Allied Forces: The Working Alliance for Meaningful Parent-Educator Partnerships in Special Education

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Strong parent-educator partnerships in special education yield benefits for parents, teachers and students, however there are often obstacles to the development of these partnerships, and teacher preparation programs and professional development are often deficient in preparing special education teachers for the complexities of this relationship building. In the following, the varied interpretations of parental involvement are explored, followed by a discussion of some of the significant obstacles to strong parent-teacher partnerships in special education classrooms. Authors introduce the working alliance as a solution for framing positive parent-educator relationships. Finally, the three elements of a working alliance are described with an emphasis on the element of the shared bond, and five practical applications are discussed.

Keywords: working alliance, parent-teacher partnerships, teacher education

Educational institutions are now welcoming partnerships with organizations, community centers, theater and music, and industry like never before. While these partnerships often offer rich experiences for students and support for teachers, the partnership between teacher and parent is one of the most important partnerships for the long term good of the student. For students in special education, the parent-teacher partnership is especially important. In fact, the establishment of a consistent, positive, and active relationship between the special education teacher and parent

yields benefits for all involved, with the parent-teacher partnership being paramount to the success of the student (Shirvani, 2007). Effective quality communication within the parent-educator relationship creates the climate for a more highly developed student (Epstein, 1995) and there is a strong positive correlation between parental involvement and a student's academic achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Parent-teacher partnerships positively affect special education students' attendance in school along with students' attitude toward school

(Sheppard, 2009). In fact, when homes and schools are on the same page, a student experiences greater continuity and adjusts more easily to educational and behavioral norms, offering students a sense of stability and confidence throughout their academic career.

As teachers partner with parents they get a deeper perspective on students' academic lives through exposure to family culture, the unique strengths of a family, and the social and support network that undergirds the student (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011). This provides preventative benefits inside the classroom, allowing teachers to better understand their students and to effectively address possible student behavioral concerns early on, providing increased opportunities for delivering content while spending less time disciplining students (Shirvani, 2007). For parents, becoming involved within a school offers them increased opportunities to create partnerships, have their voice be heard, express concerns, and network with other families, which holds positive social and academic benefits for their children (Epstein, 2008). With the best interests of the child at heart, the roles of parent and teacher seem easily aligned around a shared goal, with hope and expectation for the success of the special education student. However, amidst the challenges in homes and schools, this parent-teacher partnership is not always easily forged.

While strong parent-teacher partnerships produce positive benefits for teachers, parents, and students alike, prospective teachers entering the field of special education may be ill equipped to engage parents in such collaborative relationships (Patte, 2011). While educating pre-service special education teachers about parental involvement is

mandated in many teaching certification curricula in the United States and throughout the world (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), this topic often loses preference to other educational methodologies within the coursework for elementary and secondary special educators. This places the obligation of cultivating parent-teacher partnerships on the schools that hire teachers, overburdening the schools and limiting the amount of practical training teachers receive (Hiatt, 2006). Pre-service and in-service special education teachers can feel unprepared and experience great trepidation in working with parents, and teachers express the desire for improved training in this area (Magaldi-Dopman & Conway, in preparation). For veteran teachers, the problem persists, as there is little parent-teacher training during continuing professional development (Moles, 1993). Despite a large body of literature that supports the importance of parent-teacher partnerships, there exist many obstacles to cohesive, strong parent-teacher relationships, which in turn sustains a culture of minimal interaction with parents amongst educational institutions (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006). This minimal interaction is problematic. Without good relationships between parties, parents' contributions can be lost, teachers' can be educating in a vacuum, and students can ultimately experience the fall-out, with poor continuity, fractured support and oversight, and a message that the communities of home and school need to be kept distinct and separate. For special education students, the communication between home and school offers an increased level of support that may be helpful for students' achievement of goals. In the following, the varied

interpretations of parental involvement will be explored, followed by a discussion of some of the significant obstacles to strong parent-teacher partnerships. Next, authors introduce the working alliance as a solution to help address these obstacles. Finally, the three aspects of a working alliance are described with an emphasis on the shared bond, and five practical applications are provided.

Parental Involvement

One of the impediments to effective collaboration between homes and schools is the lack of consensus over the meaning and interpretation of "parental involvement." The meaning of parental involvement often varies across parents, teachers, schools, and school districts, and its interpretation depends on who is using the term (Flessa, 2008; Theodorou 2008). Parents are often unclear on how best to be involved, and schools are unclear on what type of involvement they seek from parents. For instance, a parent may consider parent involvement attending Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings (Wanat, 2010) while a teacher may consider parent involvement to be collaborating during a home visit of an at-risk learner (Lewis, Kim, & Bey, 2011). There can be a significant disconnect on what involvement is needed, welcomed, and expected amongst parties. Parents may consider their attendance at a PTA meeting as a great benefit to their children. However, while parental involvement in school activities is socially beneficial for the child, it plays a small role in terms of bridging learning connections from school to home (Harris & Goodall, 2008). This type of involvement may help keep parents informed, but may have little to no value in supporting a student's academic

standing (Okpala, Okpala, & Smith, 2001). Schools, unsure on how best to engage parents, may be implicitly communicating that parent involvement is equal to parent attendance (Flessa, 2008).

When schools work to engage parents in partnerships, rather than involve parents in information sessions, there are many more benefits to all parties involved (Dessoff, 2009). When teachers are partnering with parents to help them be closely engaged in the student's work at home and parents are encouraged to help students with study/autonomous skills, the benefits are reciprocated in improved schoolwork, with a far greater effect on academics than what is achieved through parent participation in school meetings (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). This supports the idea of establishing partnerships between parents and teachers to develop strong relationships and immersive educational environments in both home and school for special education students.

Obstacles to active, parent-teacher engagement

Even amongst the most well intentioned schools and parents, many obstacles exist for creating parent-teacher partnerships where parents and special education teachers are actively engaged together to the social and academic benefit of the student. The obstacles of limited teacher training, the problems associated with the urban classroom, parent and teacher misconceptions, and secondary school challenges, include some of the most problematic issues and will be outlined below.

Teacher training

Under time constraints and pressure to meet the varied academic and

socioemotional needs of students, special education teachers at the elementary and secondary level, may be unprepared for developing strong partnerships with parents. The lack of comprehensive training for elementary and secondary special education teachers in how to effectively engage parents in a student's educational process significantly hinders the development of strong parent-teacher relationships (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). While training is often available at the early childhood teacher training level (Knopf & Swick, 2008), many collegiate teaching programs lack the necessary curriculum to prepare future elementary and secondary special education teachers for establishing a professional relationship with parents (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Teacher training programs rely heavily on anecdotal exchanges and are deficient in applying more immersive methods for preparing candidates for parental partnerships (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Unfortunately, these obstacles become exacerbated if the teacher candidate is inexperienced working with a diverse student body (Kroeger & Lash, 2011), suggesting that within classroom settings where there is a great need for establishing strong parent-teacher communication, teachers are poorly prepared for forming these relationships. This implies a significant pitfall for equity in education, as those teachers working with culturally and ethnically non-majority students will be least equipped for forming strong collaborations with parents (Kroeger & Lash, 2011), hampering the potential for academic success.

The urban, culturally and ethnically heterogeneous classroom

Teachers working in heterogeneous classrooms with diverse student populations may experience difficulty in establishing authentic partnerships that are compatible with families' cultural backgrounds and expectations, without having instruction and training in multicultural competence as part of their teacher preparation programs (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007). This is often exacerbated by the pressing demands on teachers to deliver quality instruction for a large class of students on varied academic levels (Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

For those parents who are unaccustomed to the intricate, and sometimes convoluted, processes of the educational system and special education specifically, the teacher can be an important resource in offering support and shaping a strong alliance. However, never before have teachers been expected to do as much as they are today with limited time and resources, a focus on outside assessment, and with a growing and diverse student body. Without active support from teachers, parents may be uninformed regarding important educational issues, policies, and rights in special education. Parents of underachieving students in urban schools may be unsure of what students and parents are entitled to within the school system, leaving gaps in services and accommodations for struggling students and families (Magnum, 2006). This is especially of concern in communities where parents may have a limited understanding of educational issues, because these parents are more likely to place blind trust in their school, without understanding the role they can play in their child's education and how their intervention is an important part of the process (Vincent, 2001).

Within urban schools, there is a pressing need to address practical

concerns. In fact, issues of poor transparency within the school, inconvenient scheduling for parents, lack of support for teachers, and difficulty in helping parents find methods of transportation and proper child-care continue to limit parent partnerships (Johnson, Pugach, & Hawkins, 2004). Ultimately, urban schools committed to strong parent partnerships must take responsibility for enacting mechanisms, procedures, and policies, that will support parents who may want to be actively engaged in a parent-teacher relationship, but may not have the means to effectively see through their attempts, by providing varied meaningful ways for involvement (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Misconceptions, Misapprehensions, Misunderstandings, and Misgivings

Parent and teacher misconceptions influence the strength and establishment of parent-teacher partnerships. Parents may feel that attempts to influence an educational institution that seems set in its ways and is dictated by a higher governing power are futile, and they may limit their involvement as a result (Vincent, 2001). Parents may be unsure of what their role is and what their rights are within the educational system (Vincent, 2001). When discussing their home environment with a teacher, parents may not want to delve into the personal matters that may be relevant to exploring a student's academic life because of their beliefs about privacy, confidentiality, or because of cultural norms (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Parents may perceive the teacher as the prominent authority figure for their child, and may not wish to challenge or question that authority (Vincent, 2001). Additionally, parents may experience distrust or negative feelings about teachers or the

educational system because of previous negative school experiences, or institutionalized racism (Raty, 2010). Schools that address parents' misconceptions, however, through education and partnerships help lay a foundation for promoting parent-teacher alliances with positive educational outcomes (Patel & Stevens, 2010).

On the other hand, special education teachers may also have misconceptions about the parents with whom they work. Teachers may be unfamiliar with the educational practices and schooling of parents, and may be limited in how to relate current school practices in a helpful way (Conderman, Morin, & Stephens, 2005). Language barriers between families and schools can easily foster assumptions that a student may not be receiving adequate academic support at home (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). However, teachers do a grave disservice by assuming differences in language suggest a lack of support, and by portraying school buildings as the only beacon of advocacy for students (Reed, 2009). If teachers are not transparent with parents, and are not able to express their rationale for working practices in the classroom in a way that is compatible with parents' understanding of the school system, teachers may erroneously consider differences in language or socioeconomic variables as reasons for this disconnect (Knopf & Swick, 2008). This places the development of an authentic partnership in jeopardy. Teachers' misconceptions persist, unfortunately, regarding parents' socioeconomic variables, even though these variables do not explain the reasons as to why parents become involved in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey, 1995). Teachers

may feel incompetent in how to acknowledge or address these misgivings or misapprehensions, leaving both parties feeling dissatisfied or uneasy about the relationship.

Secondary School

During the period of transition between elementary school and middle school, the level of student achievement lessens simultaneously with the oversight of parents (Epstein, 1995; Richardson 2004), while schools usually forgo facilitating strong parental partnerships at this time (Yuen, 2007). As a child progresses through their educational career, parents often witness their maturation and tend to grant them more independence. This easing of parental involvement occurs within the social, as well as the educational context of the child's life across many cultures (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Parents may assume a child's social maturation is in line with their academic maturation. However, these beliefs are likely over-estimated as many adolescent special education students may not be equipped to practice even the simplest study skills such as creating a suitable work environment, time management, or motivational tactics (Xu & Corno, 2003). While schools and parents are often encouraged to allow students to work independently during these years, this is often precisely the developmental and academic period when students would benefit from strong parent-teacher partnerships to help them develop needed skills (Patel & Stevens, 2009).

Weakening an already tenuous parent-teacher relationship is decreased communication between parents and special education teachers during secondary school (Skaliotis, 2010). This creates compounded challenges, because as students enter secondary school, some parents can become intimidated by the work that their child brings home, and may need a closer relationship with the teacher to help understand how they can support their child's progress (Xu & Corno, 2003). With the progressive difficulty of the academic content, parents may need consistent, direct interaction with the teacher, not just an information session, IEP meeting, or biannual parent teacher conferences (Solomon, Warin, & Lewis, 2002).

Along with an increasingly challenging standard for learning, parents may become more alienated by their child's school building as transitions into higher education often include a growing student population. Parents of students enrolled in secondary school find it difficult to continue to portray an active role in partnerships when compared to the more welcoming culture within elementary school (Harris & Goodall, 2008). The camaraderie amongst families is often lost to a larger institution where the role of parents is less clearly defined. For those families who live within urban districts that cater to a more densely populated area, these obstacles can be exponentially more difficult to overcome (Thompson, 2003).

The Working Alliance

In an effort to address some of the obstacles in developing parent-teacher partnerships, and to help cultivate a strong parent-educator alliance, the construct of the working alliance is introduced. Often constructs that yield effective results in one field of study may very well be adapted for another field (Bordin, 1994). The working alliance has been utilized within the field of psychology and offers promise in its application to relationships between parents and teachers in the field of education

(Meyers, 2008; Toste, Heath, & Dallaire, 2010). Generally, a working alliance is developed by a therapist to help organize the necessary implements needed to elicit growth within a patient.

Three key components are a part of the working alliance, including a shared bond, task, and goal (Bordin, 1979). The highly adaptable nature of the working alliance has proven to be effective within the field of psychology across cultures (Bennett, Fuertes, Keitel M, Phillips, 2011; Fitzpatrick, Irannejad, 2008; Hanley, 2009), as well as in student-teacher relationships in education (Larose, Chaloux, Monaghan, & Tarabulsy, 2010; Toste, Heath, & Dallaire, 2010). Application of the working alliance in the classroom has yielded strong results (Ursano, Kartheiser, & Ursano, 2007). When implemented effectively between teacher and student, there is increased participation and academic awareness within the classroom (Larose, Chaloux, Monaghan, & Tarabulsy, 2010). When students perceive the working alliance as relevant, their academic outcomes improve accordingly (Larose, Chaloux, Monaghan, & Tarabulsy, 2010). There is some evidence that the development of a working alliance in the classroom correlates with grade point average (Rogers, 2012), suggesting its positive application. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the use of a working alliance is necessary to overcoming cultural divides and combating the over representation of certain cultures classified within special education (Dykemen, Nelson, & Appleton, 1996), supporting its implementation with urban schools and within academically and culturally diverse student populations.

Considering the positive effects application of the working alliance has had on student-teacher relationships, extension to parent-teacher relationships seems a natural next step. In this way, the working alliance may serve to reframe parent-teacher partnerships in a positive light, where the responsibility for the relationship is not placed exclusively on the parent or teacher, but where power is shared between parties, a bond undergirds the relationship, and where the terminology "alliance" suggests parties are allies working toward shared tasks and goals.

Shared Bond, Shared Tasks, and Shared Goals

From its conceptualization, the working alliance was suggested for practical use within the relationship between parent and teacher (Bordin, 1979), however to our knowledge, this article is one of the first attempts to operationalize its use. When we apply each of the components of the working alliance to the parent-teacher partnership, the bond is defined as an emotional relationship between the two parties in which the extent of trust between them, dictates the ability to elicit change (Bordin, 1979). This is important, as the problems associated with developing parental partnerships relate to a deficiency in the area of creating connections between the special education teacher and parent so that solid communication and relationship can be established (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). Goals refer to objectives agreed upon within the relationship that are defined by the understanding of internal or external forces influencing the necessity for change (Bordin, 1979). This is consistent with the establishment of IEP goals as part of the educational process, but also includes having a goal

for the parent-teacher partnership. Finally, tasks are the agreed upon practices and exchanges within the relationship that are performed in order to eventually reach the goals (Bordin, 1979).

Each separate component of the working alliance plays an important role in implementation. However, based on findings from its use with students and teachers, the bond represents the most integral component of the working alliance (Toste, Heath, & Dallaire, 2010). The success of shared tasks and shared goals is predicated upon whether or not a strong bond is first established (Toste et al., 2010). So that, while setting a standard for achievement (shared goal) and demonstrating relevancy in task (shared task) is important, forming a positive relationship (shared bond), has the greatest effect for partnerships.

Practical Applications of the Working Alliance

In applying the working alliance to the development of parent-teacher partnerships, certain considerations come to light. We focus attention on the development of the bond, as this has been deemed the most important consideration for success of tasks and goals, and yet is the area least likely to be covered in teacher training at the elementary and secondary level, in professional development, or in parent workshops (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). In the assessment-driven age of education, development of a bond may be considered ancillary to tasks and goals because evaluating the construct of a bond is not as tangible as the components of task and goal, and may not be deemed as important (Toste, Heath, & Dallaire, 2010). For instance, whereas the elements of shared task and

goal between parents and teachers are generally included within the framework of educational tools (for instance, the parent-teacher conference or the IEP meeting), defining a bond between teacher and parent becomes a more abstract undertaking. However, in regard to the nature of the components included within a working alliance, it is plausible that the appraisal of a particular bond between parent and teacher could be assessed based on the adequacy of goals and ability to effectively carry out tasks (Larose, Chaloux, Monaghan, & Tarabulsy, 2010). Five practical recommendations in developing a strong parent-educator bond are discussed below:

To begin, the conventional structures of task-goal oriented traditions within the field of education lack a focus on the development of a bond, but offer an opportunity to build a bonded relationship that undergirds tasks and goals. For instance, collaboration between the parent and teacher is often encouraged for a daily homework check, which is known to increase a student's engagement in the classroom (Shirvani, 2007). When applying the working alliance, teachers and parents would benefit from this shared task, but also from developing a partnership beyond homework checks, so that a strong bond can be formed to bolster later task and goal adherence and success. Thus, the initial contact between parent and teacher may be a positive, open-ended check-in with the goal of aligning together, and the task of homework coming later. It would be important for the first contact between parent and teacher to be a positive one, to help frame the rest of the year within that context. Teachers may also encourage parents to begin the year by writing a

letter or email (in whatever language they feel comfortable) about what they would like the teacher to know about their family, unique situations, and specific concerns. The main goal in this stage would be relationship-building, and creating opportunities for parents to communicate needs and concerns. Teachers' facilitation of positive, early and open communication is an important first step to this strong bond.

Secondly, within the first weeks of school, special education teachers are encouraged to specifically ask each parent if he or she would be willing to partner closely with the teacher to build a working alliance, which communicates an invitation for a strong partnership. Openly asking parents what they feel would help that partnership succeed, suggests an openness to forming a trusting relationship, and makes commitment to the partnership an active and explicit undertaking. Teachers are also encouraged to share with current parents successful stories of their strong relationships with previous parents and the subsequent positive outcomes for students, as a model and for encouragement. Sharing a critical incident or anecdotal evidence on the benefits of strong parent-educator alliances may be more powerful for some parents than providing statistics or academic findings.

Next, maintaining continual communication is imperative. Building on successes in early childhood education, early childhood educators often make use of the family communication journal, which is underutilized in the later grades. This journal can be used as an avenue for continual parent-educator communication and to ensure that communication occurs throughout the year. In addition, teachers may strive to observe a student's strengths continually, and make contact on a regular basis (monthly, for instance) with a positive phone call, note, or email that invites participation from the parent and facilitates regular communication. Parents can be encouraged to organize an online group (google or yahoo groups or a parent listserv) where the teacher is a member, and continual discussion can occur amongst parties.

Special education teachers may also seek to establish opportunities for parents to participate inside the classroom when possible, so parents are welcomed into the community. Scheduling that time during the first or last period of the day may address scheduling problems for parents. Holding institutes, parent workshops, or working groups on the weekends or evenings with childcare provided, also offers opportunities for bonds to be formed among parents and teachers. Teachers can also utilize parent surveys or focus groups to help parents express their concerns and feel heard (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Creating open forums where parents' input and responses are solicited communicates the importance of parent contributions and may help diffuse any possible mistrust.

Finally, in this relationship building, parents' practical needs and cultural considerations need to be respected and addressed so trust can be meaningfully established. As part of a strong working alliance and a commitment to reflective practice, teachers and administrators in diverse urban classrooms need to continually call into question their own misconceptions and possible biases, so that possible microinvalidations and microaggressions do not place forming a

partnership with parents in jeopardy. This suggests a continual commitment on the part of educators to ask themselves how well they are working with parents, and what changes they can make to help facilitate that process better. To this end, teacher training programs and professional development programs are encouraged to utilize the shared bond in the working alliance, as a way to usher in more explicit multicultural education and reflective practice for special education teachers.

On an institutional level, some school systems have addressed the need for strong parent-educator partnerships by employing specially trained professionals to help facilitate partnerships between parents and teachers (Smiley, Howland, & Anderson, 2008). These professionals, known as parent liaisons, help bring together home and school life, to foster a shared scope of values and develop a trusting relationship, in order to achieve consistency and openness (Sanders, 2008). Parent liaisons can be encouraged to position themselves to integrate awareness on the part of parents in order to shape an understanding of how to best partner with a teacher for improved student outcomes. These liaisons can assist in addressing concerns or misconceptions on the part of parents, helping to facilitate more genuine, open communication for parents and teachers. While not intended to take the place of the parent-teacher partnership, working with the parent liaison has the ability to bolster the bond.

Future Implications

Widely used and supported in psychology, the construct of the working alliance has newly been applied with good initial results for students and teachers (Koch, 2004). As there is little

research in its application for parent-educator partnerships, qualitative research designs are encouraged to explore parent-teacher reactions and experiences within a working alliance, along with quantitative studies to determine effectiveness. This research would fill a void, where a strong theory of practice and training around parent-teacher partnerships is needed, with empirical research to support best practices with parents.

The current means of instructing pre-service special education teachers at the elementary and secondary level regarding parental involvement, rely on discussions of tasks and goals between the two parties but lack the essential bond component that allows parents to trust in an educator's professional suggestions, and teachers to trust in parents' essential contributions to the student and the school. Moreover, the traditional teacher preparation strategies for developing parental involvement are classroom driven and tend to instruct parents rather than working collaboratively with parents (DiCamillo, 2001). Pre-service and in-service special educators may benefit from training in the three key components of a working alliance to help frame interactions with parents, with an emphasis on development of a shared bond. It may be conducive for training programs and professional development to focus on experiential exercises where teachers' misconceptions and biases are called into question and examined before the inception of the parent-teacher partnership, to help improve cultural competence. To this end, we suggest that pre-service special education teachers receive training with opportunities to work directly with parents when possible, along with comprehensive

instruction in multicultural competence, to address the weaknesses of current training practices. Higher education institutions may seek to encourage faculty to continue research in this area, so that a strong commitment to parent-educator partnerships is supported. Finally, further research to determine the most effective component of the working alliance for the parent-teacher partnership in special education, specifically, is needed to add to knowledge regarding its practical application for training and implementation.

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