

Learning From Parents of Students with Disabilities: Informing the Preparation of Teachers for Inclusive Settings

Abstract

Special education law has mandated changes regarding where and how students with disabilities are instructed yet research indicates there are schools from every state not in compliance with the law (Kluth, Villa, & Thousand, 2002). In this paper, I report perceptions and experiences that parents of students with disabilities had with school personnel. I describe how parents' experienced a break in trust, needed information on disabilities, desired assistance to determine students' needs, and encountered conflict when advocating for students. Additional findings suggested a teacher preparation gap; parents believed school personnel did not know special education law and believed teachers might have been better prepared to teach students with disabilities if they had known more about the educational politics of today.

Throughout the past decade, special education laws have mandated change regarding where and how students with disabilities are being instructed. In the 2003-2004 school year, nearly half of all students with disabilities were educated in inclusive classroom settings at least 80 percent of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). However, research suggests that teachers believe they have not been well prepared to educate students with and without disabilities together (Snyder, Garriott, & Aylor, 2001; Buell, Hallam, & Gamel-McCormick, 1999; Guetzloe, 1999). Lacking knowledge on disabilities and special education law can be problematic for general educators who are assigned to teach in such settings. Perhaps more importantly, however, is to recognize that these circumstances can have grave effects on students. Students cannot always offer expressive and descriptive language to reveal their schooling experiences. Additionally, children cannot identify political issues that may inform schooling experiences. In this paper, I argue that parents of students with disabilities may be best suited to illuminate the social and political issues at the core of inclusive education today. Conducting research on parents' experiences and perspectives of teachers educating students with disabilities is an essential step in understanding ways to prepare future teachers for providing students with a quality, equitable education.

Theoretical Background

Throughout the past thirty years, there have been significant fundamental shifts in theoretical understandings and practical implications of educating students with disabilities (Crockett & Kauffman, 1998). The overarching special education law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004), has guaranteed that all students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). While this law has undergone intermittent reauthorizations in 1990 and 1997 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and in 2004 (as IDEIA), the language defining where students with disabilities are instructed and the services for supporting instruction has, in part, informed the political context of inclusive schooling. Prior research has found that since IDEA's implementation, there have been significant improvements in the quality of public education for students with disabilities. For example, today nearly 6 million children qualify for instructional intervention, support and technical services through IDEIA while thirty years ago, most children with disabilities were entirely excluded from public school settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Despite these momentous improvements, they portray only part of the truth when reporting educational statistics (National Council on Disability, 2000). For instance, research conducted in 2000 by the National Council on Disability has found that "every state was out of compliance with the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and that U.S. officials are not enforcing compliance" (Kluth, Villa, & Thousand, 2002, p. 24).

The practical implementation of IDEIA's mandates seem to be far more complex than the political act of law passage since research indicates that many of today's educational practices emulate teaching behaviors similar to those used prior to its ratification. Studies have shown that

although it has been nearly thirty years since IDEA's initial passage, many teachers and administrators do not understand the law or how to apply it in educational settings (Davern, 1999; Kluth, Villa, & Thousand, 2002; Soodak & Erwin, 2000; Vidovich, 1998). Therefore, my goal in this study was to understand the implications of these circumstances on students with disabilities. Those most often familiar with children's educational experiences are parents whose stories need to be heard to begin to understand the ways that special education law is shaping the political educational climate of today. Perhaps more importantly, my goal was to learn from parents' experiences to inform and expedite preservice and in-service teachers' knowledge gains on how to teach students with disabilities while subsequently learning how to fully implement IDEA's mandates.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to gather data throughout a three-month duration. Eleven parents of students with disabilities participated in on-going semi-structured email interviews supplemented with telephone interviews. Three of the participants also engaged in in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

To identify participants, an announcement was posted on an Internet site created for parents seeking information on special education law. From the initial posting, ten mothers and one father responded; each participated throughout the study's duration. One element of data collection was to use email dialogue to allow parents time to (a) contemplate questions; (b) reflect on experiences; and (c) reply at a time their schedule allowed.

The participants described a variety of educational settings that their students were placed including (a) a segregated, alternative school; (b) a segregated special education classroom; (c) an integrated setting where students with disabilities spent some of their day in a general

education classroom; and (d) an inclusive classroom where students with and without disabilities were educated together.

Data sources included printed email dialogues; audio taped, transcribed interviews, and notes on informal dialogues with the participants. A four-phase data collection format was used. The first phase provided time to solicit participants and collect demographic information. The second phase provided time for on going email dialogue using semi-structured and open-ended inquiry to understand participants' experiences. The third phase consisted of in-person interviews with participants who were geographically in close proximity. The fourth phase included a member-check system (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) to ensure participants' stories were recorded and understood as accurately as possible.

Email dialogue was transferred daily into word processing documents so all communication could be collected for analysis. Inductive analysis (Biklen and Bogdan, 1998) was conducted to reveal findings that were grounded within the data. Codes were created that grouped data into similar categories to find common themes. In many instances, sub-coding offered additional insight into wide categories of data.

Limitations pertain to three different design elements. Foremost, findings represent parents who have access to email dialogue and who sought special education law information on an Internet site. Therefore, findings should be interpreted as experiences particular to this study's participants. Another limitation was that there was not a random sampling of participants. Rather, all respondents participated in the study. Therefore, it is possible that participants may have had experiences vastly different than others who did not respond. The third limitation was that while some participants had face-to-face interviews, the majority of data were gathered from email dialogue and telephone interviews. Rather than creating potentially misleading

generalizations, it may be best to use this research to inform future studies of inclusive education to learn how to better educate and prepare teachers for today's classrooms.

Results

Five findings emerged that pertained to all participants in this study. Findings revealed that parents (a) experienced a break in trust with school personnel; (b) needed information on disabilities; (c) desired assistance to determine students' needs; and (d) encountered conflict when advocating for students' education. Additional findings suggested that there might be a preparation gap when educating teachers about disabilities and special education law. Each of these findings, reported as themes, is illustrated with one data sample supporting each finding. In the full paper, I will illustrate findings using all participants' voices.

Trusting School Personnel

Parents explained that they initially trusted school personnel to truthfully explain plans for educating their students. Data revealed that parents' perceived they were told "partial truths" and that trust in school personnel was quickly broken. One participant mentioned:

They started to send Sarah to other schools in the district. They said that they could better meet her needs at the other school. So, they sent her here and there. It was getting to be too much... You see, you can't really trust anyone at the school. They tell you one thing and then go and do another... Parents can't trust the schools.

A break in trust with school personnel permeated all dialogues. Parents believed teachers and administrators were negligent by omitting information from them and from students' legal documents and school records.

Knowing Information on Disabilities and Schooling

Parents explained they initially did not know many aspects of their children's disabilities or facts regarding special education law. This "not knowing" elicited feelings of frustration and anger. One parent commented:

I didn't know all of the aspects of the disabilities. I used all my frustration and anger to study and learn about my child's disabilities. I think what kept me going was the anger I felt because they weren't teaching my child and I was doing everything I could to help her.

Parents believed that a significant barrier to students' receiving support services stemmed from them not knowing information on disabilities and schooling. Since parents did not know what to ask, what to expect or what to do, they often did not advocate until much educational time passed. Parents stated that students' teachers did not inform them about IDEA or ways to facilitate students' learning. One parent explained, "No one [school personnel] would help us or tell us what to do."

Determining Students' Needs

Data revealed that parents believed their children's educational needs were not being met at school. Participants explained that Individual Education Plans (IEP) were not written or implemented, speech and language services were not provided, modifications in assignments and testing were not offered and teaching assistants were not educated to support their students. One mother explained, "My daughter's teacher regularly warns [other] teachers not to be too friendly with the parents of special ed. students". Parents perceived school personnel as barriers to expressing their opinions necessary for educational decision-making.

Coping with Conflict

One of the most compelling findings was parents' use of war imagery when expressing the conflict they experienced with their children's educators. War imagery was noted when parents discussed a "struggle to fight" for their children's education and rights; this pointed to an underlying conflict of "us vs. them". One parent explained:

The district pulls out all of the guns. They pulled out all of their guns on me... We tried showing my son's records but we needed more arsenal... I think that they forgot that we were fighting for our son's education.

Another parent responded, "Think of it [meeting] as going into battle. If you aren't prepared and don't strategize ahead of time, you will lose because they will take advantage of what you don't know and use it to walk all over you".

Singular words included "fight... war... battle... wounds... horror... hitting... pain... intimidation... nightmares... and strong-arm"; these descriptors portrayed parents' perceptions that teachers' and administrators' individual beliefs and opinions about disabilities thwarted their students' education.

Distinguishing a Preparation Gap

Initial data analysis suggested that once parents began to learn about IDEA, they speculated that teachers, administrators and paraprofessional staff may not have known the provisions that, by law, should have been made for their students and themselves. Further data analysis pointed to a preparation gap that might exist when educating teachers. Data revealed that parents believed school personnel did not know nor understand special education law and suggested that teachers might have been better prepared to educate students with disabilities if educators had known more about the individual and social politics impacting education today.

Discussion and Conclusion

In response to calls to better prepare teachers to work with students with disabilities (Davern, 1999; Gettinger et al., 1999), this study was conducted to learn from parents' experiences to inform and expedite preservice and in-service teachers' knowledge gains. Data revealed that parents experienced a break in trust with school personnel, needed information on disabilities, desired assistance to determine students' needs, and encountered conflict when advocating for students' education. Findings imply that while parents did take actions to facilitate students' education, their experiences bring to the forefront critical changes needed for preparing preservice and in-service teachers. Findings suggest a possible teacher preparation gap, implying that school personnel might not know or understand IDEIA nor be familiar with educating students with disabilities. Furthermore, students' educational rights may be negated because school personnel may not know the sanctions established to ensure that students with disabilities are provided an equitable education. Therefore, there is an urgent necessity for teacher education programs to facilitate teachers' knowledge of IDEIA and the multifaceted nature of educating students with disabilities.

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