A Principal's Lessons Learned: Implications for School Leadership

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Abstract
Introduction by: Ann Monroe-Baillargeon, Ph.D. Alfred University

Mary Haggerty and Susan Schultz in “A Principal’s Lessons Learned” provide for us professional insights from their interactions with parents of students with special needs. It is a powerful statement to lead off our monograph, Duets and Dialogue: Voices on Inclusive Practices in Our Schools, with a focus on the relationship between school administrators and parents. All too often, our focus on parents comes at the end of a long list of other priorities, curriculum, instructional practices, student needs, etc. It is exciting to see that a focus on parents and the importance of school leadership to listen with the purpose of understanding, developing trust, and engaging parents in the change process help to frame our understanding of inclusive practices right from the beginning, rather than waiting to the end. Thank you to Mary Haggerty, Susan Schultz and the parents who generously shared their insights in getting our Duets and Dialogue monograph off to a great start!

Disciplines
Education

Comments
Chapter in Duets and Dialogue: Voices on Inclusive Practices in Our Schools, edited by Marie Cianca and Cathy Freytag. The full book can be found here: http://www.inclusion-ny.org/duet-dialogue

This book chapter is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_facpub/124
Reading 1: A Principal’s Lessons Learned: Implications for School Leadership

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Mary E. Haggerty and Susan M. Schultz

“Mrs. Haggerty, we have a problem!” These five words can generate concern, stress, and outright fear in even the stoutest heart of the most effective administrator. When shared by the parent of a student in special education, the level of concern, stress, and fear can multiply, sometimes exponentially. When I made the decision to become an administrator, the last thing I was worried about was my ability to work with parents of students with special needs. Yet, after three years as a school principal, I found myself wondering why it was that sometimes interactions with parents of students with special needs went smoothly, and why did they sometimes go terribly awry?

To complete a course requirement, I decided to engage in a study that I hoped would answer my question. Drawing upon many interactions with parents of students with disabilities, I also interviewed three sets of parents (one father and two mothers) of students with significant disabilities, (two boys and one girl) all of whom were in high school. The children of these parents were enrolled in an urban school district, and they responded to an email request sent out to a local parent support group. Parents were interviewed at their convenience and in the location of their choice (two in their home, one in an office setting). Each interview took approximately 45 minutes. I also worked with a focus group of three mothers of four elementary students with mild disabilities (two girls, two boys). These parents represented suburban school district experiences and were recruited from a list provided by the Director of Pupil Personnel of the school district. They were interviewed at a McDonald’s (so their children could play while we talked) for about one hour.

The results of that study did lead me to three important lessons that did not necessarily answer my question, but did lead me to challenge some of my assumptions and change my practice.

The First Lesson: Understanding

*Seek first to understand, then to be understood. (Stephen Covey)*

There is an expectation among professionals that parents will seek to understand the special education process. We teach them acronyms like IEP, show them data we collected about their children, and cite regulations and education law, in order to help parents become effective collaborators. Fish (2008), investigating parent perceptions of the IEP process, indicates “through persistence and becoming knowledgeable on special education law, (the parents in his study) were able to properly assist their children in acquiring the services and IEP implementation necessary for them to succeed” (p.13). Fish concludes that educators should seek parental input and collaboration so we can effectively serve students with special needs. Just as parents can become more active participants when they are knowledgeable about the process, educators can become more effectual participants when they have an understanding of the parents and children they work with.
I had hoped, and even expected, that during the course of collecting and examining the results of the parent interviews, I would come across some pithy quote from a parent that would provide a framework, or summary of what was the essential learning from this undertaking. Although I did come across such a phrase, it did not come from any of the parents. It came from the woman who was transcribing the tapes of the interviews for me. As she returned the last of the tapes she said, “You know, they’re not answering your questions, they’re just telling you stories.”

As I reflected on her statement, I realized that, yes indeed, they had shared many stories about their children. In fact, they were eager to share; it was fascinating to listen to parents who were able to recite the timelines of their children’s educational experiences with such facility and speed that I could scarcely keep up in my field notes. Reflection on these “stories” led me to understand that you have to listen to the story, the story is often complex, but, you have to listen anyway, because it’s the only way parents will perceive you as truly “knowing their children.” This lesson was reinforced when parents of students in my school brought pictures of their children to CSE meetings, wanting those on the committees to “see” their children as something more than just “the next case.”

The dilemma is, how does one keep the professional distance required to provide a valid evaluation of the child’s educational needs without projecting an uncaring, unsympathetic affect? Asking for regular feedback is one way of demonstrating sincere interest while maintaining professional distance. Active listening, where the listener is actively seeking to understand the speaker’s intent and emotional state, appears to be a significant and symbolic activity that facilitates positive relationships with parents. Active listening does not require the listener to agree with the speaker, only to seek to understand him/her and to use that knowledge to present his/her perspective. Each of the parents interviewed referred to the need to have those “in charge” understand their children. Because their children were not in a position to tell their own stories, parents did so for them. Salend and Duhaney (2002) underscore the importance of “paying attention” to what families (parents and caregivers) have to say about their child’s experiences with special education programs/schools. In seeking feedback they suggest that the following will facilitate the process:

- Being attentive
- Establishing a comfortable and supportive atmosphere that fosters the comfort level and participation of family members
- Asking open-ended, meaningful and non-intrusive questions
- Seeking clarification, details, and examples to support statements.

Lesson Two: Developing Trust

I meant what I said and I said what I meant (Horton the Elephant, by Dr. Seuss)

Federal mandates like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) can require parent involvement in the educational process, however they cannot mandate the effectiveness of involvement.
Collaborative relationships between parents and educators are dependent on developing trust (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Given the opportunity for, and nature of interactions, teachers and support personnel have a likelihood of establishing trusting relationships with parents. However, the principal’s relationship may be more complex. The principal, in a position of power and control, must be willing to work with parents as equals.

Understanding role relationships and the innate interrelated dependencies between parties assists the principal to create an environment of trust. The principal, faculty and parents depend on each other. These dependencies create a sense of mutual vulnerability (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Shelden, et al. (2010) report that within this vulnerability exists the “potential for betrayal or harm from another person,” necessitating trusting others. Therefore, the principal must establish and maintain trusting relationships through his or her vision for the school, demonstrating trustfulness in interactions with others, and mediating conflict in honest ways (p.160). Parents of children with disabilities have increased interactions with school principals. As a result, school principals must also examine how the trust factor relates to the special education process, parents and their children.

For the parents I interviewed, trust meant doing what you said you would. The difficulty was making sure that what they thought the administrator said and what the administrator thought s/he said, were sometimes very different. Thus, misunderstandings, lack of clarification and inaccurate assumptions can lead to what are perceived as broken promises. Because we are the “professionals/experts,” we assume that we have it “right.” It is easy to say of a parent, “S/he only hears what s/he wants to hear.” My question is: “Do we know what it is that parents want to hear?”

Knowing what one expects from the IEP and being able to articulate these expectations seems to facilitate trust and enables both parents and educators to develop an effective plan for the student’s success. The parent of a student with Down Syndrome, who attended my school, approached me about the inclusion program for her child. Her child’s teacher, a former special education teacher, was expressing doubts about the child’s ability to “keep up” with the rest of the class. The parent felt that the teacher was rejecting her child, expanding her concern to the entire school, stating that we were not living up to our promise to include her child. The teacher believed that the parent was holding on to unreasonable expectations for her child’s participation in the curriculum.

We set up a meeting with the child’s teacher, aide, parents and me. During the conversation, the teacher clarified her concerns that the child would never be able to participate fully in the curriculum demanded at that grade level. The parent was able to clearly articulate that her goals were not that her child demonstrate mastery of the curriculum, but that he would be able to learn how to write his name, take turns, follow school routines, and learn how to ask and respond to simple questions like, “How are you?” and “Do you need help?” She went on to say that she knew that this was a year-by-year thing. If it worked this year it might not the next and that we would all have to look at whether or not it was still making a positive difference for her child. In turn, the teacher was able to establish reasonable and effective learning goals. At a follow up meeting at the end of the year, the parents were
thrilled that all of these goals were accomplished. This couple did not need to hear “your child is not keeping up.” They knew he would not. They needed to hear “we understand your concerns and we will do our best to address them.” The end result was a trusting relationship that lasted many years and became a model for including parents in the practical matters of their child’s inclusion program.

Olivos (2009) asserts due to inherent inequalities, it is not enough to present the concept of parity and expect parents to feel like a valued partner. Increasing fair levels of parent involvement requires structuring schools in ways that minimize inequality. Including parents of students with disabilities on the Shared Decision Making Team, PTA and SEPTA leadership, and creating informal arenas for conversations are just few ways to increase the likelihood that parents will feel that their input is valued.

Lesson Three: Changing Culture

*Give me a lever long enough and I can move the world. (Archimedes)*

Barth (2001) asserts, “Probably the most important, and most difficult job of the school-based reformer is to change the prevailing culture of a school” (p.7). However, without this commitment to re-culture, we run the risk of allowing what Fine and Weis (2003) refer to as a “reproduction” of the attitudes and practices currently in place. As one of the parents in my study put it, “When I went into this, I realized I couldn’t change my daughter. So I had to change everyone else. It’s daunting at times, but that’s been my challenge.”

Principal leadership is the most significant factor in influencing the overall climate of the school. Beyond words and actions, the culture of the school must reflect relational trust, established through the principal’s vision for the school, his or her faculty and students. Sometimes faculty may need to be “reshaped” by supporting teacher/parent collaboration, increasing face-to-face social interactions, building into the school culture the ability to sustain positive parent engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Re-culturing is not an easy task, neither is establishing an inclusion program; but one may help the other. By developing processes and procedures that enable students with disabilities to participate with the general education population, everyone benefits: students, teachers and parents. Developing common language and understandings leads to less confusion and better decision making for parents, more effective planning and goal setting for teachers, a richer curriculum embedded with more instructional strategies, and a more responsive school environment for students.

In developing a culture that is inclusive, we create a micro-community that reflects the elements we would like to see in our own, larger communities. This idea was driven home by a story from one of the parents in my study, a mother of a high school student with disabilities. At a school dance, it became clear that, although her daughter was enjoying herself immensely, she was not “doing it the right way.” As a chaperone, her mother watched as a group of students approached her daughter and her partner. They were clearly trying to show her how typical teenagers dance. When it became apparent that she could not, but was glad to be a part of the group, they backed off. The parent described it as a “clashing of cultures” but once the others saw that “she wasn’t likely to conform, and that it didn’t impact them, they backed away.
and it was fine and they were accepted.” The parent offered the following advice to administrators: “You need our children with special needs more than we need you, because your general education students need to know how to live with each other, how to interact without that uncomfortable feeling.”

Conclusion

It’s Always Somethin’! (Roseanne Rosanadana, SNL)

For most administrators, the issue is not that there are problems; problems are a part of the job. Problems can be solved, solutions may not be readily apparent, but given a reasonable amount of time and talent, solutions are discovered and implemented. Typically, when parents of students in special education say there is a problem, they are referring to a dilemma. A dilemma is challenging because dilemmas cannot be easily solved, time and talent may reveal unappealing choices, and administrators must often resort to managing dilemmas, trying to build consensus while making repeated attempts to resolve them, and learning from the results of those efforts.

Learning is a dynamic process, always changing those who pursue it. As I have been changed by the learning gained from this endeavor, I will affect change in the buildings I serve. As the teachers, parents and I continue to discuss special education issues, we will inevitably see the need in change certain practices, policies and procedures. We will manage the dilemmas. There will be “ripple effects” to be sure. As Elmore (1995) has pointed out, changes are often connected and it is typical for one change to lead to other changes in school structure as implementation occurs.

In his eloquently titled article, I think, therefore I am resistant to change, Duffy (2002) points out what we know—or think we know—our biggest roadblock to learning. His strategies for change focus on “raising doubts” about what is believed to be true. His suggestions include: discussing dissatisfaction, saying it’s only an experiment, turn surprises into questions, recognizing that all dissents and warnings have some validity, believe that collaborators who disagree are both right, remember that all problems have multidirectional causes and effects, and understand that what you know is not optimal. Not unlike the well regarded and often used K-W-L chart, our interactions with special education students and their parents will lead us through cycles of ever evolving understandings and opportunities for application that ultimately will lead to more questions and searches for answers. Fortunately for those of us who work in schools, listening to parents’ stories and learning from them is part of what we do every day. We can learn a great deal from Aesop.

Information about the authors: Mrs. Mary E. Haggerty is Principal of William Kaegebein Elementary School in Grand Island, New York. Susan Schultz, Ed.D. is Assistant Professor and Director of Special Education Graduate Services in the School of Education at St. John Fisher College.
References


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Extended Learning Opportunities

1) In the introduction to the article, it is suggested that prioritizing parent participation in the education process is not often at the top of schools’ lists. Have you found this to be true from your perspective as pre-service teacher, teacher, or administrator? If so, why might this be true? Is there something we can/should do about this?

2) In this essay, the authors speak about keeping a professional distance. What do you think is meant by this and how do you make sense of this in your own practice?

3) In one interview with parents, the authors concluded that “trust meant doing what you said you would”; however, what was said was often interpreted differently. Are there recommendations for principals’ and/or teachers for communicating with parents in ways that establish a mutual understanding of discussion points and anticipated follow up?

Additional resources for working with parents that you may wish to explore include:

1) NICHCY is very pleased to offer you a wealth of information on disabilities! NICHCY stands for the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. [http://www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx](http://www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx)
