

Article

“The Voice of the Parent Cannot be Undervalued”: Pre-Service Teachers’ Observations after Listening to the Experiences of Parents of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative research was to consider the influence of parent interaction on the perspectives of pre-service teachers with regards to their interactions with and instruction of students with disabilities. The data set for this research was 106 reflection papers written as part of a class assignment after the pre-service teachers participated in a discussion panel with parents of children with disabilities. The pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on things they learned after listening to the parents and how they would use that information in their future interactions with parents when they had their own classrooms. The findings suggest that listening to the parents’ experience from the parents themselves had an impact on the pre-service teachers and would positively influence their future interactions. Recommendations to improve opportunities for parent exposure in teacher-education programs are provided.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education; parents; collaboration; special education; disability

1. Introduction

With the continued move towards inclusive education for students with disabilities and the limited number of special education teachers available for co-teaching in the general education classroom and for pull-out, resource support, it is becoming increasingly important for general education teachers to be familiar and comfortable with working with students with disabilities in the general education/inclusion classroom and, by extension, their parents. This familiarity and comfort must start in the pre-service teacher education classroom so that newly certified general education teachers enter their classrooms with some basic knowledge and experience in special education, including being comfortable working with the parents of their students with disabilities.

The need for increased pre-service preparation for general education teachers to work with students with disabilities is not new [1–4], but that preparation must go beyond academic content, classroom management, and student learning outcomes, as important as they are. Practical learning experiences are also important. Bentley-Williams et al. [4] in their research on collaborative partnerships (although not parent-focused) noted “the impact of linking teacher education with real-life experiences was shown to have potential to influence pre-service teachers’ feelings of comfort, capacity to face dilemmas and engage in better coping skills” (p. 272).

Teachers of all students, but even more importantly, teachers of students with special learning needs/disabilities, must also be comfortable working with the parents of their students, and strong parent–school partnerships are critical in facilitating this expectation [3,5–7]. According to a 2015 report from the United States Department of Education [8], the majority of the parents surveyed participated in a school-related activity, including parent–teacher conferences, school/class events, volunteering,

and/or fundraising. Parents are a regular and important presence in the school, and their continued presence should be encouraged. When a child has a disability, the parents' presence is increased through the additional need for conferences and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings as students move through their school career.

Parent–teacher interaction, participation and collaboration is generally expected, although this is a developing concept in some countries [9–11]. However, minimal, token collaboration is not enough. Teachers, first, need to understand the role parents play in the special education process and how those parents might be feeling. Pre-service teachers may not have considered the parental view of educating a child with a disability, as they often are more focused on their role as aspiring teachers, including learning about child development, pedagogy, philosophy, methodology, and so much more that is encompassed in teacher preparation programs. However, parents of students with disabilities have fears, concerns, and expectations that are very often different and, sometimes, more pressing than those of typically developing students. It is important that new teachers be afforded the opportunity to consider the parent experience as they learn about the many complexities of the special education system.

Teaching is more than just the interaction between a teacher and a student or a teacher and a group of students. Teachers must collaborate with many people during the course of a school day and throughout the year. Collaborators include other teachers, administrators, specialists, and, of course, parents. The way in which parents choose to collaborate with teachers is varied. Some never communicate; others communicate daily. When a child has a disability, however, those interactions typically increase and may become more complex as parents and teachers navigate raising and teaching a child who has all of the typical student issues that may arise as well as additional ones introduced by their disability. It is important for teachers to consider the perspective of these parents and how their experiences influence their relationships with teachers.

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to consider the impact of an introductory special education course where pre-service teachers were asked, after listening to parents' stories and experiences, to consider the perspectives of parents, their role in the special education process, and the importance of their active participation, through direct instruction, discussions with parents, and personal reflection. Understanding how pre-service teachers, most of whom are young adults without children of their own, view parents can help teacher preparation programs to design courses that are going to better prepare teachers for the reality of their own classrooms and ensure that their students who need support will come with parents who also need support.

2. The Mandate to Collaborate

The United States' federal education law on disability, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [12], requires not only that parents be afforded the opportunity to participate in the special education decision making process for their children but also that they are encouraged to be active participants. The verbiage in the law is very clear. The words "parent(s)" and "parentally" appear over 350 (367) times in the federal law. Parents are to be considered in all aspects of the special education and IEP process including participating as active members of the IEP team, "a group of individuals composed of...the parents of a child with a disability", as well as teachers and administrators [12] (Section 614.d.1.B.i, p. 63), providing consent for assessments ("shall obtain informed consent from the parent of such child before conducting the evaluation" [12] (Section 614.a.1.D.i, p. 56)), determining eligibility for services ("the determination of whether the child is a child with a disability...and the educational needs of the child shall be made by a team of qualified professionals and the parent of the child" [12] (Section 614.b.2.A.ii, p.59)), and developing the IEP ("in developing each child's IEP, the IEP Team...shall consider—"(i) the strengths of the child; (ii) the concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child" [12] (Section 614.d.3.A.ii, p. 65)). In addition, IDEA provides mandates for supporting special educators in knowledge, skills, and strategies for "effectively working with and involving parents in the education of their children" [12] (Section 662.b.2.A.iv, p.130).

However, it is not enough to simply mandate that schools facilitate parent participation. Merely inviting parents to meetings without a cognizant understanding of their thoughts, concerns, and experiences can lead to increased conflict, misunderstanding, and broken trust if the team lacks skills in collaboration. While IDEA does not mandate collaboration by definition (and by Friend's [13] definition, collaboration cannot be mandated), what it does mandate is that actively including parents in the decision-making process can be better achieved if the IEP team recognizes the importance of collaborating. Friend [13] defines collaboration as a style of working together to share decision-making towards a common goal. She elaborates on that definition to note that collaboration must also be based on parity, or the idea that all members of the group have equal voice and value, and that responsibility, accountability, and resources are shared [13]. While collaboration between teachers and parents cannot be forced, it can be expected, fostered, and facilitated. Aspiring teachers, however, cannot be expected to understand the value of parent collaboration and be able to facilitate effective collaboration with the parents of their future students unless they are exposed to the experiences, issues, and concerns faced by those parents.

3. Barriers to Parent Participation

The active role of the parent in their child(ren)'s education is important for all children, but can be particularly important for students with disabilities due to the individualized nature of their education. It is not always easy, however, for parents to participate, especially if there are cultural or linguistic differences from the school majority. Walton and Rusznyak [14] note that the increasing diversity of students is identified internationally as a significant challenge for educational systems. (p. 232). Additionally, sociodemographic issues with families such as single parenthood, poverty, mental illness, and limited parental education can create barriers to participation [15].

3.1. Schools May Still Be Working towards Inclusive Practices and Including Parents

Some schools may still be working on the concept of what it means to have inclusive education at all, and teachers and administrators may be struggling with not only what it means to have children with disabilities in the general education classroom but also increased parent participation. Pre-service teachers in the Netherlands [11] expressed concerns about having children with disabilities in their general education classrooms. The authors suggested this may be due to the relative newness of inclusive education. They note that "teacher training education is crucial to help prospective teachers alter negative beliefs about inclusive education" (p. 116) and "should provide pre-service teachers with practical strategies and skills to address the learning needs of pupils with [special education needs]" (p. 118). Although they do not specially address parent issues in this article, inclusive education comes with parental issues, especially in countries that require some parent participation in the special education process.

D'Haem and Griswold [16] looked at the views of teacher educators and pre-service teachers on parent involvement, especially those of those from diverse backgrounds, the impact of a clinical placement in a diverse area, and the role of the teacher education program in addressing teachers' concerns about working with parents, especially those from diverse backgrounds. The results indicated that while both groups felt parent involvement was important, there was an "expressed ambivalence about working with parents" (p. 98), and the teacher educators struggled to find an effective way to prepare the pre-service teachers in terms of how to work with parents. They described a "significant disparity ... between intent and practice in educating teacher candidates to work with parents" (p. 98).

3.2. Cultural Differences about What Constitutes Participation

In many countries, including the US, the parents of children with disabilities are considered to be part of a team, and their participation in their child's education may also be protected by law; in other countries, it may not be as common, and this can be attributed to cultural beliefs about disability as well

as a lack of resources to support their education and a lack of understanding about disabilities. In China, parental involvement does not mean working with the school to support the needs of their child, but “it means advocating for one’s child in the face of adversity, and often giving up one’s job and other life activities to become the child’s primary instructor” [9] (p. 48). For parents who may immigrate to a country that encourages active parent participation in the school setting, this can seem foreign and unusual. Their reluctance to participate could then be construed as disinterest or indifference rather than part of their cultural experiences. Anicama et al. [17] studied the experiences of immigrant or first generation Chinese or Chinese American parents in the United States. The researchers found that parents who identified as more acculturated to the US reported more school involvement (defined in this study as contact with the school by the way of conferences, volunteering, or other events). Parents who were less acculturated and of a lower socio-economic status were perceived to be less involved, likely due to structural barriers to school participation such as a lack of time, limited English proficiency, and feeling that they are not educated enough to volunteer in their child’s classroom.

Cultural differences, both in one’s native country and as an immigrant, can contribute to confusion about what constitutes parental participation in their child’s education. For example, a South Korean study [18] considered the role of fathers in school involvement, as it is traditionally very low due to perceived skills, social support, and other institutional factors such as expected commitment to their work. A father’s school involvement is considered important enough that the South Korean government is considering “parental school-participation leave” (p. 848) as a way to allow for work flexibility and therefore time available for fathers’ participation. The author notes, however, that a “cultural lag” (p. 848) between government encouragement and societal expectations still makes it difficult for South Korean fathers to have effective school participation.

Studies that looked at parents who immigrated to the US [18–20] found additional challenges in how school participation was defined by the parents and the frequent disconnect between how the school defined it. In a study [18] that identified the ways in which South Korean immigrant parents defined the concept of school participation found that the majority of the parents defined their involvement as supporting their children at home (68.8%) and connections with the school, including communication with the teacher (17.7%), rather than participation at the school (5%). Therefore, it is important for all teachers, both pre-service and in-service, to remember that while parents might not be participating according to their culture’s definition of participation, they may very well be active participants as viewed from within their culture. The authors recommend that teachers and schools “embrace a broader definition of parental involvement” and “honor ways that minority parents can become involved in their child’s education at home” (p. 136) instead of assuming that parents do not care because they are often not physically present at the school building.

Rodriguez et al. [19] considered the experiences of Latino parents of children with disabilities and barriers to their participation in the school. The authors reported that Latino parents also were more likely to support their children at home rather than by coming to the school. Other barriers noted were language barriers, poor self-efficacy, cultural views on what it means to have a disability (e.g., they may view it as a spiritual phenomenon rather than a problem to be fixed), and a view that the teachers are the one most appropriate to address school issues as they are the professionals. “There is an implicit trust in the teacher’s competence and professionalism” (p. 264).

The authors conclude with this statement:

Latino families, as well as other [culturally and linguistically diverse] families, may need clearer signs that schools are interested in involving them in the education of their child. These strategies convey an assurance to families that they are valued and trusted participants in their child’s education. (p. 269)

3.3. Fear (Or Reality) of Not Being Included or Respected, Which Can Cause Disengagement

Even without any of the confounding factors described above, parents can often feel like they are not valued members of their child’s educational team. Kurth et al. [21] wanted to understand

“from the parent perspective, the factors that impact educational placement and other educational decisions for students with [autism spectrum disorders], and parents’ satisfaction with the process and outcomes of such decision-making” (p. 37). They learned that, for the parents in their study, parents described themselves as “disempower[ed]” and ultimately had no choice about the services their children received, describing the schools as the “sole decision” maker, having “taken over,” and “decid[ing] it all” (p. 42). They felt as though they needed to fight for everything they believed their children needed to be successful in school. The parents were overwhelmingly dissatisfied and unhappy with the schools but also noted that experiences could vary based on where they were and with whom they were working. Parents also reported that even when things were going well, they were fearful that the next year could be difficult again.

4. Teacher Preparation for Working with Families

In addition to preparing future teachers to teach academic content and manage their classrooms, it is imperative that they are also supported in working with the parents of their students. Children do not live and learn isolated in their classrooms. They are part of a family and a community outside the classroom, and understanding how those various cultures connect with the school culture is an important component of a robust education [22]. A strong relationship between teachers and parents can benefit all parties involved in providing an education to students. It can be difficult, however, to discern what that parent involvement entails [3,9,18]. Some teachers, especially new teachers who may also be young, may experience anxiety and trepidation about encouraging parent involvement in the classroom and in the education process [11,23,24], fearing that parents could be overbearing or uncooperative, and therefore, teachers may not be proactive about encouraging parent participation but instead be reactive, only pulling parents into the conversation when problems occur.

Niles and Marcellino [25] describe four obstacles to collaboration (discussed below in more detail) between teachers and parents:

1. When parents are viewed as “visitors” (p. 298) to the classroom rather than partners in their child’s learning, they tend to be less involved, and that involvement is more likely to be teacher directed.
2. There is a “lack of focused training for teachers” (p. 298) in how to support and engage parents, especially those outside of the teacher’s culture. Teachers need to be competent in their awareness of other cultures (and this can include the culture of disability).
3. Both teachers and parents can feel a sense of a lack of trust and respect and can fail to see the contributions of the other to the success of the child. Each has a “unique relationship” (p. 299) with the child.
4. Parents and teachers can also be on the defensive. Teachers are expected to collaborate with parents but are often not given the time, training, or resources to do so effectively. Parents can interpret teachers’ frustrations with the establishment as disinterest or judgment about their child or family.

Having pre-service teachers interact with parents, especially early in their teacher-training program, can potentially break down those barriers before they become insurmountable.

Teachers need to be deliberate in how they bring parents into the school relationship, and learning how to do that must start in their own classroom as students, before they are in the classroom as teachers [23]. Discussions about parents, their role in the education process, and how they might be positively and negatively impacted by their relationships with teachers and the schools must be threaded throughout their own learning about how to become effective teachers. Encouraging teachers to learn about parent experiences directly from the parents themselves is not a new idea. Baum and Swick [26] describe the benefits of bringing the parent perspective into the pre-service teacher classroom for both parents and future teachers and encourage aspiring teachers to reflect on that exposure as it relates to their futures as teachers.

5. Teacher Preparation for Working with Families of Students with Disabilities

Special education teachers working with children with disabilities often have increased interactions with the parents of their students when compared to general educators, but research indicates that teachers are not adequately prepared for the issues specific to living with a child with a disability [6,11,27–32]. Several researchers who examined teacher preparation programs' preparation of pre-service teachers for interacting with parents reported that new teachers are not adequately prepared to collaborate with parents [16,22,24,27–31,33,34]. This lack of preparation for working with families of children with disabilities extends across disciplines, even in those where disability is a hallmark of the population served (physical therapy, occupational therapy, special education, etc.) [27]. This study noted that the average student in the fields of special education and related services received less than ten hours of course instruction in working collaboratively with families. This was supported by Flanigan [29], whose focus group interviews with faculty who work in pre-service teacher preparation programs revealed that these programs do not provide pre-service teachers with adequate course work on parent interactions or with opportunities to interact with parents in the community.

Knight and Wadsworth [30] looked specifically at the development of family and school partnerships in special education teacher preparation programs and concluded that there is very little course content in working collaboratively with parents. This can be detrimental to the education of children with disabilities as “[m]uch valuable information related to the assessment and educational programming of the child may be overlooked, or not even solicited, when family dynamics are not considered and the establishment of a mutually respectful relationship not sought” [30] (p. 25). Even when a teacher education program incorporated information about working with parents of children with disabilities, specific instruction on how to apply those skills in a real world/classroom setting was not always provided [28]. This practical application of skills is important for new teachers' understanding of family issues and needs to be actively incorporated into the pre-service learning curricula [22].

There is limited research available on general education teacher preparation for working with families of children with disabilities. This is something that is critical, however. Parents of students with disabilities experience a different set of challenges than do parents of typically developing children. It is important for teachers to be aware of the issues parents face and the feelings they may experience.

A program reviewed by Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel [35] paired parents of students with disabilities with graduate-level, special education teacher candidates for home visits with the intent of learning about how the parents experienced the special education process with their children. It gave the parents an opportunity to tell their stories, and the teacher candidates, an opportunity to learn from parents in an authentic setting. The teacher candidates were asked to reflect on that experience. This program allowed the teacher candidates to “gain insights” and access “the powerful knowledge that parents can share with educators” (pp. 130,131) regarding life with a child who has a disability. The teacher candidates mentioned frequently that this experience should be afforded to all teacher candidates, as all educators will be working with students with disabilities at some point in their teaching careers, if not every year.

In a similar program [36], parents were embedded as active participants in a class with pre-service, special education teacher candidates. By the end of the course, the parents had begun to shift their perspective of their relationships with the teacher candidates from an “us versus them” mentality to one of collaboration and mutual respect and trust. The parents reported seeing a shift in the attitudes and behaviors of the teacher candidates over the semester, with them becoming more empathetic and understanding of the parents, and recognizing their struggles, frustrations, and fears. While this exercise was aimed at future special education teachers, the implications for the benefits to general education teachers are clear.

Stoddard, Braun, and Koorland [31] noted that when their pre-service special education teachers interacted with students with disabilities and their parents at a community-based summer program, the pre-service teachers reported increased empathy for and understanding of the families of the

children with whom they worked, and they developed relationships with the parents and therefore a “deeper understanding of the challenges faced by families of children with disabilities” (p. 163).

This is not a problem inherent to the United States. Willemse et al. [34] looked at teacher preparation for working with families. Pre-service teachers in the Netherlands, Belgium, and the US “did not see themselves as well-prepared for [family-school partnerships]” (p. 795), especially when working with parents from cultures different from their own. They also saw more importance of family-school partnerships for elementary students than for secondary students, which is concerning, as the need for these partnerships does not fade as the children age. The authors recommend providing more opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with families in a practical and authentic way—such as opportunities to listen to parents, including having them speak to the classes, as well as other practical and field experiences—and also suggest a more deliberate effort to consider the research and theories on family-school partnerships to help coalesce their personal views and strengthen their knowledge. Mutton et al. [33] (England), Obradović et al. [7], (Serbia and Greece), and Alquraini et al. [37] (Saudi Arabia) had similar results and recommendations.

There appears to be a disconnect, then, in the literature. There are studies looking at preparing all teachers to work with all families [3,9,11,18,22–24], and there are studies looking at special education teacher preparation for working with families of students with disabilities [6,27–32]; addressing the need to prepare general education teachers to work with the families of students with disabilities is noticeably limited, with only one study [38] looking at this population.

6. General Education Teacher Preparation for Working with Students with Disabilities

Teachers often report feeling unprepared to work with students with disabilities [31,37,39,40]. Not all general education teacher preparation programs require an introductory course in basic special education constructs or working effectively with children with disabilities. In addition, it is not enough for pre-service teachers to learn about disability as it impacts the child in the classroom; teachers must also be prepared to meet the needs of the whole child, and the needs of the child’s parents, as they learn to help their child. However, understanding just what general education teachers need to know about disability can be a challenge. Allday, Neilson-Gatti, and Hudson [41] looked at the special education course requirements from over 100 institutes of higher education in all regions of the United States. They found that 19% of the programs for initial certification in elementary education *did not require* even an introductory course in the characteristics of disability, 67% *did not offer* a course in inclusion or differentiation, and 93% *did not offer* a course in collaboration between general education and special education teachers. Prospective general education teachers who are learning about working with students with disabilities must also have knowledge of the disability laws, policies, and practices of their school district and must be prepared through their teacher-training program to understand those laws, policies, and practices [39].

With the US’s IDEA mandate that students with disabilities be educated to the greatest extent possible in their least restrictive environment, which for many is the general education classroom, it is imperative that all future teachers have instruction in identifying and meeting the legal and academic needs of our most vulnerable students.

Dingle, Falvey, Givner, and Haager [42] asked general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators to identify the “essential competencies” (p.38) needed to educate students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Overall, there were 10 identified competencies that all respondents agreed were essential for both general and special education teachers when working with students with disabilities in an inclusive setting. They included the facilitation of a “fair and respectful environment that reflects cultural diversity” (p. 42) and an increase in the “participation of students with special needs in general education settings or community settings” (p. 42). There were also competencies that acknowledged differentiation, instructional accommodation, and curriculum modifications. The competencies identified, however, as being essential for special education teachers *only* were knowledge of the “common characteristics of different disabilities and the

effect on children's education, development, and quality of life" and the "principles and techniques of behavior modification" (p. 43). Even more worrisome was that the implementation and facilitation of "consultative and collaborative relationships with general education teachers" (p. 43) was considered the primary responsibility of special education teachers. This lack of general education teacher expectations in parent involvement indicates that there is a general belief that special education teachers should bear the primary responsibility for the educational health and well-being of students with disabilities, with general education teachers providing a supportive role, rather than a primary role. On the surface, division seems appropriate: special education teachers are trained to meet the needs of diverse learners and should take that primary role. In reality, however, in the inclusive setting, special education teachers may be in the classroom in a co-teaching model for part of the day or may take the students with disabilities to a resource room for some remediation, intervention, or re-teaching of content, but most students with disabilities are in the general education classroom, without explicit special education support from a certified special education teacher for the majority of their school day.

Sokal and Sharma [38], who looked at the effects of experience and education on both pre-service and in-service teachers, both with and without training in special education, found that both experience and education are important for fostering positive attitudes about working with students with disabilities in the general education/inclusion classroom. The authors emphasize the importance of "first-hand experiences" (p. 752) that allow pre-service teachers "to bridge the gap between theory and practice" (p. 752). While this study did not specifically address the importance of the parental role, it can be inferred (coupled with what is already known about the importance of the parental role) that pre-service teachers would benefit from personal contact with parents of students with disabilities as they learn how to collaborate in their future classrooms.

Billingsley and Bettini [43], in their review of the literature on special education attrition and retention, note that support from other stakeholders, including parents, is important in the retention of special education teachers; however, there were no studies that specifically looked at what kind of parental support was needed. Although the current research is not looking specifically at this topic, facilitating and promoting good parent-teacher relationships early in a teacher's career can help to foster mutually supportive relationships in the future and work towards keeping special education teachers in the classroom.

It is imperative, then, that general education teachers be able to step up to a primary role, rather than a supportive role, as they are the ones who are with the students with disabilities for most of their school day. They need to be able to identify students who they see are struggling academically and to consider whether they may need additional special education assessments or interventions in order to access the general education curriculum [44]. They need to address behavioral concerns and implement behavior modification techniques in the classroom. Additionally, they need to be familiar with the local, state, and federal guidelines that govern the identification and instruction of students with disabilities—all competencies identified as essential for special educators only. There needs to be a "more coordinated and collaborative effort" [42] (p. 47) in how teacher preparation programs prepare general education teachers for working with students with disabilities in their classrooms. In other words, the addition of specific instruction in how to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the general education/inclusive classroom, and by default, their parents, must be deliberately and robustly included in the pre-service teacher education classroom. While field experiences may be the gold standard for how pre-service teachers get experience, it is not always practical or possible for student teachers to interact deeply with parents in this setting. This research looks at one undergraduate program in general education teacher preparation that brought parents of children with disabilities to their classroom for discussion.

The purpose of this research is to consider the influence of parent interaction on the perspectives of pre-service teachers with regard to their interaction and instruction of students with disabilities.

The research questions that guided this research were:

- What do pre-service teachers learn from parents regarding disability issues in the family and school?

- How will pre-service teachers use their pre-service interactions with parents to influence their future teaching practices?

7. Materials and Methods

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this research over a quantitative methodology because the information needed to fully understand the views of pre-service teachers could not be adequately obtained through surveys and numerical data. Polkinghorne [45] discusses the importance of the use of linguistic data when working in the field of human science. He describes human science as being in the “human realm” (p. 259) and notes that “the special characteristics of this realm inform the researcher which of the various approaches to gathering data, which data type, and which data analysis are appropriate” (p. 259). He goes on to say that access to the human realm can be obtained through human expressions. The principal form of expression is “linguistic” (p. 264) or the spoken or written word. The written word, in the form of student reflections, was chosen as the data set.

The author teaches an undergraduate, upper-division introduction to a special education course two to three times per academic year with a two-year average of 18 students per class. Threaded throughout the course is the importance (and legal obligation) of parent–teacher interactions as well as the general experiences of parents when they have a child with a disability in a traditional classroom setting and how the disability impacts the family unit. There is specific discussion about the legal and practical role of parents in the US special education system, barriers to parent participation, and experiences parents might have (including academic, medical, social, and familial situations) when living with a child with a disability.

Towards the end of the semester (11 weeks into a 14-week semester), 3–4 parents of children with disabilities are invited to one class session to share their experiences in an informal panel-type event. The parents briefly share information about their families and their child(ren) with a disability. Then, the floor is opened for students to ask questions. The parents were told they could opt not to answer any question or share information with which they were uncomfortable; however, the parents were very open and honest and answered all of the questions posed to them.

There were five parents who participated over the four semesters of data collection. They spoke in groups of three or four (not all of the parents were available for every session). The parents came from a variety of backgrounds regarding experiences. Some of them were still raising their child with a disability while others had grown children. The disabilities their children were living with were also varied, including autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and ADHD (Table 1).

Table 1. Parents and their children with disabilities.

Parent	Gender	Gender and Age of Child(ren)	Child(ren)’s Disabilities
1	Female	Female, 14 y	Intellectual disability, language delays
2	Male	Male, 28 y	Autism spectrum disorder, ADHD
		Male, 15 y	
3	Male	Male, 17 y	Down syndrome, ADHD
		Male, 18 y	
4	Female	Female 12 y	Intellectual disability
		Male, 18 y	Emotional disturbance, autism
5	Female	Female, 13 y	spectrum disorder, learning disabilities

After the parent panel was completed, the students were assigned a reflection paper about the experience. The assignment was generally open-ended, but the students were specifically asked to address the following:

- An important thing they learned from the parent panel;
- Something that was surprising or confirming;

- How they will incorporate this new knowledge into their future teaching practice (or future career/parenting).

In April 2017, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought for this study. The IRB reviewed the application and advised that the research was approved and met the “criteria to be exempt from further IRB review” and that the research could proceed “without continuing review even if the project lasts more than one year”. The reflection papers were collected from four semesters (six course sections), from a total of 106 undergraduates at a small, public, liberal arts college in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Of the 106 students who submitted reflection papers, 18 (17%) identified as male and 88 (83%) identified as female. Only one was married, and none had children. The participants included 91 (86%) white students, seven (6%) Black students, five (5%) Latinx students, and three (3%) Asian students. All the students, most between the ages of 19 and 22 years (only one was 30 years old), were completing a minor in education and were planning to complete a graduate degree in teaching or in a related field working with students (school psychology, school counseling, speech pathology, occupational therapy, etc.) (Table 2).

Table 2. Students participating in the study.

Semester	Female	Male	White	Black	Latinx	Asian
Total students N = 106	88 (83%)	18 (16.9%)	91 (85.8%)	7 (6.6%)	5 (4.7%)	3 (2.8%)
1. N = 19	16 (84.2%)	3 (15.7%)	18 (94.7%)	0	0	1 (5.2%)
2. N = 29	24 (82.7%)	5 (17.2%)	24 (82.7%)	2 (6.9%)	2 (6.9%)	2 (6.9%)
3. N = 19	16 (84.2%)	3 (15.7%)	15 (78.9%)	2 (10.5%)	2 (10.5%)	0
4. N = 39	32 (82%)	7 (17.9%)	34 (87.1%)	3 (7.6%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)

The data were uploaded into Dedoose [46]—a secure, online platform for analyzing qualitative data—and coded. In answering the research questions (1) “What do pre-service teachers learn from parents regarding disability issues in the family and school?” and (2) “How will pre-service teachers use their pre-service interactions with parents to influence their future teaching practices?”, several codes emerged from the data (Table 3). The quotes selected to illustrate the codes are representative of the overall comments made by the pre-service teachers in their written reflections. All the names are pseudonyms.

Table 3. Research questions and data codes.

Research Questions	Data Codes
What do pre-service teachers learn from parents regarding disability issues in the family and school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents do not necessarily want their child with a disability to be “fixed”. • Kids with disabilities are still kids. • My words and actions can significantly impact parents, both positively and negatively. • Inclusivity (not necessarily inclusion) is important to parents. • Parents may be carrying a lot of “baggage”. • There are varying definitions of success.
How will pre-service teachers use their pre-service interactions with parents to influence their future teaching practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental input is important and valuable; listen and believe parents. • Schools often work from a deficit mentality. • Communication with parents is important. • Be patient with yourself, your students, and their parents. • Teachers need to educate themselves about disabilities and interventions.

8. Findings

8.1. RQ 1: What Do Pre-Service Teachers Learn from Parents Regarding Disability Issues in the Family and School?

Almost all of the pre-service teachers reported that they would use the information they learned from the discussion not only when they have their own classrooms but also when/if they become parents. Listening to the parents gave the pre-service teachers a perspective they had not previously considered. Allison said *“I have often thought about how will I engage with my students and now I am thinking more about how will I engage with parents”*. Others talked about *“deepening my understanding of what a parent is going through”* and that it was *“helpful to get an idea of what parents feel during the IEP process because the process is supposed to be a joint effort between parents and teachers”*.

Listening to the parents also helped some pre-service teachers to consider their future interactions with their own students. Kimberly said

Overall, this parent panel was one of the most helpful things I have had the opportunity to be a part of while going to school to become a teacher. One of my biggest fears in becoming a teacher is failing at helping my students, but these parents were able to help me realize that a lot of what being a good teacher means is caring for students despite their differences.

For others, listening to the parents strengthened their sense of advocacy and the desire to be an effective and caring educator. Johanna, a fine arts major, stated *“I decided I will make the most concerted effort to be aware of any possible warning signs and situations regarding a child and their disability, even as a teacher of an elective class.”*. Iris said she felt better prepared *“not only to be a teacher, but to be an effective, parent, advocate, or support system for a child who receives special education services”*.

Overall, the pre-service teachers found that interactions with parents of students with disabilities helped them to begin to have a better understanding of the real-life experiences of living with disabilities in the home and their impact on the school experience. The following themes emerged from the data.

8.1.1. Parents Do Not Necessarily Want Their Child with a Disability to Be “Fixed”

In education, and particularly in special education, teachers work towards mastery, improvement, and remediation. That is a teacher’s job. However, while the parents, of course, want their children with disabilities to learn, to be happy, and to be successful, they do not necessarily want the disability to be fixed or eliminated, as the disability is very much part of what makes their child who they are. This understanding was often surprising for these pre-service teachers, but by listening to these parents, who love their children without reservation, they were able to visualize these children as not broken or damaged but as *“someone’s child who is loved”*.

Many of the pre-service teachers initially had the view that having a child with a disability was something undesirable or something to be pitied. Eric even stated *“I had preconceived notions that raising a child with a disability was sad and less rewarding.”*. Theresa said

Something that was both surprising and confirming to hear was when every one of the parents said that they would not get rid of their child’s disability if they could. We had talked about this in class previously, but it was still amazing to actually hear the parents say it.

Their comments after listening to the parents showed that they realized that while all the parents described events that were hard and challenging, *“there was never a hint that they looked at their child as a burden”* and *“none of the parents who talked with us saw it as a burden, but a blessing. There are rough days, surely, but they loved their children for all that they were.”*.

The pre-service teachers came away with a different perspective regarding the experience of being the parent of someone with a disability. Megan wrote

I think one of the most beautiful truths that became apparent is that, as much as parents raise and grow their children, children affect and teach their parents. I came away with the understanding that you never know what you can handle and what you can overcome until it comes time to cross the bridge.

Shifting their perspective away from the idea that these children need to be pitied and fixed to one where they realize the children are loved and celebrated by their families will help these pre-service teachers avoid a deficit mentality when thinking about and working with their students with disabilities. Jennifer said

I think I will need to remember how much these parents loved their children, and how wonderful their lives seemed to be. I think that by keeping that in mind, and by helping my children be engaged in their lives regardless of their disability status, I can ensure that they will have pleasant lives.

8.1.2. Kids with Disabilities Are Still Kids

It can be easy to forget in the day-to-day world of IEPs, timelines, interventions, and classroom and behavior management that students with disabilities are still students and children and experience many of the same things their counterparts without disabilities do. The pre-service teachers often had a presumption that students with disabilities were always vastly different from those without. Chris remarked *“It can be easy when discussing a disability to focus solely on the disability, but it’s important to remember the ordinary child inside.”*

Hearing the parents talk about their children as “regular” children, with many of the same trials and tribulations as other children, helped the pre-service teachers to recognize the inherent value of these human beings, just as their parents do. Emma noted

In treating children like they have value, teachers must genuinely believe in their students’ ability to grow and provide proper instruction and support for all of their students. Far too often our society looks at people with disabilities as if they are incapable of many things and have less value than people who do not have disabilities. This is problematic because people with disabilities are still people, they just may need some extra support in some areas.

Recognizing and acknowledging that a child’s disability is only part of who they are as a student, a son or daughter, or a sibling will help these aspiring teachers remember when they are in their own classrooms that students with disabilities are valuable members of the family, school, and community and should be treated as such. Joel said

To my pleasant surprise, through the panel, I learned less of the challenging lives of these students, but more of their capacity to be kind, social, and positive contributors to not only the classroom, but the community as well.

8.1.3. My Words and Actions Can Significantly Impact Parents, Both Positively and Negatively

The pre-service teachers learned how powerful their words and actions can be when interacting with parents of students with disabilities. Care and consideration of how teachers share information with parents, and the language, tone, and attitude they use can be critical in building positive and productive relationships with parents.

I have thought about the impact that teachers have on their students, but I have never put much thought into the impact that a teacher can have on a student’s parents. These parents made it clear that it is a big deal when a general education teacher works with them and knows how to interact with them appropriately and effectively. (Max)

Another thing I will definitely take into consideration after this panel is the impact that you have as a teacher on the parents of a student with a disability. I have realized over the course of the class that there are always things to consider when teaching students with disabilities, but I think I have never really considered the effect you have on the parents. (Charlene)

I never considered just how painful it was for a parent . . . I knew that children with disabilities are bound to be different, but the reactions and how the parents conveyed the information showed me just how much it impacted them too. The fact that the parents also emphasized the language that was used in the IEP process suggests just how sensitive and difficult process it really is. (Elizabeth)

These quotes are representative of comments from the majority of the pre-service teachers. While most of these college students would likely have responded in the affirmative if they had been asked generally if they thought their words and actions impacted parents, hearing directly from the parents just how they had been both positively and negatively impacted by their children's teachers was powerful for them.

8.1.4. Inclusivity (Not Necessarily Inclusion) Is Important to Parents

The parents who participated in the panels had children in a variety of settings, from full inclusion in a general education classroom to self-contained classrooms for intellectual/developmental disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders. All of the parents were pleased with the level of inclusion experienced by their children as outlined in their IEPs.

Although some parents did not necessarily want their children in an inclusion classroom, all of them wanted their children to experience inclusivity. That is, they wanted them to participate in family, school, and community events, to be recognized as equal members of society, and to enjoy their experiences. Sara commented

All of these stories they shared helped me realize how important having a strong community must be for these families. Having social experiences, such as Special Olympics, or being in programs at school with other students with disabilities seems to have been instrumental for both the children and the parents, both socially and emotionally.

The pre-service teachers were able to hear this directly from the parents and to begin to think about how they can be instrumental in facilitating both inclusion (as appropriate) and inclusivity for their future students with disabilities.

When I become a teacher, I'll make sure to include every student as much as possible in my lessons and activities. I really would like to emphasize to my students that every person is a person no matter who they are or what they do. (Hope)

Several also noted that when students with disabilities are included throughout society, it can help people become "more aware and [then] there is less stigma surrounding disability. Talking openly with children and modeling appropriate and accepting behavior is important in the education of children."

Gabrielle wrote "Hearing about their positive social experiences had restored some hope in me with knowing that children are being taught to be respectful and accepting of people who may have differences."

8.1.5. Parents May Be Carrying a Lot of "Baggage"

The pre-service teachers learned that parents of children with disabilities experience a variety of struggles and emotions that may carry over to their relationships with the schools and their children's teachers. Several pre-service teachers wrote that they were unaware of the wide range of emotions experienced by parents. Marianne wrote "One of the things that I found surprising was the different ways in which the parents responded to finding out that their child had a disability." The pre-service teachers described a multitude of feelings they heard reflected in the conversations with the parents including "stressful", "fear, confusion, anxiety", "frustrating", "challenging", "guilt", and perhaps surprising for some, "relief".

The pre-service teachers were given a perspective that none of them had, as none of them were parents of children with disabilities (and only two of them were parents).

The parent panel definitely opened my eyes to my own thought process and caused me to think deeper about disabilities, and the fact that sometimes it does not matter how supportive a parent or a teacher or a school is, the child might just struggle. (Luke)

Listening to the parents helped them understand the role teachers play in this experience.

Victoria wrote “Parents have to make tough decisions to help their children become as successful as they can. Teachers must recognize this pressure placed on parents and work with them to make good decisions for their children.”. Shane commented

It also helped me understand that these parents not only have to worry about normal parenting problems, they have to worry about problems related to the disability and to how others receive their child. This made me realize how hard it is to raise a child with a disability.

However, schools are communities, and the teachers and parents are part of those communities. As Kate noted, “the good news is one does not have to do it alone.”. Teachers can provide the support and encouragement that many of these parents so desperately need.

8.1.6. There Are Varying Definitions of Success

Teachers and parents both want their students/children to be successful, and academic progress and mastery (usually grade-level) is often the benchmark that measures that success. Listening to the parents helped these pre-service teachers see that while academic success is indeed important, what that success looks like can vary in outcome, direction, and pace. Latoya said “I now understand even more that every child is capable of being successful, they may just have to take a different path to reach this success.”.

Pre-service teachers also recognized that comparing the success of students with disabilities to those without was, at best, not helpful and, at worst, harmful. They learned that it can be easy to fall into the trap of making those comparisons. As Samantha so eloquently wrote,

I thought the message that the child is making progress, no matter how slow, towards more successfully managing their disability and living in a way that is fulfilling to them to be fundamentally important. I imagine it would be easy to slip into a deficit model and start to view a child with excruciatingly slow progress as fixed and hopeless. As a future educator, especially one likely to be in a general education classroom with all the more opportunities for discouraging comparisons, it is crucial to return to the idea of a complete, uniquely-perfect child, who is capable of growth and worthy of the effort involved to foster that progress.

Additionally, they saw that parents do not view academic success as the only measurement of success and it is important for teachers to recognize that and realize that they play a role in facilitating and celebrating those successes, however they may look, acknowledging that “teaching is about unlocking the ultimate potential from each student rather than having students all work toward unlocking one universal, academic potential.” (Matthew).

8.2. How Will Pre-Service Teachers Use Their Pre-Service Interactions with Parents to Influence Their Future Teaching Practices?

In addition to gaining an improved understanding of the parent experience, these pre-service teachers were able to consider how what they learned from the parent panel could positively influence themselves as teachers. The following codes emerged from the data.

8.2.1. Parental Input Is Important and Valuable; Listen and Believe Parents

While it is the teachers who have been trained in pedagogy, classroom and behavior management, content, and interventions, the parents are an important source of information about their child, which is why they are legally required members of the IEP team. Harrison wrote “Adults in medical,

education, and other positions of power in their child's life do not know them or their disability the way only they, as parents, do."

In the time-crunch of daily work and meetings, however, it can be easy to forget the importance of parental involvement or give parents only a token opportunity to participate. This omission is a mistake, however, which the pre-service teachers were able to understand after listening to the parents share their experiences of working with their child's teachers. They recognized that, while they may be the experts in education, the parents are the experts on their child.

I will definitely incorporate the notion that parents of children with special needs become subject matter experts in their own right, and that they will likely have more knowledge and information than I will about the disability itself, and, of course about, how the disability manifests in their child. (Frank)

The pre-service teachers also recognized that they will need to change the mindset of teacher as expert and consider how they will take the parents' expertise into account and how they will incorporate that expertise into meeting the needs of the student.

While listening to their urges for us to listen and believe parents, I tried to think about the school's perspective and what values or modes of thought I would have to change. While it seems obvious now to listen to a parent when they tell you about what a child is like at home, I could see it easily being pushed aside in the mind of a teacher who has a perspective on the kid they may feel like the parent is not believing. (Amy)

Teachers need to understand that they don't know more about a child than their own parents do. Teachers need to listen to the parents, and try not to have more expertise than the parent. When I'm a teacher, I want to be conscious of this, and make sure that I listen and don't talk over the parents. (Jake)

8.2.2. Schools Often Work from a Deficit Mentality

The very nature of the IEP process takes a deficit mentality. Schools identify a child who is underperforming in some way, assess to find out the areas where they are lacking, and design a program intended to "fix" them or bring them up to grade level. Teachers are constantly comparing these children to the grade level standards, to their same-age peers, and to their and society's expectations. Teachers must see that these children are individuals and comparing them to others without disabilities can be hurtful for parents to hear and be detrimental to the students who may always be below grade level or lag behind their peers academically, socially, or emotionally. One thing these pre-service teachers recognized was that they could address this deficit mentality by "*reframe[ing] their language*" away from what the student cannot do to what they can do. Rose described what she learned:

I learned about how important language can be when describing a child's disability or disabilities. More than one parent explained how although evaluation is objective and results must be communicated accurately, it is very discouraging to hear about their child exclusively in language of deficiency, rather than emphasizing their strengths or how to achieve their academic goals.

It is easy to forget to look at the positives when we are focusing on remediating the deficits. While a child may always struggle in some areas, it is important for parents to hear that teachers recognize and value any progress or success their child achieves. Janie noted "*We have discussed in class the importance of focusing on the things a child with disability can do and this was a common theme during the parent panel.*".

8.2.3. Communication with Parents Is Important

Effective communication between parents and teachers is important regardless of disability status. After listening to the parents, the pre-service teachers, however, realized that they will likely have increased communication with the parents of their students with disabilities (and may need "*to make*

an extra effort to communicate with those parents”) as compared to those without, and they recognized the need for that frequent communication. They also recognized the importance of sharing positive, encouraging things, not just areas of concern. Doing so can help to foster a necessary, constructive, collaborative relationship between parents and teachers. Javier recalled “As a class, we have also talked about how taking the time to call home for good reasons, not just negative reasons can positively impact the parent- teacher relationship.”, and Sophia wrote

A large takeaway for the future I got from hearing the panel is just how imperative it is to be in communication with the parents about the child. The parent-teacher relationship in every case should, ideally, be positive and productive but I think this is even more important in the cases of children with disabilities.

The pre-service teachers also recognized that regular communication with parents might actually make their jobs easier, as noted by Philip, who wrote “If I were to have that open line of communication with the parents I might see the behaviors sooner or understand them when they arose.”. Rebecca nicely summed up the value of regular parent–teacher communication:

Hearing how crucial the community and external interactions are to the raising of the kids made me realize more acutely how important it is to integrate home and school. Copious hours of time are, after all, spent by the children at both locations and both environments help the child develop in different ways; teachers and parents should work together as cohesively as possible to ensure that children are receiving the most effective care and education.

8.2.4. Be Patient with Yourself, Your Students, and Their Parents

Many of the pre-service teachers recognized the importance of patience when working with students with disabilities and their parents, not just in dealing with challenging behaviors but also when looking for student progress. Lillian noted “The common theme . . . was the idea of patience and that to truly be a good educator or parent to a child with a disability, you must have the patience and the resolve to work with students at their own pace.”.

They noted that the IEP process itself is often lengthy and time-consuming, and once that is completed, the process to address the child’s needs begins, which can also be lengthy and often challenging and frustrating. Anna said

The most useful piece of information I acquired from the parents is to be patient with progress . . . After hearing from these parents, I have learned that it is very difficult to find solutions immediately, and that progress is not overnight. I will be sure to keep this lesson in mind in my future classrooms.

Patrick said

I will also be sure to adopt the characteristic of patience. I believe that this is a crucial quality for all teachers to develop before being placed in a classroom. All students, especially those with disabilities, deserve patience and time.

Patience does not always come easily, especially with novice teachers, but these pre-service teachers recognized the need to cultivate patience as they think about their future careers.

8.2.5. Teachers Need to Educate Themselves about Disabilities and Interventions

Most of these pre-service teachers were planning to become general education teachers. The parent panel helped them to see that, even though they would not carry the title of special education teacher, they would still need to educate themselves about disabilities in general (and even beyond the scope of this current course). As Maria noted, doing so will help her as she “work[s] towards becoming an informed teacher”, and as Robert wrote,

Another important thing that I learned from the parent panel is that in order to be the best teacher I can for a child with a disability, I need to understand their disability first. If I am able to understand the disability the child is dealing with, I am better equipped to help that student in the classroom with their needs.

Beyond educating themselves about disabilities, the pre-service teachers recognized that disabilities manifest differently in each child so they must also be prepared to learn about the specific disabilities of the students in their future classrooms and how those children are impacted. Justin said *“Something that I already knew going into this, but really did learn more so after hearing the parents speak is just how different every disability is for each child.”*

Teachers must also read their students’ IEPs, something the parents recalled that not all of their children’s teachers did. Ella said *“Hopefully in the future, I can look back on this experience and remember the important aspects that the parents emphasized, such as the necessity of really educating oneself on the student’s disability and fully reading their IEP.”*

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

Parent participation in the IEP process is required by US federal law and in several other countries but it is not always easy to do. Parents may be reluctant to participate if they think the school and teachers do not appreciate or value their input. Teachers may be wary of encouraging parent involvement because they are uncomfortable interacting with parents, they may fear the parents might want something the school is unable or unwilling to provide, or they just feel unprepared to work directly with parents, given that the majority of their pre-service training focuses on working with the student. Teachers, especially general education teachers, may feel poorly prepared to work with children with disabilities, and this may have an additional impact on how they interact with their students’ parents.

The results of this research and the literature reviewed, however, show that those concerns can be mitigated through adequate pre-service teacher education on working with students with disabilities and their parents, positive and deliberate interactions with parents during that pre-service training, and school systems that foster strong parent–school collaboration. The pre-service teachers in this study noted repeatedly that having direct contact with parents and hearing about their experiences made them feel more comfortable with the idea of future parent interactions.

9.1. Educate Pre-Service General Education Teachers More about Working with Children with Disabilities in an Inclusive Setting

While this recommendation did not emerge from the data analysis of the current study as the pre-service teachers were already being educated on disabilities due to the enrollment in the course, it was clear from the literature that this is still a significant issue for the educational systems around the world. Pre-service teachers in the Netherlands expressed concerns about having children with disabilities in their general education classrooms. The authors suggested this may be due to the relative newness of inclusive education. They note that “teacher training education is crucial to help prospective teachers alter negative beliefs about inclusive education” (p. 116) and “should provide pre-service teachers with practical strategies and skills to address the learning needs of pupils with [special education needs]” [11]. A South African study [14] noted that the increasing diversity of students is identified internationally as a significant challenge for educational systems and that disability education needs to look beyond the traditional deficit model of disability and consider the whole child, which encompasses the school, community, and family. Before the parent perspective can be thoroughly considered, general education teachers must be comfortable first with the idea of having students with disabilities in their classrooms and feel like they have the education and resources needed to meet their needs.

9.2. Include the Parent Experience in Teacher Education Programs

Strong parent–school partnerships are clearly identified in the literature as an important component of a student’s education, especially for those students with disabilities. Theeb et al. [32] looked at pre-service teachers’ perspectives on the importance of the US’s Council for Exceptional Children’s competencies for practice for beginning special education teachers. One of those competencies is *communication with families*. The teachers surveyed identified this competency as one of high importance (p. 139) but said that they practiced that competence to only a medium degree. This indicates that more training and support are needed to bring their practice in line with their beliefs. The authors note “an urgent need” (p. 141) for pre-service teacher education programs to address their curricula to enable their pre-service teachers to improve their level of practice.

While not mentioning many details about the nuances of the types of training encountered or needed, Obradović et al. [7] note that the sample university curricula in their research (in Greece and Serbia) are part of the “broad field of special education” (p. 34) and there is a need for more “practical training” (p. 34). This can include the parent experiences and specific guidance and practical training with and about parents and their specific concerns. Additionally, parents want to be included! A 2019 study [47] looked at the parent role in school-based teams for students with autism. The parents reported wanting to be “considered experts on their children and valuable partners that contribute toward shared goals and successful outcomes” (p. 461) and also noted that their child’s school team “did not understand their [the parents] needs” (p. 461), which can lead to negative interactions with the school. Parents also reported a desire for “bi-directional relationships” (p. 462) and deeper, reciprocal relationships with the schools rather than “surface level” (p. 465) involvement.

The pre-service teacher reflections on their experience talking to parents of students with disabilities was universally positive. They realized that the parents want to be authentically included and they want the schools to listen to them, and although discussions of parent experiences are included in the class work of this particular course, hearing the parent experiences directly from the parent brought the issues to life in a way that class lectures, discussions, and readings cannot do. There are several ways in which the real-life parent experience can be brought into pre-service teacher-education preparation:

- A discussion panel similar to the one described in this paper [34].
- Having parents embedded in courses as described by Murray, Handyside, Straka, and Arton-Titus [36].
- Creating an assignment where pre-service teachers interview or have a conversation with a parent of a child with a disability about their experiences [16].
- Working with professional development schools to allow pre-service teachers to sit in on and observe an IEP meeting and/or parent–teacher conferences [16].
- Creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with parents in community-based settings (camps, etc.) away from the constrictions of the school and classroom [31].

9.3. Require Program and Course Outcomes in Parent Collaboration and Communication for All Teachers, General Education and Special Education, in Their Teacher-Education Programs

The findings of this research support the need for good parent–teacher communication and collaboration not only for special education teachers but also for general education teachers who are working with students with disabilities as well as within professional relationships (special education teachers and general education teachers, teachers and administration, etc.).

Sewell [24] reports that many teachers find the idea of family partnerships a “daunting and unmanageable task” (p. 262) but also found that “even one course” (p. 262) can have a positive influence on how pre-service and in-service teachers view family partnerships. She cautions, however, that one course is not enough and the concept of school–family partnerships should be included throughout course content, even suggesting that parents be invited to speak to classes about their experiences.

This is easier said than done, however. Some of the coordinators of the teacher education programs reviewed in the research noted that although they appreciated the importance of the topic, they were not as willing to add courses to their curricula. Mutton et al. [33], however, notes concerns about limited space in the current curricula to add specific course work on addressing the needs of parents. Lehmann [48] surveyed the coordinators of teacher education programs who believed that parent involvement was important and do provide pre-service teacher education on the topic, but it is not generally considered to be a core competence for teachers, and the teacher education program coordinators were reluctant to add any additional content to the curricula regarding parent–school collaboration.

This need for communication and collaboration is not a novel idea in the US, as both the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) [49] and The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) [50] standards expect teachers to be able to communicate effectively with parents.

InTASC [49] standard 10(d) states “The teacher works collaboratively with learners and their families to establish mutual expectations and ongoing communication to support learner development and achievement”, and 10(m) says “The teacher understands that alignment of family, school, and community spheres of influence enhances student learning and that discontinuity in these spheres of influence interferes with learning.”. The CEC [50] standard 7 for initial preparation states that novice teachers should “collaborate with families, other educators, related service providers, individuals with exceptionalities, and personnel from community agencies in culturally responsive ways to address the needs of individuals with exceptionalities across a range of learning experiences.”.

Both of these US professional organizations recognize the importance of this skill set for teachers, yet not all teacher education programs, general or special education, require a course or training in communication and collaboration. An informal poll on a social media platform for special education teachers, many of whom are dual-certified as general education teachers, revealed that while many certified special education teachers did have a course on communication and collaboration in their teacher-education programs, most did not, and no one reported such a class in their general education program. Many of them commented that they wished they had had such a course in their teacher-preparation programs and that it should be a required course for all teachers, not just special education teachers.

Recommended topics for a course on communication and collaboration include listening and speaking skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving, improving family engagement, and the effects of disability on parents and siblings.

While the conclusions and recommendations above are focused on teacher preparation programs and what they can do to improve the attitudes, skills, and competencies of their future graduates, including better general education preparation for working with students with disabilities, authentically and deliberately including the parent perspective, and including program and course learning outcomes on parental participation and collaboration in the teacher education classroom will ultimately enhance and increase the presence of these things in the “real-world” classroom. As novice teachers graduate and begin to teach, they will (hopefully) bring with them a strong commitment to increasing, fostering, and supporting parent–school partnerships. The students who reflected on their experience in listening to the parents who visited their classroom indicated that they plan to do exactly that.

10. Limitations

The very nature of qualitative research is such that the data set is small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the data set came from one teacher-preparation program with a non-random sample of convenience. A significant limitation to this study is the lack of data on the students’ views of the parental role prior to taking the course. Although the students’ responses, overall, indicated that their views changed over time, or at least that they began to think about parental

issues in a way they had not previously considered, not having their pre-course views did not allow for the comparison of growth over time.

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