

Parent – School Communication in the Inclusive Classroom: A Comprehensive Model of Collaboration in Education

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Abstract

Parent–teacher communication is essential if a collaborative relationship is to be established. The outcome is the enhancement of the whole child, not only educationally but also socially and emotionally. Who is responsible for initiating and maintaining this relationship? What elements does each side contribute? How will this assist the classroom, as well as the home? What are some of the potential barriers to the communication process? How to create a collaborative relationship between parents, and school personnel? This article will examine these questions and other ways in which this relationship can be an efficacious one and serve to benefit the student, the family, the school, as well as the classroom in general.

Keywords: cooperative; cooperative; education; parental involvement; strategic plan

Introduction

There are many factors that contribute in educating the whole child. One of the most important factors includes having a symbiotic relationship between the parent and the school. In fact, research has shown that when parents and teachers have this type of relationship, the student succeeded both academically and socially (Dixon, 1992; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jeynes, 2005, Jeynes, 2007). Furthermore, Henderson and Berla (1994) conducted an analysis of eighty-five studies on the advantages of parental involvement in their child's education. They assert that, "the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status but the extent to which that student's family is able to create a home environment that encourages learning; express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children's achievement and future careers; and, become involved in their children's education at school and in the community" (Henderson & Berla, 1994, p. 160). The researchers (Henderson & Berla, 1994) have extensively documented the effectiveness of parental involvement in education and argue that there are benefits for students as well. They include: "higher grades and test scores; better attendance and more homework done; fewer placements in special education; more positive attitudes and behavior; higher graduation rates; and greater enrollment in postsecondary education." (Henderson & Berla, 1994, p. 1).

Additionally, the researchers (Henderson & Berla, 1994) argue that when families are involved, the school also benefits. They report that there is an increase in teacher morale, an increase in support from the families, higher evaluations of teachers by parents, increase in student success, and finally improved reputations in the community. Moreover, their findings revealed that parental benefits also occur when families are involved in their child's education. "Parents develop more confidence in the school. The teachers they work with have higher opinions of them as parents and higher expectations of their children, too. As a result, parents develop more confidence not only about helping their children learn at home, but about themselves as parents. Furthermore, when parents become involved in their children's education, they often enroll in continuing education to advance their own schooling." (Henderson & Berla, 1994, p. 1) Best practice informs us that in order to maximize the learning experience for all children, open, collaborative relationships must be established between all school personnel and stakeholders. It is not enough to communicate with parents about logistical matters. In order to be effective, the communicative relationship between school and home needs to move from a logistical relationship (one which involves minimum parent/ school communication that usually focuses on basic day to day needs such as lunch money, homework, school supplies, etc.), to a collaborative relationship.

Therefore the quality (or type of) of communication needs to evolve from a cooperative type into a collaborative one where both parties can form a shared partnership. This article will examine the definition of a collaborative relationship between the school and the home and describe the steps used to implement this approach in schools.

Cooperative versus Collaborative Communication

One of the most important components in education is the establishment of effective parent-school communication. In order to establish a collaborative relationship, one must move from logistical to cooperative before attaining a collaborative one. The definition for *cooperative* communication in this article is based on the following definition of cooperative learning by Panitz (1996). Panitz is a professor who has published books, book chapters, journal articles, on cooperative education. He has presented at conferences and has consulted to several school systems and colleges nationwide. According to Panitz (1996), cooperative learning is defined as:

A set of processes which help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific. It is more directive than a collaborative system of governance and closely controlled by the teacher. While there are many mechanisms for group analysis and introspection the fundamental approach is teacher centered whereas collaborative learning is more student centered. (para. 4)

In this manuscript, cooperative communication involves school personnel such as teachers, parents, service providers, etc. working in their areas independently to achieve a certain goal. There may be some form of communication between the different parties involved, but they may not be working as a team together utilizing each other's strengths to help the student maximize his/her learning potential.

The definition for *collaborative* communication in this article is based on the following definition of cooperative learning by Panitz (1996). Collaborative learning is defined as:

A personal philosophy, not just a classroom technique. In all situations where people come together in groups, it suggests a way of dealing with people which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the group's actions. The underlying premise of collaborative learning is based upon consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other group members. CL practitioners apply this philosophy in the classroom, at committee meetings, with community groups, within their families and generally as a way of living with and dealing with other people. (para. 3)

Collaborative communication is defined in this manuscript as school personnel/team members, including teachers, parents, service providers, etc. working together to achieve a shared vision. While working towards this shared vision, team members participate in shared decision making, recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses, and make a valuable contribution based on their area of expertise to maximize learning for the student. Collaboration implies a willingness on the part of the team members to change the way services are delivered by jointly developing and agreeing to a set of common goals and directions; sharing responsibility for obtaining those goals; and working together to achieve those goals, using the expertise of each collaborator (Bruner 1991).

The Parent-School Relationship

It has been documented that a strong school-home relationship leads to overall success for students, particularly for students with disabilities (Kochhar-Bryant, 2008). "IDEA 2004 and No Child Left Behind 2001 require schools to transform the traditional notions of parent involvement from signing report cards, reading newsletters, and chaperoning holiday parties, to include activities such as participating in school decision-making processes, providing input to teachers about how to assist their child, and forming meaningful partnerships with the school community" (Kochhar-Bryant, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to form a collaborative working relationship with parents. Communication is essential in any collaborative relationship. There must be a steady two-way stream of relevant information flowing in order to make this collaborative relationship a meaningful one. Establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship is an ongoing process. It begins in the early stages of the development of the parent-school relationship and continues throughout the life of the relationship. Initially, parents and school personnel may not be ready for a collaborative relationship. Instead, they may work together cooperatively to help develop a shared vision without making any tangible changes in the way they communicate or in the quality of the communication.

However, the aim should be for parents and school personnel to establish collaborative relationships. A 13 item multiple choice questionnaire survey was conducted to assess teacher and service provider's (Speech Therapists, Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Music Therapists, Art Therapists, Psychologist, and Social Worker) perceptions of the type of relationships that have been established between the school and families of the students they service. The survey included general and special educators as well as service providers who work with students with and without students with disabilities in a suburban public school located in Westchester County, New York. Questions included *how often communication occurs between the parents and the school, are the parents involved in decision-making regarding their child's educational plan, who is the primary person responsible for establishing a school-home relationship, etc.* The questionnaire did not provide the definitions for cooperative and collaborative communication.

The results of the survey indicated that only 20% felt that there was a collaborative relationship between the school and the parents. The findings also indicated that 55% perceived their relationship as a cooperative relationship. Furthermore, 25% could not define their relationship as neither collaborative nor cooperative. While more extensive research in this area is needed, these results may implicate that schools need to be more proactive in establishing collaborative relationships with the parents of the students they service. One way to do this might be to establish a formal plan that provides guidelines for increasing communication leading to effective collaboration such as a collaborative strategic plan.

Who is responsible for initiating and maintaining this relationship?

According to Imel and Sandoval (1990), a number of factors contribute to collaborative linkages. School personnel/team members should facilitate regular contact through purposeful meetings in addition to frequent communication through telephone calls and e-mail. The focus should be solely on the student as opposed to organizational matters. An individual from the school personnel or team member such as the teacher should take a leadership role in helping to develop a shared vision for the child. The outcome of this shared vision should be a plan that delineates shared goals and objectives. A strategic collaborative plan is the key factor in facilitating communication and a collaborative relationship. While it might be the teacher's role to initiate this relationship, parents must be responsive and assume an active role maintaining the collaborative relationship. For example, parents should follow through on objectives to achieve the shared vision, and be accountable for their role in the process. They should also give feedback from home regarding the strategic plan and its effectiveness. This enables consistency between the home and school environment.

What elements does each of the sides contribute?

Parents can be an invaluable partner in helping to define and meet educational, as well as social and emotional goals. However, unless these cooperative relationships become increasingly collaborative in nature, no changes will occur in the service delivery system (Melville & Blank, 1991). These partnerships involve sharing of the student's areas of strength and need. The school personnel get to know a student within the context of a family while parents can help facilitate goals and objectives with the student both inside and outside of the classroom. Many people are involved in creating the plan for a student. Once the plan is created, it is the teacher and parent who are the key players in the process and are closest to the action, it is the teacher and parent who will have the most influence on the student's ability to fail, meet, or exceed expectations.

How will this assist the classroom, as well as the home?

A shared vision that has been established with a collaborative strategic plan may lead to improved student performance and increased student outcomes. Through increased performance, students may experience success academically, socially, and emotionally. In turn, students may have higher self-esteem and feelings of self-worth and be less likely to drop out or cut school. When students experience success, they may be less likely to demonstrate behavioral issues such as acting-out, fighting, or demonstrate aggressive behaviors.

What are some of the potential barriers to the collaborative process?

Literature suggests that there are potential barriers to the collaborative process. Some of these barriers may include: language barriers, cultural barriers, lack of economic resources (such as no phones, no computer, transportation issues, etc.), lack of knowledge, feelings of incompetence, lack of time, lack of energy, or a long history of negative experiences with the school (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Additionally, time management for teachers and parents can be an issue since there are often conflicts with work schedules. It is important for teachers and schools to understand a lack of participation from parents does not necessarily reflect negligence on the part of the families (Wanat, p. 47).

Schools and teachers need to be aware that a lack of parental participation may be the result of differences in the family structure, feelings of inferiority, a negative attitude or a lack of interest in education. For example, “single parents often do not have the time, money, or knowledge to help children with projects” (Wanat, 1992, p. 46). Sometimes parents feel that they do not have anything valuable to contribute to the school. This is especially true when the parent may not have a great deal of education (Dixon, 1992; Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). As a result, the parent(s) may feel uncomfortable or self-conscious about communicating with the teacher or school personnel. Furthermore, parents sometimes do not have an interest in or value education (Vandergrift & Greene). In order to eliminate these barriers, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of these potential issues and make the necessary provisions to accommodate the families involved. For example, have translators available; consider phone conferences or Internet conferences; provide transportation if possible; hold meetings in the evening or early morning, etc. If the school personnel is cognizant of these potential barriers, they can try to limit the possibility of these causing a lack of communication between school and home.

How do you create a collaborative relationship between parents and school personnel?

In addition to addressing potential barriers to parental involvement, open communication between parents and teachers is key to establishing a collaborative relationship. Two-way informal exchanges between the school personnel and parents are much more effective than one-way communication from the school personnel (Wanat, 1992). Parents need to be involved in establishing a shared vision for their child and be involved in the development of goals and objectives towards achieving the shared vision. Parents and school personnel must both have a role in implementing the collaborative strategic plan and be accountable for their roles. The final section of this manuscript will present steps for creating a collaborative relationship.

STEPS FOR CREATING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP

In order to support a collaborative relationship, all school personnel, including but not limited to teachers, parents, social workers, psychologists, related service providers, guidance counselors, etc. should be included in developing a shared vision for the student.

Step 1- Defining Roles and Rules

Define Roles and Responsibilities

- All members of the collaborative team need to be included in establishing the shared vision. The role and responsibilities of each member should be clearly defined. While every member’s role and responsibilities to the group will primarily be related to their area of expertise, it may be helpful to develop secondary roles for the meetings, such as timekeeper, note taker, etc.
- Each member must actively participate in all planned meetings and be held accountable for their roles.
- Power should be shared by every member of the collaborative team. Avoid power struggles by recognizing everyone’s expertise in their area. Since “conflict is inevitable in any group process with high stakes, collaboration is challenging” (Kellog, 2010). Conflict resolution, consensus-building skills, and trust are essential for success. Trust will enable the collaborators to openly express their concerns and address issues.
- Determine Meeting Rules
 - a. Meetings should begin with a prescribed agenda that permits enough time to address each issue.
 - b. Deadlines should be adhered to and each collaborator should be held accountable for completing their task.
 - c. Be consistent with beginning and ending meeting at the scheduled time.
 - d. Have a plan in place if one or more collaborators are unable to attend the scheduled meeting.

Step 2- Establishing a Shared Vision

A shared vision consists of identifying goals and establishing future outcomes for the student. All team members/school personnel need to give his or her input and feedback as to what he or she value as important. It is important that all collaborators consider the student’s strengths and weakness as well as the student’s interests when developing the shared vision plan. If possible, the student should be included in defining his/her own personal vision. For example, a collaborative team might identify the following as a shared vision for Johnny, a fourteen year old with a learning disability, who enjoys working with cars. Johnny will graduate from a vocational program and become a mechanic. The team will then develop a collaborative strategic plan that will identify short and long term objectives to help him achieve his vision of becoming a mechanic. The collaborative team members may have included the parent, teacher, student, service providers, etc. All agreed upon this vision after they considered what would be optimal for Johnny based on his interests and abilities.

Step 3- Developing a Collaborative Strategic Plan

Once a vision has been defined, it is necessary to identify short and long-term goals and objectives to help the student reach the vision. The goals need to be observable, measurable, and specific, with achieving the shared vision in mind. Strategic planning usually focuses on long-term goals that may be achieved in as little as one year and as long as five to ten years. The collaborative team needs to establish time frames and reach consensus about the established time line. Collaborators should use strategic planning to enhance accountability as well as to assess and re-evaluate the plan.

Some questions that should be considered by the collaborative team when establishing the strategic plan for a shared vision include the following:

- a. How will collaborators assess the effectiveness of the strategic plan?
- b. How will the collaborators make necessary adjustments?
- c. How often will objectives be assessed?
- d. Will achievements be celebrated? How?
- e. How will the collaborators put the collaborative strategic plan into action?

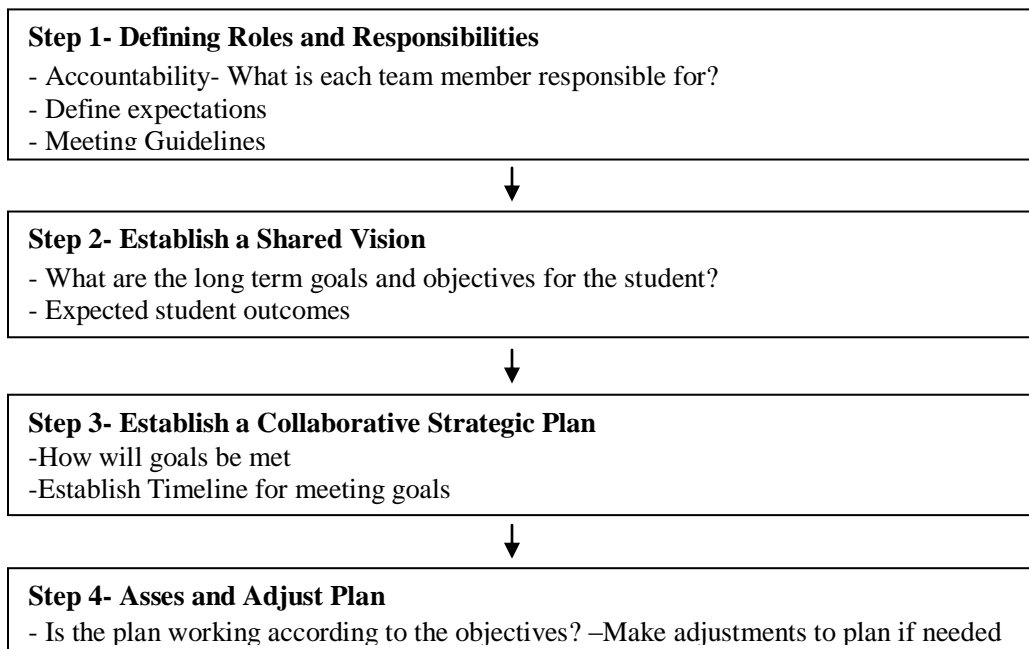
Once the plan has been developed, it is important that all collaborative team members are continuously involved in re-assessing the plan and making the necessary adjustments to improve its effectiveness.

Summary

Evidence suggests that active parental involvement in the school is a critical factor in a child’s educational success at all grade levels (Dixon, 1992; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Kochhar-Bryant, 2008). Good parent-school links also have positive effects on parents and teachers (Eccles & Harold, 1993). By collaborating with the team, the team members will experience increased success rates, which in turn will benefit the student. “Parental involvement, in almost any form, produces measurable gains in student achievement” (Dixon, 1992, p. 16). Through collaborative team meetings and the collaborative strategic plan, team members may be more motivated to succeed because they will be accountable to each other. Collaborators may also be more motivated because they experience a feeling of camaraderie.

Attending to these factors will ensure that the work of the parent-school team is more collaborative than cooperative in nature. It is important to note that not all parent-school relationships will become collaborative due to a variety of barriers. However, it is of utmost importance that all parties involved strive to achieve a collaborative relationship. Figure 1 demonstrates the three steps of the collaborative process. Lastly, more research is needed to investigate whether or not the implementation of a collaborative strategic plan leads to an increase in the effectiveness of the collaborative relationship between school and home.

Figure 1. Steps for Creating a Collaborative Relationship between School and Home



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