

**PARENTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATORS:  
PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' DISCUSSION POINTS**

**Rita Mulholland  
Norma Blecker**

*The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey*

*Students in a pre-service teacher education course, an overview of special education, were required to interview a parent of a special needs child, as well as a special education teacher as a course assignment. Because most educators have little or no training in family involvement and pre-service teacher training in this area is at best limited, the purpose in this effort was to increase the opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with special educators and parents of special needs children through an interview assignment designed to help them gain a fuller understanding of each of their roles and the need for partnerships. This investigation summarizes the class discussions from 90 undergraduate students over a three-year period to highlight their reflections which point out the need for teacher-parent collaboration.*

All education professionals today, and more specifically special educators, are guided by the federal mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. These two acts stress the importance of family/school partnerships as a more meaningful method of educational intervention rather than a child-focused strategy alone (Knight & Wadsworth, 1999). Research shows that student attendance is better, grades improve, enrollment in advanced classes increases, and high school graduation rates improve when parents are involved in the educational process by taking a greater responsibility towards their children's education. Trust, respect, and empowerment are created among families and school personnel when schools actively involve parents (District Administration, 2003).

The implications for family/school partnerships are specifically tied to the IDEA principles of zero reject, free and appropriate education, education within the least restrictive environment, the availability of procedural due process and the requirement of parental participation. NCLB's basic principles of accountability for academic achievement and school safety, which includes parental choice for student movement to a *safe* school, require communication with families and the input of families and community members (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin & Soodak, 2006). NCLB requires parent involvement at the state, district and local levels, including parental participation in the development of Title I policies (District Administration, 2003).

Teacher education accrediting organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) acknowledge that school, family and community partnerships are important for supporting student learning. In its tenth principle, NCATE addresses the need of beginning teachers to foster relationships with colleagues, parents and agencies within the larger community (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). NCATE has supported the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Common Core of Knowledge and Skills essential to beginning special education teachers which also calls for developing parent and community partnerships (Knight & Wadsworth, 1999). Lastly, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards recognizes that teachers must be skilled in working with families and communities.

Recognizing the importance of family/school partnerships, schools of higher education must address those skills needed by pre-service teachers to effectively collaborate with families. M. Elana Lopez, Associate Director of the Harvard Family Research Project, stated that family involvement should be integrated throughout all coursework and fieldwork in teacher education programs (Bradley, 1997). In a survey

conducted by Knight and Wadsworth (1999), 83% of those responding said that they have addressed family issues within coursework. However, the average time focused on family issues was only one to two hours a semester. In another study conducted by Mandell and Murray (2005), 23% of the respondents indicated having family involvement experiences in their undergraduate programs, but 70% of the respondents said that they relied more on their own family experiences to guide them in working with their students' parents. Mandell and Murray (2005) noted in their study that teacher education programs rely mainly on field experiences, not coursework, to understand and develop family relationships. Opportunities for developing the needed attitudes and skills for family-centered practice are limited when relying on fieldwork alone. Mandell and Murray (2005) support the need for additional workshops and/or class time to practice the strategies required to work with parents.

From work completed by the California Department of Education in the 1990s, several themes were identified regarding school/family partnerships. These themes include:

- Integration of family involvement with the curriculum
- Connection of family involvement and the diverse student population
- Teacher awareness of attitudes and values related to family involvement (Ammon, 1999, p. 6)

Within the population of parents having children with special needs, additional issues were isolated: the need for teachers to recognize parental angst and support family members, the need to build student self-esteem, and the need to discuss fears and concerns for their child's future (Evans-Schilling, 1999).

#### *Course Assignment*

Students in a pre-service teacher education course, an overview of special education, were required to interview a parent of a special needs child, as well as a special education teacher. Because most educators have little or no training in family involvement and pre-service teacher training in this area is at best limited, the purpose in this effort was to increase the opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with special educators and parents of special needs children through an interview assignments designed to help them gain a fuller understanding of each of their roles and the need for partnerships.

The class was directed to reflect on the specific information from parents and teachers that would contribute to their professional development as either a general education or special education teacher, before they developed their questions. Prior to redesigning class sessions to allow the time for students to thoroughly discuss what they learned from their interviews, to gain clarification, and to suggest ways for teachers and parents to collaborate, students had simply handed in their assignments and offered general comments. For the last three years, by offering the students the chance to process the information gained from their own experiences with the interviews, the instructor found the students to be more actively engaged in learning about special education and the need for partnerships.

#### *Parent Interview Questions*

By grouping similar type questions, there appear to be 93 basic questions asked of parents. These questions fall into the following categories: general information type (45%), meeting the needs of the child in special education (17%), and inquiries into how the parent feels about various aspects of their child's life in special education (38%). The following are representative questions from each category:

- At what age was your child identified for special education?
- How long has your child been receiving special education services?
- What is your child's disability? What are the characteristics of the disability?
- Is your child receiving the help s/he should be getting?
- Where has your child been receiving services?
- What do you want the special educator's priority to be regarding your child?
- What has been your greatest source of frustration with your child's education?
- How do you feel about your child being in special education?

#### *Class Discussions*

Class discussions focused not necessarily on the answers to these questions, but on students' reflective comments. Many students, who had asked parents questions that dealt with the age of a child when first recommended for special education, questioned whether or not some children were being diagnosed too

young. Students inquired whether or not being placed so young in special education might have a negative impact on children. This sharing provided the opportunity to discuss not only the value in the general education classroom providing differentiated instruction, using a variety of assessment modes, and appropriate intervention models before assessing for special education, but also allowed for the class to generate ideas for possible meetings between professionals and parents of young children that would be a forum for parents to ask questions about identifying needs when a child is very young and to get clarification about special education and services offered. At the same time students thought that regularly bringing parents together with the teachers would strengthen services for children. They envisioned parents sharing with parents, and teachers hearing their concerns and addressing any issues before misunderstandings developed.

When students had asked parents about their child being diagnosed with a disability, some parents used terms the students were not familiar with, and so they were eager to explore the characteristics of these disabilities as defined by IDEA 2004. Some students shared they had not thought about cognitive impairments as much as they considered the physical impairments for special education services. The instructor asked the students to think about how each disability might present itself in the school setting at various grade levels. Then in small groups, students spoke about the importance of considering each child as an individual, as well as their academic and social needs. In large group settings, as students discussed the responsibility of the schools in providing education for all students, they also expressed ideas on how schools could do this. They thought that if teachers met with parents to understand the family's perspective on the disability, the teacher would not only know the child better but children would also know that parents and teachers are working together for their benefit.

Since several students volunteered that they in fact had been diagnosed with learning disabilities, they agreed with some parents' comments about teachers not really understanding some disabilities, and they wished their general education teachers had collaborative meetings with special educators and their parents. This comments prompted a discussion about all teachers needing course work in special education, and that possibly special educators could regularly offer workshops for parents and general educators.

Students also commented about the types of services they learned some children were receiving and where they were placed. Most were aware of speech teachers pulling children out of class for services, and some students mentioned that they remembered children receiving services for the blind and deaf. But prior to their meetings with parents, students shared they thought some teachers and paraprofessionals just helped some children with general education classwork, or provided services in a special school for children who were seriously disabled. They were not aware of all the special education programs being offered in most of the schools. Some students had asked parents about which type of service seemed more effective but in large group discussions, they found there was no one answer.

While some students shared that parents responded positively to their child's education, others commented that some parents were not satisfied with the schools. A few students shared they had a new appreciation for what is involved in teaching students with learning problems, as well as a new understanding of some families' feelings about placement decisions. In small groups they spoke about a yearly meeting with parents and professionals to discuss all the placement alternatives and what each environment offers so that parents would not feel left out of how decisions are made. The instructor asked the class to generate a list of what has to be considered when deciding on a child's placement in special education and reflect on the impact of each of the factors when attempting to meet the needs of a child. Some students commented that parents of young children might not be able to see the whole picture and that if teachers demonstrated understanding of their feelings, maybe a parent would be more available for guidance in what is appropriate for a child. The instructor directed students to the definition of the least restrictive environment (LRE) requirement to clarify the law and enrich the discussion of placement issues. While some students felt that placing a child in the placement a parent wants is better for the child, others felt that the schools probably know what is best. Students then spoke about the need for regular information workshops so that teachers and parents can explore together the benefits of each type of placement.

Based on what they learned from the parents, students were asked to create a scenario to present to their classmates. Their scenarios presented a child's age and disability and identified several possibilities for

how the child would receive services. In small groups, students then debated the benefits of the various instructional environments. By engaging in this type of critical reflection, students demonstrated a more complete understanding of the many factors that need to be considered when deciding on placement.

Students had many personal responses to what the parents communicated through the interviews. Their reflections and ideas for teachers and parents working together created lively class discussions that demonstrated their appreciation for the many issues facing parents and the need for collaboration.

#### *Teacher Interview Questions*

By grouping similar type questions, there appear to be 127 basic questions asked of teachers. These questions fall into the following categories: teaching students with disabilities (65%), working with parents (6%), and personal questions about life as a special educator (29%). The following represent questions from each category:

- How do you reach your students?
- Should all types of disabilities be in one room?
- How do you grade their work?
- What is your secret to behavior management?
- Have you had many problems working with parents?
- What kinds of communication do you use with the parents?
- Why did you become a special education teacher?

#### *Class Discussions*

Students began the discussion telling some of the stories, which they found to be somewhat upsetting, that they heard from teachers about working with parents. The students were asked to look at their papers to see how they framed their questions about parents. Most responded that they assumed there were problems with parents, but they could not elaborate on the why and in relooking at some of their questions they saw they were framed to indicate negativity, such as, *What types of problems have you had with parents?* This information prompted the instructor to invite a group of special educators to speak about the need for collaboration between teachers and parents. Not only did they share what they needed to collaborate about, but told the students that they make phone calls, send notices home, hold informal meetings, and use email, but admitted sometimes the communication happens only when there are problems. Students shared that hearing a group of special educators discuss all the interactions they have with parents provided them with a more positive conviction of the necessity of seeing parents as partners in decision making, not receivers of school-based judgments, and not just when a problem is out of control.

The class shared they felt special education teachers had an overwhelming job and expected to hear from them about how difficult it was, but in fact, did not. What the students reported were special educators who laughed easily and discussed the importance of thorough planning with each student in mind to ensure engaged learning and minimize behavior issues. This discussion presented an opportunity to discuss the training of special educators to ensure that students had the expertise of teachers who understood how to provide appropriate instruction. Some students also shared that they were considering becoming a special educator now that they knew more. More discussion focused on how general educators and special educators need to collaborate to support students in all environments. This prompted more ideas on the need for the whole school to work with parents of learners struggling. Some students inquired about the purpose of the Parent Teacher Student Organization (PTSA) and wondered if this group could be instrumental in this effort. Others felt that a separate group of special educators, parents of children receiving special education, and general education teachers working with these children, need to be formed in each school to address their own specific issues.

Students also discussed the grading of students receiving special education. They had many questions after hearing from special educators about the IEP, testing accommodations, and adaptations. Discussion focused on the necessity of tracking data to allow for instructional interventions when needed, as well as to demonstrate students' meeting their goals and IEP objectives. Various grading software programs and Excel were demonstrated to support understanding of how data reports shared with parents and children

contribute to the overall success of the instructional program by keeping everyone informed of each child's progress.

Students heard a variety of responses from teachers about working with children experiencing various disabilities in one self-contained room and they were interested in discussing how to plan for each of the students. In small groups they created scenarios involving a teacher and a paraprofessional working with elementary students experiencing a variety of disabilities. Each group had to critically analyze what another group suggested to allow for a large group discussion of all the elements that need to be considered in planning an instructional program. Several students shared they found it difficult to plan and saw the necessity of special education teachers receiving training in curriculum training. They also wondered if general educators should receive at least minimal training from special educators since many students with learning problems are now in general education classes. Some discussion was generated by the idea of the special educator team-teaching with the general educator, which would allow for the special educator to model appropriate teaching strategies. Students revisited their scenarios to address how they could group students in general education classes with a special educator. Many of the students though expressed doubt that team-teaching could work in every school district because of the need for more special educators. Other students felt team-teaching would work in some cases, but expressed concern about teachers finding time to plan together. Some suggested that since it is in the students' best interests to have teachers collaborating, administrators should provide the scheduled time.

Another area that most students inquired about was behavior management. Overall, teachers commented on the necessity of being organized, of ensuring that the work was engaging, and that the class rules/procedures were understood by all the children. Students commented on the problems they themselves were in schools and that they were aware of which teachers would allow them to get out of work with no consequences, as well as those classrooms where they did not play around because of the consequences. Since all students take a course in behavior management, the discussion was limited to the value of creating a classroom where the teacher is teaching and students are learning without being overwhelmed by behavioral issues. In considering how teachers and parents could work together on behavioral issues, students suggested that workshops could be set up where parents and teachers provided input on how best to minimize behavior problems.

Most of the students had asked teachers why they became special educators. Students shared they enjoyed hearing all the personal stories and laughed at themselves for having some pre-conceived notions as to the characteristics of a special educator. Their comments revealed they never thought of the knowledge base, the organization skills, or the ability to work as a team member as a special educator, but rather were thinking of personality traits such as being a patient person. A few students commented about some teachers reported feeling burned-out, not from working with the children, but from the lack of administrative support, not feeling respected in the schools, and issues with parents. In small groups students discussed how administrators need to be part of the collaborative effort in supporting special educators, parents, and students.

#### *Summary Comments*

Valuable opportunities had been missed in previous years by not providing class time for students to debrief and learn from each other. In allowing students the opportunity to share their reflections immediately after completing the assignment and then again during specific class sessions, the instructor found students to be more actively involved in the discussions and demonstrated a deeper understanding of special education issues and the need for partnerships to benefit the children. The instructor addressed the students' ideas and concerns, as well as encouraged them to be critical thinkers as they read and learned about special education in their preparation to become teachers. The hope is they will see themselves as part of a collaborative team in addressing students' needs.

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