

Ideal Interactions: Perspectives of Parents and Teachers of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

We conducted a qualitative study using key informant interviews with 18 teachers and 39 parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) about how they would envision their ideal interactions with each other. Four main themes emerged from our content analysis. Parents and teachers were concerned about different aspects of communication with each other. Neither party wanted to ask the other for more involvement, and both attributed resistance to a lack of confidence in their expertise. Parents and teachers valued parental presence, but teachers wanted parents to be active partners in the education of their children. The results suggest possible reasons why parents and teachers of children with ASD are often dissatisfied with their interactions. Discussion centers on similarities and differences with general education, as well as on practical solutions to promote more positive exchanges between parents and teachers of children with ASD in school-based contexts.

Key Words: parent–teacher communication, autism spectrum disorder, parental involvement, parent–teacher relationships, partnerships, perspectives

Introduction

Legal mandates (ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 2004) require parent involvement in the planning and implementing of school-based interventions, particularly for

children with special needs, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). There also is accumulating evidence that parent involvement is associated with children's academic, behavioral, and social/emotional success, both for children with typical development (Bakker & Denessen, 2007; Garbacz, McDowall, Schaughency, Sheridan, & Welch, 2015; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013) and for children with ASD (Benson, Karlof, & Siperstein, 2008; Garbacz, McIntyre, & Santiago, 2016). Despite legal expectations and empirical support, inadequate inclusion of parents is one of the major challenges in multidisciplinary educational teams (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008). School systems' limited success in effectively working with families of children with ASD may exacerbate the proliferation of special education litigation (Zirkel, 2011).

Parent involvement can take many forms, including home-based involvement, school-based involvement, and home-school communication (Manz, Fantuzzo, & Power, 2004). High-quality, two-way parent-teacher communication is necessary and expected, but rarely achieved, especially between parents and teachers of children with special needs (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015), such as ASD (Azad, Kim, Marcus, Sheridan, & Mandell, 2016). Interactions are typically limited or hierarchical, shared information and mutual understanding are frequently lacking, and expectations and goals are often inconsistent (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jivanjee, Kruzich, Friesen, & Robinson, 2007; Lo, 2008; Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley, 2011). Perhaps as a result, families consistently report that they are not satisfied with their interactions with special education teachers (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Although several studies have pointed to the inadequacy of parent-teacher communication, more limited research has attempted to understand why. One probable reason may be because parents and teachers have different perspectives, expectations, and needs that are not properly addressed in their interactions. For example, parents value regular and timely communication, but teachers continue to struggle to create consistent, reliable, two-way communication systems with families (Lo, 2008). Teachers may have difficulty understanding parents' varying degrees of comfort in communicating with educators. For example, Tucker and Schwartz (2013) found that parents are often more comfortable providing input about behaviors rather than academics. Overt and/or covert behaviors from school staff may contribute to diminished interactions with parents. Prior studies have shown that in school-based meetings teachers speak more frequently than parents, and parents' input is often ignored, silenced, or criticized (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015; McNaughton et al., 2008). Further, educational jargon and institutional agendas may lead to lack of rapport building with parents (Howard &

Lipinoga, 2010). Unfortunately, teachers commonly position parents as part of the problem rather than a critical part of the solution (Wood & Olivier, 2011).

While previous studies have described frequent challenges faced by stakeholders during their interactions, very few studies have engaged parents and teachers of children with ASD directly to understand and characterize potential solutions. Qualitative methods are ideally suited to gain a comprehensive understanding of complex, dynamic, and multidimensional phenomena. We chose this approach because it is the recommended methodology when the goal is to identify and clarify the perceptions of stakeholders within a particular context (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). For example, these methods have been used to understand the perspectives of parents and pediatricians on various topics related to children with ASD (Carbone, Behl, Azor, & Murphy, 2010; Levy et al., 2016). Understanding parents' and teachers' perspectives of their interactional needs is particularly important for this population given the cross-contextual nature of evidence-based practices. More specifically, children with ASD are likely to have better outcomes when parents and teachers engage in consistent practices across home and school, respectively (Azad et al., 2016; Garbacz et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2015).

The present study gathered qualitative data to better understand perceptions and preferences regarding parent–teacher interactions. We interviewed teachers of students with ASD and the parents of their students about how they would envision their ideal interactions with the other party.

Method

Participants

Participants were 18 teachers and 39 parents of children with ASD drawn from kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms for students with ASD in 13 urban public schools representing a single school district. The district is among the 10 largest in the country, and 75% of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. The participating schools serve a racially and ethnically diverse student body: 65% African American, 9% White, 3% Asian, 14% Latino, .1% Pacific Islander, .06% American Indian, and 10% other. Six percent were English Language Learners, and 17% received special education services.

We followed systematic recruitment procedures. We emailed all teachers who had participated in a larger randomized-controlled trial (Mandell et al., 2013) describing the project. Emails to 33 teachers in 22 schools were sent, and 27 teachers from 18 schools consented to participate. Students of the consenting teachers were given a packet describing the study to take home. We

included only children in classrooms for students with ASD and who had a parent whose primary language was English. Forty-six parents from 18 classrooms in 13 schools consented to participate. There was a single consenting teacher representing each classroom. Parents with multiple eligible children were instructed to identify one child to be the focus of the interview. Six parents who initially expressed interest could not be reached via the contact information they provided (e.g., phone number was no longer valid), and one parent withdrew after providing consent but before beginning the interview. The final sample consisted of 18 teachers (from 18 classrooms) and 39 parents of students from those classrooms. Teachers worked with between 1–6 participating parents in their respective classrooms.

Most (89%) teachers were female. Teachers were an average age of 36 years ($SD = 11.3$), and no teachers identified as Hispanic or Latino. Approximately 83% identified as White, 11% as African American/Black, and 6% as American Indian/Alaska Native. All teachers taught in classrooms for students with ASD; more than half (55%) taught in kindergarten through third grade classrooms. Classroom grade composition varied, ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade and often with two or three grades of students in one classroom. Teachers reported, on average, 10.3 years ($SD = 11.4$) of experience teaching special education and 6 years ($SD = 3.4$) of experience teaching students with ASD (see Table 1).

Parents were primarily (95%) mothers who averaged 34.9 years of age ($SD = 6.2$). Approximately 23% identified as White, 56% as African American/Black, 13% Hispanic/Latino, 3% as American Indian/Alaska Native, and 5% as other. More than half (59%) of the parents reported a high school/vocational degree or less, and 51% were unemployed. Annual income was predominantly (77%) \$45,000 or less, and 64% were not married.

The 39 students whose parents and teachers participated all had a special education classification of ASD. They were all being taught in self-contained special education classrooms, referred to as autism support classrooms. On average, children were 7.4 years old ($SD = 1.6$), predominantly (70%) male, and most (95%) lived with a biological parent. Students ranged from kindergarten to fifth grade; 64% were in kindergarten through second grade. Many (74%) were enrolled in free or reduced lunch programs. A majority received (95%) speech and/or (77%) occupational therapy.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Parents and Teachers

Variable Mean (SD) or Percentage	Parents (<i>n</i> = 39)	Teachers (<i>n</i> = 18)
Gender		
Fathers/Males	2.6%	11.1%
Mothers/Females	94.9%	88.9%
Age (in years)	34.9 (6.2)	36.0 (11.3)
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White	23.1%	83.0%
African American/Black	56.4%	11.0%
Hispanic/Latino	12.8%	
American Indian/Alaska Native	2.6%	6.0%
Other	5.1%	
Grade(s) Taught		
Kindergarten – Third Grade	-	55.5%
First Grade – Third Grade	-	11.2%
Second Grade – Fifth Grade	-	33.3%
Teaching Special Education (in years)	-	10.3 (11.4)
Teaching Children with ASD (in years)	-	6.0 (3.4)
Additional Variables		
High School/Vocational Degree or Less	59.0%	-
Unemployed	51.0%	-
Annual Income Less Than 45K	77.0%	-
Not Married	64.1%	-

Procedure

All research activities were approved by the university’s institutional review board and the school district’s research review committee. After parents and teachers provided written informed consent, individual 20-minute phone interviews were scheduled. Prior to engaging in the semi-structured interview, demographic information was provided by participants over the phone. To maintain consistency, parents were interviewed first, and teacher interviews followed. All interviews were conducted by the first author and digitally recorded with participant permission. Since the present study was a part of a training grant, the first author received training, consultation, and supervision throughout the interview process.

Individual Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with parents and teachers of children with ASD. Parents and teachers were interviewed individually about their ideal interactions. The first author conducted all the interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Respondents were asked a systematic series of direct, probing, and indirect questions. We began with a direct question designed to elicit broad information about the experiences and attitudes of parents and teachers. Respondents were prompted to “Think about how you would interact with your child’s teacher [or student’s parent] under ideal circumstances. Tell me what that would look like.” Following this direct question, probing questions were posed to better understand the informants’ perspectives. For example, “What are some things that could help your interactions with your child’s teacher [or student’s parent]? What do you think would work well?” Lastly, interviewees were asked indirect questions to elaborate on a topic. For example, if the concept of “respect” was used, an indirect question followed such as, “How does a teacher demonstrate respect to a parent?”

Data Coding and Analysis

We engaged in a series of systematic and iterative steps to code and analyze our data using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Given the limited research in this area, we chose to avoid using preconceived codes, but instead allowed the codes to emerge from our data. The first author and two research assistants began by engaging in open coding of two early audiotapes, independently. In lieu of transcription, we audiorecorded interviews with concurrent detailed note taking, similar to the procedures advocated by Halcomb and Davidson (2006). Then, the first and last authors and two coders collaborated to review emergent codes, agree on coding priorities, and draft a preliminary codebook. Throughout the coding process, coders met frequently to resolve discrepancies in coding and further refine the codebook. Approximately 20% of the audiotapes were coded by both the first author and coders to ensure consensus was maintained.

After coding was complete, the research team collaboratively organized codes into themes and subthemes. To avoid researcher bias and establish trustworthiness, we engaged in a variety of methods, including peer debriefing, analyses of outliers, and investigator triangulation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Regarding the latter, the authors ranged in expertise from school psychology to clinical psychology to mental health services. Consensus about the organization of codes into relevant themes was reached. This strengthened our confidence in the trustworthiness of the results given the authors’ varying backgrounds.

Results

Four key themes emerged from our interviews with parents and teachers of children with ASD. Within each theme, subthemes are further delineated.

Communication

Parents are concerned about communication content, but teachers are concerned about communication mechanisms. Both are concerned about the quality of communication.

Parents Want More Information About Their Child's Education

Parents expressed concern about not receiving the most relevant information during school events, such as back to school nights. This was particularly upsetting for parents given the numerous barriers that need to be overcome to attend these events, such as transportation, child care, and work schedules. Parents expressed a desire to incorporate learning opportunities at home, such as by engaging their children during everyday activities; however, they felt ill-equipped without the teachers' guidance. Parents wanted concrete and tangible information from teachers, such as handouts with interactive activities, the syllabus, and/or recommended books.

No, you [the teacher] don't know what I want to know. I've been to back to school nights where every instructor wanted to say, "Your kid is doing fine." Of course they're fine. Not only did they just meet you, but you're reviewing the stuff from last year. I want your syllabus. I want to know what they're going to be learning in the middle of the year so that I can start this type of stuff at home, so I know how to incorporate your lessons while we're cooking or while we're cleaning or while we're out at the store. That's what I come to back to school night for. –Parent

Parents Want to Be Aware of Who Their Child Is Interacting With During the Day

Parents expressed confusion about the many adults (e.g., lead teacher, classroom assistant, therapeutic support staff, and/or behavioral specialist) in classrooms for students with ASD and what each person's role was. Parents wanted to be informed about who their child interacted with during the day; however, they frequently received limited or inaccurate information.

Who is he [the child] really with throughout the entire day? I was under the impression that he's with one person, but then they tell me he's with another person. –Parent

Parents Want to Know About Daily, Weekly, and General Progress

Parents reported being ill-informed of their child's progress at school. They thought that having more information about their child's challenges and strengths at school would help them work with their child more effectively at home. Parents wanted information about their child's general progress in addition to daily and weekly updates. They were interested in receiving updates in various forms, such as via written reports or meetings.

Daily reports and things like that where you write down if the child was good, if he had a good day, if he had an awful day. –Parent

Early week and end of week reporting so that people are aware of whatever problems there might be. “Hey, this is what we can do to help this problem. This is what you could do at home to help this problem.” We would be made aware of little things so that they don't turn into big things. That's being communicative directly. –Parent

If things were perfect it would just be more meetings...to talk about how he's doing, his general progress. –Parent

Parents Want to Hear About Their Child's Strengths

Parents reported that they have been hearing about their child's challenges since well before elementary school; hearing about their child's strengths was refreshing. Even at meetings called to discuss specific challenges, also hearing about ways in which their child was doing well was appreciated. Parents wanted the teacher to acknowledge and build upon their child's strengths, despite there also being areas in need of improvement.

I guess the whole purpose of the meetings is really to show why your child needs services, but it's always good when you hear the strengths. Obviously, you're going to work on the areas that need work, but when [the teachers] can acknowledge the strengths and build on those things, I like that. That's ideal as well. –Parent

Teachers Want Parents to Respond to Their Written Communication

Many teachers spoke about the positive and negative experiences they had when sending written materials home to parents. When parents responded in a timely manner, it was evidence for teachers that the parents were working with their child at home. Teachers frequently attempted to engage parents by sending a communication book home. The intention was for the communication book to facilitate two-way communication. Many teachers reported spending a significant amount of time writing in the books. For example, teachers would write about the child's day and asked for parents to return the communication book with questions or concerns. However, when parents did not write in the

communication book or even check their child's backpack, teachers were discouraged and often gave up their attempts to communicate with parents.

I know she's working with him at home, if I put something in his folder, it's always checked. Things are returned in a timely manner. –Teacher

Ideally, she would be checking his book bag every night, so I would be able to have a communication book in there where I'm jotting down notes and words he said today, or I could be letting her know, "look, he's labeling these words." Then she would start doing that at home...if there was a question she had, she would be communicating that to me about how to do something with the homework or just having more of that dialogue about his academics and social skills. –Teacher

Teachers Want More Face-To-Face Time With Parents

Teachers wanted parents to come into their classrooms more often. Teachers reported making themselves available during back to school nights and/or parent-teacher conferences but finding that many parents did not show up to these events, even with multiple reminders. One reason that teachers wanted parents to come to the classroom more was so they could "show off" the child and not just have face-to-face time when there were challenges. They wanted to provide parents with tangible products made by their child and for parents to see firsthand how far their child had come. Although teachers respected and even empathized with parents' preference for phone calls, they expressed disappointment in not being able to show parents their child's progress in person. Some teachers were even willing to travel to the child's home.

I'd like to be able to have more consistent face-to-face conversations...I really wish she was able, it's not a fault of hers, to be able to come. Sometimes, I want to show her how good he is doing. Even if I could go to the home and do it, I would do it. I just want to show him off. –Teacher

Both Parents and Teachers Want Genuine Communication

Honesty and sincerity were identified as important characteristics by both parties. Often this ideal situation did not come to fruition. Parents reported feeling offended that teachers seemed distracted during their interactions. Teachers reported that parents just said things that they [the teacher] wanted to hear. As a result, teachers felt helpless and oftentimes discouraged from interacting with parents.

Under ideal circumstances, I feel like the teacher will speak with you in the present tone, meaning that her mind is with you and your child at this moment. I think teachers need to be mindful...people need to know that you are genuine and sincere. –Parent

So I feel like sometimes, maybe she'll [the parent] sugar coat things or say she's doing things that she's not really doing. In an ideal situation it would be nice if she were just honest about what her shortcomings are, and then I could help better. –Teacher

Involvement

Parents and teachers are concerned about asking the other for more involvement.

Perceptions of the Other Party's Stress Is a Barrier to Involvement

Parents reported a sense of guilt when accessing the teacher in any way (e.g., asking questions, requesting meetings, suggesting accommodations for their child) due to an acute awareness of the demanding circumstances in which teachers were expected to function. They acknowledged the overcrowded classrooms (e.g., up to 12 children), limited support from school staff (e.g., principals were often unaware of the daily challenges in classrooms for students with ASD), and minimal supplies (e.g., teachers frequently used their own money to buy materials). As a result of these overwhelming circumstances, parents reported feeling as though they did not want to be an additional burden to their child's teachers.

Teachers' perceived parents in their school as experiencing numerous hardships that contributed to difficulties engaging in their child's education, including young parental age, lack of employment, and limited social and/or financial support. Teachers also highlighted that many families had multiple children with developmental concerns. Some teachers were empathetic toward parents' situations; however, others were frustrated by circumstances that manifested in limited parent involvement.

I almost feel guilty sometimes taking up her [the teacher's] time. Maybe it's because we have a good relationship, and she'll express to me how overwhelmed she is, and then that makes me feel guilty to ask her to do things that I want for my son. So it would be wonderful if it was less drama. –Parent

It's hard to find the time or set aside time to have a conversation about topics concerning him....There's not always the time, or she [the parent] doesn't always have the time. He's one of three or four, and she has another that's also on the spectrum, and I believe he is a little more severe than he [my student] is. They're very busy; there is a lot going on. She doesn't give as much time to him...maybe just more time to have a conversation. –Teacher

So I guess under ideal circumstances it would be nice if there were some way I had more of an indication of the kind of things that go on at home...but it's probably a struggle of her [the parent] being so young and single, and I could maybe think of more resources for her if I knew exactly what the situation was at home. –Teacher

Expertise

Parents and teachers are frustrated that the other person does not implement their ideas. They attribute this resistance to a lack of confidence in their expertise.

Parents Want Teachers That Are Receptive to Their Suggestions

Parents bring valuable information to the table. They wanted teachers to know that they too were experts on their child. Parents wanted to better understand who their child is at school and to be able to share how their child is at home. Sharing expertise with one another was perceived by parents as being mutually beneficial. However, parents reported feeling as though teachers resisted implementing recommendations they felt were in the best interest of their child because it would make the teachers' job more difficult. When faced with teacher resistance, parents questioned teachers' priorities and attributed inaction to a lack of confidence in the parents' expertise.

The thing that would make things more ideal for me would be...to have an idea of what side of him she's [the teacher] seeing...and be able to tell her "oh yeah, he tricked you, he can do that." –Parent

The ideal interaction would include hearing our [the parent] side of the story, our insight from home, what works. –Parent

Having a sense that she's [the teacher] open-minded to try new things based on the fact that it's in my child's best interest, not in that it makes it hard on her. –Parent

I feel as though we get a lot of push back, like asking her to come in and observe [the child in general education], that was a huge deal.... "I don't have the time; I have to do all these other things; I don't want to get a sub." It was very difficult to get her on board with trying something new. –Parent

Teachers Want Parents to Follow Through and Reinforce Specific Interventions at Home

Many teachers expressed frustration with parents' lack of follow through at home. When teachers made explicit recommendations about what the child could work on at home, parents often were perceived as not providing sufficient

follow-up. Teachers perceived this as parental indifference toward their child's education. This was particularly upsetting for teachers who had spent time, money, and effort to create individualized intervention materials. For example, visual supports for children with ASD often require materials that parents do not have at home (e.g., picture icons, velcro, a laminator). Teachers reported that they made these materials for parents and shared implementation strategies in an effort to create consistency across home and school. However, teachers perceived resistance from parents and did not understand why some parents did not follow through. Teachers felt disrespected by the lack of follow through and perceived it as parents not valuing their expertise.

If she would participate a little bit more that would be good...but she doesn't come to back to school night, and I have to really send her a lot of reminders and phone calls if there's a conference coming up. So I guess if she could respond to me with "this is working" or "this isn't working" or things like that....I wouldn't say she's not involved, but there's an indifference. –Teacher

I've made her visuals at home to use, and I don't get the sense that she follows through with them. I don't know why, if it's too difficult, or what the reason is, but I don't feel like she does. –Teacher

It's the same blueprint with everyone as far as the way you want communication to go and the way you want things to be reinforced at home that were learned in school. –Teacher

Active Partnership

Both parents and teachers value parental presence in the classroom, but teachers want parents to take on a more active role.

Parents Want to Observe in the Classroom

Parents reported they wished they had opportunities to visit the school beyond parent–teacher conferences or Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Parents felt the school only wanted them involved when something was required or when there was a problem. They felt unwelcome visiting their child's classroom. Parents reported wanting to observe in the classroom to better understand what their child was doing during the school day and how they were progressing.

Sometimes I actually be wanting to see what my child do during the day. They don't really ask you [the parent] to come in. During school hours, I really want to know, what is he doing? –Parent

Teachers Want Parents to Voice Their Concerns and Provide Feedback

Teachers frequently reported wanting parents to come into the school more often and provide their perspective. They wanted parents to feel comfortable sharing concerns, providing thoughts on home life, and giving feedback. However, this was not always happening, and teachers often felt clueless about parents' goals for their child. As a result, they felt inadequate in their role and unsure of whether they were truly addressing parents' needs.

Under ideal circumstances, there would be a little bit more back and forth, she would tell you what was going on at home and some feedback, what are her goals. –Teacher

It would be great if they could come here a little bit more often and voice their thoughts on things. –Teacher

Teachers Want Parental Participation in Conversations and Mutual Support

Teachers were frequently discouraged by what they perceived as one-sided conversations in which they asked all the questions and parents provided single-word responses. Teachers often felt unsuccessful in their attempts to facilitate more balanced conversations. Not all of the teachers reported a conflictual relationship, however. When the relationship between teachers and parents was perceived as positive, both groups described a sense of mutual support. Mutual support manifested through collaborating on intervention ideas, valuing each other's input, and following through with the others' suggestions. In these positive relationships, teachers took an active role in acknowledging parents' expertise, and parents reciprocated with their suggestions and feedback.

It feels like one person is leading the conversation because it's just me asking and her [the parent] responding yes or no, and if I really need her to get more information out, I have to prompt her....Occasionally she'll ask a question, but for the most part, it's just me prompting her. –Teacher

It's great because we support each other, and it feels real collaborative. She's always willing to take our suggestions into account. She values our response; I value her response because she has great input, too....I tell most of my parents, you're your child's first teacher; you know more about them than I do; you have great input to give, and I definitely take that into account. –Teacher

Both Parents and Teachers Want Parents to Volunteer in the Classroom

Parents and teachers both talked about the importance of the parents' presence in the classroom. Parents reported that regardless of their work and family

commitments, they always had at least some time off. During those occasional days off, parents wanted to volunteer in their child’s classroom. Teachers were open to any form of parental presence, whether it was volunteering in the classroom or on class trips. For teachers, having a parent that was present was evidence of their support.

I [the parent] want opportunities when I’m off to be able to come into my son’s school and help the teacher. –Parent

It would look like...her [the parent] coming into the classroom a little bit more. Whether it’s...volunteering or coming on the class trips, showing support in that way. –Teacher

Please see Table 2 for a summary of the themes elicited from parents and teachers of children with ASD.

Table 2. Themes Elicited From Parents and Teachers of Children With ASD About Their Ideal Interactions

Theme	Parent	Teacher	Both
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents want more information about their child’s education • Parents want to be aware of who their child is interacting with • Parents want to know about daily, weekly, and general progress • Parents want to hear their child’s strengths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers want parents to respond to their written communication • Teachers want more face-to-face time with parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents and teachers want the other person to be genuine in their communication
Involvement			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents and teachers perceive that the other person’s stress is a barrier to his/her involvement
Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents want teachers that are receptive to their general suggestions for school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers want parents to follow through and reinforce specific interventions at home 	
Active Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents want to observe in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers want parents to voice concerns and provide feedback • Teachers want parental participation in conversations and mutual support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents and teachers both want parents to volunteer in the classroom

Discussion

Four main themes emerged from our interviews with parents and teachers of children with ASD about their ideal interactions with each other. For the communication and active partnership themes, parents and teachers displayed both differences and similarities in their viewpoints. Parents and teachers had similar perspectives regarding barriers to involvement, but divergent views regarding expertise.

Communication was a pervasive theme that was frequently mentioned throughout the interviews. Parents and teachers agreed that the quality of their communication with each other was important, with both parties expressing a desire for genuineness during their interactions. Parents and teachers also shared different perspectives on communication. For example, parents expressed more concern about the content of communication. More specifically, parents wanted to know very detailed information about their child. They were interested in what their child was learning (i.e., in order to create similar experiences at home) and who (i.e., which teachers) their child was interacting with during the day. Parents also wanted to hear about their child's strengths, as well as progress with challenges. These findings are consistent with prior studies of parents of typically developing children who expressed concern about how well teachers know and care about their child, as well as how information is communicated (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Rich, 1998). Similar to the parents of children with ASD in our study, parents of typically developing children often want teachers to provide specific information on their child's academic content and learning goals, as well as clear direction from teachers on how to incorporate learning opportunities at home (Brandt, 1989; Christenson, 2004; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). A challenge that is unique to parents of children with ASD is understanding which teacher(s) their child interacts with during the day. Children with ASD receiving special education services may interact with the lead teacher as well as a variety of assistants in the classroom (different types of assistants include classroom aides and/or paraprofessional support staff, various therapists and/or behavioral specialists, consultants, etc.), and this may be particularly confusing for parents.

Teachers were more concerned about the mechanisms of communication rather than content. Teachers reported feeling frustrated with the communication methods (e.g., written and face-to-face) they attempted to use to stay connected with parents. This is important because the type of communication mechanism teachers use can greatly affect whether parents understand the information provided (Brandt, 1989; Holden, Hughes, & Desforges, 1993; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Mechanisms of parent-teacher communication

have been an area of interest in the general education literature. Recently, Thompson, Mazer, and Grady (2015) found the parents of typically developing children prefer electronic modes of communication, such as email, text messages, or social media. The teachers in our study were primarily focused on written and face-to-face communication with parents. Perhaps using new communication technologies also would be better suited for parents of children with ASD. For example, there are new texting services (i.e., free or low-cost apps on smart phones) that keep cell numbers private but facilitate quick and easy parent–teacher communication.

Involvement emerged as the second theme. Parents and teachers of children with ASD expressed concern about taking up too much time because of their own perceptions of the other person's stress and burden. Parents recognized that teachers often work in difficult conditions and assumed that this prevented them from expending extra effort with their child. Similarly, teachers believed that parents' real or perceived challenging life circumstances served as a barrier to their school involvement. Given that parents of typically developing children often feel like they are interfering when they contact teachers with questions (Gonzales-DeHass & Willems, 2003), these results are not surprising. However, the parents and teachers in our study may have experienced hypersensitivity to requesting more involvement, given the unique challenges of parenting or teaching children with ASD.

A third theme emerged regarding expertise. Both parents and teachers recognized their unique expertise and expressed frustration when the other person did not trust that expertise and value their ideas. Research with African American and Latino families (the former predominated in our sample) suggests that educators often do not welcome, expect, or advance communicative, power-sharing relationships with these families (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Cooper, 2009). In our study, parents wanted teachers to be receptive to general suggestions for school; however, teachers wanted parents to follow through and reinforce specific interventions at home. Both attributed resistance to the other person's lack of confidence and trust in the other's expertise. Studies in general education have shown the important role of trust in parent–teacher relationships, particularly during the elementary grades (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016). Improving the quality of home–school communication, not just the frequency of contact, has been identified as a primary way to enhance trust in the parent–teacher relationship (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Increased trust may further promote parental involvement (Santiago et al., 2016). For children with ASD, cultivating trust in the parent–teacher relationship may be particularly important for ensuring the implementation of consistent, evidence-based interventions across home and school.

The final theme was a desire for an active partnership. Both parents and teachers had ideas about how to close the home–school divide, and both valued parental presence in the classroom (e.g., volunteering). In general education, obtaining parental presence through conferences or volunteering are the most frequently used strategies for family involvement (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). However, teachers wanted parents to do more than just be present. Teachers wanted parents to take on an active role, voice their concerns, and provide feedback. Teachers also expressed a desire for parents to be equal partners by engaging with them in reciprocal conversations and mutually supporting one another. This is consistent with previous research conducted by Knopf and Swick (2006) with parents and teachers of typically developing children in early childhood contexts. Their study suggested that communication and collaboration between parents and teachers needs to be mutually supportive, such that both parties respect and nurture each other. Although parents and teachers frequently identify mutually beneficial partnerships as essential to a child’s learning, healthy development, and success in school (Hebel & Persitz, 2014; Lawson, 2003; Vincent, 1996), parents often report feeling unwelcome on school premises as equal partners (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). It may be particularly challenging for parents of children with ASD to feel like equal, active partners with teachers, given the ambiguity of a socially constructed diagnosis and the plethora of information and misinformation on ASD. However, parental contribution can take on many forms; therefore, the more important matter is that teachers give parents a place to be credible resources in the education of their children with ASD.

Although we describe these four themes as mutually exclusive categories, they were intertwined in our study. For example, teachers spoke about wanting parents to voice their concerns. Parents perceived resistance from teachers when they made suggestions; therefore, some opted to volunteer and/or observe in the classroom as their form of an active partnership. It is also possible that parents did not reciprocate communication and/or mutual support because they were not getting the information they were looking for from teachers. Although we conceptualized communication as its own theme, elements of communication frequently appeared in teachers’ definitions of an active partnership. It is important to note that we cannot draw causal inferences from our data, but we wanted to highlight that these four themes were presented in a related manner by many parents and teachers of children with ASD.

There are important limitations to note about the present study. First, we did not have a comparison group of parents and teachers of children with other disabilities or without disabilities and therefore cannot determine whether these themes generalize to all parents and teachers of students with disabilities

or to the general population. Second, a majority of our interviews were conducted over the phone. While this may have hindered rapport establishment, it is also possible that the phone interviews reduced social desirability (i.e., participants answering what they think the researcher wanted to hear). Third, the present study was conducted in a single large urban school district, another probable limitation to generalizability. We are unable to determine whether our findings are applicable in other settings, such as rural districts. Future studies should further explore these four themes using mixed methods and in samples of children with other disabilities and/or in rural settings.

The present study has fundamental implications for the school community. Parent–teacher communication and collaboration have academic and socio-behavioral benefits, are supported politically with special education legislation, and are valued by parents, teachers, and other staff in the school community (Bakker & Denessen, 2007; ESSA, 2015; Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003; IDEA, 2004; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). However, research identifies obstacles to positive exchanges between parents and teachers (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). Our study advances the field by identifying possible reasons why parents and teachers of children with ASD are so often dissatisfied with their interactions.

It was particularly striking to hear that many parents and teachers actually want the same or similar things for their ideal interactions. For example, both parents and teachers expressed a desire to actively partner with one another and for the other party to recognize that they bring valuable expertise to the table. However, they did not seem to realize that their ideal interactions were actually quite in line. Prior studies in general education have examined the important role of shared perceptions, for example, the extent to which parents and teachers view their relationship in general, and their communication in particular, in a similar fashion has been linked to child outcomes (Garbacz, Sheridan, Koziol, Kwon, & Holmes, 2015; Minke et al., 2014).

Strategies to Promote More Ideal Interactions

Strategies to improve interactions between parents and teachers of children with ASD are encouraged to bridge the research to practice gap. Three particularly promising areas stand out from our interviews with parents and teachers. First, our data suggest that there are no clear role delineations for parents and teachers of children with ASD. School staff involved in parent–teacher interactions should focus on providing well-defined roles for parents and teachers, with clear expectations for involvement delineated early on in the relationship. Second, parents and teachers experience negative emotions, such as guilt and frustration, because of the numerous assumptions they make about each

other. These assumptions are often made without confirming evidence. It is important for parents and teachers of children with ASD to have strategies on how to explicitly share their expectations, needs, and desires surrounding communication and partnerships on an ongoing basis, which might be provided through workshops. For example, Symeou and colleagues (2012) implemented an in-service program on parent–teacher communication that trained teachers on strategies related to reflection of feelings, parent elaboration, nonverbal communication, facial expressions, paraphrasing, and sharing of information. Finally, it is important for parents and teachers to understand what the other person brings to their interaction, especially with regard to expertise and stress. In order to improve home–school collaborations, it is imperative to help parents and teachers recognize, validate, and work with each other’s strengths and challenges from a culturally responsive perspective.

In conclusion, our qualitative study highlighted four themes important for parent–teacher communication in special education contexts for children with ASD. We also provide possible strategies to promote more ideal interactions between parents and teachers of children with ASD. Improving parent–teacher interactions has the potential to create more consistent implementation of evidence-based interventions across home and school and, ultimately, better outcomes for children with ASD.

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