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A new script for working with parents

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A new script for working with parents

Abstract

The article discusses the relationship that school administrators and teachers have with parents of students with disabilities, in response to the portrayal of these relationships in the films "The Miracle Worker" starring Anne Bancroft, "Mask" starring Cher, and "Forrest Gump" starring Sally Field. The authors look at individualized education plans (IEPs), MetLife's 2005 Survey of the American Teacher that indicates teachers' attitudes toward working with parents, a teacher training program for teacher-parent cooperation developed by St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, and the nonprofit disability advocacy organization called The Advocacy Center.

Disciplines

Education | Special Education and Teaching

Comments

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Rewriting the Script:

Helping Teacher Candidates Collaborate with Parents of Students with Disabilities

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In the scripts of many celebrated Hollywood films portraying the struggles and triumphs of students with disabilities, a common and rather tired sub-plot often emerges: the conflict between educators (or other professionals) and the families they are attempting to serve. Here are just a few examples:

- In *The Miracle Worker* (1962), Anne Bancroft as teacher Annie Sullivan must remove Helen Keller from her family to “keep her to what she’s learned.” At one point, Annie plays tug-of-war literally with Helen’s mother with Helen as the rope.
- In her opening scenes in *Mask* (1985), where she plays the big-haired motorcycle mother and in-your-face advocate for her terminally ill and facially disfigured son, Cher aggressively takes on both the clueless educational and medical establishments in the first twenty minutes of the movie.
- Sally Field, as the equally miracle-working Mrs. Gump, exchanges sexual favors with a school administrator in order to get Forrest an inclusive placement in *Forrest Gump* (1994).

In many films about people with disabilities, the parent-professional relationship is used as a plot device to not only lengthen the plot, but also create dramatic tension, often separating out the heroes and the villains for the audience. Sometimes, the professional is the hero; more often, in more recent films, the hero is the parent.

Why is this common sub-plot in these movies? Is it a case of art imitating life? More importantly, do the movies exaggerate parent-professional tension or have they exploited an all-too-prevalent failure of collaboration between these two important roles in the lives of students with disabilities?

Unfortunately, these scripts appear to have some basis in reality. According to a Metropolitan Life/Education Week Survey from 2005, new teachers often consider parents to be their biggest challenge. Visions of “helicopter parents” mixed with the all too familiar dialogue in the teachers’ lounge reinforce a negative stereotype of parents for new teachers. Negative comments in parent support groups can often mirror those made in teachers’ lounges, each side making the case against the other. Special education processes built to create parent-professional collaboration, like co-writing an individualized education plan (IEP), too often dissolve into an adversarial relationship based on misunderstanding and distrust. Dramatic tension indeed! Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot (2005) wrote: “Everyone says that parent-teacher conferences should be pleasant, civilized, a kind of dialogue where parents and teachers build alliances. But what most teachers feel, and certainly what most parents feel, is anxiety, panic and vulnerability.”

Rewriting the Script

In an effort to calm the trepidation teacher candidates may feel and provide them with skills for working with families, professors at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York have forged a unique

partnership with a not-for-profit, disability-advocacy organization, The Advocacy Center, to develop a pre-service course on parent-teacher collaboration.

The partnership began in 2005 when The Advocacy Center was ready to launch a training program to create a speakers' bureau of parents of students with disabilities. The program was designed to help parents present their family's story in a positive, professional, and proactive manner in a hope to promote understanding in potential audiences of educators, medical personnel, other parents, and the general public. Diversity of family type, ethnicity, child's disability, and other factors was sought. The Advocacy Center invited one of the professors from the School of Education at St. John Fisher College to comment on the public speaking curriculum and give feedback. This professor happened to be teaching a course on teacher collaboration in inclusive settings, which included a unit on working with parents.

Up to this point, the professor generally utilized "paper parents", or written case studies about parent-teacher issues presented in a problem-based learning format, to demonstrate how teachers can work with parents to promote positive outcomes for students. The case studies, although open-ended, were relatively static, predictable, and safe. The Advocacy Center's speakers' bureau provided a new way to think about teaching this material. Collaboration commenced between the professor and The Advocacy Center's public education coordinator, and a new way to teach and learn about parent-teacher collaboration was born.

The New Plot Thickens

A semester-long collaboration project between St. John Fisher College's teacher candidates and parents trained through The Advocacy Center's public speaking program began in the next two sections of the professor's class. Working with the Center's public education coordinator, the professor oriented

the recruited parents to the outline, purpose, and demands of the course and project. Parents received a small stipend for participating in the course.

Class sizes typically ranged between 20 and 25 students, and the class was positioned in the semester prior to student teaching. The professor broke up the classes into teams of five and each team was matched with one of The Advocacy Center families. Still using a problem-based learning design, the professor guided each team through the following steps:

Week 1: After reviewing the components of the project through the syllabus and having the students sign a consent form, the professor handed out, to each team, a current IEP provided by their respective collaborating parent. As in common practice, the teacher candidates received the IEP *before* meeting the child or family. The students discussed and wrote on their initial reactions to the IEP. (Interestingly, the IEPs are often daunting to the teacher candidates. One parent referred to the documents as “really bad resumes for kids.” Often, when the candidates meet the children behind the IEPs, they are relieved to see how one-dimensional the IEPs are and that students are more than the sum of their list of limitations.)

Week 2: The teacher candidates then wrote a letter of introduction to the parents, much as a teacher would when introducing him- or herself at the beginning of the school year. (Interestingly, in this era of texting, some teacher candidates struggled with the formal letter writing required with this assignment.) Letters could be delivered by “snail” mail or electronically or both.

Week 3-4: In the letter, the teams initiated a face-to-face interview with the parent, providing possible dates and times when all team members could meet, and a phone number for a contact person. Parents then called the contact person and arranged for the interview. Sometimes, the parent preferred inviting the team to their home; others preferred meeting on campus or somewhere in the

community (e.g., a coffee shop). Some parents preferred to meet with the team alone the first time; others introduced the team to their family right away.

Teacher candidates were given a set of questions that collected data on family make-up, functions, subsystems, and transitions, but with the understanding that the parent controlled the flow of the interview and that the experience should be a conversation, not an inquisition.

During the interview, the team was to ask the parent about an issue that the child, parent, or family is facing and that could be researched by the team. Sometimes, the parent knew of such an issue in the interview; for others, they had to think about it and get back to the team. In these cases, a deadline was set so that the team could have a research topic in the next week or so.

Week 5-6: In each class, the 4-5 parents assigned to the teams presented their stories to the entire class, demonstrating what they had learned in The Advocacy Center training. Through these presentations, teacher candidates get to see firsthand that not all parents necessarily think or parent alike, that not all disabilities have the same effects on every family, and that teachers and other professionals can be cast in either hero or villain roles in the parent's script, depending on multiple factors, some interpersonal and some systematic. Rich discussion and journaling follow each speaker.

Week 7-11: By this time, research topics, provided by the families, have been agreed upon. The teacher candidate teams then reviewed and synthesized the literature related to their families' areas of interest. They also sought out local, state, and national resources related to each issue. In recent semesters, topics have included: transition to kindergarten, home support for literacy, recreational options, bullying, assistive technology, dating and sexuality, transition to college, and residential options. Each team member was responsible for contributing to the research, seeking out resources, and developing the presentation and resource packet for the parents. The teacher candidates stayed in contact with their assigned parent throughout the research project to keep them abreast and ask

clarifying questions along the way. As evidenced in discussion and journals, most teacher candidates realized how much of a resource a parent could be, especially about their own child, and how they could work together to reach a common goal.

Week 12-13: For the final exam, the parents returned to the class and each team of teacher candidates presented to them and the entire class what they found through their research. It is important to note that many of these parents were already resourceful and experienced with the educational, medical and other community systems related to their child. When orienting these parents to the class, the professor stressed to them that their team may not find anything that the parents didn't already know, that it would be great if they did, but it really wasn't the point of the exercise. The point of the exercise is the collaboration, the mutual problem identification and search for better outcomes for students, and the process of building and maintaining rapport. That being said, many students have surprised their assigned families and the professor with new information about research and resources in a given area. As with many experiential and service learning projects, the relevance of the issue for "real people" (i.e., not paper ones) brings relevance and urgency to the assignment, and simulates "real world" problem-solving and decision making.

A New and Refreshing Dialogue

In the years since the inception of the course, four other professors have taught sections of the course, approximately 20 families have participated, and approximately 250 students have completed it. The course also covers other forms of collaboration: co-teaching, interdisciplinary teams, and supervisory relationships.

Teacher candidates will admit that it is a busy class, but evaluations of the course are routinely enthusiastically positive. One teacher candidate shared: "We are more prepared for parents in the

future and see that there can be collaboration between teachers and parents.” Another wrote that “I gained the perspective that parents can be a resource to us in our teaching environment.”

Parents participating in the class also were enthusiastic in their focus groups following the class. One mother said: “I enjoyed seeing the enthusiasm of each team member as they researched ways to help us along our journey.” Each year, The Advocacy Center prepares new members for their speakers’ bureau, but many veteran parents have requested to return to help with the course. “We made a difference in their understanding of children with disabilities,” explained one veteran parent.

With this course, teacher candidates are learning a new script for communicating with parents of children with disabilities. “We learned understanding and empathy for parents and children. This not only helped us develop as people but as future teachers. We hope to carry this understanding through to our classrooms.” Parents participating in the course agree: “It is nice to know that the teacher candidates know they have a future resource in the parent.”

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