

Collaboration skills pre-service teachers acquire in a responsive preparation program

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration skills are essential for all teachers, but crucial for personnel who instruct students with disabilities. Through collaboration, families and professionals are able to combine their strengths and wisdom to make education as appropriate as possible for the student. Capitalizing on each other's knowledge and expertise not only helps the student, it also makes for stronger families and more competent professionals. But what may come as a surprise, in schools and universities teacher education candidates do not gain extensive training and experience in collaborative teamwork; however, research reveals that it is possible to effectively teach collaboration, listening, and to some extent, cooperative skills (Cortez & et al., 2009; Taylor & et al., 1988). This manuscript reports on the status of collaboration-skill development, the many advantages of effective parent-professional partnerships, legal mandates for parental involvement in the education of persons with disabilities, essential collaboration skills needed by teachers, and provides an account of the extent to which pre-service candidates in one responsive teacher preparation program are acquiring collaboration skills. The evidence suggests that teacher candidates are on the right track but may need more in-depth training and experience to develop an appropriate level of confidence to work effectively with parents and other professionals as they prepare to teach children in today's schools.

Keywords: collaboration skills, parent-professional partnerships, pre-service teachers, responsive preparation program, and students with disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

Education has developed to a point that instruction is not a one teacher adventure. It takes teamwork to meet the educational needs of children. This has been long recognized in the field of special education. A cooperative venture is needed from the very beginning of providing education to persons with disabilities.

Considerable emphasis in the literature is being devoted to teacher-parent collaboration (Smith & et al., 2012), which is the type collaboration of primary interest in this study. This manuscript addresses collaboration from a family-professional partnership perspective with persons with disabilities as the central target. More specifically, attention focuses on the definition and principles for teacher-parent partnerships, status of collaboration-skill development, the need and impact of effective parent-professional partnerships, legal mandates for parental involvement in the education of persons with disabilities, essential collaboration skills needed by teachers, and provides an account of the extent to which pre-service candidates in one responsive teacher preparation program are acquiring collaboration skills.

DEFINITION AND PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHER-FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

A teacher-family partnership is defined as relationships in which families and professionals collaborate, capitalizing on each other's judgments and expertise in order to increase the benefits of education for students, families, and professionals (Turnbull & et al., 2010; Bayat, 2012). The establishment of partnerships is not to be by chance or without structure. The school leadership should be committed to and encourage school-family partnerships through shared responsibilities, shared decision making, and parity for all participants (Smith & et al., 2012).

For students with disabilities in inclusion settings, the integration of professional efforts and involvement of parents are required. There is a need for administrators, teachers, aides, volunteers, and members of the interdisciplinary team to work together. In addition to benefiting the children, professional growth takes place as professionals collaboratively search for ways to provide for children with disabilities in the inclusive setting. During the search process it will necessitate ways to develop a partnership with parents. To make the partnership a success, it is essential to listen to parents' concerns, consult with them on a continuous basis, and to make use of the knowledge that they possess about their children (Allen & Cowdery, 2009).

There are two major functions of parental involvement. It provides an ongoing reinforcement system that supports the efforts of the program while it is underway and it tends to maintain and accentuate the child's gains after the program ends (Allen & Cowdery, 2009). To help ensure that partnerships operate effectively, Turnbull and et al. (2010) developed seven principles of partnerships. The principles are communication, professional competence, respect, commitment, equality, advocacy, and trust. Key practices associated with each principle are as follows:

- Communication – be friendly, listen, be clear, be honest, provide and coordinate information;

- Professional competence – provide quality education, continue to learn, set high expectations;
- Respect – honor cultural diversity, affirm strengths, treat students and families with dignity;
- Commitment – be available and accessible, go above and beyond, be sensitive to emotional needs;
- Equality – share power, foster empowerment, provide options;
- Advocacy – seek win-win solutions, prevent problems, keep your conscience primed, pinpoint and document problems, form alliances; and
- Trust – be reliable, use sound judgment, maintain confidentiality, trust yourself (Turnbull & et al., 2010).

At the very outset, collaborative teamwork seems to provide the appropriate environment for effective teaching and learning. Research findings validate the benefits of collaborative work (Taylor & et al., 1988). Some positive results of collaborative partnerships include a trusting school climate, improved student achievement, and positive influences on family quality-of-life outcomes. Partnerships build on the strengths, talents, resources, and expertise of educators, families, and others who are committed to making a positive difference in the lives of children and youth with exceptionalities. When educators, parents, and students are partners with each other, in time, they come to trust each other. With trust, the partnership remains strong and can sustain all partners.

STATUS OF COLLABORATION-SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The general finding is that in schools and universities, students are not often taught teamwork skills. It is posed that perhaps the best way to learn to collaborate is by collaborating. One process found to enable collaboration and teamwork skills to be taught and measured was a face-to-face collaborative work and class-wide activities supported by wirelessly connected hand-held devices (Cortez & et al., 2009). The authors of the study concluded that it is possible to effectively teach collaboration skills through the use of immediate feedback provided by a supporting technology.

In the field of special education major textbooks are more and more addressing the topic of parent-family partnerships. The practice is also required by federal legislation as school systems educate individuals with disabilities. A detailed discussion of these requirements is provided in a subsequent section of this manuscript, “Legal mandates for parental involvement.”

NEED FOR AND IMPACT OF FAMILY-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

There is strong justification for family-professional partnerships. Allen and Cowdery (2009) provide a number of reasons for encouraging parents’ involvement in their child’s early education and intervention program. Selected reasons include:

- Parents are the major socializing agents for their child. They are transmitters of cultural values, beliefs, and traditions;

- Children with disabilities acquire developmental skills more quickly when parents participate in home teaching;
- Consistency of adult expectations can be maintained;
- Parents know their child better than teachers or clinicians, and thus, parents are a source of information not available from any one else; and
- Family members can help the child transfer learnings from school to home and neighborhood (Allen & Cowdery, 2009).

While highly qualified educators may be perceived as creative individuals who work privately, interaction and collaboration are crucial for their success. It is now recognized that teams achieve much more than individuals working alone. However, adequate support is needed to make teamwork a success (Cortez & et al., 2009). In perspective, when families and professionals partner together to achieve the best outcome for the child, all benefit by the collective power gained as a result of the partnership (Bayat, 2012).

The impact of family-professional partnership on the child is clear. It leads to student progress in terms of attendance, more positive attitudes, better grades, increased motivation, and higher test scores. It also fosters positive attitudes toward school, improves homework habits, reduces absenteeism and dropping out, and enhances academic achievement (Smith & et al., 2012).

For students with disabilities, collaborative teaming is an important strategy to promote inclusive practices from early childhood to high school. It entails two or more people working together to educate students with disabilities. They partner to achieve a shared goal, believe that all team members have unique and needed expertise and skills, and value each person's contribution (Turnbull & et al., 2010). The skill of collaboration is becoming increasingly important in the academic world (Ovadia, 2010).

Partnerships can do a lot for the entire school. Those that foster partnerships among administrators, faculty, families and students are more likely to have high levels of trust, better morale, a more positive school climate, and find it easier to solve problems. As these enhancements are with the school and the students achieve more, partnerships also boost families' quality of life (Turnbull & et al., 2010).

LEGAL MANDATES FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Schools have not always extended an invitation to parents for involvement in the education of their children. Prior to the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), many parents of students with disabilities were minimally involved in the educational programs of their children. IDEA now requires that school personnel engage cooperatively with parents in the education of children with disabilities. Parental participation is required in the identification and eligibility process as well as in placement decisions and annual program planning. Schools are no longer allowed to make educational decisions about students with disabilities without parental involvement (Smith & et al., 2012). IDEA amendments of 1997 and those of 2004 stressed the importance of parent participation by including the parents on the IEP team and by encouraging parents to submit additional information to be used during the eligibility and planning process (Overton, 2012).

Other legislations, including Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) include sections addressing the need for parental involvement. These laws stress the importance of involving the students and families in the education process and actually mandate certain steps in the process (Smith & et al., 2012).

SPECIFIC COLLABORATION SKILLS NEEDED BY TEACHERS

Effective collaboration does not come without effort. It is a framework whereby two or more individuals work together as equal partners to make decisions that will lead to positive changes. In an educational setting the goal of collaboration is to improve services for students through the efforts of families and schools working together as equal partners who share resources, decisions, and responsibilities. School-family collaboration is an important component of providing appropriate educational services to students with disabilities (Smith & et al., 2012).

Snell and Janney (2005) identified five principal components of collaborative teaming. They are building team structure, learning teamwork skills, taking team action, teaching collaboratively, improving communication, and handling conflict. Making specific reference to families and professionals, Bayat (2012) provided some key principles that promote establishing a partnership and collaborative relationship. They are communication, commitment, respect, professional competence, equality, and trust.

Difference levels of advocacy have been accorded the principles of partnerships. For example, one report is that there is no way that schools can maximize parental involvement without good communication. Ways suggested to improve communication include being an active listener; always being respectful; discussing specific educational and behavior expectations and goals of the child; making positive comments about the child; establishing regular communication with family members and communicating frequently, beginning meetings with welcoming, and not assuming parent know and understand how to assist their child (Smith & et al., 2012). Allen and Cowdery (2009) state that to ensure ongoing effective communication, teachers and parents must first establish and maintain a trusting relationship, and that the key to forming this trust is to maintain confidentiality. Another communication strategy the authors offer is to make it a two-way process and for teachers to talk with rather than to parents as they simultaneously share knowledge and obtain feedback.

McClure (2006) called special attention to the importance of trust in a study where improved student performance was observed. Smith and et al. (2012) stated that the most important thing school personnel can do to encourage parents and school partnerships is to listen to family members. They define active listening as a method of assuring the speaker that you understand the message sent. It conveys that one is both verbally and non-verbally attending to the message and that the input is valuable. In addition to really listening to parents and taking into consideration their input, school personnel can increase parental involvement in educational decision making by being sensitive to cultural and language differences. It should not be assumed that individuals from different cultural groups share the same social values as school personnel (Smith & et al., 2012).

Parents and educators working together will benefit the student's educational program. Sheridan et al. (cited by Overton, 2012) provided a list of actions that enhance the collaborative nature of the relationship. Selected and paraphrased actions that may well be translated into teacher preparation competencies are:

- View any differences that arrive as strength;
- Remain focused on a mutual interest (e.g., assessment and planning for student needs);
- Ask for ideas and opinions about the child regarding problems, goals, and potential solutions;
- Respect the skills and knowledge of each other related to the student, the disability, and contextual considerations;
- Make joint decisions about the child's educational program and goals;
- Share resources to work toward goal attainment;
- Demonstrate willingness to address conflict; and
- Refrain from finding fault, commit to sharing successes (Overton, 2012).

COLLABORATION SKILLS ACQUIRED BY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

Here, an account is provided of the extent to which pre-service candidates in a responsive teacher preparation program are acquiring collaboration skills. The teacher preparation program of study is housed in the university's College of Education and Human Development. Its major goal is to produce highly qualified teachers, administrators, and directors who understand the whole child in the teaching and learning process, especially students from inner-city and urban America. Educational realities, theories, and practices, which prepare students for teaching careers, include the tenets and core values of the Responsive Educators Model (REM). The "responsive educator" is a candidate who provides and embodies a committed response, knowledgeable response, skillful response, and a professional response. Within this context, program graduates should be committed to enhancing learning, effectively involving parents and agencies and appropriately collaborating to positively impact learners from diverse backgrounds and developmental stages, including the exceptional (Responsive educator conceptual framework, n.d.). To specifically address the latter, all education majors are required to take a course dealing with exceptional children.

The textbook (*Exceptional Lives* by Turnbull & et al., 2010) for The Survey of Exceptional Children and Youth in the Schools course (SPED 311) has a chapter entitled "Today's Families and Their Partnerships with Professionals." The chapter enumerates particular principles essential for forming partnerships with families. (For this study, the seven principles are viewed as competencies with which teacher candidates may acquire to effectively form partnerships with parents.) After completing the chapter, candidates are assessed on the chapter's content and are further requested to specify skills, abilities, and/or practices of which they feel competent in partnering with parents in the education of children with disabilities. Specifically, the essay question reads, "Think of yourself as a partner with parents in the education of children with disabilities. What particular skills, abilities, or practices will you bring to the table?" Responses were examined from

28 students enrolled in a SPED 311 course. The findings for their self reported competencies are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Collaboration Skills possessed by Responsive Teacher Candidates

Principle/Competency Area	No. Candidate Responses	Percent (N = 71)
Communication	17	23.94
Professional competence	19	26.76
Respect	9	12.67
Commitment	4	5.63
Equality	5	7.04
Advocacy	7	9.85
Trust	6	8.45
Others	4	5.63
Total	71	99.97

For the original seven principles or competency areas, the teacher candidates most frequently indicated proficiency in professional competence (26.76%) and communication (23.94%). The finding in communication shows that the candidates do well in an area of crucial importance as reported in the literature. Smith and et al. (2012) indicate that parental involvement cannot be maximized without effective communication.

The candidates indicated proficiency least frequent with the principles/competencies commitment (5.63%) and equality (7.04%). A rationale could easily be made for improvement with these competencies. Trust came in at 8.45%, which was relatively low. McClure (2006) emphasized the importance of trust in forming beneficial partnerships. The “Other” category included four responses (5.63%), where the candidates indicated strength from personal experience with persons with disabilities, high level of confidence, community outreach, and a sense of confidence.

These findings provide interesting implications for the responsive teacher preparation program and inform the profession of possible considerations in curriculum development and implementation. If the principles/competencies are considered justifiable, the findings of this study suggest the possible need for enhancement of candidate proficiency on them. None of the areas had sufficiently high responses. Even the 19 responses in professional competence and 17 responses in communication indicated that of the 28 candidates, on average only 67.85% indicated proficiency in the former and 60.71% indicated proficiency in the latter. It would appear that more appropriate response rates would be 80% or higher with most, if not all, of the principles/competencies. If teacher education majors are expected to form quality partnerships with parents in the education of their children, institutions of higher learning must ensure that appropriate program competencies are established and that candidates are accountable for demonstrating proficiency with them.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature has supported the effectiveness of training supervisors in listening skills and, to some extent, in cooperative skills (Taylor & et al., 1988). Of course the question here is whether or not or how interpersonal skills can be developed for teachers to form effective partnerships with parents in educating school children. One speculation is that interpersonal skill enhancement may require a long training period (Taylor & et al., 1988). Another study (Bacon, 2008) reported that when strategically approached, there can be significant growth with the skill: to participate and collaborate as members on a social and intellectual network of learners.

The literature does not waiver on the importance of collaborative teaming. It has been dubbed as the glue that holds an inclusive school together. But unfortunately, most teachers do not get the training they need to put this crucial process to work (Snell & Janney, 2005). Barriers to effective collaboration seem to be insufficient time and knowledge to engage in it. To make collaboration effective, speaking, listening, and leadership skills are essential (Jaecks, 2007). When properly formed, collaboration can lead to improved teamwork performance and the experience can lead to greater willingness to work in a team (Cortez & et al., 2009).

The findings from the study of a responsive teacher education program point to the possible need for strengthening its efforts at developing collaboration skills among teacher candidates. While one chapter in one course may open their eyes to the importance of parent-professional partnerships, a more structured curriculum is needed to ensure that they graduate with the needed skills to direct and facilitate quality collaboration with parents of children in today's schools.

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