

Collaboration with Parents in the Special Education Setting

An Academic Topic Overview by Jennie Armon and Dalia Terry

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Abstract

Over the course of hundreds of years, parents and students living with disabilities have struggled to be recognized as students that are capable of accomplishing the same set of requirements as students without disabilities. Not until recent years has Special Education been recognized as a legitimate field for addressing students' special needs. In the past 20 years, we have made productive steps towards a field that fully supports the right of everyone to equal opportunity of education, and there are hundreds of organizations that have begun to accommodate student with disabilities in the general education setting.

The success of scholars cannot be achieved from schools simply becoming more aware of overcoming classroom obstacles. The role of parents both inside and outside of the classroom has always been a vital ingredient to the success of students. This paper addresses several aspects of the

parent/professional relationship. Included is the history of parent/teacher relationships, the laws government collaboration in Special Education, developing trust, and teachers working with culturally diverse parents. This paper also explores the challenges of collaborating with parents of children with ASD and CLD parents, and offers suggestions for an effective collaboration between parents and teachers throughout the school year.

Overview

Early Parent/Professional Relationships

In the field of special education, collaboration with parents is generally a key part of creating and implementing an effective IEP (Cook at al, 2012). Parents, teachers, and school administrators must work together to ensure the education and well being of the student. Wellner notes "Special education is a framework where the foundation is built on adversarial relations-- where parents hire attorneys and advocates to fight against districts" (Wellner, 2012, p. 16). Indeed, the history of the involvement of parents in the field of special education for children with intellectual disabilities has been littered with tension between parents and professionals.

Until the 1960s, most medical professionals throughout the country held that the essential solution for handling children with disabilities, especially if they had a severe cognitive impairment, was separation of the child from the family and placement in a facility designed to handle the specific disability. The Children's Benevolent League of Washington, founded 1939, was the earliest advocacy group founded to support families of children with intellectual disabilities, and served to provide financial and political support to institutions that treated children with disabilities. Groups like these were invaluable to professionals working in these institutions because they "eliminate . . . much of the time that would be wasted by . . . superintendents, their assistants and attendants in useless conversation and argument with disgruntled individuals . . . members know better than to find fault with minor annoyances" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 48).

According to Ferguson (2008), while published record might make it seem like parents were dominantly on-board with this process, this was not the case. Many parents felt pressure to give into the recommendations of medical professionals because of social workers' ability to "recite cases where hopelessly retarded children, kept within the family, have warped the lives of other children and, frequently have been the means of untold hardship and ultimate separation of the parents" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 49). Many parents were also reluctant to give their child up indefinitely into these

institutions or “refused to be silent about the ‘minor annoyances’ they found in the care of their children after they were institutionalized” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 49). Nonetheless, alternatives were extremely limited, along with spots, and long waiting lists kept more than 90% of students with disabilities from being placed in the care of professionals.

Ferguson notes that, unlike in the present day, the voices in research about disabilities were limited to that of medical professionals. Families, instead of being able to refer to the experiences of other families with children with disabilities, were encouraged by professionals to move “gradually through the stages of grief similar to those supposedly followed by news of a terminal disease” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 49).

Parent/Professional Collaboration and the Law

Initially, special education programs within public schools were treated as a mechanism for overcoming resistance from parents in giving up their children. More so than a danger to the stability of the family, professionals viewed retention of individuals with disabilities by the family as a threat to society. The idea was that, once placed in a less disruptive public school intervention program, during which the child would remain with the family, the child would gradually be transitioned into a segregated institution. Eventually, professional frustration with parents who were resistant to institutionalizing their children or keeping them institutionalized led to the movement of “legislatures . . . beyond euphemisms and persuasion to forced segregation from home and community of those deemed a potential menace to society” (Ferguson, 2008, p. 52).

According to a research brief by ALLIANCE National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2008), the 1960s and 70s were marked by a desire by professionals to train parents to be practitioners and execute interventions at home. With this model, parents often found themselves in conflicting roles as both parent and practitioner.

As special education programs within public schools developed throughout the early 20th century, parents often found them lacking. Interestingly, it was coalitions of parents and professionals who, through political lobbying, “provided much of the political muscle for the federal legislation of the 1970s” (Lazerson, p. 39). Indeed, the initial Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed in 1975 awarded a number of rights to parents in the special education process. Among them is the right to give “informed consent” before their child is evaluated for special services, along with the right to also give “informed consent” before the implementation of any special services. Additionally, parents have the right to initiate the evaluation process, request a reevaluation, be a part of the evaluation team, be a member of the IEP team present at every IEP meeting, and to obtain a copy of their child’s IEP (IDEA, 1975).

The 1980s saw a shift to a “family-centered model of parent-professional collaboration” (ALLIANCE, 2008, p.2). Professionals, instead of being the sole experts on how to treat a disability, were partners. Amendments to IDEA in 1984 helped to reinforce this new approach and provided more support systems for parents. After years of parents struggling to have their voices heard, “today there is an expectation that parents and professionals will work together to use available resources to improve outcomes for children with disabilities” (ALLIANCE, 2008, p. 3).

Relevant Research Findings

A 2008 study by Waterman found that interventions could be applied within school-based adult ESL classes to increase parent involvement skills. Collaboration with diverse parents, a constant struggle within the field of parent-professional collaboration in special education, could be greatly benefitted by adult ESL classes that integrate parent-involvement knowledge into the curriculum. Grothaus (2010) found that collaboration between teachers and parents is most effective when the groups can find common social and educational values. This makes it so professionals and parents are on the same page about the goals for the student and the best methods for intervention. Additionally, citing a 2010 study, Skouteris et al. (2012) found a program in which professionals provided sessions about “practical and developmental issues” that children have when moving between grade-levels. The study found that parents who participated in the sessions and surrounding activities were better equipped to handle these transitions, which could have an effect on the smoothness of the transition for the child.

Applications

In order to begin the actual application of parental collaboration in the classroom, one must look at the elements that need to be in place to perform these actions both within Success Academy and outside of the classroom, as well. Parental involvement might not always include being physically in the classroom to collaborate, and Success Academy is very clear about the role of parents before parents even become part of the school community. “Increased parent involvement leads to early social competence, which ultimately leads to academic success (Hill & Craft). Similarly, parent involvement also increases social capital, or networks designed to leverage resources (Hill & Taylor; Lee & Bowen, 2006).” (Bower & Griffin, 2011)

Parent and Teacher Expectations

When visiting Success Academies’ website, they include a detailed description of what the school offers to parents and what it expects from its parents so that teachers can accomplish all goals that are set. Comparing what exactly the teachers need to deliver to parents and families versus what parents must deliver, the teachers have a much longer list of deliverables. The list includes items such as: “a real-time, two-way communication policy with frequent updates

about their child's progress, what the school is doing to help their child flourish and grow”, contact information for all teachers is included in the directory, and a “communication policy that guarantees every question will be answered within 24 hours.” The website also lists that teachers will ensure an “open door policy”, allowing parents to visit at any time they’d like to observe the classroom and the teacher in action, as well as opening the option for parents to attend as many field studies and school events (rallies, protests, graduations, general events, etc.) as possible.

In exchange for the teacher’s open-door policy and increased communication 24 hours and 7 days a week, the school has a few demands laid out for parents to abide by to be part of our network. For example, SuccessAcademies.org lists that parents need to: “be actively involved in their child’s learning”, check their homework for completion every evening, get their scholar in to school on time, “be an active member of the school community”, and finally “model the ACTION values (Agency, Curiosity, Tenacity, Integrity, Others, and Never giving up) of Success Academy at home.” Although these might seem like very simple requests for parents, there are several parents that do not uphold these principles. Often a minimal neglect of these promises can lead to detrimental days for the child, if not upheld. As an example, Success Academy has normed morning work every morning that gets the scholars’ brains stimulated for the day. If the scholar is not on time to school and unable to complete the tasks set out in morning work, that scholar will begin the day one step behind their fellow classmates. On the parent’s side of the argument, there are so many events and amounts of homework and reading to do, it can be easy to forget about specific events or deadlines and let things. Creating a group text for the parents with specific deadlines or dates that are approaching does wonders for getting items back in hand, and parents appreciate little reminders, as well.

Obstacles to Parental Involvement

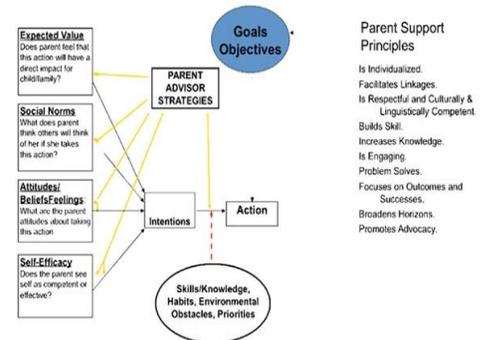
Based on Heather Bower and Dana Griffin’s research in *Professional School Counseling*, “The traditional definition of parental involvement includes activities in the school and at home. Parental involvement can take many forms, such as volunteering at the school, communicating with teachers, assisting with homework, and attending school events such as performances or parent-teacher conferences (Epstein et al., 2009; Hill & Taylor, 2004). However, viewed through this lens, African American and Latino families demonstrate low rates of parental involvement (Simoni & Adelman, 1993)... Traditional definitions of parental involvement require investments of time and money from parents, and those who may not be able to provide these resources are deemed uninvolved.” (2011) Success Academy attempts to counter this common issue by including the parents in academic challenges, as well as simply being present for events, etc.

Parental collaboration is much more effective if the parents getting involved are getting involved under positive versus

negative experiences in the classroom. However, statistically it is proven that parents traditionally step into a more active role once there is a negative issue in the classroom, usually with behavior. Olin et al. (2010) notes that we develop Individualized Behavior Plans for behavioral issues that have escalated to a higher level than just dealing with it internally at school. As always, keeping parents involved every step of the way, can go much further with support. Often, at success Academy, when teachers put Behavior Plans into action for scholars with high-level behavioral issues, parents feel angry when called to discuss their child because of the frequency of contact regarding negative behavior. Sometimes, the decision to text a daily report of a child’s scores on academics and regarding behavior is preferable. Teachers make sure to include important information and personally call when scholars accomplish something wonderful in the classroom. In one of the second grade classroom at Success Academy, there is a scholar with a behavioral issue that began in the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, the scholar’s behavior had greatly improved based on consistency with the behavioral plan at school and contact with parents every day about the actions that took place (with signatures needed.) The below diagram demonstrates just how effective parental involvement can be with poor behavior if all the elements are in the teacher’s favor:

Fig. 3 PEP model: parents as agents of change

PEP Model: Parents As Agents of Change



Responsibilities of Special Education Teachers

In regards to Special Education in the classroom, Success Academy takes a very inclusive approach to the entire experience. Success Academy’s definition of special education teaching lists multiple responsibilities of special education teachers such as:

- Assisting colleagues in understanding various student disabilities and the appropriate academic and behavioral modifications.
- Preparing student individualized education plans (IEP) in consultation with staff and families to ensure success for all scholars.
- Engaging students through curriculum that reinforces the fun of learning and enables struggling students to thrive.

- Receiving routine, ongoing feedback and support from an outstanding leadership team and faculty.
- Teaching in classrooms filled with resources and technology.
- Joining a groundbreaking faculty of teachers who collaborate regularly with a team and leadership.

Success Academy's position description for CTT Special Education teacher states, "Our ideal candidate will have extraordinarily high expectations for all scholars and believe deeply that scholars with disabilities are just as capable as general education students." This approach can be verified in our classrooms with every scholar being held accountable for the same amount of work with or without learning disabilities. Parents are informed on a daily or hourly (depending on the severity of the child's issues) on the progress of their scholar and ways they can jump in and help out (an early morning pep talk, a visit in late afternoon, etc.). Success Academies makes sure that scholars with learning disabilities and IEPs are being challenged the same way as other scholars, along with various accommodations. For example, one scholar named Moustapha had a processing issue and was allotted slightly more time than his classmates to compensate for slower brain processing with reading and writing. Another way to keep parents involved with issues would be giving parents tasks to work on at home (lacking fine motor skills would correlate with an assignment of gripping a pencil at home with larger pencils) With language impairment, teachers offer sheets to take home to work on as a family. The text on the sheet would be blacked out and more limited to overcome this particular issue. Sweetman (2000) mentions that parents want to help, but often do not know how to get involved, "they wonder how they can get involved in the life of the school without seeming ignorant about what goes on there, or appearing pushy or over-protective" (Sweetman, 1998). As a community, Success Academy makes it a little easier to troubleshoot problems. When teachers are pro-active with their parents, the scholars know that there is accountability in the classroom. Success Academy holds students in Special Education to the same standard as any scholars that attend the school.

Overall, the best way to get parents involved is to show respect and kindness on a daily basis, no matter how tired the teacher might be from the school day. "Social relationships are what drive parents' perceptions of their children's school. There are already so many social barriers between the school and the families due to differences in skin color, ethnicity, culture, and language that the parents are highly sensitive to whether teachers respect their children. The parents said they could recognize when teachers do not appreciate their children. Given the frequency in which this issue emerged in our focus groups, it is clear that teachers' ability to convey kindness and respect for children and their families is essential for their classroom effectiveness and any family support that they might obtain." (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000) Every single day at Success Academy, teachers make sure to shake the parent's hand. Some teachers give an

answer key to parents to check their scholar's homework to, text in a friendly manner and constantly update them with their scholar's efforts and actions. This is one step closer to a "marriage" of collaboration – which Success Academy strives for.

Issues

Parent/Professional Trust

Wellner (2012) notes that trust is one of the most important factors in creating a positive, productive relationship between teachers and parents of children with special needs. Most of this is due to "the escalation of IDEA-related litigation between parents of students with disabilities . . . and public school districts" (Wellner, 2012, p. 16-17). In fact, "special education has consistently been the most litigated areas in education" (Wellner, 2012 p. 17). Often, parents may have conflicting opinions with the school district regarding the eligibility of their children for special services, the services recommended for their children, and placement. According to IDEA (2004), parents have due process rights concerning the special education evaluation and IEP implementation of their child. When parents assert these rights, an adversarial attitude between the parent and the district often arises, reflecting the early 20th-Century attitude of professionals seeing parents as useless and expensive obstructions to their practice, and the same overwhelming parent anxiety and dissatisfaction of that period.

Due to the confusion and mistrust that arises during litigation, parents may often feel a lack of confidence and trust in the school district and its professionals, while schools may start to view parents as burdens. Distrust of the school system on the part of the parent usually arises when they see the recommended services as "merely adequate as opposed to ideal" (Wellner, 2012, p. 17). Meanwhile, when parents of students with IEPs advocate for additional services "beyond what administrators view as affordable or necessary", professionals may start to see the parent as an adversary instead of a partner (Wellner, 2012, p. 17). Once parents and professionals start to think of each other in this way, it is difficult to overcome these impressions. Parents, once they feel as if the system is against them, can feel additionally threatened by the complicated language and procedures of special education referenced during IEP meetings. IEP meetings, once litigation or other conflict has arisen between parents and professionals, are rarely productive. Parents often feel ignored when, after numerous instances of conflict at IEP meetings in which professionals are resistant to the concerns and requests of parents while parents assert that the services being provided for their child are inadequate, the manner of communication between professional and parent becomes exclusionary.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Parents

Lo (2012) asserts that in the IEP process, collaborating with parents in decision making processes about placement in

special education programs and implementation of recommended services is essential to student success. Lo notes that “this belief is reflective of a culture that values individualism, equality, and the need to exercise one’s rights” (Lo, 2012). Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents, however, do not always share these values. CLD parents, when they show up for an IEP meeting, often come expecting a one-on-one meeting with the teacher to discuss their child’s progress. However, to show up and find a whole educational team at the meeting is an intimidating ordeal, as in many cultures parents are used to meeting one-on-one with teachers.

In addition, language barriers often prove an obstacle to effective communication during IEP meetings. Lo notes that while in 2008, 42% of students who “received special education services were from CLD backgrounds”, while the same could only be said of 20% of school professionals. While interpretation services are available and considered the best solution to language barriers to parent/professional communication, it is difficult to find the “right” interpreter. There are at least 380 different languages, as of Lo’s study, spoken in the United States. Certain languages have a number of dialects, and it can be difficult to find interpreters who speak that same specific dialect as the parent. In addition, many languages do not have terminology for many of the terms and concepts in the United States special education system, which creates an additional barrier to effective interpretation.

Parents of Students with ASD

Literature on Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) finds overwhelming levels of parent dissatisfaction with levels of communication from teachers. A 2012 study by Zablotzky found that parents of children with ASD are more likely to be dissatisfied with the level of communication from teachers. While high levels of parent involvement correlate with high satisfaction in this area for parents in general, there was no such correlation among parents of students with ASD. Additionally, parents of students with ASD are more likely to attend IEP meetings, meetings with guidance counselors, and parent-teacher conferences than parents of students with other disabilities, yet the statistic persists. Zablotzky (2012) hypothesizes that as the number of disabilities increases, the harder it is to meet all a student’s needs, thus leading to higher levels of parent dissatisfaction.

Meanwhile, Tucker (2013) reports that among parents of students with ASD there is an issue with negative perception of school professionals. Specifically, parents felt that disability-specific educators lacked adequate preparation and knowledge of their child’s specific disability. *The Autism Helper* (2013) cites numerous submissions by parents regarding the lack of communication about their child’s behavior and skill developments and a desire by teachers to talk about issues at inappropriate times and in inappropriate settings. These parents often note that they understand the time constraints of the teacher, but that they need a higher

level of communication in order to keep track of how their child is doing.

Conclusion

The history of parent-professional collaboration has been fraught with legal and emotional conflict. Even with the implementation of IDEA and other legislation to streamline the process of collaboration between teachers and professionals, parent/professional relationships are in constant danger of becoming filled with conflict and misunderstanding and rendered ineffective in serving the best-interests of the child. However, highly effective collaboration is possible. Following are a number of recommendations collected from different literature on the subject of parent/professional collaboration:

Building Parent/Professional Trust

Wellner (2010) uncovered three distinct classifications of “trust actions” to build and maintain positive parent/professional relationships and avoid a “win-lose mentality” that can often follow parents’ litigation against the school system. Wellner recommends that in order to build trusting relationships, professionals need to prove themselves trustworthy by being prepared, demonstrating competency, and by being consistent, reliable, and predictable. Teachers should also personally invite parents to partner on the team and create a safe environment for parents to express themselves. McNaughton and Vostal (2010) observed that during IEP meetings, special education professionals spoke 51% of the time, and parents only 15%. McNaughton and Vostal recommended that teachers use active listening skills to make parents feel heard and included. Active listening typically includes, “empathetic comments, asking appropriate questions, and paraphrasing the speaker’s comments as a means of demonstrating attention and confirming understanding” (McNaughton and Vostal, 2010, p. 252). Parents want to know teachers understand and value their feelings, reservations, and opinions regarding their children’s education.

Wellner (2010) also advocates certain actions for creating trust throughout interpersonal communication during IEP meetings. Teachers should avoid using acronyms, or explain them outright, explicitly explain procedures for recommended services, and include the parent’s story in justification of a certain recommended service. Teachers should provide parents with information about certain services before the meeting so that parents can feel prepared. Teachers should also encourage the district to have fewer professionals at the meeting in order to make the meeting seem less threatening for parents. Problem solving strategies include exploring the differences in opinion between IEP team members as opposed to ignoring them, planning next steps, creating an open environment for sharing personal and sensitive information, establishing a clear desired outcome for the end of the meeting, and giving team-members equal roles in the problem-solving process. Lo (2012) suggests

meeting around a round table in order to demonstrate the “equal status” of all the team members.

Collaboration with CLD Parents

In order to prepare a CLD parent for the IEP meeting, the special education teacher should have a face-to-face meeting with the parent before the actual IEP meeting. In this meeting, the special educator should provide the parents with informational material in the parent’s native language and help answer any questions the parent may have about the IEP process. Parents should also be informed of their rights and the timeline according to IDEA (2004), also in their native language, before the IEP meeting. Parents need to be informed of community resources available to help with intervention in their child’s disability. Teachers should also inform parents beforehand who will be at the IEP team meeting and the role of each individual. Lo advises that parents should not be pressured to make any decisions at the meeting, but be encouraged to discuss options at home with the family.

It is important that parents feel welcomed when they come into the school building to attend an IEP meeting. Lo recommends that a staff member, either the classroom teacher or a staff member who speaks the parent’s native language, come to greet the parent and lead him or her to the IEP meeting. Interpreters should be met with prior to the IEP meeting so that it can be established how frequently team members should pause to allow for interpretation. Interpreters should also be given a list of key terms and their definitions to allow for effective interpretations of key concepts and terms. Parents should also be provided with a copy of a translated IEP for their reference.

Parent Education and Preparation

In a recent article, Cook et al (2012) notes that while evidence-based special education is effective it can only truly be effective with the additional element of parent collaboration. Parents need to play a prominent role in which evidence-based practices (EBPs) should be implemented in their child’s IEP and how these should be implemented. Education professionals need to come to IEP meetings armed with comprehensive information about EBPs for parents. Professionals need to make sure that parents fully understand what an EBP is so that parents can research responsibly as they make steps towards making a decision. Parents, as the people who know the students best, and professionals, who have knowledge of and access to the resources, need to collaborate to determine the EBP that is likely to have the greatest effect.

Tips for Parents

McGoey (2008) provides a list of tips for parents who are interested in having an effective collaborative relationship with the educational professionals involved with their children. Parents should find an advocate who they know has the best interests of the child in mind. Parents should work with this person first, finding common ground and agreeing

on principles, and then move through collaboration in the rest of the IEP process from there. Often, a classroom teacher can make a great advocate. Parents should also encourage children to advocate for their own needs and work on role-playing appropriate methods of self-advocacy with their child.

An addition, McGoey also notes that parents need to make sure their needs are heard, and be proactive and assertive. If a special education teacher or IEP team member set out an agenda, parents need to make sure they are assertive about the topics they want covered. Parents should come to IEP meetings with an agenda of their own in order to make sure that all their concerns are addressed. Parents and teachers should also make sure that the goal of each task is clear, and collaborate on communicating this goal clearly to the child.

Terms and Concepts

Below are several terms and concepts that were used throughout this report.

Self-Efficacy – Measuring if the parents actually see themselves as competent or effective.

Expected Value – Amount to which the parent feels as though the actions taken in the classroom, or for the classroom, will have an impact on their home or community.

Open Door Policy – Allowing parents to stop by and observe the classroom at any time to see their child’s learning environment.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) – People who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse usually are people of color, but the term can also refer to people who are Caucasian or White who live outside the American Mainstream. Belonging the American Mainstream means subscribing to “Caucasian or White American cultural traditions” and speaking English as a native language. People who are CLD have historically been discriminated against in the United States in the fields of education, politics, and civil rights (Leak, 2005).

Intellectual Disability (ID) – An intellectual disability is a disability that is characterized by significantly limited intelligence and adaptive behavior. Individuals who score a 75 or below on an IQ test are typically considered to have an intellectual disability. Limitations to adaptive behavior can include limited conceptual, social, and practical skills. Tests that determine intellectual disability must take into account the cultural context of the person being tested (AAIDD, 2013).

Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) -- Evidenced-based practices are practices used by special education teachers that, through research, have been shown to be effective in specific settings. While some research can be faulty because of issues with experiment design or execution, EBPs are only

identified as such when it has been determined that they are supported by the most trustworthy of research. EBPs help identify the most effective practices being used in the field of special education (Cook, 2012).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) – An Individualized Education Program is a document written for the purpose of detailing the type of disability and planning intervention for a student with a disability. An IEP team is a group made of parents, teachers, special education specialists, and other school personnel that determines the needs, goals, and planned supports for the students. Together, an IEP team writes, implements, assesses, and revises the IEP for the particular student (NCLD, 2012).

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