, unstable housing, barriers to Internet technology, and inadequate

accommodation for students with disabilities (Natanson, Balingit & Stein, 2020). Family engagement, or how families and schools build reciprocal, strengths-based partnerships (Halgunseth, 2009) has always been important in education, but the current Coronavirus crisis coupled with the continued fight for racial justice has illuminated just how essential family engagement is for students, families, and teachers.

Family engagement is relationship-based and partnership oriented (Halgunseth, 2009), and it is associated with positive child outcomes (McWayne, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Teacher preparation for family engagement is associated with increased teacher confidence in and knowledge of working with diverse families (Evans, 2013). According to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), education preparation programs should teach concepts on families related to: the role of families in early child development, culturally-responsive instruction, communication with families, and engaging students at home and in school (8 Va. Admin. Code § 20-543-90, 2020). The current socio-historical context focused on issues of racial justice reinforces the importance of family engagement and calls for reimagining how we prepare pre-service early childhood educators for family engagement.

During this historic time of heightened racial tension, pre-service teachers (PSTs) must learn intentional family engagement with Black families. Black families equip young Black children to thrive in the face of daily race-related stressors specific to the pandemic and the urgent threat of police brutality, all occurring within on-going structural racism among systems important to children's development. It imperative that PSTs understand the nature of racial socialization, a term that connotes "a broad class of parental behaviors that transmit attitudes, values, and information regarding their racial group memberships and intergroup relations to children" (Hughes & Chen, 1997, p. 202). Student understanding of this process and essential

elements of Black parenting (e.g., monitoring child emotional safety, regulating physical environments, modeling ways to challenge racism, etc.) (Doucet, Banerjee & Parade, 2018; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Neblett et al., 2009) contribute to how Black families conceptualize family engagement. Black parents 'own racialized histories in and out of schools, shape family-school relationships (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004; Hughes et al., 2009). Moreover, research indicates that racism vis-à-vis microaggressions, implicit bias, and access to social capital continues to permeate family engagement experiences for Black families (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Posey-Maddox, 2017).

The extrajudicial police murders of Black people-- and we want to say the names of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Jacob Blake -- who represent too many of the deaths during the quarantine, drew national attention to the chronic race-related stressors that Black children and their families face across educational and social systems. Given this socio-historical context coupled with these policy requirements, it is imperative that PSTs, who across the nation continue to be predominantly White and monolingual English-speaking (Partee, 2014) garner the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to engage families from diverse backgrounds (Kidd, Sánchez & Thorp, 2008; Author, 2017). With this demographic composition in mind, teacher education and district efforts to diversify the teaching workforce are noteworthy. "Grow Your Own" programs and human resource efforts to match the demographic makeup of student populations enable contributions from dynamic and skilled teachers who might have been kept out of the education field (Lutton, 2019; Partee, 2014). However, education stakeholders must go further than parity in diversification of the teacher workforce and must also focus on retaining racially and ethnic diverse teachers by ensuring that workplaces are emotionally safe. Racialized school exchanges and power-laden relationships compound underlying teaching stress and push

many Black female teachers out of the classroom (Hancock, Showunmi & Lewis, 2020; Mosely, 2018). The limited research in this area underscores that greater focus on the professional experiences and persistence of Black female teachers is needed in teacher education. The field does very little to acknowledge these realities - let alone prepare them to thrive related to facing racialized employment conditions that are all too prevalent in schools. As such, it is necessary now, more than ever, that we ensure that all our PSTs are prepared to engage families from varied backgrounds by building sustained, respectful, culturally sensitive, reciprocal relationships with families and their colleagues.

In this paper, we highlight our role as teacher educators at the most racially and ethnically diverse predominantly White institution (PWI) in the state of Virginia, in ensuring that PSTs know how to build authentic partnerships with families from diverse backgrounds, and how to sharpen necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities even during these challenging times of social distancing. We discuss this in the context of how we shifted a critically reflective, process-oriented, relationship-focused face-to-face (F2F) family engagement course that uses experiential learning, to a fully online course during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on the importance of building relationships—between students and instructors, among students, and among the course instructors. We also discuss our positionality as instructors within our community of practice and how each of us are uniquely situated during the current socio-historical context of the COVID-19 public health crisis *and* the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice, and how this shaped the course and our teaching.

Importance of Family Engagement (in the Current Socio-historical Context)

With school buildings closed, families and teachers scrambled to continue children's learning, while also meeting families 'basic needs during this time of crisis. This immediately

illuminated the importance of connections between schools and families. Research indicates a number of developmental benefits for children, especially for children living in poverty and/or who have limited English-language proficiency that are associated with family engagement (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Lin, 2003; McWayne et al., 2004).

The pandemic and the socio-historic context has brought attention to how communities of color are faced with food insecurity, health related problems with high-density housing, and opportunity gaps (Sethi, Johnson-Staub & Robbins, 2020), and some of these types of traumatic experiences can have profound impact on family engagement. In districts and schools where family-school partnerships already existed, the adjustment to supporting students and families during the pandemic was effective. Similarly, teachers with strong, trusting relationships with families will be better equipped to discuss issues of racial injustice in response to extrajudicial killings and heightened racial tensions (Cole & Verwayne, 2018). Research demonstrates that education preparation programs can guide PSTs in cultivating teacher identity and beliefs that recognize needs, strengths, and agency particularly with families of racially minoritized students (Kidd, Sánchez & Thorp, 2008). Teacher identity relates to teachers 'sense of expertise, relatability, and power dynamics with parents. Teacher beliefs reflect expectations, past experiences with families, and education philosophy (Izadinia, 2014). For example, prioritized teacher education work is needed to confront stereotypical beliefs about Black fathers and their role in education. The range of Black men's experiences with family engagement is largely unknown because current literature focuses solely on single Black fathers in urban cities (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Posey-Maddox, 2016). Implicit and explicit racism shape many interactions between Black men and school staff. Assumptions about their criminality, disinterest, and problematic relationships with their child's mother caused participants to be wary

of incessant questions from school staff (Posey-Maddox, 2016). More nuanced teacher research and coursework to dispel cliched views of Black fathers will expand PSTs 'views of Black masculinity and a fathers 'role in schooling their children.

For these many reasons, education preparation programs have a vital role in preparing teacher candidates for responsive family engagement. In this paper, we work to provide other teacher educators with insight into how to build essential knowledge, skills, and abilities for partnering with families from diverse backgrounds, even in these pandemic times as well as in the context of our continued work towards racial justice.

Background on the Family Engagement Course Content and Delivery

Engaging Families of Diverse Young Learners is a required course in our inclusive early childhood education undergraduate and graduate licensure programs. In this course, PSTs develop knowledge, skills, and abilities for building culturally appropriate relationships and engagement with families from diverse backgrounds in relation to socioeconomic status, language, immigration status, disability, race, ethnicity, and family structure. This is especially important given that our ECE pre-service teacher education program, while increasingly racially and ethnically diverse is still predominantly comprised of White female students. Because building family-teacher relationships is a primary emphasis of this course the course focuses on understanding and developing cultural humility (see Vesely, Brown & Mehta, 2017), and understanding and examining implicit biases. These areas of foci support PSTs in deepening their understanding of how their own values, beliefs, experiences, and life stories shape their interactions with others, especially those situated differently than the PST in society. For the major course assignment, which includes visiting with a family that is marginalized differently

from the PST's family (see Vesely et al. 2017), PSTs are encouraged to reflect on their positionality in society related to intersectional identities (e.g., gender, race, class, ability, etc.).

In written format, similar to a qualitative research memo, once PSTs select a family to work with, they critically reflect on the assumptions they hold regarding the family's experiences as well as how they believe society may view the family. They subsequently plan for the visit by detailing questions they have about the child and the family. Upon receiving feedback from the instructor regarding the depth of their critical reflection, PSTs schedule their interview with the primary caregiver and observation visit with the entire family. Following the visit, the PST writes a second critical reflection (Memo 2) that incorporates their original assumptions with what they learned about the family during the visit. The PSTs also consider how this experience and what they learned will shape their choices regarding family engagement in their classroom. Previous research on this course assignment indicates that through this home visit project, PSTs developed cultural humility by: 1) exploring their implicit biases, which were reflected in PSTs ' assumptions and emotions regarding working with a family from a diverse marginalized background (different from the PST); and 2) by building their compassion and empathy through spending time with the family to learn more about their experiences. For more details regarding this assignment and its connections with student learning see Author (2017).

At least two sections of this course, across undergraduate and graduate levels are taught by full-time faculty and adjunct faculty each semester. Vesely is a full-time tenured faculty member and serves as the course lead for the family engagement course. In this role, Vesely provides adjunct instructors and other full-time faculty members who are teaching the course with support regarding building the syllabus and generally developing and organizing course content. In addition, as course lead, Vesely, serves as a mentor professor for any doctoral

students who may be participating in a higher education teaching internship in the family engagement course. Historically, over the last decade, meetings between course instructors and the course lead for this course, occurred once or twice during the semester, and all sections of this course were taught in face to face or hybrid formats. When the COVID-19 pandemic began there were a number of changes made to the course to adapt to the new landscape of social distancing. These adaptations were in relation to course delivery and assignments, as well as building a structure for regular connection among the course lead and course instructors.

Course Adaptations Due to COVID

In March 2020, the university moved to a fully remote teaching and online space due to the pandemic. Within the first week of F2F coursework ceasing, the Spring 2020 course instructors, inclusive of Mehta, connected with the course lead, Vesely, to adjust course assignments and course delivery. Spring 2020 instructors opted for synchronous class meetings so they could implement their already prepared lectures and in-class activities with limited adaptation to the remote teaching space. This ensured that instructors were able to maintain regular connectivity with students especially in uncertain times.

A primary area of discussion focused on adapting the home visit project, which is the major course assignment. These initial adjustments informed permanent adjustments to this assignment later for the fully online course developed in summer 2020. PSTs were at different points in the project, with about half of students already having completed a face-to-face visit and about half who had not yet visited with families. The course instructors and Vesely met to develop written communication to students regarding course delivery for the rest of the semester, assignments, and most importantly, how PSTs would conduct their home visits. This communication included clear directives to *not* conduct these home visits in person. Instructors

encouraged students to use videoconference tools for both the interview and observation, and provided them with additional interview questions to ask, including: "*If I had been able to visit you during a family event, what event would that have been? What would I have observed in terms of the activity, sibling relationships, parent-child relationships, etc.? Why is this type of event important to you?*"

Shifting from F2F to remote teaching to fully online course delivery. With three sections of the course scheduled for the summer, we began to develop a fully online version of the course for the summer. Vesely, as course lead, and Mehta, Gundling, and Arora, who were scheduled to teach in summer 2020 began to meet weekly to develop the course modules. The three sections of the course were scheduled to run for different lengths of time during the summer, with the shortest being seven weeks and the longest being 10 weeks. One of the sections was all graduate students and the other two sections were a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. Vesely, Mehta, Gundling, and Arora met weekly to build online asynchronous and synchronous versions of the course. As the course lead and full-time faculty member, Vesely organized these discussions and led the building of each of the six course modules. This work occurred between May and July 2020. These weekly meetings, which began in May, initially consisted of syllabi development; in June and July meetings focused on course module development and delivery, as well as discussing emergent course issues and questions related to the modules, as well as course assignments, and in August we discussed fall syllabi and continued course development.

Vesely previously developed and taught a fully online course in another program within the university, after taking a basic course focused on online teaching offered at the University. In addition, Vesely co-developed the family engagement course nearly a decade ago, and has

been the main instructor of this course over the last nine years. Vesely is of White European American descent, and is upper middle class. She is the mother of three children (ages 3,7,10), who were participating in online elementary school and preschool during the pandemic. Mehta, Gundling, and Arora came to the course with a range of experience in terms of teaching the course and teaching in hybrid or online formats, as well as diverse positionality in the world. Mehta, an Indian American woman who migrated to the US when she was 11, taught this family engagement course F2F in two previous semesters, and also had online teaching experience. During Spring 2020, she sought professional training from the university Center for Teaching and Learning to develop and teach courses online. Gundling, a male of White European descent who has over 40 years of experience as an ECE practitioner had never taught online or at this university and had never taught this course focused on family engagement. Arora, an Indian American woman born and raised in the United States, had experience teaching a fully online course focused on a different area of ECE, had taught the family engagement course previously in person, yet not in an online format. Additionally, Arora has 28 years of experience teaching early childhood special education in a public school setting. Sansbury, an American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Holmes Doctoral Scholar and Black female ECE doctoral student, joined the team as a teaching intern in fall 2020. In fall 2020 Vesely (with Sansbury as a teaching intern) and Mehta taught asynchronous sections of the course, given competing family (Vesely's children in fully online education due to the pandemic) and non-academic employment (Mehta is an adjunct instructor with other paid employment outside of the University) demands. Gundling taught the course fully online synchronously due to the demands of his non-University employment. During the fall 2020 semester Vesely, Mehta, Sansbury, and

Gundling met for one hour each week via Zoom to check-in about assignments, course content, and communications with students.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst for changes related to course delivery, as well as increased connection among course instructors; however, the BLM movement informed important content development in the course. In particular, instructors added content focused of racial identity development and socialization as well as anti-racism more generally. Instructors focused on continuing to support PSTs in understanding personal identity and intersectionality, but specifically focused on familial racial socialization among racially marginalized families. This denotes a "specific type of socialization utilized by families of color in response to the challenges associated with the sociohistorical landscape, the persistence of racism, and living in a racialized society that has historically not valued their existence" (James, Coard, Fine, & Rudy, 2018, p. 420). Understanding this process is essential for PST as they consider the protective influences of affirming messages and race-related parenting practices particularly in Black families during this critical juncture (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002). Guided, deliberate conversations about race and the larger system of systemic racism prove critical as PSTs look to bolster family-school relationships, aptitudes, and skills. James et. al. (2018) emphasize that racial socialization occurs in all families with varying degrees of urgency and explicit talk of race. Deliberate guided conversations about race and the larger system of systemic racism prove critical as PSTs look to bolster family-school relationships, aptitudes, and skills. Throughout the fall semester, weekly meetings served as a community of practice for instructors, and a structure for continuing to adapt the course in terms of delivery *and* content. These meetings provided a designated time and space for instructors to be supported in engaging students as they navigated the demands of the course amidst the uncertainty of the socio-

historical context. In particular, instructors discussed our own racial identity and the teacher educator role in raising consciousness among students. As students grappled with course material regarding implicit bias, race, racism, anti-racism, privilege, and oppression, and were confronted by material that challenged or validated students 'experiences and long-held beliefs, it was necessary that instructors scaffolded students 'learning in these spaces. As such, during weekly meetings instructors checked in with and supported each other through advice and feedback regarding student communication. This connection across instructors modeled for students how to create communities of practice, trusted relationships, and collaboration with critical colleagues.

Adaptations to build relationships within the course. Building relationships is fundamental to the work that early childhood educators do, whether it is with children, co-teaching colleagues, administrators, and of course, families. Early on in the course, instructors note to students that as early childhood educators, they are in the business of relationships. Given this focus on building relationships, instructors work to support students to begin to understand the phenomena (implicit bias, ethnocentrism, stereotypes) that interrupt our ability to build authentic relationships with individuals from different backgrounds. Consequently, instructors ensure students have the opportunity to learn from one another and practice building authentic relationships, by participating in small group activities.

Pre-pandemic in the face-to-face version of the course PSTs spent a portion of every class working in small groups whether it was to complete a case study, conduct a critical reflection activity, or develop family engagement strategies. These groupings were sometimes student-led and sometimes faculty-led. Instructors wanted to ensure a similar experience for students in the online asynchronous and synchronous versions of the course. It was also very important to

ensure that students were working with students whose life experiences and stories were different from one another. To create these groups such that students would have the opportunity to learn from peers 'diverse stories, each instructor emailed their students one week before the course began seeking background information (see Appendix A). Instructors then used this information to both ensure diversity across and within experiences in the small groups. While a goal was to ensure diversity of experiences in the group, instructors also did not want to tokenize students related to any aspect of their identity. For example, if there were two students of Latin American descent in a group, instructors would try to ensure their families were from different countries of origin, or different family structure, or socioeconomic status backgrounds.

During each of the six course modules students had small group activities to complete. For the asynchronous course sections, the instructors provided guidance regarding different roles of group members including group leader, technology officer, communications officer, and editor(s). These roles rotated each module. Students met via videoconference to accomplish their group work, and then sent their group work, which was critically reflective in nature, to the instructor via google documents. Using google documents enabled an on-going dialogue between the group and the instructor. For some activities, groups posted their work in the larger class discussion board for large group discussions. In the synchronous section, this small group work was accomplished during the class meeting time.

Adapting major course assignment. The Home Visit Project required the greatest adaptation of any assignments in the course to ensure its effectiveness even during a time of social distancing. Instructors created an additional module in the course focused on the Home Visit Project to provide students with resources including scripts for reaching out to families, more assignment details, and role plays. The main adjustment to this assignment was that PSTs

conduct all parts of the visit virtually via Zoom or WebEx (both tools are available to students at our university). With home visits being virtual, PSTs needed to ease discomfort using the technology tools and build rapport through a screen. As such, small groups were encouraged to meet for their small group activities via videoconference. These meetings assisted them with scheduling and hosting future virtual connections. In addition, instructors scheduled mandatory meetings with small groups throughout the semester to discuss various assignments. In these meetings, instructors modeled how to build rapport through a screen by encouraging each participant to turn on their video, and checking in with each student as they entered the group meeting (as one would when someone enters a brick and mortar classroom).

Beyond ensuring students were comfortable using video conference technology, some instructors also demonstrated how to conduct a home visit interview via videoconference. Dr. Lilian Katz notes the importance of congruency (Vanderven, 2000) in working with pre- and in-service early childhood educators such that teacher educators model expected strategies for supporting children and their families in developmentally appropriate ways. As an example, during a virtual class meeting, Gundling asked a student who is from Korea to participate in a role play of a virtual home visit. During the role play, Gundling used strategies and skills that students were expected to use during their virtual home visit with the families. During the role play experience, the other students were prompted to write their observations of the interaction. Following the role play, the students discussed their observations in small groups and identified strategies and skills for learning about the family, and how this connected to what is required for this core assignment for the course. Arora encouraged her students to strengthen positive relationships with families through careful crafting of questions, prior to conducting virtual home visits. To this end, she provided students with a family questionnaire that was adapted from

Tabors (2008), which included questions focused on garnering a better understanding of dynamics and priorities for families from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

For the video observation, instructors emphasized the importance of the observation component of the Home Visit Project to have the opportunity to observe interactions among the various family members in their everyday life. We provided examples from PSTs home visits in previous semesters of the: 1) kinds of family events or activities that PSTs observed 2) ways that some of these activities, like a family dinner or birthday celebration, would work well for a virtual visit and 3) how other activities might be more challenging (e.g., attending a religious service, sporting events). For the observation of a family event component of the Home Visit Project, instructors encouraged students to ask families to place their phones or laptop devices in spaces where the students could virtually see (and hear) all family members within a specific room in the home. During these observations some PSTs had difficulty hearing conversations between family members. Instructors encouraged these students to ask families questions post-video observations to gain any information missed during the interview. Moreover, instructors (Vesely and Mehta) who had also taught the course face to face assessed PSTs 'learning using the virtual home visit compared to those PSTs in previous semesters who conducted face to face home visits. It seems in both formats, PSTs were able to critically examine their assumptions and unconscious biases. However, in the virtual format, PSTs had limited ability to truly observe the lived experiences and environment of families even with an observation portion of the visit. It was difficult for them to fully experience the culture and develop deeper understanding of the customs of their chosen home visit families on an iPhone or a laptop screen. The opportunity to physically be in families 'homes and observe families in their homes and in their communities provided even greater space for PSTs to gain critical consciousness of their own biases.

Recommendations for Pre-Service Teacher Educators

Despite many pandemic constraints, shifting things in the course has expanded opportunities for learning among PSTs and instructors engaged in the course. Recommendations for teacher educators include giving PSTs ample individual and group meeting times so they can begin to unpack their biases and co-construct knowledge of working with diverse families. During such meeting times, teacher educators should consistently model practices (e.g., strategies) to scaffold PSTs 'learning of how to promote stronger bonds with diverse families. This modeling exemplifies how instructors interact with and build relationships with PSTs in their course. Such modeling also directly hones student skills in navigating conversations with families through role play exchanges among students and parent/family guest speakers from varied backgrounds. Through manifold opportunities to observe relationship building, PSTs will observe how to foster reciprocal relationships with diverse families. During the course, the home visit component serves as tool to cultivate PSTs 'skills, beliefs, planning, and aptitudes toward collaboration particularly with racially and ethnically diverse families. This paper contributes to emergent scholarship that positions work with families as critical to teacher education (Jackson & Sedehi, 1998; Keilty & Kosaraju, 2018; Kidd, Sánchez & Thorp, 2008; Lin & Bates, 2010; Peralta-Nash, 2003; Vesely et al., 2017).

Having ongoing dialogue about PSTs 'positionality and intersectional identities during individual activities and group workshops guides PSTs in unpacking a) who they are, b) what topics they are comfortable or uncomfortable with, and c) how they make meaning of personal, peer, teacher, and societal perspectives on diverse families. Having a sense of *how* others, inclusive of teacher educators, talk and think about diverse families within the current climate will allow them to expand their knowledge of diverse families and to view this course as process-

rather than outcome-oriented. They, similarly, will recognize the significance of required introspection and engagement in ongoing dialogue with diverse families. In particular with Black families at this juncture, such critical reflection enriches family engagement as a powerful means to build bridges with Black families.

Finally, work in this course also highlights the importance of instructors working together to create a community of practice. Through regular meetings, instructors can contribute to each other's professional development. This connection is especially salient for teacher educators who aim to develop more course curriculum focused on issues of race, racism, anti-racism, and racial identity development to support children, families, and school personnel- particularly in promotion of racial justice within and outside of our schools. In these communities of practice, instructors can coach each other and model confronting yet essential practices that they expect PSTs to implement beyond the course. Such courageous, intentional teacher education spaces provide opportunities for critical reflection and empowerment.

Limitations

Despite the positive developments in this course in terms of content, delivery, and instructor connections, there were limitations to teaching a family engagement course in this fully online environment that must be noted. First, face to face synchronous interactions (with instructors, peers, and families) in the course were limited to videoconference. Given the importance of in-person face to face interactions for building relationships, PSTs in the all virtual environment did not benefit from practicing developing relationships with families in person in families' homes. However, PSTs did gain proficiency in using videoconference tools which may enhance their abilities to build relationships with families beyond the use of email and telephone, and to supplement in person visits. Second, PSTs were unable to conduct the observation portion

of the home visit in person, which limited their understanding of families' lived experiences. Without physically being in families' homes and communities, PSTs abilities to visualize families 'daily routines and experiences were limited. This may have limited the depth of PSTs critical reflection on their implicit biases and deeper understanding of the family's culture, and this reflection is especially important for PSTs as they prepare for a profession where they are expected to work with diverse families of young children.

Appendix A

This is the email we sent students to assist in our group formation:

I have an easy request for you. Our class is going to have a fair number of group activities related to studying issues facing families today. Please know that many online learners who have come before you have noted how much they liked working in groups and learning from their groups. As I'm preparing to assign students to groups, I'd like to ensure richness of learning by making the groups as diverse as possible. Would you help me **by sending me an email** to tell me anything about you that you think might be unique from others in the class? Examples of the type of information I'm looking for are:
1. Your major
2. Your preferred name & pronouns
3. If you spent (all or part of) your childhood in another country
4. If your family was wealthy, low-income or poor, or middle-class
5. If you speak (or spoke) a language other than English in your home growing up
6. If you or someone in your family is adopted
7. What your family structure was growing up (single parent, two parent household, etc.)
8. Or anything else that you think would enable you to bring a unique perspective to the study of families
9. Please let me know if you are okay with me sharing your GMU email address within our course for the purposes of forming small groups.

Please respond with whatever you'd like to share about yourself as soon as possible**.**

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