

Parent Empowerment: Connecting With Preservice Special Education Teachers

Mary M. Murray, Lisa M. Handyside, Leslie A. Straka, and Tabatha V. Arton-Titus

Abstract

Parent empowerment includes the ability to meet the needs of one's family while feeling in control. This phenomenological study seeks to understand the experience of 71 parents of children with disabilities who participated with preservice teachers in a 16-week special education course between 2006 and 2010. Analysis of pre-course and post-course parent focus group transcripts resulted in four shifts in perceptions of parent-professional partnerships: (1) from judgmental and impersonal to caring professionals; (2) from intimidation to confidence; (3) from defensiveness to trusting professionals; and, (4) from despair to hope. Results demonstrated parents' perceived increase in self-efficacy in decision-making, access to resources, group affiliation, positive perception change, feelings of mutual respect, experience as a change agent, and hope (i.e., empowerment).

Key Words: parents, empowerment, children with disabilities, preservice teachers, partnerships, special needs, education, preparation, candidates, families

Introduction

Becoming a parent can be a time full of joy and anticipation. Prior to the birth of the baby, parents think about what the child will look like, the sports he or she will play, and whether the child will be a dancer or into theater. Maybe the new baby will even follow in the parents' footsteps. When the infant is

born, parents may not be fully prepared to take on the role of parenting. In the process of envisioning the “new family,” the parent thinks about the child in terms of typical development; they do not generally plan to parent a child with special needs. When parents find themselves in this role, they often feel very unprepared, afraid, and angry. Parents have described this feeling as one of helplessness devoid of hope (Huang, Kellett, & St. John, 2010). The transition from feeling helpless and overwhelmed to believing in and acting on their ability to parent a child with special needs is an ongoing process for families (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Most parents require supports and resources to feel competent in parenting skills and to learn to advocate as part of parenting a child with special needs (Carpenter & Egerton, 2007).

Literature Review

Empowerment is the ability to seek control over one’s life by taking action to get what one wants and needs. Empowerment involves increasing one’s knowledge and skills and boosting motivation to achieve a desirable outcome, and it refers to a continuum of experiences that offer the individual opportunities to utilize his or her own competencies to learn new information and skills (Turnbull et al., 2006). Self-efficacy, one of the strongest measures of success, is the belief in one’s ability to organize and carry out an action or task (Heslin & Klehe, 2006). In order for the process of empowerment to be effective, it must allow the individual time to practice new skills in a supportive environment to work toward new goals (Vig & Kaminer, 2003). Family empowerment has been defined as a family invested with authority (Morrow & Malin, 2004). It is the process of a family acquiring the skills, resources, authority, opportunity, and motivation to meet the needs of their family. Family empowerment is the action associated with high self-efficacy (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). Empowerment enables parents to achieve desired outcomes for their family and their children (Zhang & Bennett, 2003).

A parent’s role in the education of a child with a disability is a unique one. In fact, Dunst and Dempsey (2007) propose that “the role of parents with a child with a disability shows a level of complexity and intensity not generally found in the general population” (p. 305). Due to the multifaceted role required of parents raising a child with a disability, educators should work to empower parents in these efforts (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Green et al., 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Pinkus, 2005; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). In order to define the construct of parent empowerment, it is essential to give attention to the characteristics that

make up this term. These characteristics across disciplines include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) playing an active role in the education and decision-making process; (b) receiving access to resources; (c) effecting change in one's life and/or community; (d) feeling part of a group or sense of belonging; (e) having a sense of self-efficacy; (f) experiencing hope; (g) changing perceptions and learning to think critically; and (h) receiving respect (Carpenter & Phil, 1997; Dunst, 2002; Lloyd & Hastings, 2009; Murray et al., 2007; Murray & Curran, 2008; Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008; Summers et al., 2005).

Parent–Professional Partnerships and Empowerment

Research in the area of parent–professional partnerships and the impact of quality partnerships on parent empowerment is in its infancy (Stoner et al., 2005). According to Morrow and Malin (2004), partnership should be structured around an “equal division of power” (p. 164), which entails providing parents and professionals a shared role in decision-making that is built on respect (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Moreover, research concludes that parents are typically at a disadvantage when dealing with professionals (e.g., general and special education teachers, therapists, school psychologists, physicians, and administrators), and 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). Research supports the notion that professionals tend to blame parents for a child's educational failures as well as to view parents as needy and unprepared (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents often feel that the unique knowledge they possess about their child is underappreciated by professionals, and that professionals are more interested in the child's label than in providing personalized services (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). These issues unveil problematic power struggles which frequently lead to conflict between parents and professionals that could be avoided with appropriate planning and collaborative efforts (Staples & Diliberto, 2010; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007).

Few research studies thoroughly discuss parent empowerment. However, it is widely recognized that a vital factor in empowerment is a sense of hope (Harnett, Tierney, & Guerin, 2009; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). Lloyd and Hastings (2009) evaluate the significance of hope in families with children with disabilities. Parents who view goals as attainable and who find ways to reach those goals had stronger hope agency (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009). Hope agency is defined as “the perception that one can reach his or her goals” (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009, p. 957). Parents with strong hope agency experienced benefits that trickled down to their children, thus reducing problematic behaviors

and improving the overall quality of family life (Lloyd & Hastings, 2009). The concept of increased hope agency in families of a child with a disability illuminates the notion that parents who participate in decision-making experience greater empowerment.

Dunst and Dempsey (2007) evaluated parenting competence, confidence, and enjoyment in families of a child with special needs. The study focused on relationships between parents and professionals as it related to parent empowerment and parent capabilities. Overall, the study concluded that the type of professional support received by the family impacts parental sense of control. Furthermore, the researchers stressed that the “operational indicators of family–professional partnerships are yet to be developed” (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007, p. 316), revealing that further research is needed to define the impact of effective parent–professional partnerships on parent empowerment.

Although some teacher preparation programs provide students with instruction in family involvement, most fall short of truly preparing teachers to successfully engage with families (Casper, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011). This project represents an effort to not only provide preservice educators with hands-on family engagement experience but also to empower parents of children with disabilities to confidently fulfill their role in the parent–professional partnership in meaningful ways. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experience of parents of children with disabilities through participation as an embedded parent in a preservice special education teacher preparation course and its impact on parent empowerment.

Method

Setting

Faculty at a midsized Midwestern university collaborated with school districts and community agencies to design a course to provide training on effective parent–professional partnerships and collaboration for special education teacher candidates and parents of children with disabilities. The goals of the local school districts and community agencies (fetal alcohol prevention, disability, pediatric therapy) were to provide parent empowerment and to encourage parent engagement among families served. Districts and agencies paid a small stipend to the parents of children with disabilities to participate in this course. Upon completion of the course, the parents were expected to go out and use the information and skills they learned in the course to empower other parents of children with disabilities in their agency or district. Further, this course provided opportunities for parents and candidates to engage in collaborative relationships and partnerships.

The course, “Consultation and Collaboration with Families and Colleagues,” is a required course for the special education teacher preparation program at both the undergraduate and graduate level and is offered every semester. The 3-credit hour course occurred over a 16-week semester and included a variety of large and small group discussions in which parents learned course content alongside students, participating as auditors in the course. Five to ten parents of children with disabilities were embedded in each section of the course with 25–35 candidates. The parents of children with disabilities in the course will be referred to as *embedded parents*. Parent participants were embedded in the course, attending all 3-hour weekly sessions, contributing to class discussions and content, but not required to complete course assignments. One parent was also selected to participate as a co-teacher of the course each semester, working closely with the professor on planning, instructing, grading, and formative evaluation of course components. The course also involved a 20-hour service learning component in which the preservice educators spent time with an assigned embedded parent in school, home, and community settings to gather insight into the family experience.

Course activities involved a variety of opportunities for embedded parents to interact with students. Up to four preservice enrollees were paired with each participating family and required to spend time outside of class with the family in a home, school, or and community setting. Students logged these hours and applied course concepts to the family through written reflections and a final paper on family characteristics related to the outside-of-class experience. The field experience included a culminating presentation of the students’ experiences with the family throughout the course of the semester, presented in video and Power Point format to peers, school district representatives, agency personnel, and other community partners.

One course activity that proved especially significant to participant outcomes was the Virtual Family assignment. Embedded parents provided a written account of their family experience of the child’s disability identification or journey to diagnosis to be presented anonymously to students. In class, one embedded parent was placed in a small group of students to read and reflect upon the Virtual Family. Presented as a case study to preservice teachers, this assignment required students to place themselves in the parents’ shoes, virtually assuming the role of parent in the process of seeking answers to the child’s challenges. After student reflection and small group discussion on the case, the parent of that Virtual Family case revealed their identity. This activity resulted in a series of interactive panels through which each parent related their family story, including identification of the child’s disability, educational experiences, and involvement with child- and family-serving professionals.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Embedded Parents and Their Child(ren) with Disabilities

Parent Characteristics	(<i>n</i> = 71)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	4	5.6%
Female	67	94.3%
Marital Status		
Single	13	18.3%
Married/Partnered	58	81.6%
Age		
20–30	14	19.7%
31–40	35	49.2%
41–50	22	30.9%
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	58	81.6%
African American	6	8.4%
Hispanic	6	8.4%
Other	1	1.4%
Highest Education Level		
HS/GED	40	56.3%
Bachelor’s Degree	21	29.5%
Graduate Degree	10	14.0%
Child Characteristics^a	(<i>n</i> = 76)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	56	73.6%
Female	20	26.3%
Age (range from 2–41 years)		
2–9	29	38.1%
10–12	26	34.2%
13 and up	21	27.6%
Disability Category		
Autism Spectrum Disorder	23	30.2%
Down Syndrome	12	15.7%
Multiple Disabilities	10	13.1%
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder	6	7.8%
Learning Disability	6	7.8%
Mental Health Disorder	2	2.6%
Extreme Prematurity Resulting in Disability	2	2.6%
Genetic Disorder	2	2.6%
Cerebral Palsy	2	2.6%
Co-Occurring Disabilities	1	1.3%
Cystic Fibrosis	1	1.3%
Neurofibromatosis	1	1.3%
Diabetes	1	1.3%
Joubert Syndrome	1	1.3%
PANDAS Syndrome	1	1.3%
Rett Syndrome	1	1.3%
Sensory Processing Disorder	1	1.3%
Spina Bifida	1	1.3%
Williams Syndrome	1	1.3%
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	1	1.3%

^a Several parents reported characteristics of more than one child with a disability.

Participants

Embedded parents were selected by the collaborating agency based on their individual agency's criteria (e.g., county of residence, child's disability category, eligibility for agency services) for participation in the course. Parents were paid a stipend by the collaborating school district or agency: \$50 per class or \$800 per semester to defray transportation and child care costs.

Embedded parent demographics were collected over four years (2006–2010). Respondents ($n = 71$) provided information on personal characteristics as well as characteristics of their child or children with a disability ($n = 78$; see Table 1). Demographic data for parents who participated in more than one cohort were counted only once, with all duplicated data removed from final counts.

Design and Procedures

Focus groups were conducted with all embedded parent participants each semester before the start of the 16-week course and again during the final week of the course. All focus groups took place in classrooms at the university and were audiotaped. Both pre-course and post-course focus group discussions continued until each topic was exhausted, with focus groups consisting of the 4–10 embedded parents for that semester's course. The duration of the focus groups lasted between one and two hours for both pre- and post-course discussions. The focus groups were conducted by the first author, who disclosed that she was a parent of a child with a disability, and by an outside individual trained in qualitative research who was also a parent of a child with a disability. One central research question was used to guide both pre- and post-course focus groups: How does an embedded parent experience contribute to empowerment and self-efficacy as a partner in the parent–professional relationship? The nature of phenomenological research dictates that data remain somewhat fluid, allowing respondents' perspectives to emerge upon analysis (Groenewald, 2004). Subquestions evolved in an effort to develop an understanding of parents' feelings before and after participation as an embedded parent in the course.

In the pre-course focus group, embedded parents were prompted to describe their experiences related to the guiding research questions. Questions asked of participants included:

- What types of experiences have you had working with professionals who provide services to children with disabilities in your community?
- What are the most important qualities in a professional with whom you have had a positive experience?

- How do you feel about working with professionals who provide services to children with special needs and their families?
- How do you think expectations for partnership may differ between parents and professionals?
- What do you hope to gain from participation as an embedded parent in the course?

The post-course focus group questions provided parents with an opportunity to reflect on the embedded parent experience. In order to revisit the essential research questions, focus group facilitators asked the following questions:

- Before this class, how did you feel about working with professionals who provide services to children with special needs and their families?
- Thinking back over your experiences in this class, was there a time when you realized that your values, beliefs, or expectations about parent–professional partnerships had changed?
- What made you aware that a change had occurred?
- How will the change impact you as the parent of a child with a disability?
- How do you think expectations for partnership may differ between parents and professionals?
- What did you get out of this class?

Data Analysis

In order to assess parents' attitudes toward parent–professional relationships before the course began, the first author and an outside parent trained in qualitative research asked pre-course focus group questions that allowed participants to freely discuss their experiences with professionals as well as positive and negative qualities of professional partners in general. Analysis of that portion of findings resulted in subthemes that are not relevant to post-course focus group findings, as embedded parents were not asked to reflect on these general experiences after participation in the course.

The authors used thematic analysis of focus group data to guide this phenomenological study, a design in which researchers examine the perspectives of people involved to make sense of social or psychological phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). As described by Creswell (2007), phenomenological data analysis consists of horizontalization (highlighting significant statements) then organization of statements into themes. In this study, transcripts of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Two researchers not connected with the study independently conducted an initial analysis of data by generating codes related to parent empowerment in an effort to combine and categorize the data. From these categories, patterns related to parent empowerment

were identified and assertions that pulled together the patterns found in the data were developed. Significant participant statements provided insight into the central research question and/or subquestions. These statements or quotes were then clustered into groups of meaning, resulting in a series of pre-course and post-course themes. The separate analyses of the two additional researchers who did not participate in data collection helped ensure inter-rater reliability. Consensus was reached by both sets of researchers on themes for pre-course and post-course focus groups. The authors sought to discover how the embedded parent experience influenced parent perspectives toward professionals, parent–professional partnerships, and themselves as change agents.

Major Themes

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to see the issue from the participants' point of view and reveal the meaning of, in the case of this study, the embedded parents' experience of empowerment (Groenewald, 2004). Both pre-course and post-course focus group transcripts revealed the experience of empowerment and growth as parent–professional partners. The findings are outlined here as they relate to four themes: (1) From judgmental and impersonal to caring professionals: Parents believed that the connection with preservice teachers contributed to personalization of all involved; (2) From intimidation to confidence: Parents felt that course participation increased their confidence in partnering with professionals and in attaining appropriate services for their child; (3) From defensiveness to trusting professionals: Parents sensed growth in their perceptions of professionals and in preservice educators' perceptions of parents; and, (4) From despair to hope: Parents were encouraged and hopeful for future positive parent–professional partnerships. Each theme is presented with supporting statements from parents in pre- and post-course focus group sessions describing the transformation in parents' views on parent–professional partnerships. (Note: italics within quotations indicate the speaker's emphasis.)

Theme 1: From Judgmental and Impersonal to Caring Professionals

Before the course, a strong sentiment emerged from parents that they wished that teachers were more willing and able to see parents and children with disabilities as people rather than tasks. A parent stated more generally that, "I think that it is important to bond as humans. It's always good to know that you are not alone in this. It's very important." Another parent added, "If people feel wanted and feel like they are a special person no matter what, then that would be a good thing."

The pursuit of personalization in the process of parent–professional partnering appeared to become a reality for participating parents. Upon reflection, they believed that students in the course, who could potentially be their child’s future teacher, truly understood parents through their experiences with the embedded parents throughout the 16-week course.

Today, when we were doing our Virtual Family and they were asking me questions about what I did in certain situations, two of my group members started crying because they felt what I felt and went through in that situation. That, to me, was just like the “wow factor.” I just couldn’t believe that they had gotten themselves that attached to it.

I think it happened, it was probably about the third time they [preservice educators] came to our house. It was as relaxed as possible. There was dog hair everywhere, there were crumbs everywhere, there were dirty clothes everywhere, you know? It was, if you’re going to see me, if you’re going to see our family, you’re going to see it warts and all. But, they got it...they could understand what it was like to live in our shoes a little bit more.

Perhaps more salient to parents is the need for a personalized experience for professionals in viewing the child with a disability. Pre-course statements 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.

We go for an open house, and again, this is our first time, our first experience with the school system. We’re out of preschool and transitioning into primary school. My son can read his name at this point, he knows his name, and we go down to the typical classroom where he is supposed to be and all the kids have a name on their desk and he’s going by, looking for it, looking for it, and he can’t find his name anywhere. We get in line to talk to the teacher, and we get up to her and she’s like, “Oh, he’s down in the special education room. He’ll only be coming down here once in a while.” There were plenty of empty ones. She could have put a name tag on one to make him feel welcome. That was what it was all about. He wasn’t welcome to his own open house. That was a terrible, terrible feeling.

Parents sensed long-term implications for society due to circumstances in which the child was not valued.

If you don’t include them [children with disabilities], then all the other people never know how to react to them either. So, when he finally does

get into the community as an adult, they're like, "Well, I don't know how to talk with him. I don't know what to do."

When asked what a quality professional would do to better include a child with a disability, one parent replied, "Just give it a try. I always thought if we could just get in there [sports team], they'll see. They'll know. He's not an alien; he's a boy."

In direct contrast to this mother's sense of estrangement, several parents reported post-course that due to the course, they believed that the preservice teachers would emerge from the course more able to view the child as a person with individual, human characteristics and a name other than a disability label: "...another thing we talked about in class too, was looking at the child as a child having a disability, not, "This is Autism." Parents also shared a sense of relief that person-first language became more than a construct to the preservice educators because of interaction with the children themselves inside the family home and in the community. This parent's post-participation quote uses the term "we" when referring to person first and how it translates into classroom practice among parents and professionals working together as a team.

And you [another parent] mentioned the person first. That was a big change in the class when the students went from the disability came first, and then they mentioned the student. I think now students all have a bigger understanding of person first. It's not the disability we're looking at, it's the person, and then we look at what things we need to put in place to accommodate the disability.

Before the course began, parents reflected that it is difficult to view professionals as people outside of the realm within which there is contact, because most interaction occurs in relation to the professional's job. The parent-professional relationship is often based solely on the educational or therapy experience, separate from the family, community, and societal roles each also enacts.

The professionals—we [parents] don't want them to have *stuff*. We want them to be professional and supportive and beyond human in a way, and not have little issues, per say. And sometimes I think they do, and they fall short of our expectations, and then we become very disappointed, and we take that with us when we deal with other professionals.

Post-course focus group discussions revisited the parents' notion of the professional as a person with experiences outside of the workplace. After having contact with pre-emerging professionals in class, one parent cited that a great benefit of participation was "...that I'd be more willing to look for that human side to the professional, because sometimes you want them to be more than

human.” Similarly, another parent recognized the need for parents and professionals to know one another more intimately in order for parent–professional relationships to prosper.

So your only contact with them [professionals] as a parent is that professional and sometimes you do need to see them as people. They have kids, too. They get sick, they have good days, they have bad days...it’s a good thing to invest in getting to know them.

This quote reflects that parents felt that their willingness to observe the professional in a more personal light had enlarged due to the contact they had with students in the course.

Theme 2: From Intimidation to Confidence

Prior to the course, many parents felt that the caregiver’s role in the parent–professional relationship should be that of partner, but had experienced barriers to partnership limited by the professionals’ inability to see parents as willing and/or able contributors.

No matter what the professional brings to it, if the parents themselves don’t feel comfortable and feel like they are a part of it, then it doesn’t work as well. They have to actually feel it. They have to make the parents feel that they are a part of the team and feel like what they have to say is important. They have to feel that the child is just as important to them as it is to the parent.

Often pre-course focus group participants reported a lack of full participation in decisions related to their child’s educational or medical care, citing a superior attitude of professionals or environmental factors in meetings that set parents up for unequal partnership.

When I was in fostering, I had to go to this training on IEPs and stuff, and the trainer said, “You know, if you feel out of place because everybody has a M.D. or Ph.D. behind their names, write M.O.M. or D.A.D. behind yours.”

One parent discussed her child’s initial IEP meeting, saying that the manner in which the meeting began left her feeling

...intimidated. Because at his first meeting, I was the only one there; I didn’t have my husband with me....They were all seated, and then I walked in. And that was a big thing. And they all had their papers in front of them. I had my purse, you know. I didn’t have a clue...each person went around the table, and they were very, you know, the professional. They were telling me what my son wasn’t going to do, cannot do,

probably would not do, you know. And they had it all planned out in their own professional mind.

However, after the course, parents felt that learning more about special education law, the history of disabilities in America, experiences of other parents, and qualities of effective parent–professional partnerships better equipped them to participate in decisions for their child. “I think I didn’t feel as confident then as I do now. I feel more confident about approaching school situations...knowledge is power, and we shared so much knowledge, and I feel like I could be more confident.” Not only had parents gleaned specific information to inform their decisions, they also reported increased ability to communicate information as it related to their child’s services. “And I feel like I know how to talk to them [professionals] a little bit more intelligibly about things too, you know?”

I’ve only had two IEP meetings, and just from this class, I’ve learned that I can ask for things. I can do a lot more with the IEP than I thought I could. That has definitely helped me out personally, and will help me out in the future.

Pre-course focus group parents also reported a lack of confidence because of their own perception of the professional as more informed and deferring to the professional for decision-making on behalf of the child. Sometimes parents felt that the option for full participation in decision-making for their child was not available to them, because professionals left little room for parental input.

That was horrible when you have to sit there, and they say, “So, what exactly do you want me to write?” Or, “There is no possible way. What else do you have?” Or, you don’t even get to speak. Each person goes around, they read their goal. “This is what we are doing. Please sign here.” Well, I don’t see how I have participated in any of that.

In post-course discussion, however, parents reported a new sense of confidence in their contribution to parent–professional interactions. The change was due to a combination of increased knowledge about parents in special education and suggestions for increased involvement from other embedded parents. “I’ll be more willing to go in and work more one-on-one with the professionals. Rather than saying, ‘You’re the professional; you know what to do.’ Because I was always too shy or didn’t know what to do.” The shift in confidence did not necessarily mean that parents wished to assume sole responsibility for decisions related to their child’s care, but desired more equal input and influence.

Before this class—for most of us, I think—we expected professionals to be the professional...I think now for me, I want the professional to be

prepared, but I, also, I don't mind showing the professional what the course should be.

This self-assurance came, in part, from the realization that professionals are learners as well as experts. "One of the things I remember is thinking that all professionals probably have more information....I'd turn to them really looking for answers, and maybe they really didn't have them. It set me back in remembering that we're all students."

The course appeared to also increase parental confidence because it provided a forum for sharing with other parents who are new to having a child with a disability. As one parent shared before the course began, parents may feel engulfed by input when attempting to navigate disability information and services. "When you first start off, it's overwhelming. You're bombarded with everything, and you're kind of like, 'Okay. All right. I have no idea. This is all new, and I don't know what to do.'" Whereas, sharing the family story and related experiences enabled parents to find a new sense of purpose that extended beyond advocating for their own child.

I think that it gave me some self-value, like self-worth. Like someone is going to learn from me. I spend so much of my time trying to help my kids. You forget what you're doing is learning, and you're capable then of turning around teaching others or sharing with others what you know or what you learned or what you've had to dig from deep because nothing is laid out for you. You've got to learn how to navigate, and the more you advocate, the more you learn.

One parent echoed the confidence gained by others in the course as she reflected on her interaction with preservice professionals: "I feel like it's even better now, because I know where they're [professionals] coming from more after this class. And I feel like I know how to talk to them a little bit more intelligently about things, too." This statement not only reflects that the parent feels more equipped to meet professionals as equals but that her perception of professionals, in general, had developed.

Theme 3: From Defensiveness to Trust

After 16 weeks of learning course content, discussing course concepts from both a professional and parental standpoint, and applying course principles to their own families, embedded parents felt that the perspectives of all participants had grown. Pre-course focus group participants often felt it necessary to be defensive in order to communicate with professionals, sometimes viewing interactions in terms of a battle.

...you have to fight the war with a smile. Let them know that you are there and that your nose is in their business. And they'd better do it right, or you will just be there to gently remind them that we have gotten off track a little bit.

When discussing potential outcomes of the course, parents hoped that students would gain a better sense of a parent's perspective to prevent further defensive encounters. One parent revealed that, when necessary to obtain appropriate services for or to protect their child, parents usually feel responsible to come to their child's defense.

I want them [preservice educators] to know everything...that's coming from our heart, and if they can't handle it, get out. We don't want you. We can become mama bears and papa bears, and we will chase you out. It's not fun, but I want them to know that this is some serious business.

The idea that professionals present as superior to parents resonated with several pre-course focus group participants as well. "Some of these people [professionals] think, 'I've taught for 30 years. I've seen it all. Done it all. I'm going to tell *you*.'" Although some parents reported perceptions of professionals as exerting a superior attitude, others conveyed that parents' high expectations for professionals' knowledge was not always met. When asked what professionals should bring to a partnership, a pre-course focus group member stated, "Experience and knowledge of teaching, because he obviously went to school for that. Hopefully, they know something." Upon post-course reflection, another parent described one course outcome by saying, "I did get out of this class that there are some pretty smart kids out there, and they're going to be out there teaching our kids, and they do care."

Another significant area in which parents experienced perception change is in professionals' ability to become emotionally invested in the child with a disability. Before the course began, one parent explained a disconnect among parents and professionals in relation to the emotional connection to the child. "When it's my own child, it's my child, so it's your own world. I'm obviously much more emotionally involved and have more at stake, emotionally, than that professional does. That's huge." However, after the course, embedded parents recognized that the pre-professionals with whom they interacted did develop an emotional bond with the child and family through the experience.

I always felt like they [teachers] didn't care; my child was just another child that would fall through the cracks. But with this class, I have a different opinion now. I do know that there are some good educators out there who are interested in the children with special needs....I was never afraid. I always wanted to be involved. I always wanted to speak what I thought was best as a parent, but I did not feel that they wanted to listen.

After the course, parents reflected a much altered perception of emerging professionals, mainly due to direct encounters with the students through field experiences. “I think meeting wherever we met—outdoors, the Student Union, everywhere we met—it did not have the impact that it did when they came into my house.” Another parent added,

She [preservice teacher] made a remark to me, “I just don’t know how you get anything done!” I’m like, “You learn to do dishes with a kid hanging off your leg.” So, I think that that belief to make a difference, to change their mindset, was really neat.

Before the course, one parent reflected the sentiment that parents and professionals both tend to expect too much from one another, but professionals seem to ask, “Why isn’t the parent doing...” rather than working with the parent to reduce barriers.

...it was really, really good for me to see that change. After dealing with their [preservice teachers] attitude toward parents and what they thought of all parents [before the course] and what they had to go through even to make it to IEP meetings...

...they [preservice teachers] learned not to judge, which is really important, because they know us individually as parents. I think that’s been a big experience in this class, is that judgment factor...I feel *we* have made the biggest differences in their lives. I’ve seen it, and I’ve heard it from them.

I was surprised that the students said, IEP meetings—they are brutal. And several of the students said, “We have got to figure out a way not to do that to you folks.” The kids that did go to the IEP meetings said, “Whoa! It is different on the other side of the table,” and I was pleased to see that.

Quotes reveal that the embedded parents felt reciprocal empathy with the preservice teachers that resulted from getting to know one another in a parent–professional context. One embedded parent recounted an experience with a student assigned to her family, “When we were going over the presentation, like practicing, they [students in my group] said, ‘we’ did...and it was like, stuff that I did for [child’s name]. But she said, ‘we’ so I think that she really did put herself in my shoes, and I think they would do 110%.”

My students went to our IEP meeting, and I was surprised when we walked out, and they said, “That was intimidating!” I found it interesting that the students really saw what it felt like to be on the other side of the table.

In addition to feeling that the students better understood the parent perspective on the IEP process, parents also developed a clearer sense of the work required of a teacher in preparation for the IEP meeting. When asked to reflect upon the most significant personal change she experienced as a result of the course, one mother replied,

...I think it was looking through somebody else's eyes. I didn't realize how long it took to write an IEP. I didn't realize how much work, especially when things had changed for teachers, how difficult that transition was for them. I think it also opened my eyes that, sometimes, it's not necessarily the bad teacher. That it could be more of a systemic problem—that the person who is writing the IEP is doing the very best that they possibly can, but that their hands are also tied....So, I think that, to me, was a huge eye-opening experience, because you are fighting that person in the IEP meeting, and that person may want the best for your child and their hands may be tied.

Further, parents felt able to approach professionals more openly after participation in the course, having an increased expectation for honest and productive communication. "It's [the class] made me more willing to reach for that wisdom, because of the group experience and coming to collaboration... making me more collaborative and less combative."

I had some really bad experiences, but this has made me be a little more trusting and to tell them that it's okay to say I don't know. At least be honest with me. And I think that's giving me a better voice.

The interactions mandated by course activities generated relationships among embedded parents and preservice educators that resulted in perception change because of the opportunity to know one another on a more personal level. "I think back when we told our stories and just the reaction of the students changed things right there. We [embedded parents] were all crying, but they [preservice teachers] were all crying, too."

Yeah, on the first focus group I remember saying that I didn't want the professionals to give up on my son, because I was going through that with different speech therapists. But I would never say that about these students. I know that they would never give up on my child.

I do think it helped me to have their perspective a little better. You know, I think that I went into it thinking more about what I could teach them about my perspective. And that is the goal, I think, but I do think that I learned a little bit more about where they're coming from, too.

Theme 4: From Despair to Hope

Perhaps the most significant outcome of course participation for parents was an overall sense of contributing to a brighter future for parent–professional collaboration and better outcomes for students with disabilities. Even before the course began, parents hoped for improved communication among parents and professionals that would affect their child’s school experience. “I want to develop a better working relationship with special educators who are going to be in my son’s life all throughout his school years. Learn ways to communicate better and know where they’re coming from a bit more.” Another parent echoed this desire to learn strategies for effective communication with professionals on a level that generally only comes with experience. “I’m hoping to learn to speak with teachers better. I haven’t had experiences yet to learn from...I’m hoping to bite that on the head before it happens and learn things before I make a mistake.” One parent reflected his wish to help by participating, stating, “The ability to not only change those people who will be hitting the streets when our kids are still in school, those of us who have young ones, may directly impact our children beyond just the world around us.”

Reflecting the findings of Royea and Appl (2009), after the course, many parents felt that it was realistic for the communication skills and relationship-building gained in the course to transfer into everyday settings.

The same kind of relationship with the professionals that I’m going to be dealing with, by what we did with the students, I really think if we can do that with the students and see that in the students, then why can’t we do that with the professionals that we’re dealing with in school now?

The hope for the course to serve as a catalyst for change mainly stemmed from parents’ exasperating experiences in navigating supports and services for their child with a disability. Before the class began, parents shared,

I don’t want any other parents to have to go through the hell that we have been through...if there is anything we can do that the next family doesn’t have to do, this is time well spent for me. The next kids coming down the pipe are my kids, too. It’s like I’ve got ownership of all kids with special needs somehow. We are all in this together.

I think there are a lot of things that we’re all going to get out of the class, but I really think that the main reason, most of us, are probably doing this class is so that we can give back, and hopefully the new students coming up can help parents have better experiences than what we’ve had.

A pre-course focus group participant stated that her purpose for participating as an embedded parent was because “I want to give as much as I can to those students [preservice teachers], because they are the professionals, and

other parents might not have to go through the devastations that we have had to go through.”

After spending the semester learning alongside preservice educators, parents developed reassurance that the course with embedded parents did, in fact, make a positive impact on the emerging professionals that would produce a long-term difference in the arena of parent–professional partnerships.

I think, in the future, I feel more confident that there are going to be some very good people in our school system, because you’ve made the difference in their roles. So, I think I’m very excited about that. I wish I knew all people coming in had gone through the class.

One parent expressed confidence that the course’s influence may directly impact his child. “There is a good chance that this could still impact our children, because these very same students could be in our school district in just a couple of years.” This influence became increasingly meaningful to other parents in the post-course discussion, as several parents related that the impact of their participation was likely to reach much farther than their own families, because the university students in the course would be teaching around the nation and for many years to come. “I feel like I’m helping everyone’s future. It might be my child’s because we’re not done yet, but especially kids that are young that maybe aren’t even in the major programs yet.”

It’s not just about our children, which is what I think I thought. It’s not about my daughter. It’s about all our kids...I had a part in that. Even if I never see it. So, I think that mentoring role that we kind of adopted would come out of this experience.

Parents expressed optimism in how the preservice teachers would serve the children with disabilities and also in the caliber of parent–professional collaboration that may result from the embedded parent course. “It seems like what they’ve learned...you really look forward to seeing how they’re going to work. How they’re actually going to be with parents and work with parents and come together. I think there’s some hope in there.” One embedded parent summed up the hope inspired by the course experience nicely, saying, “For students, the most valuable aspect is the ability to see and almost experience life outside the book or expected result of life. For me, the parent, the possibility of even better care for our children.”

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that an embedded parent experience contributes to parent empowerment in all areas identified by researchers

as significant to attaining empowerment: (a) playing an active role in the education and decision-making process; (b) receiving access to resources; (c) effecting change in one's life and/or community; (d) feeling part of a group or sense of belonging; (e) having a sense of self-efficacy; (f) experiencing hope; (g) changing perceptions and learning to think critically; and (h) receiving respect (Carpenter & Phil, 1997; Dunst, 2002; Lloyd & Hastings, 2009; Murray et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008; Summers et al., 2005). Post-course focus group results clearly depict that parents felt better equipped to participate fully in the decision-making process, which is a critical element of empowerment (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008). Successful participation in course activities armed parents with new knowledge of rights and available supports and increased their self-efficacy in actively partnering with professionals. Relationships with professionals and other participants increased embedded parents' knowledge of and access to resources in the community as well as facilitated group membership among parents. Parents who were newer to raising a child with a disability benefitted especially from these factors, but veteran parents experienced a deeper sense of effecting change in the community by transmitting important advice to newer parents that helped to simplify new parents' navigation of complex disability services.

All parents experienced an adjustment of perceptions toward professionals, citing increased personal interaction and communication as reasons for change. Likewise, parents strongly believed that preservice teachers' perceptions of parents had been altered as a result of field experiences and personalization of the parent-professional partnership. The Virtual Family activity and the final presentation of student-family interactions proved to be excellent vehicles for students and parents to think critically about the trust, communication, and perspective-taking necessary for effective partnerships. Overall, the embedded parent experience helped participants have hope for the future and allowed parents to see themselves as change agents, impacting preservice educators to help them emerge as family-centered professionals.

The unique nature of this phenomenological study provides practitioners and parents with an image of how working collaboratively can build strong partnerships and empower parents to be agents of change. Furthermore, this study provides a model for reciprocal parent-professional partnership training. The present study also explores how efforts to empower parents can change negative perspectives held by parents and pre-professionals, supporting the formation of trusting partnerships.

Parents participated as embedded parents in this course with the intent of impacting the perceptions of preservice teachers, yet they reflected a profound personal change as a result of the course as well. Data obtained by comparing

parental attitudes in pre-course focus groups to those in post-course focus groups revealed a distinct path of change. Parents felt empowered when their lived experiences (opinions and knowledge about their child and schools) were valued by preprofessionals. Parents developed a willingness to view preservice teachers on a more personal level, and by doing so, increased opportunities for positive interactions. Parents felt more confident to advocate for services for their children due to participation as embedded parents. This study suggests that networking among families may also contribute to parental empowerment. Parents perceived an increase in decision-making power due to access to new information and resources. Furthermore, giving parents the opportunity to gain information, share experiences, and support one another generated a sense of group belonging that enhanced empowerment (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009; Kirby, Edwards, & Hughes, 2008). The final benefit clearly demonstrated through this research was the increased feeling of hope for the future that the course gave to participating parents.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are mainly related to lack of diversity in the sample. All participants reside in one region of a Midwestern state and nearly all (all except four) embedded parents were female and Caucasian. Most parent participants were also married, alluding to the fact that the time, travel, and child care requirements for course participation may be difficult for a single parent of a child with a disability. More than half of the participants had completed high school, also limiting the sample in regard to educational level.

Future Research

Future research may enrich the diversity of the sample by recruiting as participants more fathers, individuals from minority groups, and parents who are not married or partnered. Additional research is needed in the area of parent empowerment in order to truly support families' efforts to confidently make informed decisions about their child's educational experience. It would also be interesting to follow the parents who were embedded in this course to ascertain their leadership endeavors after their involvement in the course. It would be worthwhile to look at the responses of the fathers who were embedded in the course and analyze them individually to determine if their responses differed significantly from the mothers. This qualitative study could also be paired with quantitative survey results, looking at dispositions of parent-professional partnerships before and after the course or intervention. Finally, it would be noteworthy to investigate if teachers who took this course were more likely to empower their students' parents once they were practicing in the field.

Conclusions

It is evident that parents want to be respected, understood, and valued in the educational decision-making process for their child with a disability. Both parents and professionals could benefit from increased interactions and education on how to create successful partnerships. To date, no evidence has been found that other universities embed parents of children with special needs into undergraduate or graduate courses for a full semester. This study demonstrates the benefits to parents of children with disabilities from this innovative educational practice.

References

- Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J., Frankland, C. H., Nelson, L. L., & Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of family and professional partnerships: Constructive guidelines for collaboration. *Exceptional Children, 70*(2), 167–184.
- Carpenter, B., & Egerton, J. (2007). *Working in partnership through early support: Family structures* (Distance learning text). London, UK: Department for Education and Skills. Retrieved from <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1926/>
- Carpenter, B., & Phil, M. (1997). Empowering parents: The use of the parents as researcher paradigm in early intervention. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 6*(4), 391–398.
- Caspe, M., Lopez, M. E., Chu, A., & Weiss, H. B. (2011). *Teaching the teachers: Preparing educators to engage families for student achievement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dunst, C. J. (2002). Family-centered practices: Birth through high school. *Journal of Special Education, 36*(3), 139–147.
- Dunst, C. J., & Dempsey, I. (2007). Family–professional partnerships and parenting competence, confidence, and enjoyment. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education, 54*(3), 305–318.
- Forlin, C., & Hopewell, T. (2006). Inclusion—The heart of the matter: Trainee teachers' perceptions of a parent's journey. *British Journal of Special Education, 33*(2), 55–61.
- Giovacco-Johnson, T. (2009). Portraits of partnership: The hopes and dreams project. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 37*(2), 127–135.
- Green, C. L., Walker, J. T., Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (2007). Parents' motivations for involvement in children's education: An empirical test of a theoretical model of parental involvement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 99*(3), 532–544.
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), Article 4. Retrieved from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/back-issues/3_1/pdf/groenewald.pdf
- Harnett, A., Tierney, E., & Guerin, S. (2009). Convention of hope—Communicating positive, realistic messages to families at the time of a child's diagnosis with disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37*(4), 257–264.
- Heslin, P. A., & Klehe, U. C. (2006). Self-efficacy. In S. G. Rogelberg (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of industrial/organizational psychology* (pp. 705–708). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Hodge, N., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2008). Problematising parent–professional partnerships in education. *Disability & Society, 23*(6), 637–647.
- Hornby, G., & Lafaele, R. (2011). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An explanatory model. *Educational Review, 63*(1), 37–52.
- Huang, Y., Kellett, U. M., & St. John, W. (2010). Cerebral palsy: Experiences of mothers after learning their child’s diagnosis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 66*(6), 1213–1221.
- Ice, C. L., & Hoover-Dempsey, K. V. (2011). Linking parental motivations for involvement and student proximal achievement outcomes in homeschooling and public schooling settings. *Education and Urban Society, 43*(3), 339–369.
- Kirby, A., Edwards, L., & Hughes, A. (2008). Parents’ concerns about children with specific learning difficulties: Insights gained from an online message centre. *Support for Learning, 23*(4), 193–200.
- Lloyd, T. J., & Hastings, R. (2009). Hope as a psychological resilience factor in mothers and fathers of children with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 53*(12), 957–968.
- Morrow, G., & Malin, N. (2004). Parents and professionals working together: Turning the rhetoric into reality. *Early Years, 24*(2), 164–177.
- Murray, M., Christensen, K., Umbarger, G., Rade, K., Aldridge, K., & Niemeyer, J. A. (2007). Supporting family choice. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 35*(2), 111–117.
- Murray, M., & Curran, E. (2008). Learning together with parents of children with disabilities: Bringing parent–professional partnership education to a new level. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 31*(1), 59–63.
- Murray, M., Curran, E., & Zellers, D. (2008). Building parent/professional partnerships: An innovative approach for teacher education. *The Teacher Educator, 43*(2), 87–108.
- O’Connor, U. (2008). Meeting in the middle? A study of parent–professional partnerships. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 23*(3), 253–268.
- Pinkus, S. (2005). Bridging the gap between policy and practice: Adopting a strategic vision for partnership working in special education. *British Journal of Special Education, 32*(4), 184–187.
- Royea, A., & Appl, D. (2009). Every voice matters: The importance of advocacy. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 37*, 89–91.
- Staples, E. K., & Diliberto, A. J. (2010). Guidelines for successful parent involvement: Working with parents of students with disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 42*(6), 58–63.
- Stoner, J., Bock, S. J., Thompson, J., Angell, M., Heyl, B., & Crowley, E. (2005). Welcome to our world: Parent perceptions of interactions between parents of young children with ASD and education professionals. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 20*(1), 39–51.
- Summers, J. A., Hoffman, L., Marquis, J., Turnbull, A., Poston, D., & Nelson, L. L. (2005). Measuring the quality of family–professional partnerships in special education services. *Exceptional Children, 72*(1), 65–83.
- Turnbull, A., Turnbull, R., Erwin, E., & Soodak, L. (2006). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Van Haren, B., & Fiedler, C. R. (2008). Support and empower families of children with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 43*(4), 231–235.
- Vig, S., & Kaminer, R. (2003). Comprehensive interdisciplinary evaluation as intervention for young children. *Infants and Young Children, 16*(4), 342–353.

- Whitbread, M. K., Bruder, B. M., Fleming, G., & Park, J. H. (2007). Collaboration in special education parent–professional training. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 39*(4), 6–14.
- Zhang, C., & Bennett, T. (2003). Facilitating the meaningful participation of culturally and linguistically diverse families in the IFSP and IEP process. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 18*(1), 51–59.

Mary M. Murray is associate dean in the College of Education and Human Development and associate professor in the School of Intervention Services at Bowling Green State University. She has extensive experience in training programs for professionals and parents of children with special needs. She has over 25 years of experience working in the community in a variety of positions. She is a board member of the Autism Society of Ohio and is a member of the State Advisory Panel of Exceptional Children. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Mary M. Murray, Bowling Green State University, 444 Education, Bowling Green, OH 43403 or email mmurray@bgsu.edu

Lisa M. Handyside is an associate professor in the School of Intervention Services at Bowling Green State University. She has more than 15 years of experience working in the field of special education, with a specific emphasis in the area of education of children with hearing loss. Currently her research interests lie in empowering parents of children with disabilities.

Leslie Straka holds a graduate degree in Intervention Services and a graduate certificate in Autism Spectrum Disorders, both from Bowling Green State University. She is a licensed Intervention Specialist who currently works as the executive assistant to the Dean of the College of Education and Human Development at Bowling Green State University. Leslie has worked with individuals with disabilities and their families for 10 years in a variety of settings. Her research interest is in educational interventions for students with autism.

Tabatha Arton-Titus is currently an Intervention Specialist (K–2) with 20 years experience working in the field of early childhood education. She also holds a certificate in Autism Spectrum Disorders from Bowling Green State University. Most importantly, she is a parent of three children, two with exceptionalities. Her research interests include parent empowerment and teacher education.