

Topic: Build child, family and community relationships that promote child development and learning.

Murray, M. M., Handyside, L. M., Straka, L. A., & Arton-Titus, T. V. (2013). Parent empowerment: Connecting with preservice special education teachers. *School Community Journal, 23*, 145-168.

Context

The role of a parent with a child with a disability is both complex and intense (Dunst and Dempsey, 2007), and the role of educators should be to empower them by increasing their knowledge and skills (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Pinkus, 2005; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). Although some teacher preparation programs provide students with instruction in family involvement, most fall short of truly preparing teachers to successfully engage with families (Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). Research concludes that despite legislation that supports collaborative efforts between families and professionals, effective parent-professional partnerships remain out of reach (Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; O'Connor, 2008; Pinkus, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

This study measured changes in parents' perceptions of parent-partner relationships after they participated with preservice teachers in a 16-week special education course. This project represented an effort not only to provide preservice educators with hands-on family engagement experience but also to help parents feel empowered to play an active role in the education and decision making process of their children.

Method

University faculty, school districts, and community agencies collaborated to design a course in which five to ten parents of children with disabilities were embedded in each course section with 25-35 special education undergraduate and graduate students. Parents attended all 3-hour sessions and contributing to class discussions. The course included a 20-hour service learning component in which the

preservice educators spent time with an assigned embedded parent in school, home, and community settings and a Virtual Family Assignment in which parents provided a written account of their family's journey to diagnosis and discussion of their child's educational experiences and involvement with child-and family-serving professionals. Pre- and post-course focus questions were asked of parents and analyzed to determine how the embedded parent experience influenced their perspectives towards professionals, parent-professional partnerships, and themselves as change agents.

Major Themes

Pre-course statements of parents regarding negative experiences with professionals often centered on the child being viewed as his or her label rather than as a unique individual, worthy of being included in all educational activities. Parents reported that this was not the case post-course and that preservice teachers emerged from the course seeing their children as capable individuals. Pre-course, parents commented on barriers to parent-professional partnerships such as a superior attitude of professionals or environmental factors that intimidated parents and set them up for unequal partnership. In post-course discussion, however, parents reported a new sense of confidence in their contribution to parent-professional interactions. Parent attitudes also changed from defensiveness when communicating with professionals to trust, especially when preservice teachers visited with them in their homes. Another significant outcome of course participation for parents was an overall sense of contributing to a brighter future for parent-professional collaboration and toward better outcomes for children with disabilities.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that embedding parents of children with disabilities

in teacher preparation coursework contributes to parent empowerment in the following significant areas: playing an active role in the education and decision-making process, using resources to inform them of their rights, effecting change in their lives and their community, experiencing hope and a sense of belonging, changing perceptions and learning to think critically, and receiving respect.

How to Use This Article

For Instructors

This article confirms the importance of having students hear the stories of parents of children with disabilities. While embedding parents in coursework or having them visit the classroom is one option, another is to have students visit with parents individually or in small groups in a place that is convenient and comfortable for them to discuss their family's experiences and challenges, and for students to place themselves in parents' shoes assuming the role of parent in the process of seeking answers to a child's challenges.

For Practitioners

Recommendations parents made in this article included having general education teachers welcome the child and parents into the class even if the child is being served part of the time in a special education setting (e.g., at open house, have a desk and name tag for him or her); make frequent home visits to talk with parents; mention the child first, not the disability; maintain high expectations; and create a relationship that is a true partnership.

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About the ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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