

The School-Family Partnership Training Program

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Abstract

The School Family Partnership Training Program was an innovative program created and implemented out of a desire to assist schools and families to connect with one another. The program was implemented over a six-week period with one and one-half hour combined sessions for families of a local urban elementary school. The goal of the program was to increase the level of involvement of families of children with disabilities, as well as assist them in building effective home-school partnerships. It was a program that helped children with exceptional needs achieve higher levels of school success through the involvement of their families in the school. Data resulting from this program showed that the program significantly impacted the participants. Through participation in the program, families redefined their roles in the education of their children and explored multiple possibilities for family involvement.

Keywords: parent education, family involvement, children with disabilities, urban schools, home-school partnerships

1. Introduction

Successful partnerships between urban schools and parents are essential to the overall achievement of students (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Reynolds & Clements, 2005; Shellard & Protheroe, 2006). As ethnically/racially diverse (ERD) parents of children with disabilities face additional challenges, these partnerships become critical. Despite economic, racial, and cultural differences, effective home-school partnerships have a positive impact on students' success. However, school personnel and ERD families experience a sense of uncertainty regarding how to efficiently build and sustain home-school partnerships.

The School-Family Partnership Training (SFPT) was a program focused on families. The goal of the program was to increase the level of involvement of families of children with disabilities in the school, as well as assist them in building effective home-school partnerships. The SFPT program was funded through the Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute (TJEEI) at the University of Central Florida. Each year TJEEI offers special initiative grant awards to faculty and doctoral students in the College of Education. SFPT was an innovative program created and implemented out of a desire to assist schools and families to connect with one another.

2. Participants

2.1 School Demographics

The elementary school was an urban school where ethnically/racially diverse (ERD) students constituted the majority of the student population. Additionally, the school served a large majority of disadvantaged and at-risk students. The school served approximately 432 students in grades Pre-K to 5, 99 percent of whom are ethnically diverse. Of the total student population, there was a total Exceptional Student Education (ESE) student population of 75 students. The elementary school had an active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and School Advisory Council (SAC). The PTA board consisted of 10 members, 3 Caucasian and 7 African American. With at least 100 members, the PTA sponsored activities such as school fundraisers, Spring Fling, Just Say No T-shirts for 3rd graders, and supplied food for staff on Parent Conference Nights, Welcome Back Breakfast, Teach In, Field Day, Foster Grandparents and Volunteer Celebration, Teacher Appreciation and Parent Workshops. Generally, the attendance at PTA meetings ranges from 50-75 members.

The School Advisory Committee (SAC) consisted of twenty-three members. Of this membership, there were two administrators, seven teachers, seven parents, one classified staff, and six business/community representatives. This board was seventy-eight percent African American and twenty-two percent Caucasian. Generally, the attendance at SAC meetings ranged from 18-20 members.

Regarding classroom teachers, there were twenty-five general education classroom teachers, three full-time ESE teachers, and one Speech/Language pathologist which visit twice a week. The disabilities of the students in attendance included Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Varying Exceptionalities (VE), Gifted, Speech, and Language. The school was identified and selected using the following criteria: 1) low parental involvement, 2) an existing ESE program, and 3) a high level of commitment to the research project. According to the ESE personnel and school administrators, parental involvement was minimal. These families rarely attended school functions such as Parent Teacher conferences and Back to School night. Very few of these parents responded to communication attempts made in the student's daily agenda, phone calls home, or written communication sent through the mail. Furthermore, there was little participation in IEP meetings, parent organizations, or other volunteer opportunities. With this background, the ESE faculty and administrators strongly supported the researcher's attempt to strengthen home-school partnerships at this school. Research was conducted at this site for two additional reasons. First, the researcher was formerly employed by this school, thus providing some familiarity with the school personnel and administrators. The rapport, previously established between the researcher and school personnel further supported the study. Second, the ERD population of the school and its families was consistent with the participants sought to participate in this study.

2.2 Parent Demographics

"A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a certain concept or the phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p.51). This qualitative method brings to the front the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives. Because phenomenological research seeks to highlight the experiences of individuals with a particular phenomenon, it generates a large quantity of interview notes, tape recording, and other documents to be analyzed. Sample size recommendations for phenomenological studies consists of 8- 10 participants (Creswell, 1998). In this study, thirteen ERD parents attended the initial orientation meeting and a total of nine ERD parents completed the program. All of the participants lived in the urban community, which the elementary school served. The ages of the participants ranged from a twenty-two year old single mother to a seventy-three year old grandfather. Of the nine participants, one married couple participated together in the study. Table 1 provides additional information about the parents who participated in the study.

3. Program Features

3.1 Session Structure and Content

The SFPT program was implemented over a six-week period with one and one-half hour sessions for families of children who attended the local urban elementary school. During each SFPT session, the researcher used various strategies (lecture, PowerPoint, classroom demonstration, group discussions) to present information concerning family involvement and building home-school partnerships. In addition to the presentation of information, the researcher engaged the participants in numerous activities and interactive discussions to stimulate the learning process. Each session will be one and a half hours. The time allotment for each session was as follows:

- Meal, review, and questions (Warm up) =15 minutes
- Presentation, discussion, group work (Instructional Time) = 60 minutes
- Review, preview and questions (Wrap up) =15 minutes

A major component of this program was mealtime. All participants, including the children and the facilitator sat together for dinner each week. This allowed interaction among the families, school personnel, and the facilitator. A bond of unity was fostered. After 15-20 minutes of mealtime, the group transitioned into the next activity. Because the sessions were held in the cafeteria of the school, individuals were able to finish their meals, if necessary, as the session continued. The second contributing component of the program was the provision of childcare. Participating families were allowed to bring their children with them to the SFPT program. After mealtime, the children were escorted to another area of the school for educational and recreational activities.

Next, the SFPT program had a learning component. Here, the facilitator shared knowledge and information, taught new skills, answered participant questions, and facilitated group activities. During the initial session, the participants discussed their concerns about teachers and the school in a focus group. These comments were recorded and used to build the content and weekly discussions of the program. Sessions included the following topics: 1) Overview of Family Involvement; 2) School Systems and Operations; 3) Effective Communication; 4) Rights of Children with Disabilities and their Families; 5) Learning Activities at Home; and 6) Leadership Development. Table 2 presents more details about the topics covered in each session.

Additionally, there was an application component. ERD families had opportunities to use new knowledge and skills gained from the session. Each week activities, role-plays, learning centers, and simulations were developed and implemented to assist participants in applying the knowledge and skills learned in the sessions. And finally, there was a reflective component. At the end of each SFPT session, participants completed a session evaluation describing what was learned, what was missing, and what other knowledge and skills were needed. This analysis of this data will be discussed in a later section.

3.2 Program Costs

The SFPT program was funded through the Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute at the University of Central Florida. The researcher was awarded \$6400 to implement this program. Initially, the researcher used the funds to purchase program supplies and participant materials. Next, compensation was provided to the paraprofessionals that facilitated the educational and recreational activities for the children during each session. Additionally, a stipend was given to the program assistant who accompanied the researcher to all sessions and assisted with the delivery of the session content and materials. Finally, monetary compensation was mailed to participants for their time and participation in the study. The participants received a stipend of fifty dollars for participation in the SFPT program and an additional twenty-five dollars for the interview. Mealtime during the program did not incur a cost because local businesses and organizations were solicited to sponsor all meals.

4. Procedures

This phenomenological study implemented a three-phase plan. The initial phase was the recruitment of participants, conducting schools' needs assessment, and distributing parent surveys. Two local urban schools where ERD students constituted the majority of the student population were recruited using the following criteria: 1) low parental involvement, 2) an existing Exceptional Student Education program, and 3) a high level of commitment to the research project. A letter was sent to each schools soliciting their participation in the study and outlining the purpose and nature of the study. Work sessions were scheduled with the participating schools to conduct a needs assessment. Each school completed the Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnerships developed by Dr. Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships and National Network of Partnership Schools as a measure of the needs assessment. Recruitment letters were sent to all ERD parents of children with disabilities at the participating schools to solicit their participation in the study. Parents who indicated a desire to participate in the project were invited to a focus group at the school to discuss parental involvement issues. Because of the limited number of parents who attended the meeting, the survey was then sent to parents through the mail, as well as sent home with students.

Next, there was the implementation of the SFPT program. Due to the lack of response from families at one of the participating schools, their participation was discontinued. Only one school participated in the second phase. The program was designed to enhance home-school partnerships by providing interactive sessions to participants on topics and issues surrounding urban school systems and the families they serve. The curriculum was designed specifically to address the concerns of the participants. Based on feedback from participants in the initial focus group, session topics were created for implementation. At the end of each session, participants reflected on the experience, describing what was learned and the utility of the program. One month following the completion of the SFPT program, parents participated in structured interviews with the program facilitator. The qualitative data gathered from the initial session, session evaluations and interviews were coded for analysis. In the final phase, qualitative data was analyzed to describe the experience of the SFPT program for nine ERD parents. Document collection corroborates your observations and interviews and thus makes your findings more trustworthy. Beyond corroboration, they may raise questions about your hunches and thereby shape new directions for observations and interviews" (Glesne, 1999, p. 58).

Documents collected during this study consisted of the initial focus group session notes, subsequent weekly evaluations, and transcribed interviews. At the onset of the program, participants participated in a focus group session. In this session, participants discussed their concerns about teachers and the school. These comments were analyzed to determine session topics for the program. A second source of document collection was the weekly session evaluations, completed by all participants at the end of each session. During this evaluation, participants reflected on the session experience, describing what was learned and the utility of the program. As the researcher reviewed the evaluations after each session, a better understanding of phenomenon and its impact on ERD families of children with disabilities developed. Qualitative data originated from interviews, as well. In phenomenological studies, the interview is the primary method of data collection, utilizing open-ended statements and questions to elicit responses addressing the research questions. When attempting to interview to search for opinions, perceptions, and attitudes, the researcher employs a form of topical interviewing (Glesne, 1999). An interview schedule, designed by the researcher, was used to facilitate the implementation of the interview, as well as to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions. Conversely, variability existed in the posing of additional questions to clarify a point or comment made by the participant. The questions posed during the interviews were developed in the midst of two activities: a review of items used on the weekly session evaluations and facilitator session observations.

The data was divided into three files: 1) Initial Concerns data; 2) Weekly Evaluation data; and 3) Transcribed Interviews data. Each file was reviewed carefully to conduct the procedure of horizontalizing the data. Horizontalizing data is the procedure whereby the researcher identifies the significant statements or horizons from all the statements listed. Next, the horizons are grouped into meaning units. Meaning units are the conceptual headings for each group of horizontalized statements. Then, the meaning units are categorized into themes. From these themes, textural descriptions of the experience are developed. Textural descriptions depict the experience of each individual participant. From textural descriptions, structural descriptions and the essence of the phenomenon are produced (Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions focus on how the phenomenon was experienced by all participants, including the researcher.

To ensure the validity of the findings in the phenomenological study, data was triangulated by using multiple methods of data collection such as interviews, weekly evaluations, and a focus group. Additionally, diverse participants were used in this study. Although participants came from the same urban community, there was diverse representation in terms of age, gender, marital status, and relationship to the child. In an effort to establish credibility, the researcher utilized thick, rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Thick, rich description of how the participants experienced the program allows readers to determine if the findings are generalizable to other settings or similar contexts. Moreover, quotes from interviews and other forms of document collection are used to support and connect the surfacing themes. Finally, a measure used to ensure validity was researcher reflexivity. This validity procedure requires researchers to describe their assumptions, beliefs, and biases early in the research process. Furthermore, researcher reflexivity allows the reader to get into the mind of the researcher and understand their position (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, a statement was recorded, fully exploring the personal experience of the researcher. Below is an excerpt of the researcher reflexivity statement:

Initially, I was excited about the opportunity to share my knowledge with families from ERD backgrounds. I felt that I was qualified to teach them all that I knew about parental involvement and working with schools. I envisioned an auditorium full of families, eager for me to unload volumes of knowledge and information on them. However, as I began to plan for this partnership training, I realized that what I thought they needed or wanted might not be what they expected from this training. I became anxious about the content I would present to these families, as well as my delivery of the content... I did not want the training to be content heavy but to have a blend of content, activities, and interactive discussions. It was important that the families felt comfortable with the presentation and utilized the opportunities to interact throughout the sessions. I was concerned that if I used PowerPoint slides that it would be too formal and they would view the training sessions as lectures and not be willing to participate in the session. Additionally, I was troubled over how many activities to use in each session.

...With my background knowledge of families and understanding of the importance of time, I was unsure if this training would consume too much of their time...Ultimately, I knew I could present information for one and one half hours, with no problem...Through the SFPT program, I wanted to provide ERD families with information and resources about working with school personnel...Initially, I felt the impact that the SFPT program would make on the families would stem from the information and resources they received. Also, I thought the participants would be impacted by the incentives they received—free childcare, free meals, and stipends. When looking back, however, I now believe the things that made this training successful had little to do with the content I delivered...The interactive discussions and activities are what I think had the greatest impact on the ERD participants. Giving families the opportunity to open up and freely share their experiences and beliefs made the training program a place where families, and their opinions, were valued and welcomed. I believe this is what made the SFPT program a successful experience for participants.

5. Outcome Data

5.1 Participant satisfaction data

Over the period of the program, the participants consistently evaluated the content of the sessions as effective in enhancing their understanding of disabilities, explaining the role and function of school personnel, and increasing their awareness of parental rights. The following statements reflect the effectiveness of the session content over the six weeks, according to the participants.

It help me to understand better what my son needs are and to take out as much time as I need to help him...To help me with my child's schoolwork. (Evaluation, Week One)

A clearer understanding about our children and others...Knowing who's who in the school and how to find them. (Evaluation, Week Three)

I learned more about my rights and solidified my knowledge of other things that I already was familiar with. (Evaluation, Week Four)

...the learning new and empowering things about the schools and our rights. The information I received was priceless. (Evaluation, Week Six)

Additionally, the participants were satisfied with the structure and format of the sessions. One participant liked the session design "because it was a lot of communication. It wasn't all about her talking". Another parent stated that they enjoyed "the way the class was taught." (Evaluation, Week One). The activities used in the sessions were positively commented on as well. A participant wrote, "I enjoyed the role playing" and another wrote, "the activities used to learn to help with teaching your child at home are good" (Evaluation, Week Two). Other indications of participant satisfaction came in the areas of strategies (review of session, communication, explanation of ideas, environment) employed by the researcher. Some comments included:

She listen to the parents and our problems with our children. (Evaluation, Week One)

The setting was very comfortable and my participation was strongly encouraged. (Evaluation, Week One)

The introduction held in front of the class was a success (Evaluation, Week Two).

I like the open atmosphere along with the relaxed way that the information is presented. (Evaluation, Week Two)

I liked the way the subject was explained (Evaluation, Week Four).

The review of things covered in previous weeks, the information presented, and the open and relaxed atmosphere... (Evaluation, Week Six)

Consistently over the six-week program, the participants indicated time as the only factor least liked during the session. Many participants believed the sessions were not long enough and more time was needed to engage in learning activities.

In the Week One evaluation of the SFPT program, one participant stated, “It was over too soon because I was really enjoying the opportunity.” Throughout the program, the researcher consistently saw these types of comments related to the length of the session.

5.2 Program impact data

The program had a significant impact on the participants and their children, as well as the local school. After conducting interviews and through researcher observations, data emerged suggesting the program impacted all of the participants in the areas of empowerment and opinion. The participants were empowered to express themselves freely to one another and school personnel. They understood their opinions were valued and did matter when it came to their children and the school that served them.

...You gave us like questions and we got to sit in groups. And you know, we all gave our opinions. And basically, a voice to speak and how we would handle that situation. (Participant 7057, Interview, 1/29/04)

...we were allowed to express our opinions about things. That would probably be the greatest impact. (Participant 0403, Interview, 2/22/04)

I just thought the school rules meant that was it, point blank. But now I got the...now I know that I can come in and talk to the principal or anybody about the way I feel about things. My opinion do matter. (Participant 4848, Interview, 1/28/04)

It seem like I had an impact on her. ‘Cause you know I’ll say, ‘Hey, you can’t do that. You can’t stick your head in a hole when it comes to the children because you live with those children...You face up to it and try to do something about it’. (Participant 8706, Interview, 1/28/04)

Additionally, the program impacted the participants in their understanding about the various levels of family involvement. Based on interview comments from each of the participants, there was an evident increase in the communication with school personnel and a better relationship among parents and teachers.

It enriches the communication that I have with them. Knowing how important it is after talking with you. Well, the way I always approach them respectfully, they all know me very well. But it let me know that it is not just something, it is very important. I’ll continue with that even as he goes along, as long as I live... (Participant 0023, Interview, 1/28/04)

...Cause now, I used to when I went to talk to the teacher I had to be careful. But now I know how to go, because of the training, I know how to go and talk to the teacher and give them a chance and listen before I jump to them in a conclusion. (Participant 8706, Interview, 1/28/04)

The communication between me and Ms. A., it has grown a lot because before it was just me coming in. Now, it’s me, my cousin, my brother, they’ll pop up on Ana quick so she know. And Ms A., she calls me for anything basically...we just basically a partnership with Ms. A. (Participant 7057, Interview, 1/29/04)

All participants indicated an impact in the activities used to foster learning at home.

I get rid of that (dining room table homework) and convert one bedroom into a study room and have his books organized there where he can do his homework. And I can see the improvement...And, how to approach them. Don’t get mad, don’t push. Change if something is not focusing at this moment, we switch to something else. (Participant, 0023, Interview, 1/28/04)

Before the training, I used to show her like, go over her homework, show her like two problems how to do it and just let her sit at the table and just do it...But now I sit down and I basically work with her through every problem until she gets done with the whole activity or homework. (Participant 7057, Interview, 1/29/04)

We play UNO. We play Monopoly and stuff like that...But what I've been having her do is like watch a thirty minute show, a cartoon or whatever. 'I want you to tell me the beginning, what happened in the beginning, what happened in the middle, and what happened in the end. And tell me all the characters names or whoever it was in the show'. (Participant 3496, Interview, 2/04/04)

Little impact was made in the areas of decision making and community involvement activities. Participants reported time and available opportunities as hindrances in this area.

6. Discussion

Based on the feedback of the participants, the program proved to be successful. All of the participants were empowered as a result of the SFPT program. They received many opportunities to voice their opinions. They were encouraged to express themselves regarding the school and family life issues that were important to them. The participants no longer looked to the researcher for validation. They validated themselves and each other. Through the SFPT program, the isolation that many of the participants indicated they often felt was eliminated. With this new sense of empowerment, the participants created a network that fostered support and camaraderie among them.

Additionally, the SFPT program increased the level of family involvement of the participants. The participants gained a meaningful definition of family involvement. Furthermore, they were able to identify and understand the various levels of family involvement. Communication among families and school personnel flourished and maintained the following semester and into the following year. Several of the teachers commented on the increased interactions and communication with the parents. Participants implemented new and creative ideas at home to support learning for their children with disabilities. The experience of the School-Family Partnership Training program left the participants changed mentally and emotionally.

Continuing the SFPT program is important to understanding the themes that emerged in the data. Further research from this program could be used to develop and implement strategies to increase family involvement of children with disabilities, especially those in urban settings. Information gained would be beneficial to urban schools as they consistently struggle with low levels of family involvement. The theme of time could be explored in an effort to establish what families deem valuable enough, in reference to children with disabilities, to give their time to participate in family involvement practices. Replications of this program could provide additional insight and information regarding diverse family systems, family structures, and interactions while dealing with the presence of a child with a disability. The SFPT program could be modified to further study the various levels of family involvement and how they impact the family system, including student achievement. Furthermore, the program could be modified to include the varying perspectives of school personnel. This modification would add to the limited literature of best practices for schools in fostering positive home-school partnerships in urban settings. It would also have direct implications for teacher preparation of special and general educators in colleges and universities.

7. Recommendations

From the data gathered and analyzed in this study, a few recommendations emerged for the field of education. In school systems, especially those in urban areas, school administrators must address the compounding and ever changing challenges of families. An initial step to addressing these challenges is to hear the voices of parents. It is important schools listen to the concerns and challenges of the families and act upon them. Otherwise, families will not take an active role in the school. Families need to feel empowered to take ownership of their schools and invest in building them to capacity. Thus, when the challenges and concerns of urban families are addressed in the school setting, some of the daily pressures of raising children with disabilities are lifted and families become more available to participate in activities other than meeting their basic needs for survival.

Next, school systems must move from the traditional perspectives of what and how families should be involved in the education of their children with disabilities. Barriers that are cited often in the research (Christenson, Godber, & Anderson, 2005; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Shellard & Protheroe, 2006; Staples & Diliberto, 2010) must be overcome. One recommendation is to create spaces for families within the school environment. This will demonstrate to families they are welcome and create a sense of acceptance.

Overlooking cultural and linguistic differences is a barrier that must be eliminated. A common recommendation is to provide families with information in their native language. Additionally, school personnel may get acquainted with the families and their cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, to demonstrate acceptance of different cultures, incorporate cultural activities into school events and throughout classrooms. Schools should also implement appropriate family involvement practices. Family involvement practices include a wide range of activities such as family academic nights, family social events, parent support groups, students' support groups, and parent-teacher activities (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). These activities increase the likelihood families will become active participants in the educational process. Provide school personnel with information and professional development training on cultural competence. And finally, think outside of the traditional perspectives, and create appropriate ways of communicating with families to better serve the needs of students with disabilities in urban settings.

8. References

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Tables

Table 2.1. Parent Demographics

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Child's Age	Child's Disability
3496	25	Female	8	Educable Mentally Handicap
9931	25	Male	7	Developmental Delay
0023	73	Male	9	Specific Learning Disability
8706	54	Female	10	Specific Learning Disability
4692 (husband)	33	Female	8	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity
0403 (wife)	32	Male	8	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity
5041	42	Female	4	Developmental Delay
4848	41	Female	6	Communication Disorder/Attention
7057	22	Female	7	Developmental Delay/Communication Disorder

Table 2. School Family Partnership Training Modules

Session Number/Title		Session Topics
1	<i>Overview of Family Involvement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why family involvement is important • Goals and types of family involvement • Federal/state requirements for family involvement
2	<i>School systems</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Function of school • School policies • Understanding how school operate
3	<i>Effective Communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Components of effective communication • Ways to communicate with administration and teachers to support your child
4	<i>Rights of Children with Disabilities and their families</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal implications • Advocating for student rights • Inclusion in the decision making process
5	<i>Learning at Home</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of help do you need from schools to assist you in helping your child • How to help your child with homework
6	<i>Leadership</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective leadership skills • Building an action plan • Open forum and review of sessions