Parent-Teacher Partnership: Diagnosing the Divide

A Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract

Relationships between educators and parents are a requirement of IDEA 2004. Often these interactions have been characterized by misunderstanding, tension, and parents' contentions that teachers do not have the best interests of their child as a focus. This causes a divide in the parent-school relationship. As times have changed, this divide has as well…it has grown. So what are the reasons that the divide continues to grow? What causes parents to distrust teachers and schools or become un-involved in their child's education? What causes teachers to distance themselves from parents? What can we do about it? This meta-synthesis delves into these questions of the parent/teacher divide, and the implications of what schools need to do to fix the ever-widening gulf. The research suggests that there are many ways that we can bridge this divide. However, to make this happen, schools need to be proactive, family-centered, and be willing to work with parents outside of regular school hours. Both school and parents need to be able and willing to look at their own feelings and preconceived notions about school and parent involvement.

1.   Introduction

1.1.   Background

Throughout the history of public education, parents have been involved in their children's education. There have traditionally been parent conferences, meet the teacher nights, back to school nights, sports events, and academic competitions. In 1975, PL 94-142, Education of All Students Education Act, introduced the Individualized Education Plan to the equation. This document mandates that teachers and parents collaborate in the development of an educational program for students identified as having a disability. According to the Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, "estimates showed that, about 5.7 million of the nation's school children, ages 6 to 21, were receiving special education services through IDEA." (Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, 2015, page 3) Further, in 2007 a U.S. Department of Education Memorandum, suggested that 35% of all students in 2000, were considered to be from minority groups. (US DOE Memorandum, 2007) However, parents from backgrounds other than those of the school hierarchy have a tendency to view participation differently than teachers and administrators. Not only are there cultural barriers between school personnel and some parents, there are also feelings of inadequacies when parents do not know educational lingo and the processes and rights to which they are entitled.

Wellner (2012) states that, "Often, parents of students with special needs will come to an Individualized Education Program team meeting and feel threatened by the very people who are responsible for providing a safe and nurturing learning environment for their child…Because of differing perspectives and theories of educational intervention, there has been a remarkable escalation of IDEA related litigation between parents of students with disabilities – specifically austism- and public school districts." (p. 16)

There are also more players involved now than ever before. Teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, parents, pediatricians, child advocates, behavioral or emotional specialists, and lawyers all have a stake in a child's education. With this many people potentially being involved, it's no surprise that more and more tensions can build to intense levels. How can a school expect parents to attend meetings if they feel threatened, not welcome, or not a driving force of the process? More importantly, how can we, as educators and professionals, make them feel like they are a part of the process?

1.2 Author's beliefs and experiences

I have been teaching middle school for thirteen years. During that time, I have taught in five different schools. The first school I taught in was a Title I school in Dallas, Texas with 97% of the population speaking another language at home. Student performance across the board was low, and parents appeared to have no buy-in with their student's education. This was particularly true of students under the special education umbrella. As a new teacher, these were the students who needed the most supports from me and home; I was unable to communicate with parents because they spoke, for the most part, Spanish. When I could get an interpreter to call for me, the parents would very respectfully inform me that since I was the expert, I could do as I felt

necessary. I was told by one parent in a whispered voice, "I hated school as a kid, and I hate coming to meetings even now." While working in that school, I had one student in the eighth grade who defecated in his pants to get out of class, a gang fight in the middle of class, and three students get arrested. Fifteen of my students were deemed homeless; one I found sleeping on the school entrance stairs one morning when I got to work. These issues were difficult, and I couldn't help but wonder where their parents were.

Following my husband, I moved to the north side of Houston, Texas in a more affluent area. The population of students had very good test scores, and I was encouraged prior to my first day. Once I began teaching, I was amazed at the level of dependence of many students on the adults around them for everything. This was especially true of the special education population. Parents were constantly doing work for their children, and the students learned very early on that if they asked enough questions, teachers would limit their work requirements or just do the work for them. Parents were exceedingly easy to get into contact with for the first time in my teaching career. However, even here, parents of students with special needs were tougher to get into the school for meetings, conversations, field trips, or assemblies. I had several parents explain to me that they found little incentive to miss work to attend events at school. While at this school, I had more students cry than ever before. While homework was often done to perfection, in-class work tended to be a lot less precise. Again, I found myself asking, "What are these parents doing?"

When I became a mother, I found that I had a hard time developing a level of trust for someone else to watch my child all day for me. I could not get over the fact that some stranger

was rearing my child in my place and was teaching her many of her first values and lessons. I cannot imagine the level of trust it would take for a parent of a special needs child to leave their child with a stranger. Parents know exactly what each child needs, what their wants are, and how best to soothe them. It made me realize exactly how much trust and faith that other parents had placed in me to teach their children. What could possibly make parents that are uninvolved become so? What could be an incentive for these parents to change? Something was going on; they trusted me to teach their child, why would they not come to school to see what their child was doing? Why would they not come to meetings that would benefit their child? I also began to wonder what on earth my children's teachers thought of me. I am also unable to attend many of my child's meetings, because I teach in the same school district that my children attend. I cannot come to the first day of school, or attend meet the teacher nights, because I have to be working in my own classroom, and meeting those parents. Surely, there were other people like me. A light went off…maybe all of those parents that I wondered about, had reasons for not being there. This may seem like a no-brainer, but it really was a revelation to me.

Since then I have taught in the suburbs of southeast Houston and Anchorage, Alaska. In both settings, parents of students with special needs were difficult to reach and maintain a lasting communication. I transitioned to being the special education department chair, and it became glaringly obvious that there was a problem. In one month alone, the special education department had to reschedule ten out of thirty IEP meetings due to parents not attending. All of these meetings had a room full of professionals who had given up their planning times to come to meetings to best meet the needs of the students. For many of these meetings, interpreters also had

to be present. Not only is this a waste of expenditure for the school district, but this does not help the child in the least. I began to ask myself these questions:

1. What factors are related to parent engagement in the educational process?

2. How can my department and school collaborate effectively to bridge the gaps between parents and schools?

1.3 Purpose of this meta-synthesis

The purpose of this meta-synthesis that is focused on pinpointing factors that could lead to disenfranchisement of parents of students served in special education, is to explore several questions through reviewing articles that have been published on the topic. The first question that I wanted to answer was, "What does productive, supportive parent support look like?" The second important question that I researched is, "what are some of the roadblocks to parent support or presence in the schools?" Lastly, I asked the question, "how can schools and specifically my department get the parents to feel comfortable and involved in the special education process?"

The first thing that I did was to discuss with teachers in my school and district what their concerns were with education. Then, I selected a topic that could yield helpful results to me in no matter which school I teach. What I learn from this research could have a long-reaching impact on the way that I teach and conduct myself as a teacher. As a special education department chair, I have the ability to use what I learn to impact how the rest of my school assists parents with the special education process as well.

2. Methods

2.1 Selection Criteria

      The articles included in this meta-synthesis had to meet the following criteria:

1. The articles explored either the history of special education or parent involvement in education.
2. The articles explored issues of parents from backgrounds different from the majority of school personnel.
3. The articles were published in journals that were educational journals or related to the field of education.
4. The articles were published since 2000 to make sure that information is recent and up to date.

2.2 Search Procedures

      I conducted systematic searches of several databases that include articles related to education, special education, and studies related to students with disabilities. These databases included: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC, Ebsco Version), Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection (Ebsco Host), and Education and Full Text (H.W. Wilson – Ebsco Host).

2.2.1 Database Searches

      I conducted several Boolean searches using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) hosted by Ebsco. I used the following search terms:

- "Parents with disabilities"

- "Special Education" and "Parent involvement"

- "Parent involvement in special education"

- "IDEA"

- "Demographics of Special Education"

- "Low parental involvement" and "Special Education"

These searches yielded a total of 19 articles. These are: (Hara & Burke, 1998; Baker, 1997;

Baker & Soden, 1998; Ascher, 1988; Tinkler, 2002; Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba,

Henderson, 2013; Wellner, 2012; Etscheidt, Clopton, Haselhuhn, 2012; Conroy, 2012;

Zhang, 2012; Delmore, 2013; Posny, 2007; Dor, Rucker-Naidu, 2012; Kayama, 2010;

Applequist, 2009; Anacker, 2010; Robbins, Searby, 2013; Young, Austin, Growe, 2013;

Desforges, Abouchaar, 2003).

2.2.2 Ancestral Searches

An ancestral search involves reviewing the reference lists of previously published works

to locate literature relevant to one's topic of interest (Welch, Brownell, and Sheridan, 1999). I

conducted an ancestral search from two sources that yielded the following additional articles:

(Brantlinger, 1987; Carpenter, 1997; Cranwell, D., & Miller, A. 1987; Doak & Doak, 1987;

Duquette, C., Fullarton, S., Orders, S., Robertson-Grewal, K., 2011; Fish, W., 2008;

Fitzgerald, J., Watkins, M., 2006; Male, D., 1998; Ryndak, D.L., Downing, J.E., Morrison,

A.P., & Williams, L.J., 1996; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Spann, Kohler,

Soenksen, 2003; Trainor, 2010).

2.3 Coding Procedures

I used a coding form to categorize the information that was presented in each article that I

used. The publication types were one of the following: a. research study, b. theoretical work,

c. descriptive article, d. opinion piece or position paper, e. guide, f. annotated bibliography. For the articles that were categorized as a research study, I further categorized articles that were identified as research studies were categorized into one of the following classification: a. research design, participants, data sources, and findings.

2.3.1 Publication Types

Every journal article and book was read and assessed to determine the publication type. The references that I used were categorized as being one of the following. *Research study, Theoretical work, Descriptive work, Opinion piece/Position paper, Guide, Annotated bibliography, or Review of the Literature*. A research study is an investigation with the goal to discover facts or to amend previously held beliefs. A theoretical work is a work based on theories that are within the realm of the discipline that is being discussed. A descriptive work focuses on describing a topic and providing more information including examples. An opinion piece or position piece states an author's opinions and states reasons to defend it. A guide is a paper that is written to help someone make decisions and navigate through an uncertain place or idea. An annotated bibliography is a list of sources that an author used with a summary of the article included. Finally, a review of the literature is analyzing literature that is already in existence on a topic.

2.3.2 Research Design

Each empirical study was classified by its research design type: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. A *quantitative design* uses objective data including numbers. *Qualitative*

design employs subjective data including opinions and thoughts of the author and others. A

mixed method design employs both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more thorough

approach to a topic.

2.3.3 Participants, data sources, and findings

In each of the research studies, I identified the participants involved. (For example, were

the participants students in early childhood, middle school, or high school?) I also determined the

data sources that each study used. (Did the author use standardized tests or interviews and

observations?) Lastly, I have summarized what each study found (Table 2).

2.4 Data analysis

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by

Duke (2011) and Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 28 articles that I included in this

meta-synthesis. For the purpose of this meta-synthesis, significant statements were identified as

statements that addressed issues related to the disenfranchisement of parents and populations of

special education students. I then generated a list of non-repetitive, verbatim significant

statements with paraphrased meanings. These meanings represented my understandings of each

of these statements. These meanings were then grouped into theme clusters that created emergent

themes. These emergent themes represented the fundamental elements of the entire body of

literature.

3. Results

3.1 Publication type

I located twenty eight articles that met my selection criteria. The publication of each type of article is located in Table 1. Thirteen of the twenty eight articles (46%) in this meta-synthesis were research articles. (Anacker, P.L., 2010; Applequist, K.L., 2009; Baker, A., 1997; Dor, A. & Rucker-Naidu, T., 2012; Etscheidt, S., Clopton, K. & Haselhuhn, C., 2012; Robbins, C. & Searby, L., 2013; Ryndak, D.L., Downing, J.E., Morrison, A.P., & Williams, L.J., 1996; and Young, C., Austin, S., & Growe, R., 2013) Six of the articles (21%) that I used for the meta-synthesis were Reviews of the Literature. (Baker, A. & Soden, L., 1998; Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A., 2003; Duquette, C., Fullarton, S., Orders, S., & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Gonzalez, L., Borders, L., Hines, E., Villalba, J., & Henderson, A., 2013; Reiman, J., Beck, L., Coppola, T., and Engiles, A., 2010; and Tinkler, B., 2002) (7%) Two of the articles used were guides. (Cortiella, C., 2006; Posny, A., 2007) Five of the twenty eight articles (18%) were opinion pieces. (Delmore, P., 2013; ED293973, 1988; Hara, S.R. & Burke, D.J., 1998; Wellner, L., 2012; and Wenner Conroy, P., 2012) Finally, three of the articles (11%) were Descriptive Works. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; NICHCY, 1994; and Santa Maria, K., 2001)

Table 1

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
Anacker, 2010	Research
Applequist, 2009	Research
Ashby, 2012	Guide
Baker, 1997	Research
Baker & Soden, 1998	Review of the Literature
Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2006	Review of the Literature
Bell, Long, Garvan, & Bussing, 2011	Guide
Carter & Wilson, 2011	Research
Cartledge, 2005	Guide
Cortiella, 2006	Guide
Delmore, 2013	Opinion Piece
Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003	Review of the Literature
Dor & Rucker-Naidu, 2012	Research
Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Roberston-Grewal 2011	Review of the Literature
ED293973 1988	Opinion Piece
Etscheidt, Clopton, & Haselhuhn, 2012	Research
Fierros, 2005	Review of the Literature
Goodman & Webb, 2006	Research
Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013	Review of the Literature
Hara & Burke, 1998	Opinion Piece

Hosterman, Jitendra, & DuPaul, 2008	Research
Kayama, 2010	Descriptive work
Lin, Lake, & Rice, 2008	Guide
McClosky, 2010	Research
National Center for Education Statistics 2010	Descriptive Work
NICHCY 1994	Descriptive Work
Posny, 2007	Guide
Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010	Review of the Literature
Robbins & Searby, 2013	Research
Ryndak, Downing, Morrison, & Williams, 1996	Research
Santa Maria, 2001	Descriptive Work
Talbott, Fleming, Karabatsos, & Dobria, 2011	Research
Tinkler, 2002	Review of the literature
Wellner, 2012	Opinion Piece
Wenner Conroy, 2012	Opinion Piece
Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013	Research
Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2012	Research

3.2. Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies

As discussed in the previous section, I found twelve articles that I characterized as research. (Anacker, P.L., 2010; Applequist, K.L., 2009; Baker, A., 1997; Dor, A. & Rucker-Naidu, T., 2012; Etscheidt, S., Clopton, K. & Haselhuhn, C., 2012; Goodman, G. & Webb, M., 2006; Hosterman, S., Jitendra, A., & DuPaul, G. 2008; Robbins, C. & Searby, L.,

2013; Ryndak, D.L., Downing, J.E., Morrison, A.P., & Williams, L.J., 1996; Talbott, E., Fleming,

J., Karabatsos, G., & Dobria, L. 2011; Young, C., Austin, S., & Growe, R., 2013; and Zhang, D.,

Katsiyannis, A., Ju, S. & Roberts, E. 2012) The research design, participants, data sources, and

findings have been detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Authors	Research Design	Participants	Data Sources	Findings
Anacker, 2010	Qualitative	8 parents with Intellectual Disabilities who have at least one child with an IEP.	Structured question interviews, followed by open-ended discussions	Parents with intellectual disabilities feel that they do not understand the IEP process for their own children, and may agree to whatever the school says. Parents do not receive enough support from schools and agencies that are meant to support them in every stage of the IEP process and school year.
Applequist, 2009	Qualitative	32 parents with students in IEP program from rural to urban communities and children's ages ranging from 3 to 19.	Interviews	Families like to be fully informed about special education services and choices that they have. Professionals should consider ways to improve communication. Rural families in general, have fewer options in services and providers to choose from for their children with disabilities than urban parents do .

Baker, 1997	Qualitative	111 parents (53 Caucasian, 46 African-American, and 12 other minorities) participated. Half had no more than a high school education, half had education beyond high school.	Focus groups consisting of parents of special education students.	The facilitators of involvement are: feeling welcome at the school, a feeling of acceptance of administrators, programs for information dissemination, and a belief that their children wanted them around. When these occurred, parents were much more likely to participate in all aspects of school.
Dor, & Rucker-Naidu, 2012	Qualitative	56 teachers in Israel and US. (43 were women.) All 56 were actively teaching at the time of the study.	Interviews	Teachers are in favor of parent involvement, understand the importance of collaboration with parents, and are empowered by parents showing appreciation and gratitude.
Etscheidt, Clopton, & Haselhuhn, 2012	Qualitative	19 Law cases from 2004-2008. All cases were about eligibility or eligibility criteria.	Labor Relations Press Education Research Library online database. Once the cases were located, researchers interviewed parents to determine why they sought to avoid special education.	Parents refuse consent for special education testing because: of a perceived harm from an evaluation, the stigma of disability designation, inadequate qualifications or credential of the evaluator, intent to refuse special education services, and placement predetermination.

Goodman, & Webb, 2006	Quantitative	66 third and fourth grade students referred for special education for reading during a three year period. All participants were from a low SES neighborhood in a large urban area in the southwest United States.	TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) data	There was no gender or ethnic bias among the students referred for special education made by teachers for special education referral. Non-native speakers were much less likely to be referred for special education. There was a large amount of subjectivity and incompetence of referrals.
Hosterman, Jitendra, & DuPaul, 2008	Quantitative	171 students in first through fourth grade. Half had ADHD and half were a control group that had no ADHD. All students live in eastern Pennsylvania.	Direct observation of both groups during class of classroom behavior was conducted by trained graduate students.	The ethnic minority group contained a larger percentage of male students than the Caucasian group. The Caucasian group came from groups with higher SES levels. Both groups were the same age and disability groups. Students in the ethnic minority group showed much higher levels of verbal off-task behavior in both reading and math. The teacher perceptions of the ethnic minority students more accurately reflected the directly observed findings.

Robbins, & Searby, 2013	Mixed Design	Team teachers from 3 different schools in central Alabama (1 urban, 1 suburban, and 1 rural middle school) and parents from each of those teams.	E-mail prompts, interviews, observations, team meetings, document review, parent questionnaires and focus groups	Effective middle school interdisciplinary teams: believe that parental involvement is essential to student success, are open and approachable to parents, serve as a resource to parents of adolescence, and approach problem-solving opportunities as a team rather than individuals.
Ryndak, Downing, Morrison, & Williams, 1996	Qualitative	Parents of 13 children having moderate or severe disabilities who were receiving educational services in inclusive settings across seven school districts were interviewed.	Semi-structured interviews	Parents were clear about inappropriate versus appropriate restrictiveness of educational placement. However, parents expressed discontent with exactly what those services would look like once an inclusion setting was selected. Parents also expressed discontent with schools about discussing other options or scenarios for providing other services for their children.
Talbott, Fleming, Karabatsos, & Dobria, 2011	Quantitative	1,394,024 who attended schools from the elementary to high school levels in the 2004-2005 school year.	Office for Civil Rights survey responses in 2005.	School factors (such as grades, teachers) become the main predictors of special education labels, not race or gender. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on schools if there will be changes made to the system of referrals.

Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013	Qualitative	500 participants from 3 different presentations given by the researcher. These 500 were categorized as: school administrators, parents, parent liaison, parent as a teacher, teachers, and parents as an administrator.	Written responses to prompts	Parent involvement includes parents being actively engaged in school activities, home-based activities, and communicating with the school. The schools need to get better at communicating with parents. Parents, in turn, neet to become more effective at communicating with both the teachers of their child as well as their child.
Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2012	Quantitative	Data on state poverty rates in 2004 from the US Census Bureau, data on students from 2004 to 2008 served in special education under Part B of IDEA from the Data Accountability Center funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs	Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), Data Accountability Center	Minority overrepresentation in special education continues to be a challenge. African Americans were represented the most, followed closely by American Indians/Alaska Natives. Asians were the least represented in special education programs. In order to address this, we need to make special education program highly effective to try and bridge the gap.

3.2.1 Research Design

Four of the twelve research studies used a quantitative design. (Goodman, G. & Webb, M. 2006; Hosterman, S., Jitendra, A., & DuPaul, G. 2008; Talbott, E., Fleming, J., Karabatsos, G., & Dobria, L. 2011; and Zhang, D., Katsiyannis, A. Ju, S. & Roberts, E., 2012) Seven on the nine used a qualitative research design. (Anacker, P.L., 2010; Applequist, K.L., 2009, Baker, A., 1997; Dor, A. & Rucker-Naidu, T., 2012; Etscheidt, S., Clopton, K., & Haselhuhn, C., 2012; Ryndak, D.L., Downing, J.E., Morrison, A.P., & Williams, L.J., 1996; Young, C., Austin, S., & Growe, R., 2013) Finally, one article employed a mixed design research style. (Etscheidt, S., Clopton, K., & Haselhuhn, C., 2012)

3.2.2 Participants and Data Sources

Six of the research studies used parents as participants as members of their studies. This equates to 50% of the studies used. (Anacker, P.L., 2010; Applequist, K.L., 2009; Baker, A., 1997; Robbins, C., & Searby, L., 2013; Ryndak, D.L., Downing, J.E., Morrison, A.P., & Williams, L.J., 1996; Young, C., Austin, S., & Growe, R., 2013) Three of the articles had teachers as participants. (Dor, A. & Rucker-Naidu, T., 2012; Robbins, C., & Searby, L., 2013; Young, C., Austin, S., & Growe, R., 2013) One data source included information taken from court cases. (Etscheidt, S., Clopton, K., & Haselhuhn, C., 2012) One of the sources cited data taken from government agencies. (Zhang, D., Katsiyannis, A., Ju, S., & Roberts, E., 2012) Lastly, one of the articles also conducted research involving school administrators. (Young, C., Austin, S., & Growe, R., 2013)

Interviews and focus groups comprised the majority of the data sources used in this meta-synthesis. Five of the twelve (42%) used these interviews to talk to both parents and teachers. (Anacker, P.L., 2010; Applequist, K.L., 2009; Baker, A., 1997; Dor, A. & Rucker-Naidu, T., 2012; Robbisn, C. & Searby, L., 2013; Ryndak, D.L., Downing, J.E., Morrison, A.P., & Williams, L.J., 1996) The rest of the data sources came from written response to prompts, income and poverty estimates, and research from the Labor Relations Press Education.

3.2.3 Findings of the Studies

The findings of the research studies used for this meta-synthesis can be stated in the following ways:

1. There are factors outside of school that correlate with parent withdrawal from "active" support in the educational setting.

2. There are institutional factors within school that lead parents to feel disconnected.

3. Teachers want to support parents and teachers in the best way possible, but feel that they often feel a disconnection with parents about the best ways to support children.

4. Research suggests that teacher's may hold negative opinions or biases toward students identified as having disabilities.

5. There need to be steps in place in order to make sure that Special Education programs are highly effective to bridge the gap between parents and the school environment.

3.3 Emergent Themes

      Several themes emerged over the course of my research in this meta-synthesis. These themes could be broken down into the following: (a) parents of students with educational disabilities want to be involved in the educational process of their children, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or educational background of either the child or the parent; (b) parents often feel a disconnection with the school because of past uncomfortable or unfortunate situations; (c) teachers want to feel connected to both the student and the parent, but feel that there are gaps of understanding between the schools expectations of "parental support" and what some families feel as the way to best support their child; (d) teachers have negative perceptions about students with disabilities for many reasons, (e) there are ways to bridge these gaps between parents, teachers, and schools, but it takes a concerted effort on the part of both sides to make the connection fruitful for all participants involved in the process. These four themes are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Clusters	Formulated Meanings
External factors impact parent engagement in the educational process.	• Parents are often pushed into the world of services early by a pediatrician, and are not given the tools to understand them fully. • Working parents feel guilty over not being more involved with their kids' schools. • Minority over-representation in special education is still a concern • School populations are becoming increasingly diverse. • Students are from all over the world, and every society values its children. • Cultural, societal beliefs on disability affect both the students with disabilities and their parents. • Parent involvement may be an area of misunderstanding between teachers and parents. Parents may be limited in their ability to participate or volunteer at school and may seek other means of helping their children.. • As children get older, parents become less involved in schools. • Many parents who have jobs that do not provide the option of paid leave, may not be able to frequently go to the school for teacher meetings, IEP meetings, and behavior meetings. • Some families are not involved due to transportation troubles.

There are internal factors that can lead to parent withdrawal from active participation in the schooling environment.	• Previous personal experiences in school are related to parent perceptions about the educational process. • School personnel often use language that may impact how parents perceive their ability to work with the school. • The scheduling of meetings is often in conflict with parent work schedules. • Parents often do not know the best way to help at school. • Parents often feel "put down" by teachers and/or administrators at school by comments of student inadequacy. • 41% of special education students are linguistically or culturally diverse, compared to only 14% of educators being diverse. • Most communications are written with the assumption that parents already know what is being discussed. • The variety of offerings for meetings in the evenings is very sparse. • Parents of a low SES background may not have the educational ability to help their children with their homework. • Students are the main link that many parents have to schools. A majority of what they hear about school, is seen through the eyes of their child, who may or may not provide relevant, correct information. • Parents can feel as though it is their fault that their children struggle with school or have a disability.

| Teacher/Parent Collaboration | • Teachers begin teaching with little to no skill development in parent communication.
• Teachers don't have enough time to call every parent.
• Teachers can have difficulty communicating over the phone with parents from different ethnic or social backgrounds.
• Because teachers come from a background different than that of 41% of the special education students, they may find themselves disoriented or scared of how the different cultures represent themselves.
• Staff members may fear retaliation if they address problems proactively.
• Teachers have a wide range of abilities, race, ethnicities, and cultures in their classrooms. This make it difficult to decide whether an issue with a student is based on cultural factors or educational abilities.
• Most continuing educational opportunities for teachers are aimed at working with students after the diagnosis, and not preventing gaps from occurring. |

| Teachers can be biased towards students with disabilities. | • Teachers can hone in on students with labels and notice behaviors that they would not notice in other students.
• Teachers may not see the value in modifications or accommodations for students that may be troublesome.
• Many teachers feel that a student of a certain age should be able to demonstrate certain skills and abilities regardless of any disabilities that a student may have.
• There can be a determinist view point from teachers against students with disabilities. For example, "Why expect these students to work hard, when they won't?"
• When teachers are short on planning time, modifications and accommodations are the first things to be sacrificed.
• When parents do not show up for meetings that teachers attend, it causes many to think, "If the parents don't bother, why should I?" |

It is possible to bridge the gap between all parties concerned.	• Schools need to be clear about what parents can do to be involved and why that is the case. • Schools can create more opportunity for parents to be involved not during the regular working day. • Parents and teachers can both show more gratitude to the other for even small things. • Schools need to use clear and concise language to talk to parents about students with disabilities, and avoid subjective statements. With that information, give the parent time to consider all of it. • Gather as much data from parents as possible about information during meetings. • Teachers should call as a team, but avoid using the "gang up" mentality. • Teachers need to build relationships with parents before there need to be calls about negatives. • Teachers need to make information in documents available in a parent's first language. • Schools need to provide a cultural liaison, and not just an interpreter, to ensure that nothing gets lost in translation. • Schools need to provide a variety of programs to parents. One of them should include parent support groups of different varieties. • Administrators need to make an effort to hold teachers accountable for positive, pro-active communications.

4. Discussion

In this section, I have further described the emergent themes that I have discovered in this meta-synthesis. I then connected these themes to my own work and observations throughout my teaching career.

4.1 There are factors outside of school that can cause parents to withdraw from "active" support in the educational setting.

Countries all over the world provide schooling for their children, and each country expects something different from its population of parents for support. How educators define involvement may vary in different countries, and it may in fact vary with respect to how parents conceptualize involvement; for example, according to Dor and Rucker-Naidu (2012), American and Israeli teachers and parents disagreed on what type of support was acceptable in school. In this study, 40% of Israeli teachers saw issues with "helicopter parents" (parents who hover protectively over their child), compared to 0% of the elementary teachers in the US that saw this as an issue. This would suggest that parents are much more vocal and involved with the teachers in Israel than they are in the United States, or the US teachers are more tolerant and expect parents to act that way. Parenting expectations vary across cultures with respect to acceptable levels of engagement, and parent participation.

One of the biggest factors for parents coming into the school for meetings is cultural background and whether or not that background coincides with that of the school culture. The number of students as a whole who are considered minorities is growing as is the students in

Special Education from minority groups. Another cultural aspect of parent support is how children with disabilities are viewed in other societies. If the culture that the family comes from views disabilities as embarrassing or a subject not discussed, the parents of that child are less likely to want to attend a meeting discussing the very disability that is viewed as a source of embarrassment. Because our society is getting more and more differentiated as regards to its ethnic makeup, the viewpoints of what roles parents should take in schools varies as well (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Roberston-Grewal, 2011).

Another factor outside of the school that can affect parent involvement is the socioeconomic status of the family. While parents from all levels of society care about their children, their ability to attend meetings during the school day differs. Parents with typical office jobs may have more flexibility in their work day, so are able to attend school meetings and events. Hourly wage earners and laborers are often unable to get time off or cannot afford being away from work for even a short time, so are much less likely to be able to attend meetings that are held at times that require them to be away from the job. Not only is the availability to be present at meeting different, but the type of support that these families offer in while attending these meetings differs as well. Another factor relates to the educational background of the parents. In general, research suggests that parents with less education tend lack the educational background to challenge or question any statements made on behalf of the school, parents with more educational backgrounds feel more free to have a back and forth discussion with school personnel due to having more confidence in the educational process. So educators define parent participation as attending meetings while parents may view their role as being supportive at home (Tinkler, 2002).

Another source of issues with parental involvement comes from the age of the child. Elementary schools always receive a lot more participation than secondary schools (Desforges, 2003). As students progress through the educational system, parents spend fewer hours in schools. Parents spend more time contributing from home by making their child study and complete homework than volunteering hours in schools (Desforges, 2003). This can make working parents feel guilty over not being more involved with their child's education (Baker, 1997). The age the child is when he or she is diagnosed as having a disability can also be a factor. Parents of children who are diagnosed by a pediatrician before their child begins school are typically not given the tools to understand them fully (Applequist, 2009). Therefore, as these students enter school, parents can feel confused or overwhelmed by the amount and variety of supports and services that public schools have to offer.

4.2 There are internal factors that can lead to parent withdrawal from active participation in the schooling environment.

Parents have preconceived notions about schools based on their own experiences in school, as well as with previous schools that their children have attended. Not only can their associations color their perception of school, their child brings home stories of school operations, teachers, and school business as well; In fact, students are the main link that many parents have with the school. A majority of their perceptions of the school are what their child sees, hears, and then relates back to the parents.

The actual scheduling of meetings is a huge impediment to parent attendance and participation. Most meetings are scheduled with teacher conference periods in mind, and are not

scheduled at a time mutually beneficial to the parent. The variety of offerings to parents for

meetings in the evenings is sparse at best. In many of the schools in which I have worked,

teachers become angry and somewhat verbally hostile to parents if they request meetings at times

outside of the contract day.

As discussed in 4.1, students and parents under the special education umbrella are

becoming more diverse. Parents who speak a language other than English have a difficult time

receiving the same level of communication as their English-speaking counterparts.

Communication about meetings and important school information is often provided only in

English or one to two other dominant languages. 41% of special education students are

linguistically or culturally diverse, compared to only 14% of educators being diverse (Zhang,

Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2012). Due to this vast discrepancy, parents can misunderstand what

teachers and school administrators are communicating to them. School personnel often use

language that may impact how parents perceive their ability to work with the school. This can

lead parents to feel demeaned by the very people who are trying to support them (Wellner, 2012).

Translators can be notoriously hard to come by-particularly when a parent is the one initiating

the conversation with the school, so if a parent did try to read a communication from the school

and had questions to ask, there would be no one available to answer any questions ahead of time.

This is not a welcoming environment for the family.

4.3 Teacher/Parent Collaboration

While teacher preparation programs vary widely from state to state, one truth is fairly

universal- there is very little skill development focused on communication with parents

(Kayama, 2010). Few programs even offer courses on special education to teachers who are being certified to teach general education courses. Therefore, teachers begin their teaching careers with deficits in these areas. Continuing professional development is often aimed at working with students following a diagnosis - not preventing gaps from occurring. As the demands on teachers' time grow each year, teachers simply do not have enough time to call or e-mail every parents on a daily or even weekly basis (Baker, 1997).

Teachers have a wide range of students in their classrooms every year. Not only are students culturally different from each other (and possibly the teacher), their abilities can span a large range as well. This is a daunting task for any teacher. These differences can make it difficult for a teacher to determine if an issue in class is based on cultural factors or educational disabilities. Not knowing what a student's culture may be like at home can lead the teacher to feel disoriented or scared of how different cultures represent themselves. They may worry about retaliation if they address problems in a way that is not in keeping with a parent's expectations (Etscheidt, Clapton, & Haselhuhn, 2012).

With the growing number of ethnic minorities across the United States, there are more dialects spoken now than ever before. Many districts can only hire interpreters for the most common languages spoken in their district. For example, in Anchorage, Alaska there are two different varieties of the Hmong language (Green Hmong and White Hmong). A parent informed me at an IEP meeting for her daughter that she could not read the Procedural Safeguards in Hmong that we provided to her because she read Green Hmong. The Procedural Safeguards were written in White Hmong. While there are many similarities, there was just enough of a discrepancy to render the document confusing at best and unreadable in most places.

4.4 Teachers can be biased towards students with disabilities.

Bias in Special Education starts from the very first part of the process: the referral. During this process, Fierros (2005) found that African American males are diagnosed as being ID (Intellectually Disabled) or ED (Emotionally Disturbed) at a much higher percentage than other ethnicities. Similarly students of Asian ethnicities are much less likely to be referred for special education services at all. Boys are much more likely to be referred to special education as ED and ADHD than females are. These overwhelming trends point to some major issues with both the education system and the special education referral system. In four years of teaching special education in Anchorage, Alaska, I had one female student for every four males. One year, I had a class of one female and nine males and another class of two females and ten males. More recently teaching co-teach classes, I taught a class of 24 students; six of them are females and eighteen of them are males. There are examples of discrimination in areas other than the referral process as well.

With the mounting amount of responsibilities that are heaped upon teachers, and the ever-expanding diversity of students in teachers' classrooms, the demand on teacher's time grows each year. Teachers suffer from increasingly stressful demands with little relief. When teachers are given their list of students, as well as a separate list of students with a wide variety of accommodations and modifications to keep track of, the task can be daunting. Once teachers are aware of these students, they are told to keep an extra eye on them. As such, teachers notice more behaviors and deficits than in other students because they are watching them more closely.

For students in general education classes, there is also bias due to a lack of understanding of the nature of the individual disabilities themselves (Robbins, 2013). For example, a teacher

not understanding the nature of Tourette's syndrome, may not understand that a student tapping is not being disruptive, but fulfilling a deep need that the student has for that motion. Students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) can appear as "just a behavior problem". Students with very slow processing can appear lazy to teachers who are trained to view speed of recitation as an indicator of concept attainment. Because of the wide-range of needs and challenges that students with disabilities place on a teacher, teachers may not want to put in a lot of effort if the parents do not APPEAR to want this assistance.

State wide testing has increased in ferocity over the last decade. The increasing emphasis on standards based assessments is another factor that impacts There are no alternate tests for students with learning disabilities to take. Many teachers, when facing this dilemma, state that if a student is required to perform on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers, then they should be required to do all work with the same requirements as their peers. Teachers worry about the trend that test scores can be used to determine teacher effectiveness and promotion. So, who determines every year which teachers teach the gifted students or the special needs students? In my experience, it has been the newest teachers to a school who are given the special education students to teach; the most experienced teachers in the school teach the gifted or advanced students. For teachers who are just learning the system to also be given students with the most amount of needed supports is setting up not only the teachers, but the students and parents for failure as well.

4.5 There are ways to bridge these gaps between parents and teachers.

There are many ways to build collaboration between parents, teachers, and administrators. To begin with, schools need to be clear about what parents can do to be involved and why these are important ways to help (Baker, 1997). This list should include ways that parents can help within the school, home, and community at varying times of day. This would ensure that all parents had some way of being involved with the school. Schools should provide a variety of programs to parents. One of them should include parent support groups of different varieties. "Making constructive use of differing perspectives and cooperative planning of next steps can be useful in moving from distrust to industrious and meaningful relationships" (Wellner, 2012).

Schools need to use clear and concise language to talk to parents about students with disabilities. "Avoiding subjective statements is also recommended. Following this information disbursement, it is important to give a parent time to digest what they have been told" (Etscheidt, 2012). Teachers should call as at team to avoid numerous calls the same day; however, teachers need to be wary of seeming like it is the parents versus the teachers (Robbins, 2013). Teachers need to attempt to make more positive communication with parents, especially early on. This starts the communication on a positive note and shows the parents that the teachers are not just seeing the negative aspects of their child (Baker, 1997). Administrators need to make an effort to hold teachers accountable for positive, proactive communications (Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013). While teachers can definitely call home for more positive interactions, both parents and teachers should show more gratitude to the other for even small things. For example, a teacher can be quick to call a parent to say thank you for remembering to send supplies for a special project. Parents can be quick with a call or note to thank the teacher for gathering extra materials

to help their struggling child out. Providing not only interpreters for meetings, but for day to day conversations with staff as well for any parents who do not speak English, is an excellent way to make families feel more connected to school. Special education case managers should gather as much parent data as possible throughout the year, so that the student's IEP is a more accurate reflection of what both the school and parent observe in the child. Information in documents should be made available to the parents in whichever language they feel most confident with. This requires hiring qualified interpreters to ensure that documents and accurately translated including attention paid to cultural norms.

5. Discussion

There are always reasons that there might be an adversarial relationship between parents and teachers. There will always be excuses for teachers and schools to not communicate more often with parents. However, in this meta-synthesis I strove to uncover a variety of ways to combat the divide. Early positive communication with parents leads to a more open link between parents and teachers. Schools can communicate more clearly to parents and offer ways for parents of varying timetables and abilities to participate in their child's life at school.

I also wanted to examine the reasons that parents might not be able to participate in their children's schooling. This can seem obvious from afar; however, as you look more in depth at this question, more and more layers of complexity are revealed. Because we deal with individuals in education, there are many individual reasons why some parents cannot or will not attend meetings at school. To lump all parents of a certain demographic or socioeconomic status together into "not caring" about their children is exceedingly negative and not helpful. Overall, what I discovered is that parents love their children and want what is best for them. Most parents, if given the chance to participate in a variety of ways and times of day, will support their children in school. It is up to the school, school administrators, and teachers to come up with a plan to make this happen. Parents see the school through the eyes of their children, their own experiences, and the atmosphere at the school that they see. It is by doing our best and approaching all children as having the ability to succeed, that schools will be able to bridge the gaps between the schools and parents…no child, or parent, left behind.

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