

# **The Influence of Parenting Experience on Special Education Teachers' Pedagogy**

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers who have the dual role of parent and teacher of children with disabilities. Data were collected in a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with participants about their experiences. Questions focused on how teachers 1) experienced their roles, 2) addressed role conflict, 3) experienced communication with parents of children with disabilities and their colleagues, and 4) their thoughts and experiences regarding their pedagogy. Two broad themes emerged: 1) things parents of students with disabilities need to know about special education teachers and 2) things special education teachers need to know about the parents of their students. Sub-themes were also identified. Suggestions for teacher professional development are offered.*

**Key words:** *Pedagogy, special education, professional development*

## Introduction

The influence of parenting experience on special education teachers' pedagogy  
Being the parent of a child with a disability is a complex issue. Parents may experience denial, grief, stress, or anger about their child's disability. Parents also need to develop coping strategies to address the challenges of having a child with a disability in the family system (Little, 2002; Judge, 1998; Diamond, 1994; Marcenko & Meyers, 1991; McCubbin, McCubbin, Patterson, Cauble, Wilson, & Warwick, 1983; Abery, 2006). Teachers can be a source of support for parents as they navigate having a child with a disability in their family. Teachers who have personal experience with disability in their family can be a unique source of information and support for parents.

When parents have a child with a disability, they can expect to spend a great deal of time interacting and communicating with teachers and those parent-teacher relationships are often complex and tenuous. Parental views of satisfaction with that parent-teacher relationship and of school support and communication can vary. Parent satisfaction with the home-school and parent-teacher relationship can be contributed to the quality and frequency of communication between teachers and parents (Friedman, Bobrowski & Markow, 2006), the frequency of teacher-initiated communication (Spann, Kohler & Soenksen, 2003), the age of their child (parent satisfaction decreased as the children aged) (Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull & Poston, 2005) and the amount and quality of services their child received (Bitterman, Daly, Misra, Carlson & Markowitz, 2008). These four studies (Friedman, et al., 2006; Summers, et al., 2005; Spann, et al., 2003; Bitterman, et al, 2008) all point out the need for schools to be aware of the importance of 1) communicating with parents about their child's academic programming, whether it is disability related or not, 2) initiating communication, not just responding to parent-initiated communication and 3) encouraging parent participation in the school. When parents feel involved and part of their child's academic program, their satisfaction with the school increases.

Some parents report, though, that they are dissatisfied with their interactions with schools and special education teachers, especially over issues of communication and trust (Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009), regarding the education of their child with a disability. Many parents would like their child's special education teachers to increase their knowledge about disabilities (characteristics and educational implications) and how disabilities impact children and families at home and at school (Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998); they want special education teachers to be more empathetic to the needs of their children, even suggesting they "*imagine how they might feel if they were parenting a child with special needs*" (Pruitt, et al., 1998, p. 165). Additionally, parents want the special education teachers to be more receptive to listening to their concerns and to include them more deliberately in the IEP process, and they want better and increased communication between families and special education teachers (Pruitt, et al, 1998; Fish, 2006). Parents who have children with disabilities are often struggling with acceptance and understanding. They will process their experience from a completely different perspective than the

teacher. It is important for teachers to acknowledge this difference in how the child's disability is experienced in order for avenues of communication to be opened. As Ray, Pewitt-Kinder and George (2009) noted, "*unless you have a child with a disability, you cannot fully understand the experience*" (p. 17).

Teachers of children with disabilities also face challenges. Many general education teachers report they do not feel prepared to address the special needs of children with disabilities, or their parents, particularly when those children are receiving some or all of their education in the inclusion classroom (Smith & Smith, 2000; Hardin, 2005; Harding & Darling, 2003; Hay & Winn, 2005).

### **Teacher Preparation for Interacting with Parents**

Special education teachers working with children with disabilities often have increased interactions with the parents of their students when compared to general educators, but studies indicate that teachers are not adequately prepared for the issues specific to living with a child with a disability (Bailey, et al, 1990; Knight & Wadsworth, 1999; Flanigan, 2007; Brownell, et al., 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

Several studies that examined teacher preparation programs on how these programs prepare pre-service teachers for interacting with parents reported that new teachers are not adequately prepared to collaborate with parents (Bailey, et al, 1990; Knight & Wadsworth, 1999; Flanigan, 2007; Brownell, et al. 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). This lack of preparation for working with families of children with disabilities extends across disciplines, even in those where disability is a hallmark of the population served (physical therapy, occupational therapy, special education, etc.) (Bailey, et al., 1990). This study noted that the average student in the fields of special education and related services received less than ten hours of course instruction in working collaboratively with families. This was supported by Flanigan (2007) whose focus group interviews with faculty who work in pre-service teacher preparation programs revealed that these programs do not provide pre-service teachers with adequate course work on parent interactions or with opportunities to interact with parents in the community. Knight and Wadsworth (1999) looked specifically at the development of family and school partnerships in special education teacher preparation programs and concluded that there is very little course content in working collaboratively with parents. This can be detrimental to the education of children with disabilities as "*[m]uch valuable information related to the assessment and educational programming of the child may be overlooked, or not even solicited, when family(dynamics are not considered and the establishment of a mutually respectful relationship not sought*" Knight & Wadsworth, 1999, p. 25). Even when a teacher education program incorporated information about working with parents of children with disabilities, specific instruction on how to apply those skills in a real world/classroom setting were not always provided (Brownell, et al., 2005). This practical application of skills is important to new teachers' understanding of family issues and needs to be actively incorporated into the pre-service learning curricula (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

## **Teacher Preparation for Working with Students with Disabilities**

The quality and type of training that new special education teachers receive in their pre-service education is critical and has an impact on planning for and delivery of instruction as well as the classroom environment (Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2005) and subsequent interactions with parents. First year teachers who are traditionally trained through a state-approved teacher-education program (rather than those who had training in a non-education field and/or had received emergency license and a few education courses) are at a pedagogical advantage, rating higher in observations of planning, preparation, classroom environment and delivery of instruction (Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2005).

The quality and type of teacher education can also have a significant impact on how teachers plan and prepare for instruction, manage the classroom environment and deliver instruction, especially when teaching students with disabilities (Nougaret, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2005; Boe, Shin & Cook, 2007). The skills new teachers bring to the classroom via their teacher education programs are critical to the education of children with disabilities. Brownell, Ross, Colon and McCallum (2005), after reviewing the literature on teacher preparation programs, recommend that newly qualified special education teachers be able to 1) teach students with widely varying disabilities and severity of need, 2) provide instruction across content areas, and 3) take on different roles as needed to interact with students, administrators and parents. Despite their limited experience, however, beginning special education teachers are expected to take on the same roles and responsibilities as more experienced special education teachers, and in some cases may be expected to take on the more challenging students (Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez & Bradley, 2005).

Pre-service teacher education programs can improve their programming for new special education teachers by 1) improving field experiences for pre-service teachers to gain practical skills and a more realistic understanding of the challenges of special education (Billingsley, 2002; Jung, 2007; Bailey, Simeonsson, Yoder & Huntington, 1990), 2) augmenting teacher preparation programs to enhance instruction on culturally and linguistically diverse students (Billingsley, 2002) and 3) provide opportunities for increased collaboration with parents, colleagues and other professionals (Bailey, et al., 1990)

The need for awareness of disability issues continues once teachers leave their training programs and enter the work force. Once teachers enter the work force, on-going professional development is needed to maintain and enhance knowledge, which is important for student achievement (Hall, 2007; Bruce, DiNatale & Ford, 2008).

## **Parent and Teacher Interactions and Relationships**

Issues of trust or broken trust between parents and teachers are another matter of concern (Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005; Blue-Banning, 2004; Matuszny, R. M., Banda, D. R., & Coleman, T. J., 2007). The

issue of broken trust between parents and teachers was addressed in one study that looked at the experiences of parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (Stoner, et al., 2005). One theme that emerged was that “the struggle for a diagnosis initiated a pattern of persistent behavior and a sense of distrust with the medical professionals which continued and influenced parent interactions with education professionals” (pp. 41-42). The authors recommended that teachers foster communication, provide support and enhance trust with the parents of their students. Teachers who have personal experiences with the challenges associated with living with disability issues may be in a better position to make the connections with parents that are necessary to facilitate communication and develop trust. Tensions between parents and teachers, between general education teachers and special education teachers and even between students with disabilities and their teachers, all stem back to issues of disability and contribute to a lack of understanding or broken trust between the parties (Stoner, et al., 2005). Teachers who have personal knowledge of disability issues, from the perspective of both the parent and the teacher, may be valuable conduits of information, connecting parents, teachers and students in ways that teachers without that personal experience cannot. This personal, subjective knowledge that is outside the realm of systematic teacher training is an important component of pedagogical knowledge. Van den berg (2002) says that every teacher has personal knowledge, experience and opinions that may be different from his or her colleagues. This is a collection of “*general knowledge, insights and experiences gained from actual practice*” (p. 589). This personal/practical knowledge is what makes up the core of their professional knowledge and “*on the basis of this personal knowledge base, teachers construct their own subjective educational theories*” (p. 589). Personal/practical knowledge of disability, therefore, can help construct professional understanding of disability issues in the classroom along with more carefully constructed interventions.

This current study addressed experiences of special education teachers who are also parents of children with disabilities in an effort to better understand the impact of having a child with a disability at home and in the classroom, what that experience might mean to their teaching practices, and how they can meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. For parent-teachers of children with disabilities, exploring how they view their roles, especially their dual role, may help them refine or improve their teaching practices, clarify their personal and professional expectations and those of others and better understand their pedagogical relationships with their students with disabilities which can also help shape practice and policy. Special education teachers who also have a child with a disability have a unique perspective on disability issues and can help all individuals involved in a child’s school experience understand the myriad of issues, both school and family related, that are part of having a child with a disability.

The overarching question that directed this qualitative research study was “*What does it mean to be both a parent and a teacher of children with disabilities?*” Additional questions helped guide and focus data collection and analysis:

- 1) How do parents and teachers of children with disabilities experience their dual roles?
- 2) Are conflicts experienced in the dual roles and how is that conflict addressed?
- 3) Does the dual role help facilitate special education teachers’ communication with parents about their children and with other teachers about their teaching?

#### 4) What is the impact of parenting a child with a disability on pedagogy and teaching?

### **Method**

The participants in this study were 11 special education teachers (10 female, one male) who were also parents of children with disabilities. They ranged in age from 31-60 years and had teaching experience ranging from 1-35 years. The ages of their children ranged from 3-30 years. Their children with disabilities had diagnoses of Autism, Specific Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment (including ADHD), and Multiple Disabilities. The teachers had experience in all areas of public education, including all grade levels. The teachers had experience in a variety of settings during their careers including resource support, self-contained classrooms and inclusion classrooms. Data were collected through face-to-face and phone semi-structured interviews which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The teachers were asked questions about their parenting and teaching experiences, focusing especially on how the experience of parenting a child (or children) with a disability impacted and influenced their teaching and their relationships with their students and the parents of their students. After the interviews were completed, transcribed and analyzed, a summary of all of the interviews was provided to the participants by email for their review and discussion to determine if “*this is what the experience [was] really like*” (van Manen, 1990, p. 99). Of the 11 participants, 70% responded, all with positive comments, noting that they felt the summary was an accurate representation and description of their experiences. The data were analyzed for themes and two primary themes emerged: 1) things parents of children with disabilities need to know about special education teachers and 2) things special education teachers need to know about parents of children with disabilities. Sub-themes were noted in each of the primary categories.

### **Results**

#### **Theme 1-What parents need to know about special education teachers**

Generally, the special education teachers who were interviewed reported good working relationships with the parents of their students. Their dual role of parent and teacher of children with disabilities helped shed some light on things they felt it would benefit parents to know about them which would hopefully facilitate trust and improve relationships between the teachers and the parents.

#### **We care for and worry about your children and often put ourselves in your shoes.**

Special education teachers who are parents experience overlap of their roles. For these teachers, how they identify themselves professionally and personally seems to be a “*package deal*.” They think about teaching when parenting and about parenting when teaching. Being a parent seems to have a positive influence on how the teachers cared for their students with disabilities.

The special education teachers reported feeling as if they were often in a parental role with their students, even wondering if they were acting more in the role of parent rather than teacher when trying to meet the academic needs of their students. This sometimes caused difficulty with setting comfortable boundaries between their roles, but most teachers felt that advocating for their students was worth some discomfort.

These special education teachers all had personal experience with disability in their families and felt that this helped them to understand the experiences of their students' parents as well. Maria said:

*" I want parents to know that I know what you're going through in some ways because of having gone through this myself. I feel like, I don't know, it always comforted me when people who worked with my daughter knew what I was going through, through their own personal experiences... "*

These dual role teachers indicated that they advocate a little harder for their students, constantly reflecting on their own experience as a foundation for their interactions with others. They ask themselves, "*What if this were my child?*" or, "*What would I want if I were in their place?*" These teachers reported that once they became the parents of children with disabilities they were more inclined to "*try one more thing*" or ask for "*one more service*" because they believed they could relate to the concerns of their students' parents.

### **We understand this is hard and we want to be an advocate for you and your child.**

All the special education teachers saw themselves in the role of advocate for their students and as a system of support for their parents. That advocacy and support role has been strengthened by their understanding of what it means to be a parent. Several special education teachers reported that as parents they may have an improved perspective of what the parents of their students may be experiencing, especially when considering the overlap of school into home life. Perhaps, more importantly, the special education teachers' personal experiences with the disability identification/assessment process, writing and implementing IEPs and navigating the entire medical and educational process allowed them to help parents with in a way that a teacher with only professional experience cannot. Allison says she can support parents effectively because she knows "*how to navigate and negotiate the various systems, whether its advocacy or an IEP, connecting with resources in the community, from first hand experiences being able to tell parents...what to expect from a particular resource and those kinds of things.*" When communicating with general education teachers regarding student needs in the classroom, the special education teachers interviewed felt that their experiences helped them to be good advocates for their students when explaining the need for an IEP, accommodations and modifications. Additionally, these dual role teachers noted that they try to empower parents to be their own advocates. They have the experience of learning to be an advocate for their children and their students and want parents to be able to advocate for their own children as they realize the importance of having that skill.

Samantha, the mother of two children with autism, said:

*" I understand now more as a parent how hard it is to learn when you don't have*

*the special ed background and how hard it is to implement it yourself and to parent when you just want to pick up and hold a kid, when you really need to do a behavioral thing, or you really need to expect some language out of your child or something. "*

**We have high expectations for your children and work hard to look for strategies and alternative solutions to reach those expectations.**

Special education teachers who are also parents of a child with a disability report they feel a personal connection to their students, which motivates them to be persistent and creative when looking for ways to foster school success. Victoria considers what *"I go through at home with my son"* when working with students and modifying their assignments. Claire said she is aware of the bigger picture when working with children with disabilities because she had experience with disability as a parent, saying there *"were so many areas that I had a much clearer picture of what kind of difficulties this child was encountering and what kind of supports I had to put into place."*

Maria approaches her teaching with an understanding she does not think she would have if she had also not been a parent of a child with a disability. She said, *"I pour that same level of energy into other people's children that I have done into my own. I don't think I would have really sensed that as well had I not had my own child with special needs."*

These special education teachers are able to use information and skills they have learned about disability from their own children to help their students and to set appropriate expectations. They feel committed to finding alternate ways to reach their students because they know that they have had to try a variety of strategies at home with their children, and they think about how they would want their child treated in the classroom by teachers. Allison thinks that finding the right level of challenge in her expectations for students can be *"a tricky thing to do"* and she believes that general and special education teachers need to be willing to set expectations, and then be flexible if they need to re-evaluate those expectations so you *"bring them forward and frustrate them maybe just the right amount"* but not too much. She said:

*I learned from...experience that we have to have expectations of all of our children, all students and if we do have expectations of them then we can help them grow. I don't know that I would have known that to the degree that I feel it now had I not had my own child and gone through that experience.*

**We get frustrated, too, by the rules that tie our hands and feel conflicted at times about the right things to do.**

The special education teachers were, at times, conflicted between the loyalties they have to their employer and the loyalties to their students for whom they feel much responsibility. Vanessa considered things on a case-by-case basis because she always tries to have her loyalties lie with the child. *"Above anyone else, but sometimes I feel that the parents are better at representing what the child needs and sometimes my employer is... It isn't always one or the other side because every child does have different needs; you're always going*



*to have situations where one side or the other has unreasonable expectations."*

Samantha noted that sometimes she does worry that she might be experiencing some "blurred boundaries" between her roles when working with parents in some potentially controversial situations, and when she feels unsure about whether she may be crossing the line between parent and teacher she will ask for support from her supervisors. She said that she has asked herself "*what is my support role here, because I want to make sure I don't cross into that parent role instead of the role that I am supposed to be doing. That's been hard a couple of times.*"

Several of the special education teachers said while they do not avoid telling parents what they think they should ask for from the school for their children, they tend to do it privately, as Allison said, "*some coaching on the side*" and away from supervisors and administration so as to not create personal conflict with their employer.

These teachers had personal experience in "*fighting*" for their children and know the lengths that one must sometimes go to in an effort to obtain special education services. They know that the school may disregard the opinions of teachers but will acquiesce to the request of a parent, sometimes simply to avoid conflict. Special education teachers who have experienced the IEP process both as parents and as educators have a unique insight to the process, understanding the legal and practical restrictions placed on the school concerning services that can be provided. They also understand the myriad of emotions and concerns the parents can be experiencing in their desire to meet the needs of their child.

While these dual role teachers may not be able to mediate all conflicts between school and parents, their understanding of the complexities can help reduce conflict, facilitate communication and promote consensus within the IEP team.

While dual role teachers cannot take an official role as an advocate for the parents and their child because of their employment by the school district, they may be able to act in an unofficial advocacy role to support parents, and the CEC Professional Standards (CEC 2008) expect teachers do just that—advocate for their students. Weinfeld, Davis, Paynter and Jeweler (2008) note that the role of an advocate may include "*knowing and understanding children's rights and school system responsibilities...making sure that the student has access to appropriate rigorous instruction...navigating the school system procedures to secure school services and placement*" and "*linking parents and teachers with a variety of community resources*" (p. 12). Additionally, as noted by two participants, dual role teachers can act officially as advocates for parents and students who are not in their school or school system.

Collaboration between the school and parents is important, and even more so when child has been, or is being, identified with a disability. This event can be a life-changing event for many parents and they can find accepting the diagnosis difficult. Knowing that an educational professional has been on the receiving end of difficult news, experienced the stress of an IEP meeting or may have experienced conflict at the IEP table, can create a bond of common experience and help parents feel that they are cared-for. This commonality can help move the process forward in a positive and productive manner.

**We want you to be more engaged with us and we want to help you as you fight for your child.**

The special education teachers who have their own children with disabilities sometimes shared personal information as a way to facilitate engagement and trust. While the teachers reported they are judicious about what and how much they share about their children, they noted that when they do share, their relationships with parents often improve as it forges a connection or common bond with the parents. This, in turn, helps the parents be more open in their communications with the teachers and facilitates more trust in the school and the teachers.

Victoria recalled that when she shared details about her experience with her son with another parent, the other parent responded positively and now understands *“that I have the same concerns for my son that she has for hers. She sees a commonality between us.”*

Maria said that a fellow parent *“was so grateful and reassured because it made her feel less alone”* when she shared that she was also the parent of a child with a disability.

For some parents, knowing that their child’s special education teacher has sat on *“both sides of the table”* can be a source of comfort for them. Other metaphors used included *“bridging the gap”* and *“both sides of the fence”* to indicate that there were shared, common experiences between these parents and teachers.

Maria believes that sharing her experience has helped parents be *“maybe a little more trusting of what I say because they know that I have gone through some similar issues that they are experiencing.”*

Claire has also experienced this first hand saying:

*“I know that parents also have demonstrated a lot more trust in me almost because they know I also have a child with a disability. And when parents trust you and you come to the table together that enriches the whole experience as well.”*

Increased trust can contribute to increased communication and collaboration and when the teachers shared about their child with a disability they found that the parents with whom they worked were more relaxed, more communicative and more trusting of them.

Outside of IEP meetings, special education teachers who have experience with disability in their families can help parents learn to advocate for their own children. Helping parents learn to be their own advocates can be difficult for teachers (Blue-Banning, et al., 2004), in part because teachers may believe that parents may be disadvantaged by the educational system and lack trust in the process.

Helping parents to become their own advocates can be accomplished by the sharing of personal experiences of advocacy, educating parents on both their rights and their responsibilities as parents and by being a source of support. This education and support can help empower parents to speak up confidently and not antagonistically on behalf of their children. These dual role teachers will have insight on what is necessary to help children with disabilities be successful at school as well as at home and in the community. Teachers with personal experience of disability issues will have more intimate knowledge of resources, both medical and social, within the community. They may be able to help parents locate the resources that most appropriately meet their needs and those of their

children.

## **Theme 2-What special education teachers need to know about parents of children with disabilities**

These dual role special education teachers were also able to uncover some things that are important for teachers to remember when working with parents. Because they have been “on both sides of the IEP table” they have the parent perspective that both other teachers must keep in mind when working with parents of children with disabilities.

### **The disability does not stay at school.**

Teachers who have personal disability experience at home are perhaps better able to recognize that children with disabilities are impacted in their daily home lives as well as in their academic lives. While special education teachers “*live*” with disability during school hours, for parents of children with disabilities, it is a 24-hour experience. Teachers may have difficulty understanding (and remembering) that the child with a disability may likely struggle at home as much as they do at school. Things like schedules, homework, meals and extracurricular activities can all be impacted by the disability.

While no-one can truly understand another person’s experience, having shared similar experiences can help special education teachers be more understanding and empathetic to the parents of their students. When parents know that their child’s special education teacher has understanding beyond the school setting and may have experienced many of the things they have experienced, this knowledge can help increase the parents’ trust in the school (Angell, Stoner and Sheldon, 2009).

Dual role parent-teachers will understand that the home life of many of the families who have children with disabilities can be very difficult, and developing relationships with the parents and being aware of their struggles can help facilitate a positive working relationship with the parents (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004). Some children with disabilities are aggressive, depressed, or over-active. They may not sleep well, have serious communication difficulties or chronic medical conditions. Even if the children are not severely disabled, many aspects of their disability can cause problems at home, including difficulty with homework and other assignments, poor organization of work and belongings, poor self-esteem and difficulty with social relationships. These factors can cause stress for parents beyond the school day. Parents are worried and anxious about their children when they are at school, and they look to their teachers and school administrators to alleviate some of those anxieties. At home, however, they may have no respite.

### **We’re not angry with you (usually) but we are often tired and confused.**

Teachers who understand that disability can pervade all aspects of a family’s life can help support those parents beyond the confines of the school day or school year. They can start by acknowledging that the parents may be tired, grieving, overwhelmed or frustrated. They can help the other teachers and school staff, understand that parent behaviour may be

fueled by emotion or worry and, to not judge a parent solely on any negative interactions they might have but to remind them to consider that parent's home experiences with the child. They may not have slept. They may have spent hours helping their child with homework or been consoling them when the social advances of their disabled child were rebuffed by a peer. They may be trying to coordinate care between medical practitioners or find childcare for siblings. Their reserves may be limited and they may not be able to competently and calmly negotiate the terms of their child's IEP, explain again why the homework is not done or why their child behaves inappropriately. Seeing parents not coping well could frustrate or confuse teachers who do not understand the pervasiveness of disability and can contribute to communication and trust breakdown between parent and school. A reminder for teachers to consider the complete picture beyond the school walls can help build relationships with parents, demonstrate an ethic of care, and ultimately foster school success for their students.

### **We sometimes feel alone and need support.**

The special education teachers interviewed all shared that they needed support in their parental role but were generally able to access support in one way or another. All special education teachers in this study were successful in finding at least one support system for their parental role, primarily family or spouse and work colleagues.

When considering personal coping strategies all special education teachers were able to identify at least one strategy. Coping strategies for the teachers who had children with disabilities included reading, writing, educating themselves about disability issues, spending time on the computer, walking, exercise, talking or "*venting*" with others, and finding humor in stressful situations.

While the participants in this study were successful in finding support, they also had more resources for support in the form of their professional colleagues. They were also generally further along in the acceptance process than are the majority of the parents with whom the work. They all recognized the critical need for support in their parental role.

Teachers who are familiar with the stressors of life with a child with a disability are in a better position to recognize this with the parents of their students and can be more proactive in helping parents locate sources of support as well as act a direct source of support.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of special education teachers who are parents of children with disabilities in an effort to understand and appreciate how they experience the dual role of parent and teacher and subsequently provide recommendations for practice.

The recurrent thread woven throughout the participants' responses was that the experience and knowledge gained by teachers who have their own children with disabilities is an essential part of who they are as teachers. This experience impacts their pedagogy, parenting, communication, and the caring relationships with their students and their

parents.

Having a child with a disability does not automatically make one a better special education teacher and schools certainly cannot mandate hiring of teachers with particular family demographics. Excellent teachers come to the classroom with a variety of backgrounds and personal experiences. Special education teachers who have personal family experience with disability, however, have a particular understanding and perspective not only of the students but also of their parents. They can provide insight to other teachers regarding the special challenges faced by their students and especially by the parents of those students. In the absence of personal experience with disability in the family, how can teachers improve their knowledge and understanding of what it is like to be a parent of a child with a disability or to be the student? Teacher education programs can play an important role in helping teachers understand the need to develop relationships with the parents of their students. Pre-service teacher preparation programs and in-service professional development can support understanding of the issues (beyond academics) relevant to students with special needs and their parents by providing teachers with information about the characteristics and experiences of these students and their families. As educators, teachers want to remediate and educate. They tend to be driven to action, data-oriented and focused on problem-solving. It is important to remind teachers that there is more to the student with disabilities than his or her test scores and IEP progress. They are part of a family unit, not students in isolation, and the disability follows the child home with an altogether different set of problems and concerns. Having an understanding of what the parents and siblings of these students may be experiencing (fear, grief, isolation, etc.) can go a long way in building the relationships that can be instrumental in student achievement.

### **What can pre-service teacher education programs do to help foster parent-teacher relationships?**

Pre-service teacher preparation programs can teach aspiring teachers how to dialogue with parents and other professionals, can teach awareness of ethical issues and dilemmas in special education and how to approach resolving them by an on-going discussion that is threaded throughout the entire teacher preparation program. The concept of an ethic of care and how that ethic can enhance and improve their professional advocacy, pedagogy and communication with students and parents, and can reduce conflict should be embedded throughout the curriculum.

A study (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009) on special education professionals' knowledge and application of professional standards, researchers found that 46% of the special education teachers and administrators who were surveyed said they had little-to-no knowledge of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) ethics principles developed a quarter of a century ago. The CEC is a professional advocacy and education organization that helps shape and promote educational policy and practices for people with disabilities. CEC standards and principles are used to help prepare pre-service special education teachers for "*safe and effective practice*" (CEC 2010). The CEC website, [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org), describes their ethical principles as "*ways that respect the diverse characteristics and needs of individuals*

*with exceptionalities and their families*” (CEC, 2010).

It is in the areas of professional competence, collegial practices, relationship development and professional growth that dual role special education teachers may be able to have the most influence on their colleagues and employers due to their personal experiences. If nearly one-half of special education professionals are not familiar with these principles and how they can be implemented, then, clearly, teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, need to address these principles.

Field experiences in the schools, volunteering with community organizations that work with adults and children with disabilities (such as Special Olympics, Best Buddies and Goodwill Industries) and facilitating mentoring relationships with professionals who can model the ethic of care and professional advocacy are all ways that pre-service teacher programs can enhance caring and advocacy as well as help teachers build relationships and increase understanding of their students’ lives and experiences.

Increasing knowledge about parents and parental involvement is also important. Patterson, Webb and Krudwig (2009) conducted research looking at the incorporation of parents of children with disabilities directly into the pre-service teacher education program to help new teachers understand the parental perspective. Through a program called “Family as Faculty,” parents of children with disabilities participated in teacher preparation activities through sharing of personal experiences, panel discussions and mock IEP meetings. The researchers were interested in whether teachers’ beliefs about parent-teacher partnerships changed after the Family as Faculty activity where they had the opportunity to have authentic interactions with parents. The researchers found that these interactions, especially after a mock IEP meeting, *“appeared to reinforce some beliefs of [teacher] candidates that support positive teacher-parent partnerships’ and to weaken some beliefs that do not support partnerships”* (p. 48). A program that actually embedded parents of children with disabilities into a semester-long course on improving parent-teacher partnerships (Murray, et al., 2008) showed that when pre-service special education teachers interact with the parents of the children they are going to be teaching, their impressions of and attitudes towards the parents improve dramatically which, in turn, will improve the relationships and partnerships between teachers and parents.

By incorporating information about families living with disability into the university curriculum, teacher preparation programs can provide pre-service teachers with information about family coping and dynamics when families are living with disability. This information can help new teachers begin to consider the whole child as part of a whole family unit and can therefore be proactive in their interactions with these students and their families.

### **What can in-service teacher professional development do to help foster parent-teacher relationships?**

Once teachers are in the classroom, they will need to continue to further their awareness and understanding of the special and often complex needs of their students and their families. Furthering this awareness and understanding can be accomplished by ongoing professional development, not only in disability knowledge and remediation, but also in

family and parent issues. Parents want to know that their child's teacher is knowledgeable and familiar with their child's disability (Ray, Prewitt-Kinder & George, 2009). Increasing disability knowledge can help teachers not only prepare to meet the academic needs of their students but also to help build relationships with their families by showing an interest and commitment to them.

There is little ongoing professional development for general education teachers regarding special education issues (Leko & Brownell, 2009) and in the researcher's personal experience, professional development for special education teachers is either not disability-relevant (i.e. it is administrative in nature) or it is general education-based in an effort to prepare special education teachers to teach in an inclusion model. Special education teachers need ongoing professional development that provides them with the most up-to-date information on disability diagnosis and educational techniques for remediation as well as on psycho-social issues relevant to disability and family life. Parents of children with disabilities want their children's teacher(s) to be aware of disability issues and sensitive to their needs and feelings. Limiting disability awareness to only what teachers get in their pre-service education contributes to a gap in knowledge and in linking theory to practice. Additionally, because special education teachers work closely with general education teachers and will help them address the needs of children with disabilities in the inclusion classroom, they need to be aware of the general education curriculum as well as the concepts that are specific to special education (differentiation, disability characteristics, parent issues, etc.). Carefully crafted professional development that trains special education teachers in general content areas, pedagogy, collaboration and academic interventions can help them work effectively with students and other educators (Leko & Brownell, 2009).

Dual role special education teachers are in a unique position to be able to help school districts provide some of this ongoing professional development to other teachers, both general and special educators. These dual role teachers can also be valuable liaisons between parents and the school, can help provide a different perspective to general education teachers and school administrators and can act as a conduit or bridge to minimize and mitigate misunderstandings or conflict. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (United States of America, 2004) mandates that local education agencies provide parent training and information centers to help parents understand better the educational and developmental needs of their children with disabilities. Dual role teachers can be liaisons between the school district and the parents as they have knowledge and understanding of both the school's and the parents' needs and concerns.

Caution is warranted, however, to ensure that the message sent is not that teachers cannot be effective if they do not have this personal experience. Not only Black teachers can be effective teachers of Black students, nor Spanish-speaking teachers be effective teachers of Spanish-speaking ELLs, nor teachers who live/have lived in poverty be effective for students living in poverty, but the world and culture they have experienced and the understandings they bring to the relationships can inform others about, if not "*best practices*" for students who have differences from the cultural norm, then at least "*better practices*" for them.

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