Trust Among Special Education Parents

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Decades of research has reinforced the importance of the role of parent involvement in positive educational outcomes for students (Colarusso & O'Rourke, 2007). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 encouraged school systems to enable parent involvement (Keller, 2006) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 required parental involvement in all aspects of assessment and service delivery for students who receive special education support (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004).

With family and school collaboration being legally enforced, trust between parents and educational professionals is a critical factor in the success of building a successful collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Parent involvement influences student achievement, and it follows logically that trust shapes parents' attitude toward schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). If trust is as valuable as the data suggests, it is essential that school personnel foster it, maintain it, and demonstrate trusting relationships with all parents, especially parents of students with disabilities.

Listening to families is critical to working with them successfully as partners in supporting the learning and development of their child with special needs. Due to this reality, schools are beginning to create networks that unite parents, teachers, and the community. Each of these groups is dependent on the others for successful performance. It is more difficult for schools to effectively educate children without parental support in the educational process, and parents are dependent on schools to help prepare their children for future academic and personal success (Epstein, 2001).

Families of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Literature related to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) finds overwhelming levels of parent dissatisfaction with levels of communication from teachers. A study by Zablotsky (2012) 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 Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and parent-teacher conferences than parents of students with other disabilities. Tucker (2013) reported that 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.

Definition of Trust

In their review of literature, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) found sixteen definitions of trust. They identified five aspects of trust reflected in those definitions, including benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Based on those aspects, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran offer that trust is "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (p. 185). Trust is the most essential element in building relationships and improving learning. As Henderson and Mapp (2002) stated, "neither organizational learning nor professional community can endure without trust – between teachers and administrators, among teachers, and between teachers and parents" (p. 9). Trust has to be earned. An absence of trust within student-teacher relationships creates a dormant environment (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Without trust, there cannot be change and

acceptance among all parties. According to Tschannen-Moran, "in a hierarchal relationship, those in power -- teachers, in the case of the classroom -- are responsible for building trust" (2001, p. 317)

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, as a result of "the escalation of IDEA-related litigation between parents of students with disabilities . . . and public school districts" (p. 17). In fact, "special education has consistently been the most litigated areas in education" (Wellner, 2012, p. 17). Many times, 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 fight for these rights, a confrontational attitude between the parent and the administrators often arises.

Lack of Trust

Due to the confusion and mistrust that arises during litigation and due process, parents may often feel a lack of trust with the school district and administrators, and schools may start to view parents as burdens. Wellner (2012) stated that 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 (p. 17). Once parents and school professionals start to think of each other in this way, it is difficult to overcome these impressions. As parents begin to feel that the system is against them, they lose sight of the complicated language and procedures of special education referenced during IEP meetings. If conflict has arisen between parents and professionals, IEP meetings are rarely productive. Parents often feel ignored after conflicts arise in IEP meetings and the bond of trust is broken.

Parent Involvement

Epstein (1991) described five types of parent involvement in schools. The first is the basic obligation of parents to provide for their child's general wellbeing and readiness. Parents need to send students to school prepared to learn and ready for the day. Students need to understand what is expected of them during the school year and how to become learners. Second, schools need to ensure that they are communicating with parents about school activities and requirements, as well as information about individual student progress. Schools provide quarterly progress reports and updates about student academic and behavior performance. Third, schools need to make a place for parents to volunteer and attend performances and workshops. Inviting parents into the school shows them they are welcome and that the school is open to forming and relationship. Fourth, the school needs to be involving parents in learning activities in the home. Sending activities home and encouraging parents to work with their students so they understand what the student is learning adds an additional connection. The fifth type of parent involvement includes having parents partake in the decision-making roles in the governance of the schools (Epstein, 1991). This could cause some problems if those decisions are not accepted, but parents will be able to feel ownership and participate in the school-wide decision discussions. These five parts need to work together to create and establish trust among both parties.

Why Trust?

The *26th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (*Westat, 2004) indicated that 33% of students with disabilities in Grades 1 through 3 received their primary language arts instruction in the general education setting. For Grades 4 and 5, 35% of students with disabilities received their language arts instruction in the general education classroom. The percentage for Grades 6 through 8 was approximately 39% (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Based on these data and mandates from current laws, it is extremely important for educators to collaborate with parents to ensure that students will be successful in

elementary and secondary classrooms. Special education collaboration may not make a noticeable difference overnight, but, if all parties, including the students and parents, are on board to share ideas and strategies, then the student could be on the road to a more successful education.

Collaboration is Key

In the field of special education, collaboration with parents is a key part of creating and implementing an effective IEP – perhaps the key part. Parents, teachers, and school administrators must work together to ensure the education and well-being of the student. Grothaus (2010) found that collaboration between teachers and parents is most effective when the groups can find common social and educational values. This helps teachers and parents work together to set appropriate goals for the student and agree on the best methods for intervention. If families are to trust teachers and other school staff members, they must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair, dependable, and have their child's best interests at heart. To build this trust takes time and numerous interactions between the two parties. The more honest, open, and positive interactions that happen over time, the more trust can be developed. Wellner (2012) 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.

Bridging the gap between home and school is not a new idea. John Dewey, the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform, recognized its existence in the early 20th century as industrialization led families to migrate from the familial rural setting to overcrowded cities, sparking a growing isolation between families and schools (Benson, Harkavy, & Pucket, 2007). Dewey's solution was to turn schools into social centers by providing instruction on methods that promote intelligence and encourage students to become active citizens. Dewey's initial ideas are still seen in the strategies teachers use today to engage parents. Dewey argued that schools are part of a larger social system and they depend on community cooperation for effective performance (Benson, Harkavy, & Pucket, 2007).

How Parents are Involved

A definition of parent roles in schools is hard to find in the literature. Theodorou (2007) argued that many ideas about parent involvement have been poorly defined and practices centered on these ideas lack examination. Parent involvement literature validates her point. Many studies are based on questions that pertain to the effectiveness of specific parental practices and behaviors, such as what parents do or do not do to support learning without clearly defining parents' role in the educational process (Balli, Demo, &Wedman, 1998; Calabrese, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001). It is true that parents are important educational partners, but with the lack of a framework to understand the connection between parents and schools, parent involvement becomes a fairy-tale (Epstein, 2001). Where do parents fit within the organizational structure of schools? Are they part of the audience, or are they stars in the show?

There is no definition or set practice of parent involvement that is universally incorporated in schools across the country. Finding a universal term to describe parent-school relationships is challenging enough. Parent involvement (Comer & Hayns, 1991), parent engagement (Calabrese et al., 2004), and parent partnership (Epstein, 2001) are the most commonly referenced concepts. The confusion in the literature is seen in school practice as collaboration varies from school to school and district to district. Also, within each school the parent behaviors vary. Family members' prior experiences with school have a significant impact on how willing they are to trust school staff members and become involved in their children's schooling. Family members whose own experiences were negative may not feel comfortable entering the school building, or may not trust that teachers will value their input. And indeed, their fears may be justified.

Epstein (2001) provided a framework to explain how parents and schools, working together as partners, can share in the responsibility for student learning by stating:

"effective parent-school partnerships begin with foundational supports, such as creating stable, caring, and structured home environments along with fostering frequent two-way communication about student progress and development, before advancing to more social and emotional engagement that establishes a visible presence and active role for parents in the school community" (p. 3).

Specific behaviors include volunteering at the school, being a part of the decision-making process, and collaborating with the community. Epstein's parent involvement idea does help to shape the definition of parents as partners and build trust among all the parties.

How to Build Trust

Communication

Effective parent-school collaboration must be sustained over time if successful programs for students with disabilities are to be developed and implemented (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). For this idea to become a reality, many key ideas must occur. First, effective communication skills are essential between all parties. Both parents and educators participating in the collaboration process must understand the issues being discussed. If the issues are not clearly communicated, the participating individuals may be working toward different goals (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). An important step in engaging families is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence, and respect. As Henderson and Mapp (2002) stated, "When outreach efforts reflect a sincere desire to engage parents and community members as partners in children's education, the studies show that they respond positively" (p. 15). As the level of trust in a school increases, teachers, family members, and administrators not only become more willing to work together, but develop higher expectations for success.

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" (p. 252). Parents want to know teachers understand and value their feelings, reservations, and opinions regarding their children's education.

Learn from Each Other

Second, it is important to draw on each other's expertise. There is a wealth of knowledge available today, and one single person cannot be expected to be an expert in all areas (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). The IEP team, which is comprised of parents, teachers, administrators, support staff and the student, is developed to ensure that a variety of people are working to plan for what is best for the student (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). For example, the parent understands how the student behaves at home while the teacher can discuss how the student responds with work tasks. Wellner (2012) advocated certain actions for creating trust throughout interpersonal communication during IEP meetings. He stated that:

"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 prepare. Teachers should also encourage the district to have fewer professionals at the meeting in order to make the meeting seem less threatening for parents" (p. 18).

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

Collaborate

Third, school administrators must be advocates of trust and make it a priority by providing time for teachers to engage in collaborative activities. Administrators must also understand the components of collaboration and offer training to their teachers to ensure that collaboration is being implemented properly (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Literature supports the use of trust as a collective property that forms through affective, cognitive, and behavioral norms (Adams et al, 2008). Parent trust is not necessarily missing only in schools that serve primary low income students or struggle to meet state requirements. Regardless of poverty status, school size, ethnic makeup, or school level, school staff and leaders can build and support parent trust by aligning policies and practices to address the needs of parents' relationship. (Adams et al, 2008).

Be Ethical

Fourth, all individuals involved in education must be ethical. Teachers and administrators must understand that student data is confidential and should not be shared outside of the collaboration meetings (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Trust cannot be formed if parents worry that teachers are talking about their students and not respecting their personal stories.

Respect

Fifth, trust and respect are essential. Parent-school relationships cannot be just among those who like each other, as effective collaboration has to include all individuals, including veteran and new teachers (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). As much as federal and state policy attempt to create uniformity in schools, no two schools look or act the same. Schools have their own characteristics, cultures, practices, policies, and structural features. Literature has been documented to have developed characteristics of high-performing schools, but these characteristics are not identical across schools (Austin & Reynolds, 1990). Schools across the country have various sizes, grade levels, populations and incomes. These differences have an influence on teacher and parent trust (Adams & Forsyth, 2007; Goddard et al., 2001). Research has

demonstrated that smaller schools with a similar population produce a stronger bond of trust than bigger, more diverse schools (Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2006). This proves that school conditions can help shape trust. Schools that can successfully control structures to allow parents and school authorities to connect within a social context that is supportive of forming trust are better positioned to engage parents in meaningful and purposeful ways (Kochanek, 2005).

Be Effective with Time

Sixth, collaborative efforts must be time efficient. To build trust among teachers and parents there needs to first be a culture where trust is accepted. Without opportunities for frequent interactions with teachers, students, and administrators, parents cannot develop the emotional and cognitive connections through which trust forms (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Meetings should be well planned, and the valuable time educators are using for this process must be used effectively.

Finally, all involved individuals should have an understanding of the standards and curriculum used in their schools (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

Barriers

Unfortunately, even for those who desire to develop trust and strong bonds between parents and educators, there are two significant barriers that prevent effective collaboration: lack of time and skills to work with parents (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

Lack of Time

Due to the busy school day, there is a lack of time available to collaborate. Teachers are busy people, and it is often difficult for them to find time to call or email parents and collaborate. Almost all of the workday is taken up by supervising or teaching students; as a result, little time is left over to collaborate with adults (Nolet & Tindal, 1994). According to Emihovich and Battaglia (2000), Educators indicate that few opportunities exist for disseminating and exchanging teacher-generated professional knowledge due to insufficient free time

during the school day. (p. 233). Without finding the time to call and work with parents, trust cannot be formed. Parents will not trust a teacher they never hear from.

Skills Needed

Secondly, teachers are trained to work with students, but some have a difficult time working with parents, especially those who have differing instructional or behavioral philosophies (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Also, it is difficult sometimes for adults to change what they have been doing. They may become defensive and think that new ideas are a criticism of their current teaching or behavior strategies. When an adult appears to be defensive, forming trust will be more difficult. Professional development for teachers about promoting effective engagement and gaining parent trust is not only helpful, but necessary. It cannot be assumed that teachers are comfortable working with parents, know how to promote effective parental involvement, and possess the skills to interact with parents in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Where to Go Next

Based on the literature reviewed, data on individual parent and student responses was not collected, which stopped any assessment of individual factors of parent trust. This refers to individual parents, such as parents of students with special needs. Future research can address the individual personalities that influence parent-school trust formation within schools. More research is also needed on the quality of social interactions and the type of parent engagement that most successfully builds and sustains parent trust. Finally, the studies that were reviewed did focus on the creation of parent-school trust but did not explore how the consequences of forming that trust were also useful to the school setting.

Conclusion

The history of teacher-parent collaboration has been full of legal and emotional conflict in the field of special education. Even with the implementation of IDEA and other legislation to reorganize the process of collaboration between teachers and professionals, teacher-parent

relationships are in endless risk of becoming overrun with conflict and misunderstanding.

Relationships between parents and educators are more important today than ever. However, forming and keeping trust is not easy to accomplish. Administrators, teachers and parents need to work on strategies and techniques to collaborate and form a bond of trust.

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