



Received: 15 June 2016
Accepted: 27 September 2016
Published: 13 October 2016

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TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

One step closer: Connecting parents and teachers for improved student outcomes

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Abstract: This study investigated the influence of a professional learning intervention on parents and special educators' perceptions of collaboration to support student outcomes. Over a period of six months, participants worked together to identify effective ways to establish and sustain partnerships in their districts. Eight pre- and post-intervention semi-structured focus groups were conducted with homogenous parent and educator participant groups. Findings indicated that participants recognized specific needs of improvement in home-school partnerships in the areas of: communication, understanding, and appreciation of the families' experiences, contributions and funds of knowledge, and participation in special education processes. The post-intervention findings indicated that the training helped participants to gain critical insight over each other's perspectives. This study brings important considerations for school districts or other agencies to design and deliver effective professional development in the area of partnerships between schools and families.

Subjects: Inclusion and Special Educational Needs; Educational Change & School Reform; Continuing Professional Development

Keywords: collaboration; special education; parents; professional development; professional learning; expectations; communication

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mariana Mereoiu's, PhD, interests focus on collaboration, inclusive practices, and issues related to cultural diversity in special education and early childhood education. Mereoiu's current activities include projects focusing on teacher preparation and professional development in culturally sensitive and collaborative practices, particularly supports for families of young children with disabilities.

Sara Abercrombie's, PhD, interests include promoting learning and motivation through collaboration, as well as considering how individual and cultural differences influence learning and motivation.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Special educators and families of students with disabilities must establish and sustain partnerships to support students with disabilities. However, due to a multitude of factors (e.g. complexity of the special education procedures, communication across a large number of team members, need for preparation in collaborative practices) typical partnerships between schools and families leave significant room for improvement. This study describes a professional learning opportunity where special educators and families worked together to identify goals and design action plans to improve collaboration in their own school districts. The study describes the model employed and the ways in which participants' views were influenced by the training. The findings in this study are particularly relevant for school districts and agencies interested in providing professional learning opportunities to improve home-school partnerships to benefit students with disabilities.

1. Introduction

Over the past 40 years, since the passage of Public Law 94-142, special education has experienced significant changes in the ways schools support the rights of young children, students, and youth with disabilities as well as their families. Indeed, parents are now identified in the legislation as partners in the special education processes (Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, 2004, 34 CFR § 300.322). The rationale for establishing and maintaining partnerships with families relies on the need for parents and caregivers to make decisions together with educators in order to pursue the best interest of their children. However, establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships between schools and families is a matter of skill, knowledge, experience, and professional wisdom. The purpose of this study was to examine the complexities and considerations associated with collaborative training experiences for parents who have children with diagnosed disabilities and special educators.

1.1. Parents and schools in the complex process of collaboration in special education services

1.1.1. Multiple roles of parents of children with disabilities

Parents have long been at the core of advocacy for quality education for students with disabilities. They have been partners in a variety of capacities, such as organization members, educators for their children, service developers, or political advocates (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Epstein identified six ways in which all parents can be involved in schools and which represent critical opportunities for schools to build partnerships: *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community* (Epstein, 1995, 2001, 2011, p. 46).

In addition to collaboration opportunities, parents are a necessary part of the evaluation process. Parents of children with disabilities are involved in the request or consent to the referral for evaluation following school concerns on student outcomes, and law specifies that local educational agencies must gather from the parents functional, developmental, and academic information (Turnbull et al., 2015, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1414(b)(1)(A)). Moreover, at the completion of the evaluation process, the team reviews the results with parents. To be able to serve and support as advocates and partners in education, parents must learn critical information related to the needs of their children, ways in which special education system functions, rights and responsibilities of stakeholders, strategies to advocate, and ways in which special education services can provide with support.

1.1.2. Complexities of the home-school collaboration process

Families of children with disabilities and schools collaborate at multiple levels: they recognize and communicate about educational needs, participate in the evaluation process, identify goals and design of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), discuss and reflect on the progress toward the IEP goals, and plan further steps necessary toward successful transitions. When effective collaboration takes place, students experience significant benefits, from increased performance, better attendance, and behavior in schools, to services that are actually aligned with the student needs (Chen & Gregory, 2011; Kreider, Caspe, Kennedy, & Weiss, 2007; Shumov & Miller, 2001; Simpkins, Weiss, McCartney, Kreider, & Dearing, 2006). Collaboration is based on a reciprocal relationship characterized by parity, as in equal distribution of roles and responsibilities (Epstein, 2001; King-Sears, Brawand, Jenkins, & Preston-Smith, 2014). However, the parity and collaboration process between schools and parents or caregivers oftentimes proves to be difficult. Collaboration in special education processes is challenging due to the multiple stakeholders typically involved, the wide variety of needs and cultural backgrounds represented by students with disabilities and their families, and the lack of adequate preparation for collaborative skills. Identification of services and the educational placement of students is perhaps the most complex step for parent and professional school partnerships (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1414(b)(4)). Within this process, oftentimes parents report that they feel like passive recipients of professional decisions and their voices are not heard. Studies indicate that sometimes parents might in fact not fully understand the terms or issues discussed in the IEP meetings, feel coerced to agree to the decisions being made, or not feel comfortable sharing their opinions (Hammond, Ingalls, &

Trussell, 2008). In such power-over situations, professionals are the actual decision-makers, which often lead to families' anger over hierarchical relationships and ultimately conflict in the home-school relationship (Turnbull et al., 2015).

Often ineffective communication or lack of opportunities to build on collaborative skills prevents teachers, school professionals, and families from establishing effective partnerships (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Nevertheless, barriers in collaboration and consequently negative outcomes for families and students can be avoided when professionals create opportunities for authentic communication with families and caregivers. Parents emphasize that it is both the extent and the quality of the exchange of information being critical in establishing effective communication. More specifically, parents want communication with teachers to be honest, open, clear, and jargon free. In parents' view, communication is a key in establishing trust-based, equal relationships conveying respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). In addition, parents describe teachers who are able to engage in effective communication as being friendly, good listeners, and skillful information coordinators (Turnbull et al., 2015).

Many scholars and practitioners agree that one of the pillars of collaborative partnerships between families and schools is trust (Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Fish, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Turnbull et al., 2015). In their study exploring trust of mothers of children with disabilities in educators, Angell et al. (2009) found that the extent to which educators show genuine care for children, are good communicators and learn extensively about the child's disability determines the trust parents have in these educators. In addition, the schools' overall attitudes toward children with disabilities and their parents, the quality and accessibility of services, and the ability to establish and sustain partnerships affect the extent to which parents trust educators and schools (Angell et al., 2009). In another study conducted by Rodriguez, Blatz, and Elbaum (2014), parent participants who were not satisfied with the collaborative efforts of schools indicated that sometimes parents have to appeal directly to higher education administrators in order to obtain necessary services or that teachers serving children were not in fact familiar with the children's IEPs. The findings of the same study indicate that in order to be able to establish a trust-based relationship, schools must be reliable in implementing services as specified by IEPs. By contrast, schools who fail to be compliant with mandated laws regarding parent participation are viewed unfavorably as partners by parents (Rodriguez et al., 2014).

1.2. Professional learning in collaboration and the context of this study

Federal and state mandates to improve quality of education have created the impetus for professional learning initiatives to prepare teachers to meet an increasingly wide range of needs in American classrooms. The knowledge base on possible ways to facilitate teacher learning expanded considerably in the past two decades. However, identification of highly effective practices in professional learning (Webster-Wright, 2009), particularly in preparing teachers to collaborate with families and other professionals, is still emerging. Literature findings on effective professional learning indicate that educators need sufficient time and opportunities to develop, assimilate, and process new knowledge (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Guskey, 2000; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009). The professional development opportunity employed as an intervention in this study was designed to meet particular exigencies of the collaboration process in special education. In particular, the opportunity to examine and reflect on core and implicit values, beliefs, and assumptions that drive practices has been identified as one of the elements of professional learning that leads to significant learning for individuals and organizations (Mezirow, 1998; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009).

The quality of the relationships and the values driving decisions and actions in special education are core elements often shaping collaboration dynamics. Consequently, for the purpose of meeting the ultimate goal of the state's education agency to improve partnerships between schools and families, the professional development intervention in this study was designed to revolve around these two core concepts. Additionally, research findings on teacher learning that leads to changes

in views suggests that educators must have safe opportunities to understand themselves in challenging and novel circumstances (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). If they are able to understand the complexities of the relationships underlying collaboration in special education processes, participants in professional learning experiences need to have ample opportunities to explore, exercise, and obtain immediate and authentic feedback from stakeholders. Moreover, in professional learning, the context offers possibilities to challenge assumptions through reflective action (Webster-Wright, 2009). Driven by this rationale, the professional development opportunity described in this study was offered to the participants outside the school context and as a safe learning opportunity free from the pressures of the special education formalities. Furthermore, because educators and families enter special education processes with prior knowledge and experiences, it was necessary that they had the opportunity to learn about each others' perspectives and experiences, be challenged in prior views and assumptions, and work together to reconcile the differences. Finally, reviews of the literature examining the importance of collaboration in teacher learning (Jarvis & Parker, 2005; Opfer & Pedder 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009) found that the interplay between individuals, communities, and contexts leads to meaningful learning and changes sustained by shared responsibility. Specifically, professional development is more effective and more likely to lead to changes in practice, attitudes and beliefs when participants from the same school or agency participate together and when participants collaborate (Cordingley, Bell, Evans, & Firth, 2005; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). Therefore, pairing teachers and families who are familiar and engaged within the same local educational context was a priority. The parent and teacher participants were tasked to work together and identify goals meaningful for educators and families in the school districts represented.

Guided by the findings above and in order to be conducive to professional learning, the intervention in this study was designed around a set of principles that guide group and individual learning (Knight, 2011; Stewart, 2014):

- (a) *Equality*: The intervention was delivered outside the school context.
- (b) *Choice*: The educators and families identified their own goals.
- (c) *Voice*: Participants shared experiences and outcomes.
- (d) *Reflection*: Participants reflected on their experiences during and at the completion of the training.
- (e) *Praxis*: Participants applied knowledge and skills they learned during the professional learning experience.
- (f) *Reciprocity*: The professional development program advanced based on participant feedback.

Federal funds awarded to the special education services agency in a Midwestern state supported this research study. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this state has almost 11.6 million residents, among which 1.8 million are students enrolled in PreK-12 classrooms (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The authors' parent-teacher partnership model implemented at a northwest Ohio university yielded positive results in changing parent and preservice teachers attitudes and dispositions regarding partnering together (Murray, Mereoiu, & Handyside, 2013). The results of this research led to the development of a key component of the federal grant written and awarded to the state. The authors were involved with a large team made up of teachers, principals, and special education specialists in developing the state training model for the grant. Once the grant was awarded, the authors were asked to work with additional researchers to determine the effectiveness of the training model.

This professional development opportunity was designed as part of the state's improvement process and was utilized as the intervention described in this study. The training was delivered in a hybrid model, with both face-to-face and online meetings. The purpose of the training was to improve collaboration among families and school districts by increasing the knowledge base and the collaboration skills of special educators and families who have children with disabilities. In this training,

the special education professionals were paired with parents of children with disabilities for the entire six months, during which all teams had to attend the professional development sessions, share the information with their districts, identify goals for improving collaboration between schools and families, and report and reflect on outcomes. The topics addressed in the training were focused on issues and practices for communication, equality and decision-making processes, advocacy and collaborating with the community, competence, parenting, learning-at-home, commitment and volunteering, respect and trust, and the importance of partnerships for student outcomes.

This study aimed to address the following questions: (1) What experiences and expectations of home-school collaboration do parents and special educators have before teaming for a six-month professional development intervention? and (2) How does a six-month collaborative training program influence growth and changes in the perceptions of parents and teachers working together?

2. Methods

This qualitative study describes findings based on data collected as part of a larger portion research project. Data were collected before and after the completion of the professional development intervention.

2.1. Instruments and procedures

The research team conducted focus groups at the beginning and completion of the intervention. This study employed the focus group technique because data are produced through group interactions where participants assign, advance, and negotiate meaning in social contexts (Hyden & Bulow, 2003; Morgan, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998, p. 187). The focus groups in this study were guided by a set of semi-structured open-ended questions, and took place separately for parents and special educators. Two focus groups of parents and two focus groups of special educators were conducted prior to the intervention and at the end of the training, though focus group membership shifted at the two time points due to participant availability. The focus groups were set up based on participant status criteria because discussions were anticipated to be more productive as participants would share significant similarities relative to the special education processes. Indeed, methodologists suggest that focus groups can be highly beneficial when participants share similarities and are cooperative with each other (Creswell, 2012, p. 164). In addition, homogeneous group structures were preferred in order to minimize the pressure both parents and educators might experience due to inherent positions and investment in the special education processes. The questions guiding the focus group discussions targeted experiences of collaboration prior to the training, participant views on differences in expectations, benefits, and challenges of collaboration in special education, as well as views on expectations and experienced benefits of the training.

2.2. Participants and recruitment

This study employed purposive sampling, drawing from those already involved in the professional development opportunity. A total of 47 participants were recruited to participate in eight focus groups conducted in this study. All participation was voluntary, and participants were not compensated for participation in the research study. All focus groups ranged in size of 4–7 participants. While we attempted to assign the same individuals to the same focus groups at time one and two, there was some variation in participants due to attendance. Demographic information of the focus groups is described in detail in Table 1.

2.3. Data analysis

All audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and proofread for accuracy. A multi-step approach was followed in analyzing the data generated by the transcribed recordings (Agar, 1980; Creswell, 2012). Research team members read each transcript entirely multiple times in order to get a sense of the group interviews as whole. During this first step, key concepts were identified and noted on the sides of hard copies of the de-identified transcripts. Based on these identified concepts, an initial set of broad categories was developed and used against additional readings of the transcripts. Through this iterative technique and discussion of the categories, the researchers

Table 1. Focus groups participants demographics

| | Gender | Age range | Ethnicity |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Cohort 1</i> | | | |
| <i>Parent</i> | | | |
| Focus group 1 (n = 4) | F = 4 | 41-50 = 4 | Caucasian = 4 |
| Focus group 2 (n = 4) | F = 4 | 31-35 = 1 | Caucasian = 3, unknown = 1 |
| | | 36-40 = 1 | |
| | | 51-55 = 1 | |
| | | Unknown = 1 | |
| <i>Professional</i> | | | |
| Focus group 1 (n = 6) | F = 5, M = 1 | 36-40 = 1 | Caucasian = 5, unknown = 1 |
| | | 41-50 = 1 | |
| | | 51-55 = 2 | |
| | | 56+ = 1 | |
| | | Unknown = 1 | |
| Focus group 2 (n = 7) | F = 7 | 41-50 = 2 | Caucasian = 6, unknown = 1 |
| | | 51-55 = 2 | |
| | | 56+ = 2 | |
| | | Unknown = 1 | |
| <i>Cohort 2</i> | | | |
| <i>Parent</i> | | | |
| Focus group 1 (n = 5) | F = 5 | 36-40 = 1 | Caucasian = 5 |
| | | 41-50 = 4 | |
| Focus group 2 (n = 7) | F = 7 | 26-30 = 2 | African American = 2, Caucasian = 5 |
| | | 31-35 = 2 | |
| | | 36-40 = 1 | |
| | | 41-40 = 1 | |
| | | 51-55 = 1 | |
| <i>Professional</i> | | | |
| Focus group 1 (n = 7) | F = 5, M = 2 | 31-35 = 1 | Caucasian = 7 |
| | | 36-40 = 1 | |
| | | 41-50 = 2 | |
| | | 51-55 = 1 | |
| | | 56+ = 2 | |
| Focus group 2 (n = 7) | F = 7 | 41-50 = 3 | Caucasian = 7 |
| | | 51-55 = 2 | |
| | | 56+ = 2 | |

determined the final broad categories in conjunction. Following the determination of the categories, the researchers coded the data by identifying specific descriptive units of information assigned to each category. To achieve reliability between coders, the themes and codes identified by the research team were reviewed collaboratively and differences discussed until consensus was achieved.

2.4. Findings

The primary themes identified as a result of the focus groups analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Pre- and post-intervention findings

| Parents/caregivers' experiences | Professionals' experiences |
|---|--|
| <i>Pre-intervention findings</i> | |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents educate themselves to be advocates for their children and other parents 2. Parents of students with disabilities experience a sense of disconnection between families and professionals 3. Effective teaming requires honest communication, professional competence and commitment | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents of students with disabilities need support in understanding and navigating the special education processes and services 2. Culture of the special education process and practices varies across districts 3. Parents and professionals might experience differences in the expectations for the education of students with disabilities 4. Family-school partnerships help improve student outcomes |
| <i>Post-intervention findings</i> | |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Working together offered new understandings on each other's perspective 2. Parents hold high expectations of teachers 3. Partnerships empower parents and ultimately benefit students 4. Establishing partnerships can be a challenging process 5. Effects of the training on how parents work with teachers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The parent-teacher partnership reinforced professionals' belief that it is important to work together with families 2. There are multiple challenges in collaboration that are yet to be addressed 3. Dialog creates opportunities for improved relationships 4. Improved student outcomes are the ultimate goal 5. The training provided a reminder on importance of effective collaboration, listening empathetically and intentionally |

Research question 1: What experiences and expectations of home-school collaboration do parents and special educators have before teaming for a six-months professional development intervention?

2.4.1. Parent pre-intervention findings

Several themes emerged from the focus groups conducted with parents before the family-professional partnership intervention.

2.4.1.1. Theme 1: Parents educate themselves to be advocates for their children and other parents. Parents shared that highly collaboratively teams require efforts that often involve self-educating to be able to advocate. One parent stated:

I kind of dove in with my son once we found out about his diagnosis so I learned just about everything I could and I was involved with the schools from the get go. So, I knew the procedures, I knew a lot of what maybe they didn't think parents knew.

Parents shared that self-educating and gaining experience with the special education services often helped them gain a broader perspective on the educational processes and prepared them to serve as mentors for other parents. One parent stated:

I'm now the parent mentor so now I'm coming at it from another side and you know helping families who maybe have not had that kind of experience so ... I'm, I'm seeing things in a different way. Kind of from the other side of the table, maybe seeing some people have had more frustration.

Participants also shared that parents of students with disabilities in general need to be assertive in order to ensure the educational needs of their children are being addressed. They expressed that through participating in the training, they can be a source of empowerment for other families and therefore offer greater support.

2.4.1.2. *Theme 2: Parents of students with disabilities experience a sense of disconnection between families and professionals.* Parent participants shared that often professionals do not convey empathy for the experiences of families of students with diagnosed disabilities. One parent stated:

I mean, I thought they would be more, compassionate I guess. When we were in the IEP, IEP meeting, I had to just stop them and say, "Listen, take off your professional hat, put on your parent hat ... if this was your child what would you do?"

Parent participants shared that families experience the special education process at an emotional level sometimes fraught with grief, whereas professionals do not always enter the partnership taking into consideration the unique needs of each family and student. One parent shared:

Well I feel like for families, so much of what we go through is emotional and it's so close to our heart and it's hard to separate the business of getting your child through school ... and ... the emotional aspect of what as a family you're dealing with whatever the disability is. I think that for the school its business as usual.

Another parent commented: "Every step along the way we have to grieve another loss." Transitions, in particular, can be a very challenging time for students with disabilities. Parent participants discussed how students with disabilities experience difficulties during transition points as relationships established with their teachers are left behind and new professionals enter the educational journey. One parent stated: "... it seems like every educator in a building knows you so well, and then ... you move ... to another building. It's starting all over again." Another parent added: "... what's happening' after high school? ... What's graduation going to look like?"

2.4.1.3. *Theme 3: Effective teaming requires honest communication, professional competence, and commitment.* Parent participants discussed how open communication is critical for decision-making in the best interest of the child. One of the parents commented:

I feel that ... they don't always know. And that's okay, they have to be able to admit that we don't know and that we need to work together to find what's best. So, my son for example went to school then ... that was one situation then he had this [disability category] and now he's going back to school. So nobody knows what to do. But we all have to work together to figure out what to do.

Parent participants shared that teachers need not only understand the unique educational needs of all students, but also hold the same high expectation of success for students with disabilities as they would be holding on any other student. For example, one parent commented:

... in my situation it seems like the teacher or the teachers or some of the therapists think that everything fits one child's needs. Every child is different, every child will need different learning techniques ... different learning utensils and that's what we have struggled with. You know, think outside the box. There's more to the picture-just because he can't write physically doesn't mean he can't do it with his finger on the computer for example and u ... So it would be nice sometimes if they would help think outside the box sort of.

Parent participants felt that one of the most important outcomes of the training should be a solid foundation of knowledge on how to establish effective partnerships with professionals, how to become more assertive, and how to better communicate with professionals.

2.4.2. *Professionals pre-intervention findings*

Similarly, several themes emerged from the focus groups conducted with professionals before the family-professional partnership intervention.

2.4.2.1. *Theme 1: Parents of students with disabilities need support in understanding and navigating the special education processes and services.* Participants recognized that parents need support in

sharing their knowledge with the professionals. One special educator explained her perspective on working with families: “A lot of times our ... our parents [of children] with disabilities feel like they’re at a disadvantage at the table, they feel very intimidated by it ...”

Another participant explained through her personal experience how parents are affected by the emotional aspect associated with the diagnosis and the overall experience of having a child with a disability:

... thought I had a great relationship with parents. It totally shifted when my own child became identified. And I was the one at the IEP meeting as the parent, because that emotion as a professional you can never ever understand that emotion and I finally realized that when I became the parent of a child with a disability. It’s just different, it’s ... so I can’t imagine a parent that doesn’t know anything about special ed, because I had years of experience in it. It is very overwhelming to sit in a meeting with, even I knew these teachers that I was sitting there with ...

Participants also acknowledged that special education is complex and that parents need support and information to understand and learn how to navigate special education services system:

I think building a relationship is very important. Building the rapport with the family to understand and listen and to assist with the whole—it’s almost like a navigation ... Learning the whole system and helping them understand it cause ... it’s complicated.

2.4.2.2. Theme 2: Culture of the special education process and practices varies across districts. Participants in the focus groups shared a sense of frustration with the discrepancies between districts where demographics and professionals’ vision of inclusive education create differences in the quality of educational opportunities for students with disabilities. One participant shared: “I do see a difference in the culture and the ... and the types of activities [...] districts provide [...].” This participant added: “I see a lot of differences, and I see ... I see differences in the way that parents interact with the schools and I see differences in the way that the schools provide opportunities for parents as well.” Moreover, teacher preparation and professional experience of educators was perceived as a factor in the discrepancies of the experience of students with disabilities across school districts. Some participants discussed their disappointment in teachers at the beginning of their career not being open to inclusive classrooms despite recent exposure to coursework and inclusive practices, whereas other participants discussed how they had positive experiences with the same group of teachers. One participant concluded: “You literally can drive 5 miles between higher education institutions and have completely different programs with completely different philosophies around what they emphasize.”

2.4.2.3. Theme 3: Parents and professionals might experience differences in the expectations for the education of students with disabilities. Participants recognized that parents and professionals enter the partnership with different perspectives on what best serves students with disabilities and where the priorities should be placed. Participants discussed the fact that parents oftentimes step into the special education process with different levels of knowledge regarding the structure, goals, procedures, and members of the teams, and the extent of preparation for these processes. Moreover, participants recognized that oftentimes the lack of professional knowledge on the family leads to misconceptions regarding family engagement in the education of students with disabilities. One professional commented:

I also think that for some parents as far as their expectations of teachers would in some aspects depend on the level of education of the parent, what you mentioned, how much they know about the school system and so on. I found that teachers or parents that tend not to have that knowledge are kind of sometimes in the background. And we have to kind of pull them out in a nice way and those that have the access to [...] the language and so on, that are already involved in school and so on, that they navigate the system in a more beneficial way.

At the same time, participants recognized that oftentimes the lack of professional knowledge on the family leads to misconceptions regarding family engagement in the education of students with disabilities. One participant commented:

I believe families see their child in context of their family and their community ... their expectations are driven by that vision and many times, not all times, we as educators see students in a silo of education. And so we have completely different expectations and we've got to be able to move that more to the middle because we know ... I mean it's amazing how much work we put into education, but then the school bus doesn't show up any longer. And so until we start to look at the child in the context of his family and as a young adult and his community we've done nothing. We may have educated, but the quality of that education based on that child's and student and young adult's vision of their, their lives ... in the community ... So I think that, that's uneven an expectation to begin with. I think maybe that might be a good starting point when we build relationships.

2.4.2.4. Theme 4: Family-school partnerships help improve student outcomes. Participants felt that one of the major benefits of parent professional collaboration is translated into improved student outcomes. More specifically, participants emphasized that effective communication leads to effective home-school relationships and therefore improvements in school environments. One participant explained:

I think it would improve communication, which I think is very important in the lower areas of education. And, I also think like [name of participant] said is just the, the more engaged the parent is, the better the outcomes of the child are gonna be. So I think it would be a direct correlation between their engagement level and then the improvement or just the relationship improvement, the perspective how we view each other as well as the student actual, hopefully, the gains of that student that he or she makes.

Another participant pointed out benefits for professionals as well: "And, and on that too, when there is a strong parent professional relationship, I think it provides encouragement to staff members or validation of the great work that they do."

Research question 2: How does a six months collaborative training program influence growth and changes in the perceptions of parents and teachers working together?

2.4.3. Parent post-intervention findings

2.4.3.1. Theme 1: Working together offered new understandings on each other's perspective. Parent participants in the post-intervention focus groups shared a sense of improved communication at the completion of the training. Parents discussed partnerships as a valuable opportunity for professionals to get the parent perspective. One participant explained: "... teachers—got a better perspective of where the parents were coming from; that they didn't know how they felt on a lot of the levels."

In the same time, parent participants discussed how they found that professionals do care about students and families. One participant explained:

Well, as a parent, I would just like to say it's nice to know that there are some teachers and professionals in the [state agency name] that do care; that are going out of their way to learn more and to help the parents that are struggling in their districts or towns—that they're trying to reach out to them and say you do have a voice; you can speak up for your child and let's get them one parent going so they can say what they need to say or you know, have some input on their child's IEP or services and things like that.

2.4.3.2. Theme 2: Parents hold high expectations of teachers. Participants in the parent focus groups discussed that parents of children with disabilities expect teachers to have knowledge about the

education of children and that they expect teachers to share information relevant for the best interest of children with disabilities. One participant explained:

Sometimes I think that the parents—their expectations are that the teachers know more; they know the—you know—I don't—they're more trained—they have the education. They're the teachers. They know the jargon and the parent might not feel as confident or competent in being able to have a conversation with them, but they can have a conversation with them.

Parents in the focus groups also shared that they expect teachers to understand that children have a wide variety of abilities and needs and to be able to identify and address these needs. For example, one participant commented:

One thing that I could add is that I have a child with autism. And so like you were saying, expect everybody to know what this entails. So I may go pick him up and they'll say oh, he was spinning around or he was moving his hands. Well, if you know a child with autism that is one of the things that they do. They spin around and sometimes they flap their hands. So it's kind of frustrating as a parent to see that maybe the teachers don't know everything that you may think they know.

2.4.3.3. Theme 3: Partnerships empower parents and ultimately benefit students. Parents in the focus groups shared that being part of the partnership in this training allowed them to hear experiences of other participants and to feel more connected with other parents. For example, one participant explained: "I think the benefit is just a better overall understanding of each other. And when you have a better understanding you have a better working partnership. Everything runs smoother." Participants in the focus groups also discussed how the training allowed them to use the knowledge they have gained in the relationships with teachers and the ways they approached teachers. Parent participants in the post focus groups also shared that parent-teacher partnerships have the benefit of teachers supporting families to become advocates and also help children become advocates for themselves. Moreover, participants concluded that partnerships benefit all students, not only students with disabilities. Participants shared that partnerships allow for an overall sense of better understanding each other, which in turn facilitates better relationships.

2.4.3.4. Theme 4: Establishing partnerships can be a challenging process. Parent participants shared that many parents feel intimidated by communication with teachers. Use of professional jargon and acronyms are some of the biggest challenges in this regard. For instance, one participant explained:

A lot of that intimidation, I think we talked about, stems from not understanding the acronyms. There are so many out there, like we said and that's kind of a big problem because parents just do not feel comfortable if there is a problem or doing an IEP, asking a question or saying I don't understand what you're talking about. And then you kind of lose them is what we said. You lose them sometimes during just that one—just that one acronym. They can be stuck on that and the team has gone ahead.

Participants discussed the fact that schools should provide more structured, systematic ways of presenting participation opportunities to families and caregivers.

Participants in the groups also shared that families might experience difficulties when there are inconsistencies in practices across school districts. For example, one participant stated when discussing the approach used after moving her child in a new school district:

And it took a while and kind of like pulling some teeth to try to get on the same page and say "okay, well, this is how my son operates". And this project actually helped us to see that, okay, they are still professionals. They still are open to learning what it is that they can do to help my child. It's not just I know everything or they know everything or they're trying to tell me what I should do and I'm trying to tell them what they should do. And after a while we got on the same page about how is it better to help my son because he wasn't eating.

2.4.3.5. Theme 5: Effects of the training on how parents work with teachers. Parent participants in the focus groups shared that the training had an overall positive influence on them. Participants shared that the training helped improve their understanding of the professionals' perspectives. One participant explained:

I think it's helped us understand them [teachers] a little bit better as far as they do want the best for the kids too, and sometimes their hands are tied because of district or whatever, you know, that they're willing to work with us as parents to come up with solutions—that they're not so scary after all.

Moreover, participants felt that the training helped improve not only the relationships with special education teachers, but also the relationships with teachers in different subject areas.

The training also helped parents in the focus groups realize that teachers do appreciate communication with families and they recognize the information families share as being valuable. One participant summarized:

I think that's why they appreciate when parents come to them because there may be something that we know that they could implement at school that would make their day easier for themselves and for the student. So if there's no communication, no talking with that it can make for a difficult day.

Participants in this training felt strongly that all teachers should have access to this training. This would benefit all students, not only students with disabilities. One participant stated:

I know we discussed in our group how do you get the general education teachers to work with your child if they are special needs because they don't really know a lot about a child with any disability, whether it's autism or something else? How do they engage them when they have them for specials like music or something like that? You know what I mean? So I think that it should be a bigger variety of people involved in this process in some kind of way to get it spread across the district.

2.4.4. Professionals post-intervention findings

2.4.4.1. Theme 1: The parent–teacher partnership reinforced professionals' belief that it is important to work together with families. Participants in the post-intervention professional focus group shared that the training further validated the importance of working with all families and maintaining open lines for communication. The participants in the professional focus group discussed how parents took more of a listener role because they felt that the teachers are the experts. During the training, there was a shift toward parents sharing more, a more balanced representation of views in the conversations. One participant described this shift:

I want to say that it seemed from my point of view that the parents almost wanted to sometimes have—their voice was not always in their eyes to be heard because the professional might know the information and they were the expert. They would do more listening. But for this project I saw a change in the balance and more of an equal representation of both because they both have good information to share with each other.

2.4.4.2. Theme 2: There are multiple challenges in collaboration that are yet to be addressed. One of the main challenges identified by the participants was the gaps in communication throughout the collaboration process. Participants in the professional focus groups recognized that there are gaps to be addressed in the communication and collaboration between teachers and families. More specifically, effective communication between parents and schools does not always happen, as communication is not always systematic, and it is more difficult than anticipated. One participant explained:

I think it's opened my eyes to the idea that I think schools have always felt like they were communicating with parents and parents felt like through the IEP meeting they were communicating with the school but with this project we realized that neither side was doing a good job and the communication really had no formal structure to flow but was sort of just thrown out there and you didn't know if anybody received it from either side.

However, participants in the focus groups shared that the training was an eye opening experience by learning how much valuable information families have to share. The professionals recognized that the training provided families with a voice and a network to connect them to support and resources. The training rebalanced the partnership by making the voice of the families heard. Participants believed that the more information families have, the higher chances that conflict situations can be avoided.

Another challenge identified by the participants was that professionals need to be aware of the needs of culturally diverse families. Participants in the professional focus groups indicated that it is important to understand that cultural differences might influence parent participation. For example, parents from some cultures are reluctant in sharing disagreement or criticizing teachers, which in turn might prevent them from being able to disagree and share their position in that sense. One participant detailed on this issue:

[work group in the school district implementing the training strategies] they were sharing that the Hispanic community was very reticent to come forward and say anything negative or share any negative experience and it wasn't just because of the language barrier; it was because they really ... that was stepping out of bounds to say something like that about an educator so I thought that was really an interesting discovery for the group there.

Another participant commented how diverse family structures or backgrounds can encounter barriers in engaging in the educational process:

It's a whole learning. You have to really get involved and learn and research it and put that effort forward and it's exhausting, especially when you have a family. There's a lot of research saying if you have multiple children—sometimes you have multiple children with special needs and a single parent, maybe a single parent and also demographic issues, cultural issues; those are all barriers.

Participants shared that there are multiple social or time barriers for families to participate in partnerships with schools. Participants in the focus groups for professionals recognized that it is still a work in progress to learn how to recognize and acknowledge that parent participation does not always come in the form of the physical presence in the meeting, but the effort at home as well. For instance, one participant pointed out:

It's the single dad who tucks his kids in and says, "Did you do your homework? What did you have?" That's as engaged as somebody who shows up for a parent partnership session on communication, and how are we ever going to effectively measure that? So those are the folks that we're talking about we're interested in reaching, those people that we never see that we know are trying to some capacity.

Participants in the professional focus groups shared that it would be beneficial to have more culturally and linguistically diverse families and staff in the training. In addition, more information on cultural diversity at the beginning of the training and embedded throughout each of the topic is highly necessary. Finally, the participants in the focus groups shared that they recognized the need for looking at the larger family unit beyond parents. One participant commented: "We had a session where we had siblings there because the sibling takes an active role in advocating for their brother or sister. So I think we need to be careful about that." Another participant pointed out: "The whole picture of what the child's family has to look like first, what's the child's culture, home culture looks like first, community culture look like first, before you can even talk about communication."

Oftentimes it can be the emotional experience of the diagnosis or the life circumstances that put time barriers for families to be able to actually meet with professionals. One participant explained:

The biggest challenge that they have found so far is that giving the parent time to sort of accept it themselves. One of the parents described it as a gut punch when you first hear that news that your child has a disability so giving them time to understand it and to deal with it themselves before you say, “Okay and now here’s this 13-page ETR that we’re going to go over that has all these statistics and things in it,” when you’re still reeling from the fact that my child has a disability.

Another special educator commented on how life cycle transitions can be difficult as well: “ ... you really get a feel for the grief as they come up to those pinnacles of like driver’s license, of going to dances ...” Another participant completed the series of examples: “ Not being invited to birthday parties.”

Finally, participants in the professional focus group discussed that one of the challenges anticipated in the future is sustainability of the practices of collaboration they experienced in the training. Participants mentioned that maintaining the program in a positive and functioning way might be a challenge in the future. Participants also shared that some school districts are yet to embrace the value of the family voice and that sometimes new initiatives are met by school districts feeling cautious. However, the participants agreed that building sustainability is critical in maintaining partnerships with families.

Participants in the focus groups agreed that the model should be shared with preservice teachers and general education teachers, not only special education teachers. Preparing all in- and pre-service teachers under this model would create a solid collaborative community. One participant explained:

I see some schools really working on it but there seems to be a mindset out there that it’s just—there it is again, I’ll go back to that word, this is the way we do things. Once we get teachers that get in that mode, then it’s hard. So I guess to answer your question I take that back to the pre-service things of how we teach teachers to deal not just with parents who have children with disabilities but also any parent so that we are building a collaborative structure because if we want to raise the achievement gap we have to move and shake and be inviting and I see that that’s a real issue for schools in general.

2.4.4.3. Theme 3: Dialog creates opportunities for improved relationships. The participants in the professional focus groups shared that taking the time to establish partnerships with families has the benefit of time for dialog and therefore the potential to improve relationships and build trust. One participant commented on the benefits of participating in this collaborative professional development opportunity:

I mean we all said over and over again the conversation is where the work gets done and got started and the barriers were broken down and, “Oh, I didn’t realize that parents thought like that. Oh, I didn’t realize that’s why the district had to do such and such and so and so,” and just the time to sit and have those conversations.

Another participant concluded: “And the benefit of that relationship is trust.”

2.4.4.4. Theme 4: Improved student outcomes are the ultimate goal. Participants in the professional focus groups capitalized on the improved outcomes for students as being the ultimate outcome for family–professional partnerships. One participant summarized: “It seems to me that the benefits to the teachers and the parents are secondary to the benefits that hopefully the students will reap out of this.” Another participant commented on this same aspect

Well the ultimate outcome would be hopefully: is it improving student achievement and are kids receiving the benefits in terms of services? That would be the ultimate goal but you may not be able to observe that right away. But I think the partnership working toward that end is the biggest key.

Moreover, participants recognized that when parents see outcomes that reflect their participation in the decision-making process they feel more motivated and committed to collaborate with schools. One participant explained:

It's the decision making, the something that happens after the conversations are held I think that helps build sustainability with families. If families feel as though what they say is valued and used to make a change, you've got buy in then probably for the rest of the educational career.

2.4.4.5. Theme 5: The training provided a reminder on importance of effective collaboration, listening empathetically and intentionally. Participants in the focus groups for professionals shared that there is a greater sense of awareness and empathy toward families. One participant commented: " ... not having a child with a disability even though I've worked in the field, you still don't have that empathy and you really have to think about what it truly is like to be in their shoes ..."

Participants also shared that the training served as a reminder of how important it is to listen to the families. One participant explained:

I think for me it really emphasized the need to really listen beyond the emotion. What are they really saying? They sound angry, they sound frustrated, but what is behind that emotion? What is the true message that they're trying to communicate in spite of the emotions they're feeling?

On this same note, another participant commented:

Yesterday at a meeting I said to a parent—she was so upset—and I said, "Tell me why you're asking that question," and then we got to the real issue of oh, that's what it is. It wasn't what it was asking about, it was a whole other reason, but until you figure out why and where that's coming from ...

3. Discussion

This study explored the changes determined by a six-month intervention in the form of a professional development and teaming opportunity for teachers and families. The results of this study indicate that parents and teachers of students with disabilities oftentimes enter the collaboration process with the awareness that families need support to understand and navigate the special education system. In the same time, parents and professionals are also aware that there is a disconnection in communication and in expectations regarding the collaboration process or the education of students with disabilities. The model of intervention employed by this study was designed to meet specific needs of special educator and families as stakeholder highly invested in the education of students with disabilities. Special educators and families had ample time and opportunities to reconcile differences in perceptions over each other's motivation and participation in special education, worked together to identify goals to meet individual school districts, and reflected over the process and outcomes of the training. However, the results of this study also suggest that although both families and educators recognize significant challenges in the process, both groups believe in the benefits of collaboration for the ultimate goal of improved outcomes for students with disabilities. These results should be considered within the small size of the sample and the unique demographic characteristics of the state in which the project took place. An extended study with larger samples of participants from different regions of the country would offer a better understanding of the influence of factors such as demographics, available resources, or school system policies, and the extent

to which these findings could be generalized to the larger population. Still, many important themes emerged from the study, as summarized below.

Parents had the opportunity to engage in a process of learning together and teaming rarely experienced through the typical collaboration process during IEPs. Whereas in the IEP process parents are often the stakeholders with the highest concern and investment in the process, this professional development created a collaboration opportunity exclusive of the pressure typically experienced by parents in the IEP process. Before starting the training, parents of students with disabilities participating in this study shared a strong commitment to educating themselves as much as possible to help their own children and other families of students with disabilities. Parents also shared a sense of disconnection from professionals in the ways they experienced special education processes. This finding was particularly concerning, considering that the ability to understand and demonstrate empathy for the emotional and overall impact of a diagnosed disability on the family is critical for setting the foundation of a good rapport (Rogers, 2007; Turnbull et al., 2015). Many parents experience a series of strong emotions when they embark in this new journey for their child, and professionals sometimes do not feel prepared to support these emotional needs (Brotherson et al., 2010). Although many parents might experience a sense of validation of their prior concerns, some parents might also experience feelings of shock, anger, guilt, depression, or a sense of isolation before experiencing a sense of hope and acceptance (Haley, Hammond, Ingalls, & Marin, 2013). Parents might also experience anxiety and a sense of urgency in having concrete answers and solutions (Brotherson et al., 2010). Moreover, for families in this study, like for many other families, key moments in the special education process (e.g. identification, transitions) are particularly difficult (Rodriguez et al., 2014). Therefore, effective communication and teaming, as well as the ability to access and serve as networks of resources are critical (Benson, 2012; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

Similar to the parent participants, educators in this study recognized the parents' need for support in understanding the processes involved in special education services in order to become advocates (Rodriguez et al., 2014). In addition, professionals acknowledged the need to have a better understanding of the family experience in the special education process, particularly during key moments, such as identification and transitions (Landmark, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013). The results in this study are encouraging, as they indicated that both educators and families recognize the importance of effective communication in designing educational services for students with disabilities. Moreover, even though both groups acknowledged collaboration to in special education be a complex process with significant room for improvement, parents and educators in this study recognized that learning together facilitated a better understanding of dynamics in collaboration and team members' perspectives. Particularly encouraging, the educators in this study also discussed the multiple benefits of partnerships, such as information sharing and shared decision-making, which ultimately translate in improved outcomes for students (Malone & Gallagher, 2010). Ultimately, these aspects could essentially represent indicators of the first steps into effective family-professional partnerships. In addition, participants in this study agreed that systemic solutions are necessary to ensure sustainability of collaboration between families and schools.

The six-month training delivered to the parent-educator teams was designed with the purpose of triggering changes in perspectives, as well as growth in the extent to which the teams conceptualize and position themselves in collaborative partnerships (Starr & Foy, 2012). Overall, parents participating in the post intervention focus groups shared a sense of improved communication between teachers and families. More specifically, parents felt that the training allowed teachers to access parent perspectives. At the same time, parents realized that teachers do in fact care and want to help families and students with disabilities. However, due to the fact that teachers are perceived as experts, parents expect teachers to inform them what they need to know and to be able to identify and address the wide variety of student needs. Nevertheless, at the completion of the training parents shared that the opportunities of networking made a significant change in the extent to which they felt empowered. Having access to a network of support allows parents to access information and have interactions that validate their experiences or feelings (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans,

2008). Parent participants also shared a sense of stronger support and better understanding between families and teachers. Finally, the results of the post intervention focus groups indicate that parents view student outcomes as the driving force and the ultimate goal of collaboration.

The parent-teacher partnership training reinforced professionals' belief that collaboration with families is critical to understand families' needs (Cook & Friend, 2010; Starr & Foy, 2012). Similar to the parent participants, professionals recognized that there is yet much work to be done to address gaps in the communication and collaboration processes. Professionals shared the belief that dialog creates opportunities for improved relationships, and that families should be included in the decision-making process with results that include family input. It is also very encouraging that professionals expressed the need to understand the experiences and implications of receiving a diagnosis, and that more consideration should be provided to the structure of supports during key moments such as diagnosis or transitions. Moreover, professionals recognized the need to learn more about ways in which they can effectively support culturally and linguistically diverse families (Cote, Jones, Sparks, & Aldridge, 2012; Renshaw, Choo, & emerald, 2014). This finding is particularly encouraging as the diversity of students and families represented in American schools continues to increase (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), 2015).

Several limitations exist in the current study, and future research expanding this research line may help explore these issues. The sample in this study was a convenience sample, and it is likely that many parents of children with disabilities did not volunteer for a plethora of reasons, such as conflicts with work and other commitments, limited access to information about the learning opportunity, or lack of childcare. Similarly, the professional volunteers may not be fully representative of the teachers in their districts. Therefore, the full scope of perspectives is likely not represented here. Similarly, specifics such as the region in which the training was carried out likely influence the specific voice and foci of the study participants. Next, the study examined the effectiveness of the training broadly, but did not compare the effectiveness of specific delivery models, such as online versus face to face. More fine-grained analyses of what specifically works to optimize such a collaborative training model will help pinpoint best practices in training in the future. Finally, the grant funding for this project provided resources to offer the training, including offering parents and professionals the time, space, and logistics coordination for all meetings. This set the stage for the optimal deployment of the learning opportunity, but also makes it difficult to uncover the specific challenges to implementation when such resources are lacking. Future research that specifically targets this type of professional learning opportunity at different scales (e.g. district wide vs. statewide) will help elucidate this issue.

The findings of this study indicate that family members and educators step in the special education process with divergent experiences, expectations, and beliefs. School districts motivated to systematically improve home-school relationships must recognize that there might be a real need to design infrastructures that improve communication between these groups. These results indicate that through the training, both family members and professionals gain important insight into each other's point of view. In the end, the reminder that the student with exceptionalities is the benefactor of the positive relationship between parents and professionals should guide the efforts to create opportunities for change.

Funding

The contents of this publication were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education [grant number #H323A120002]. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: One step closer: Connecting parents and teachers for improved student outcomes, Mariana Mereoiu, Sara Abercrombie & Mary Murray, *Cogent Education* (2016), 3: 1243079.

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