
GENERAL INTEREST ARTICLES

Communicative Challenges in the Parent-Teacher Relationship Regarding Students with Special Needs

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Abstract

The current study explored the communicative challenges for parents and teachers of children with special needs. This qualitative study elicited interview data from both parents and teachers, and revealed that teachers were frustrated with parents not communicating regarding their special needs children in a way that could help prepare the teachers for the challenges they may face. Caregivers cited a lack of communication with teachers as problematic, as well as their perception of teacher as expert that led them to feel as if the teachers presented information in inaccessible ways. The findings are discussed through the lens of structuration theory.

Keywords: *Parent-Teacher Communication, Special Needs Students, Structuration Theory*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted in 1975, mandated that eligible children ages 3 to 21 receive a free and appropriate public school education in the least restrictive environment possible. In 2015-2016, 13 percent (approximately 6.7 million) of all public school students between the ages of 3 and 21 in the United States were receiving special

education services (McFarland et al., 2018). Special education plans, either an individualized education program (IEP) or a 504 plan, guide the educational processes for special education students. Both plans require the efforts of teams comprised of the student's parent(s), general and special education teachers, the school psychologist, a variety of applicable specialists and therapists, and either a district representative responsible for special education or the school principal (www.understood.org). Creating and implementing special education plans is guided by federal laws, strict timelines, extensive testing procedures, complex data, and evidence-based practices. Developing the special education plan is only one part of the educational process for individuals identified as having special needs, and the role of communication and the challenges that occur between key participants are evident as parents, teachers, and district officials engage in a complicated process designed to help meet the educational, emotional, physical, and social needs of the student. It would seem that their ability to communicatively construct a positive relationship has implications not only for the student, but for the larger structure of education.

While Vickers and Minke (1995) clearly stated that parents (or caregivers) and teachers share the complex task of educating and socializing children, numerous other studies have alluded to the communication difficulties that exist between parents and teachers, especially when concerning students who have special needs (e.g., Epstein & Becker, 1982; Lightfoot, 1978; Paget & Chapman, 1992). Studies have indicated that parents who feel excluded from the decision-making and communication processes express feeling intimidated when meeting with their child's teachers (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002), while veteran teachers reported that communication problems with parents are a major source of job dissatisfaction (Chase, 1985). These mutual problems are magnified when the student has special needs (Murray, 2000).

Despite the challenges that exist, Moore (2002) argued that frequent parent-teacher communication does increase overall student success. The outcome of these interactions, though, does rely upon the perceived communication satisfaction of both parent and teacher. The interactions between teachers and parents regarding a special needs child are rife with challenges, including: perceptions of relational incongruence (Minke, Sheridan, Moorman Kim, Hoon Ryoo, & Koziol, 2014), communication styles (Laluvein, 2010), communication preferences (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015), content of communication (Rothengast, 2016), and power differentials (Dunn, Constable, Martins, & Cammuso, 2016), among others.

While frequency and mode of communication have been established in the literature, little research has investigated the ways in which parents and teachers may be creating and maintaining a communicative structure that both parties often find frustrating. The purpose of the current study was to explore the communicative challenges that exist between parents and teachers of students with special needs. We analyzed the data through the lens of structuration theory (Giddens, 1979), which revealed how the challenges experienced by both teachers and parents result, in part, from the (re)production of structures that constrain both parties as they attempt to meet the needs of the special needs students in their care. The use of structuration theory as applied to this relational context marks a unique contribution to the literature.

Review of Literature

Challenges in Parent-Teacher Relationships

The literature on parent-teacher relationships points to several broad categories of challenges that exist in the relationship. In this section, we briefly review relevant literature regarding the following challenges related to the parent-teacher relationship: relational

congruence, communication challenges related to frequency, amount, medium, communicator style, and content, as well as power differences between the parties.

Relational congruence between parents and teachers is a contributing factor to successful working relationships. Minke et al. (2014) found that incongruence may occur as a result of motivations of both parents and teachers in the participation process. For parents, role construction is the degree to which parents believe that their child's education and the educational process is an appropriate part of their role. Self-efficacy, according to Minke et al. (2014) refers to the extent to which parents believe they are capable of engaging in activities that will help their child succeed and their motivation to participate in the educational process. Parents with positive beliefs are more likely to participate and hold congruent roles with teachers. Self-efficacy looks different from the teachers' perspectives than the parents'. For teachers, self-efficacy refers to the degree and extent to which parents can and should be involved with their child's education. Negative experiences with families may reduce the teacher's efforts to engage (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Mereoiu, Abercrombie, and Murray (2016) found that with appropriate training and support, both educational professionals and parents were able to reconcile perceptual differences that they held about the other's role and motivation in the process, and were able to collaborate more effectively in the special education process.

Tveit (2009) found that the institutional setting itself may also cause role confusion. While IDEA puts parents first on the list of individuals required to be on the IEP team, teachers struggle between seeing a parent as a resource and someone needing instruction. Educational professionals may want parents to participate in the educational process but feel that the parents'

role is outside the school. Parents themselves may view school as a “closed institution” where they drop off their children each day and only enter with invitation (Tveit, 2009, p. 293).

While relational incongruencies are problematic for both teachers and parents of children with special needs, both parties also experience communicative challenges in their relationship, including unstated assumptions about the frequency and type of communication (e.g., email, phone call, communication log) as well as stylistic differences (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015). Although parents typically want the same types of information, they prefer to receive it in different manners via different channels (Vornberg & Garret, 2010). Communication also depends on the parents’ previous interactions with their own schools; “parents avoid meeting the teacher [if] their own experience at school was negative” (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015, p. 142). Lake and Billingsley (2000) further stated that communication challenges can arise over lack of communication, misunderstood research, or even timing of any clarifying attempts that are made. For example, Zablotzky, Boswell, and Smith (2012) identified that parents whose children are on the autism spectrum often reported being unsatisfied with communication from the school about their child’s placement and role in the school.

Palts and Harro-Loit (2015) identified four types of parent-initiated communication between parents and teachers: active-positive, active-negative, passive-positive, and passive-negative. Active-positive was when parents wanted communication to occur, knew what kinds of information they wanted, and knew whom to ask at the school to receive that information, while active-negative parents were those who worried about all aspects of their child’s day and often overwhelmed teachers with their need for information. Passive-positive parents only wanted communication when there were problems, and passive-negative parents believed the school expected them to initiate communication when there was a problem. Knowing the

parents' communicator type would "enable teachers to plan their communication strategically" (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015, p. 152). Laluein (2010) also described several similar types of communication that parents and teachers used to maintain a working relationship with one another. One significant difference from Laluein (2010) was the inclusion of situations in which a parent is also a teacher. In these situations of dual-membership, antagonistic communication, or using positive deception to pretend to comply, can occur when the parent feels that they hold more knowledge than the child's teacher.

Regardless of communicator style, a frequently mentioned source of challenge is derived from the content itself. In an educational meeting, the focus can be strengths-based or deficiency-based (Rothengast, 2016); the meeting first focuses on the progress that the student has made (strengths-based) or the problems and challenges that the student has made (deficiency-based). Communication from a deficiency-based approach can be particularly problematic with initiation of contact only occurring to report new or unresolved problems. This type of communication tended to be more one-way communication as opposed to a two-way conversation (Hibbitts, 2010). Parents expressed frustration in Gwernan-Jones et al. (2015) when they felt as if schools were doing all of the talking and parents were simply there to listen.

Power differentials based on information also have the potential to further complicate the working relationship between parents and teachers. Access to information and understanding of that information is frequently cited as a problem. Dunn et al. (2016) identified that parents highlighted the need for "good explanations and recommendations," rather than simply being handed a packet of information that they were then expected to read and understand (p. 4). This is particularly complicated with schools' reliance on evidence-based practices (EBP). Parents can be easily overwhelmed by the amount of information available as well as the lack of

instruction about how or where to access and understand these practices (Cook, Shepherd, Cothren Cook, & Cook, 2012). Problems with EBP are compounded when a team approach is utilized and the parent begins to feel as if schools brought everything and everyone to the table (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Structuration Theory

Prior interactions between parents and teachers of students with special needs have an impact on how both perceive and approach future interactions. Both also bring with them an understanding of what they believe their own role is or should be in the process. The recursive nature of the parent-teacher relationships as they are used to produce structure lends itself well to analysis through the lens of structuration theory, which was developed by Giddens (1979) in an attempt to explain the intricate interrelations between macro-level organizational structures and micro-level interactions. In explaining the relationship between structures and interactions, Giddens (1979) argued that structure is comprised of rules and resources that produce conditions that create, change, or maintain social systems through interactions.

The rules and routinized practices individuals enact in order to accomplish their daily lives are generally known by the individuals (Giddens, 1984). It is important to note that with this knowledge, individuals also possess agency, which according to Giddens (1979) means “at any point in time, the [individual] could have acted otherwise” (p. 56). The knowledgeability individuals bring to an interaction may occasionally be more a result of intuition (i.e., relying on routinized rules and practices) than a calculated response to the situation (Stones, 2005). Giddens accounts for this with his assertion that individuals possess both a practical consciousness (those actions in which an individual can engage but cannot explain) and discursive consciousness (those decisions an individual can discuss). Although individuals are

generally knowledgeable and purposeful, intentional conduct (i.e., choice) can have unintended consequences for agents during the production and reproduction of social structure (Stones, 2005). These unintended consequences are not only involved in social reproduction, but also become conditions of action (i.e., agency) and are often contradictory.

Structuration theory offers a unique opportunity to frame this study and to analyze the data. As covered in the literature review, previous research has highlighted the importance of communication in the parent-teacher relationship, demonstrated that certain types of pragmatic challenges exist, and illustrated the stylistic and preference differences between parents and educators. Structuration theory, however, allows for a more complicated perspective of the communicative activities and relationships to emerge. A structuration perspective may reveal how the challenges each party experiences with the other, the school, and the structure of education in general could be produced and reproduced through their own interactions. Importantly, this means that we need to examine not only what the communicative challenges are between parents and teachers of special needs children, but how the challenges are co-constructed through the interactions themselves.

Research Question

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of the parent-teacher relationship in student success (Dawson & Wymbs, 2016; Mistry, White, Benner, & Huynh, 2009). Research has also demonstrated that teachers and parents often disagree about their ideas of who should be contributing what information, and what their respective roles should be in the relationship (Minke et al., 2014). While frequency and mode of communication have been established, little research has looked at the ways in which parents and teachers may be creating and maintaining a

communicative structure that both parties often find frustrating. Thus, the following research question was developed to guide the research:

RQ: What communicative challenges are co-constructed as teachers and parents interact regarding special needs students?

Method

The current study was one aspect of a larger study exploring parent-teacher interactions for students who have been identified as special needs. The researchers gathered data through an online quantitative survey, at the end of which respondents were asked if they would be interested in participating in a qualitative interview. Participants were then interviewed by teacher candidates enrolled in a special education course at a Midwest university. To answer the current research question, participants were asked to describe their communicative and interactional experiences from a teacher or parent perspective.

Both teachers and parents were asked open-ended questions in four broad categories using a semi-structured interview format. First, they were asked to talk about their philosophies and past experiences with teacher-parent partnerships and collaboration. Then, both parties were asked questions about their communication expectations and preferences. Third, participants were asked to describe their experiences and ideal processes for handling conflict resolution and problem-solving. Finally, they were asked to discuss their individualized educational plan (IEP) experiences.

In total, 7 teachers and 17 parents agreed to participate in audio recorded interviews. Ages of parents were 35-44 (n=3), 45-54 (n=11), and 55-64 (n=2), with one not indicating age. Fifteen parents self-identified as being white and one self-identified as Latina, while one parent declined to provide their racial identity. Nearly all of the parent participants were female (n=16).

All 7 teachers identified as white. Ages of teachers were 25-34 (n=1), 35 to 44 (n=1), 45 to 54 (n=4), and 55 to 64 (n=1). Most of the teachers who participated identified as female (n=5).

Separate interviews were conducted with teachers and parents. Teacher interviews lasted an average of 59.6 minutes with the shortest being 47.48 minutes and the longest being 61.36 minutes. Parent interviews lasted an average of 56.09 minutes with the longest lasting 128 minutes and the shortest being 29.32 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim yielding 165 double-spaced pages for teacher interviews and 255 double-spaced pages for parent interviews.

Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers independently read the responses several times to familiarize themselves with the data, and both made initial notes in the margins about issues of interest. Separately, the researchers then underlined each unit in every response that addressed the research question. Each complete unit was then cut out and taped to a notecard, serving as an initial code for that unit. Individually and then collectively, the researchers read each code and made piles based on content. Each code was compared to the others and similar codes were grouped together until the data could no longer be reduced. The remaining groups formed the themes that served as answers to the research question.

Results

Teachers and parents encountered a number of challenges when attempting to interact about special needs students. For teachers, the predominant theme was that of *parents not communicating*. Two themes were found to characterize parents' views of teacher communication: *teacher as expert* and *lack of communication*. Each of these themes will now be described.

Teachers

Parents not communicating. Teachers felt that their success in the classroom with particular students depended largely on the communication they received from the parent(s). Even simple information such as “Oh it was a really bad morning. Chris struggled getting on the bus,” helped teachers put the student and their potential challenges for the day into context. One teacher stated, “So just knowing that allows me to—when he gets here, we don’t stress him out too much by going right into class.” Without this constant stream of communication, teachers were left to “differentiate for families” what might be occurring outside of school, and how to best meet a student’s needs. One teacher demonstrated this by stating:

A student was crying at school, and I’m like “What is going on?” And he was saying, “Oh there was all this blood and the police were there.” And I’m like, “What in the world!” And so without the communication, your thoughts start going all over the place. I had to contact his older brother to find out where he wants me to [send the student] or what he wants me to [do]. You know, she is a single mom. Should I send him home? If the teacher had not known that the student had an older brother who was an adult that could provide her with information, she would not have known how to handle the child’s emotional state.

Given teachers’ perception of the importance of the role of communication, parents not communicating was particularly frustrating for them. One teacher explained, “If you are going to provide your email, and I feel like in this day and age, I know, that’s an assumption, it’s hard for me sometimes to understand like, why aren’t they emailing me back?” When one teacher placed herself into the parent’s role, she stated, “because as a parent myself, I would contact a

teacher.” Teachers indicated that while email was convenient, they would take information any way that they could get it—in a letter or in a phone call, etc.

Teachers indicated that lack of communication on the part of parents is the factor that most challenged their interactions. They did not understand how or why communication was limited, but strongly felt as though they could not meet student needs without this collaborative parent input. Now, we turn our attention to parent perspectives of the challenges to this communicative relationship.

Parents

The communication challenges described by parents included *lack of communication* as well as a theme we identified as *teacher as expert*. Each of these themes will now be discussed.

Lack of communication. Parents felt that receiving more information about their special needs child’s day, homework, and expectations for the next day helped them set the child up for success. This is illustrated by one parent who stated:

My child has major executive functioning issues, and the kind of information I need from teachers to help keep up with things like what are the homework assignments, and is he missing—did he forget to turn something in. He forgets to turn stuff in all the time. He does the work and then he forgets to turn it in. So if the teachers can let me know what’s going on, I can make sure that he does the work and actually turns it in. But if they don’t tell me what’s going on, I can’t help and they end up mad at him, and it’s not his fault.

He has executive functioning problems. He’s got a disability.

Another parent illustrated their frustration with the lack of communication by stating, “It’s such a huge piece of education and yet it’s not always done real well.” This problem was exacerbated as children entered middle or high school and both parents and students had multiple teachers to

interact with as well as a larger student body. As one parent explained, “There is a lot of teachers and a lot of kids coming and going. Communication is not as good.”

Parents reported feeling as though teachers believe they only needed to provide information when there was a problem. One parent described it this way, “Especially when your kid’s grades go down, you would hope that the teachers would reach out to you before you had to reach out to them, but I don’t really see that happening.” Another parent shared that communication was limited because teachers seemed to only want to communicate at “the IEP meeting once a year.” Parents indicated, however, that they would welcome not only more frequent but also positive communication throughout the school year. This was explained by a parent:

As a parent, I always would be happy to get a call from a teacher, from a principal, guidance counselor, anybody at the school level that’s interacting with my child all day long...[those calls] are well-received and so much appreciated.

As with teachers, parents identified lack of communication as a challenge to their interactions. Parents felt that little information was provided, and when it was, the content usually focused on a problem with the student that had already occurred rather than regular communication that could be proactive. Teachers not providing information was closely tied to the next theme of teacher as expert.

Teacher as expert. When teachers did communicate with parents, parents reported that they often felt as though the information was presented in ways that were not communicatively accessible to them. One parent said, “There is a list available through, I don’t know, there’s a website and they give me that information. But it’s hard to [inaudible] when I’m looking stuff

up.” The academic and therapeutic jargon also prevented parents from participating in the decision-making process because:

I felt like, feel like an idiot. I didn't even know what they were going to do. I mean I knew what the flow of it was going to be, but my ability to offer my input for them in a setting that I was not familiar with to offer input. It just seemed...uh illogical? So I felt very dependent upon them and I felt like I was saying a lot of yes, or you know yes, yes, yes.

As one parent stated, “The teachers and staff have gone to schools for this. Parents went to school for whatever their profession is.” Words such as “intimidating” and “professional heavy” were frequently used to describe the theme of the teacher as expert. Parents felt that when teachers did share information with them, the information was generally presented in a manner that was inaccessible to parents. This inaccessibility prevented parents from participating in the conversation.

Discussion

While any provider-client conversation is going to be fraught with challenges, the relationship between families and teachers is unique. Rather than mere involvement, the goal of these interactions is to create a team-based approach to a special education student's academic needs and future. Yet, when an approach designed to facilitate communication between members of this team—such as joint behavioral consultation—was utilized, neither party viewed the process as communication or team building. Both teachers and parents identified communicative challenges in these interactions.

Teachers and parents identified lack of communication as a primary characteristic of the teacher-parent relationship. The need for information in both instances was similar; both

teachers and parents felt they needed the information in order to support the child's success when he or she was with the other. This is consistent with relational congruence between teachers and parents (Minke et al., 2014). While parents constructed their role as being a part of their child's educational experience, they also felt constrained by self-efficacy or their perception of their ability to participate in the conversation in a meaningful way due to the teacher performing as expert. This in turn impacted teacher self-efficacy of the degree and extent to which parents can and should be involved in educational decision-making.

Although Palts and Harro-Loit's (2015) study identified four types of parent-initiated communication, this study only illustrated active-positive. Active-positive, the desire for communication to occur, was evident throughout the parent interviews and is consistent with Zablotsky, Boswell, and Smith's (2012) research that indicated the most frequently cited complaint of parents of special needs children was the desire for more communication from their children's teachers. Examples of active-positive communication were indicated by utterances such as, "I would appreciate regular communication with me," or, "Never hesitate to contact parents." When reflecting upon why only one type of communication was illustrated in this study, it was clear from parent experiences that they did not often have the opportunity to either talk about the challenges that they had experienced or what they would ideally like to be occurring communicatively in these interactions. This could also be a by-product of the power differentials that often exist between parents and the school as well as the barrier created by the institutional setting discussed by Tveit (2009).

Palts and Harro-Loit (2014) also identified passive-positive motivations to communicate when only one party or the other felt a problem existed. Interviews with parents demonstrated the complete opposite. Parents indicated a strong desire to receive communication about any

topic from anyone who is interacting with their child all day long. However, parents reported they received most of their information from teachers when there was a problem and that conversations were often deficiency-based or times when the teacher wanted to inform parents of a child's negative behavior or incident where they were not meeting district standards. This differing outcome from past research may have occurred because, although parents were experiencing passive-positive motivated communication, the interview questions may have elicited desires. While parents had experience with passive-positive motivation, they were frequently contacted with deficiency-based information due to the structure and policies of school districts, but they would prefer more active-positive communication where they are contacted about their child's ups and downs throughout the day. Data showed that parents' past experiences with passive-positive motivation differed from their ideal communication, which would be more active. This research did illustrate Laluevein's (2010) findings that when teachers or parents hold memberships in multiple communities, antagonistic communication or perceptions were more likely to occur. This was demonstrated every time that a teacher began their answer with statements such as, "Well as a parent, I would." The fact that teachers and parents rarely discussed their multiple memberships could be a result of either or both using "generative rules and resources" (Giddens, 1979). The rules guiding their communicative interaction were routinized from prior experiences with schools, either with their child or as a child, leading to a more practical consciousness whereby neither felt it was necessary or relevant to mention their membership in both parent and teacher communities.

When Tveit (2009) detailed "closed institutions," the concept was largely metaphorical, referring to the parental perception that their ideas and experiences were not welcome or valuable within the educational walls; however, security measures have made closed institutions

more literal. As caregivers are buzzed into schools and sign in at main offices during the school day, face-to-face communication is, out of necessity, a more deliberate process requiring intention and planning. Couple this with an academic system that requires all involved parties to meet on a yearly basis, with prior notification and key stakeholder absences necessitating rescheduling, and it is possible neither party may know when or how to initiate conversation outside of these formal meetings. Previous experience (or routinized practices) with parent-teacher interactions may have created unintended consequences (Giddens, 1979). These yearly meetings are data driven and focus more on scores than solutions, which may in turn create a structure in which each party expects information will begin with the other party. Teachers will provide knowledge or data, while parents will provide anecdotal information. As this process is repeated yearly for IEP meetings, they become ritualized and roles become formalized. These rules of teacher-parent interaction recursively establish the tone and structure for not only the next meeting but also future day-to-day interactions.

When parents view teachers as the experts who know best, parents are often reluctant to share information with teachers because they are not sure what information they could or should share. Parents frequently reported feeling as though they were outnumbered and less professionally qualified to add to the conversations about their students even though they expressed a desire to participate in these conversations. When parents hesitate to participate in these conversations, teachers may themselves start to limit communication to negative incidents. The recursive nature of this structure may be the biggest barrier to successful parent-teacher interaction. As the interactions are repeated, interaction protocol is established that becomes ritualized rules and practices that in turn guide future teacher-parent interactions and communication patterns.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the intriguing findings, there were several limitations to how this study was conducted. First, special education teaching candidates collected a significant portion of the qualitative data. Although they were trained in semi-structured interviewing techniques, skill and comfort level with probing follow-up questions varied. The teacher candidates and their instructor were educationally and occupationally vested in and pursued information most relevant to the educational process for exceptional needs students. A co-interviewer with a more targeted focus on communication as a process rather than a means might have been able to delve deeper in places throughout the interviews. Second, interviewees were primarily recruited from school districts with which the authors' university is affiliated. These districts are fairly homogenous, and that limited diversity in an already small sample. Finally, both parents and teachers tended to share more of their negative experiences than positive. This may be a result of a lack of another venue to express these feelings or it may be a by-product of the phenomena where we see clients more willing to share negative experiences than positive (such as review of a business transaction (Verhagen, Nauta, & Feldberg, 2013)).

Future research should focus more specifically on communication satisfaction as well as the teacher-parent communicative socialization process. If these interactions are a product of rules and structures from previous years for both teachers and parents, what practices could be engaged in to help disrupt nonfunctional structures? Additional research could also examine special education meetings from a more solidly focused communication perspective; in other words, how can we improve the communication processes and relationships in these meetings? This, in turn, could yield higher communication satisfaction for all involved as well as potentially stronger educational outcomes for students.

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