Parent-Teacher Collaboration: Teacher Perceptions of What is Needed to Support Students with ASD in the Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract: Positive parent-professional collaboration is critical for the educational success of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, little is known about teacher perceptions of parent-professional collaboration. Thirty-four teachers participated in a qualitative study to gain a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of helpful parental involvement and advocacy strategies to ensure the success of students with ASD educated in inclusive settings. Through focus groups and interviews, teachers reported perceptions of parents ranging from too much involvement to not enough involvement, the importance of parental and student advocacy, and shared examples of positive parental advocacy. Implications for practice and directions for future research are discussed.

As children and youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are increasingly participating in inclusive education settings, the need for parent and professional collaboration is essential for students’ success. The foundation of support for students is ongoing communication and collaboration between parents and teachers. Positive parent-teacher collaboration benefits the family, educators, and students with disabilities (Bezdak, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010; Turnbull, Zuna, Turnbull, Poston, & Summers, 2007). In fact, research indicates parental involvement in schools is strongly linked to better student outcomes related to academics and involvement in organized groups and friendships (Newman, 2004). Moreover, federal mandates support parent involvement in developing, reviewing, and revising the child’s individualized education program (IEP; Turnbull et al., 2007) and value parents as equal partners and informed decision makers in their child’s education (e.g., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004, and the No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Research suggests that in the case of social skills of students with ASD, certain skills may be context-specific making it necessary for parents and professionals to be involved in order to fully understand the student’s abilities (Murray, Ruble, Willis, & Molloy, 2009). Even though such partnerships are widely valued, establishing positive parent-teacher partnerships can be difficult (Epstein, 2005).

Research has found conflicting results in regards to parents’ perceptions of parent-teacher partnerships. For example, in a survey of parents of children with ASD, parents reported they felt resentment from school personnel and other parents (Starr & Foy, 2010). Parents felt this resentment was often the result of the time and resources their child required from teachers. Further, many parents reported lack of communication and collaboration as a significant problem. On the other hand, strong communication and collaboration were reported by some parents as primary reasons for their satisfaction with their child’s educational experience (Rodriquez et al., 2014).
Parents who were most satisfied with their child’s educational services had children in younger grades (kindergarten to third grade), possibly indicating greater collaboration in early elementary school years compared to secondary school years. Similarly, parents of children with ASD in a study conducted by Stoner et al. (2005) echoed the need for frequent and open communication among teachers and parents. These parents further noted that negative communication and collaboration experiences resulted in a lack of trust of the educational professionals, which was difficult to regain. Parents reported feeling supported when they believed educators were knowledgeable about ASD, able to manage behaviors, and engaged in quality collaboration and communication with them (Starr & Foy, 2012).

The diagnostic process is a crucial time for potential collaboration. Unfortunately, parents have reported frustration due to their concerns not being heard, and needing to “fight” to be heard in order to begin the diagnostic process (Braiden, Bothwell, & Duffy, 2010). Once the process begins some parents report feeling confused about the roles of the team members and what evaluations are done (Braiden et al., 2010). When a diagnosis is received, some parents report they were not given the information they needed about understanding ASD or the available services for their child (Osborne & Reed, 2008). Parents often feel they have to search for information instead of having it provided by the professionals working with their child (Brown, Ouellette-Kuntz, Hunter, Kelley, & Cobigo, 2012; Glazard & Overall, 2012).

Another important time for collaboration is during the IEP process. While IEP meetings provide an opportunity for parents and educators to collaborate, research suggests families who participate in traditional IEP meetings have expressed their primary roles included listening and answering questions (Childre & Chambers, 2005). When Childre and Chambers (2005) interviewed families about their experiences with traditional IEP meetings, families reported minimal collaboration with the school staff and feeling pressured to agree with preset agendas including student goals and educational placements (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Further, in a study of parent perceptions of IEP meetings, parents reported inconsistency between their views and teachers’ views regarding what practices should be implemented for their children and what services should be provided (Fish, 2006). Parents additionally reported they felt blamed for their child’s academic and behavioral difficulties and expressed concern that teachers were unaware of the student’s services and accommodations listed in the IEP. Parents voiced a desire for the IEP meeting to be more collaborative in nature so they could be equal contributors (Fish, 2006).

Unfortunately, research indicates education professionals often do not view parents as equal partners. For example, Bezdek and colleagues (2010) interviewed educational professionals regarding their perceptions of partnerships with parents of children with disabilities and results indicated they wanted parents to be involved but only to a limited extent. In other words, education professionals desired families who supported their guidance about how to work with the child with disabilities, but did not value families who provided too much input on the supports they felt their child needed. While some of the professionals placed blame on families who did not follow through with suggested supports at home, others recognized that not all parents have the necessary time, knowledge, or skills to facilitate supports at home (Bezdek et al., 2010). Parents have noted strong parental involvement often depends on individual teachers, not the school system as a whole (Barclift, 2010), highlighting the importance of individual teachers in starting and sustaining collaboration with parents. Parent-teacher collaboration can often be hindered by unfamiliar language during the IEP process, as many educators use educational jargon parents are unfamiliar with (Barclift, 2010), and language and cultural differences between the family and school personnel (Lo, 2009).

Parent-teacher collaboration and parental advocacy are integral to one another. Parents who have children with ASD have been noted in the literature as being strong advocates for their children. For example, Barclift (2010) interviewed 15 parents of children with ASD and provided examples of successful parental advocacy, including one participant who requested monthly meetings with the IEP team.
because she felt the yearly IEP meeting did not provide sufficient information to keep her fully informed. Another parent noted “she felt she was the only voice her child had” (Barclift, 2010, p. 66). Parents need educators who are not only knowledgeable about their child’s disability and evidence based interventions, but who will collaborate and advocate with them in order to best support their child.

Planned parent-professional partnerships within the school setting are necessary for increased parental involvement and advocacy (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). School personnel need to encourage and guide parents on how to become involved in their child’s education (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). In fact, research has demonstrated that parent involvement is strongly correlated with teacher invitations (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Moreover, communication between home and school predicted positive parent-teacher relationships (Minke, Sheridan, Kim, Ryoo, & Koziol, 2014). However, limited information is available regarding teachers’ perceptions of parents of children with ASD and their views on parent-teacher collaboration.

More information is needed about teachers’ perceptions of parents and how their beliefs impact parent-teacher partnerships. Research supports the notion that collaborative parent-teacher relationships can enhance the positive social and academic outcomes for children and youth with ASD (Turnbull et al., 2007). However, more information is needed to help understand and confront the barriers of parent-professional collaboration to promote positive outcomes for children and youth with ASD in our schools. Thus, the focus of this study was to gain an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of helpful parental involvement and advocacy strategies for ensuring students’ with ASD success in inclusive school settings.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers’ perceptions of parents of children and youth with ASD educated in inclusive K-12 classrooms. Of particular interest was understanding how parents support children and youth with ASD within the school setting through advocacy and other collaborative activities with the school team. This investigation was a component of a larger study focused on understanding teachers’ perceptions of the social support needs of students with ASD, teacher preparation practices, and current strategies most helpful for the inclusion of students with ASD (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2015). Parent advocacy and collaboration activities became a clear factor influencing children and youth’s social and academic success within the school setting. Thus, our primary research questions for this study were: 1) What are teachers’ views of parents in facilitating their child’s school success? 2) What parent advocacy and collaboration strategies do teachers find most helpful in achieving school success for students with ASD?

Participants and Procedure

The research was conducted in a southeastern rural school district with approximately 7,500 students. The research team partnered with the district’s Exceptional Children’s Coordinator (ECC) in order to identify schools with students who had ASD. Both general and special education teachers at the identified schools were invited to participate in focus groups. Thirty-four teachers who were general, special, and related arts educators from two elementary, two middle, and two high schools participated in the focus groups. Participants across the school levels included: 10 elementary teachers in which one was an Academically Gifted Specialist; 12 at the middle school level with two who were special education teachers; and 12 at the high school level with four who were special education teachers and one was a student teacher. See Table 1 for additional participant demographic information.

Over the course of 1 year, two focus groups were conducted at the elementary level, two at the middle school level, two at the high school level, and one interview was held for a teacher at the secondary level unable to attend the focus groups. The focus groups and interview were held at the schools at the end of the school day. There were four to eight participants in each focus group, which lasted approximately one hour each. Two members of the research team attended each focus group.
One member was the facilitator, and was a university faculty or graduate assistant trained to facilitate focus groups. The facilitators used a script to keep facilitation across groups consistent. The second member of the research team took notes and coordinated paperwork for the participants. Before beginning the focus groups, participants signed consent forms and completed a demographic form. Each participant received a $25 gift card to compensate them for their time.

Once paperwork was completed, participants were given a case study with a list of questions to read before the focus group discussion began. The case study described a fictional student named Luke who was described as often playing and working alone, being a strict rule follower, and typically experiencing isolation or bullying by his peers. The case study was similar across school levels, but varied slightly to best reflect a student at that school level. For example in the elementary version of the case study, Luke was depicted as playing by himself during recess, while in the middle and high school versions, he was depicted as spending the time before morning bell in the library alone instead of in the halls like the other students. The specific focus group questions related to parent advocacy and collaboration were as follows: (a) How is Luke similar to or different from the students you work with? (b) What are your biggest concerns related to students such as Luke? (c) What would be most helpful to you in helping students like Luke? Issues regarding parent involvement and advocacy were the major foci of teachers’ responses to questions b and c.

The focus groups and interview were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim. One member of the research team transcribed the tapes and then a different member reviewed all of the tapes and transcripts to ensure accuracy. Next, transcripts and summaries of the focus groups were emailed to the participants to serve as a member check procedure (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, 2008). The participants who responded did not note any inaccuracies with the transcripts and had no concerns to share.

Data analysis. The focus group data were coded using a constant comparative method in which themes and subcategories were constantly revised and recoded as new themes and categories emerged from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A constant process of organizing and reviewing the data was used to cluster the data into discrete categories or domains. This process allowed the team to analyze data while the focus groups were being conducted. Memo writing (Charmaz, 2000) was used to organize the data and identify thematic relationships from the focus group transcripts helping us to understand the participants’ perceptions of parent involvement and advocacy. Codes were continually refined to ensure that the interpretations were thorough and consistent across the focus groups.

All data were coded by two researchers and inter-rater reliability coding was conducted (House, House, & Campbell, 1981). This process ensured that the specific delineation of the categories was consistent and congruent. The reliability procedure served as an inter-rater agreement index in which the data coders sought to reach agreement on thematic categories and the inclusion of specific data into those categories. The goal for agreement was on the description or categorization of the

### TABLE 1
Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>European American: 30</td>
<td>1 year: 1</td>
<td>Bachelor’s: 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: 3</td>
<td>31–49 years: 16</td>
<td>African American: 3</td>
<td>5–10 years: 15</td>
<td>Master’s: 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; 50 years: 8</td>
<td>DND: 1</td>
<td>&gt; 10 years: 18</td>
<td>DND: 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DND = Did not disclose.
data rather than the frequency of the data, which is typical in experimental studies. The number of agreements and disagreements were calculated per page and totaled for each focus group interview. The average inter-rater reliability was 87%. For those data in which agreement was not initially obtained, peer de-briefing and discussion was used to determine agreement of the inclusion of the data into categories.

Results

Several issues emerged related to teachers’ perceptions of parents and parents’ collaboration and advocacy activities focused on children’s school success. Teachers’ perceptions of parents focused on collaborating with “under” or “over” involved parents as well as with parents who were having difficulty accepting and navigating the diagnosis of their child’s ASD. Teachers stressed the need for parental collaboration with the school team and parental advocacy as well as provided examples of effective advocacy strategies. Of particular concern, was the need for parents to teach their children to be self-advocates and the crucial role parents can play in supporting their child’s or adolescent’s social development. The information below highlights the teachers’ perceptions.

Teachers’ Perceptions of Parents’ Involvement

Teachers’ perceptions of parents ranged from their having to deal with parents who are “over involved” or “under involved” with their children’s schooling. Teachers also were concerned about parents who were perceived to be unrealistic and guilty about their children’s ASD diagnosis. Teachers’ perceptions of parents were important indicators of collaboration between the home and school.

The issue of too much parent involvement or advocacy was a concern for teachers. Teachers indicated, “We see a little bit too much involvement from parents. They ask for resources and supports that our schools cannot provide.” A specific example provided included: “We don’t have a sensory room where these students can go to chill and sit in a chair to swing or bounce if they need to. We just don’t have any of that.” Teachers felt that in certain circumstances parents were unrealistic about the supports and services schools can provide. Conversely, teachers discussed the issue of parents who were not involved with their children’s schooling. Teachers described these “under involved” parents as: “A lot of parents are not going to come in and talk to me about their child – they either do not know how to or some parents had difficulty in schools themselves from being in special education classes.” Thus, these teachers recognized that many parents do not have the skills to be advocates for their children. On the other hand, teachers felt some parents were not “ready” to be advocates for their children.

Teachers felt parental lack of advocacy and involvement often was because some parents were struggling with the acceptance of their child’s disability. At the elementary level, teachers reported parents appeared to be trying to understand what it means to have an ASD diagnosis and how that impacts their child’s school success. For instance, a teacher shared that parents may not know much about child development and are “just really lost” with their child who has ASD. They referred to parents expecting their child to be perfect. “There is not a lot of acceptance when their children are ages 5 or 6.” Teachers explained that often parents of younger children have not had much experience with other children – so they do not understand what is typical development. Elementary teachers’ perceptions were that parents were searching for information and resources while trying to accept and understand ASD and its implications for their children.

However, teachers of middle school aged youth described parents who still struggled with guilt and their child’s diagnosis of ASD. One teacher explained: “We had an eighth grader who had ASD and was a paper eater.” Finally, his mother said to us – “OK – I have to deal with the elephant in the room – my son is not like other eighth graders.” Thus, teachers recognized the difficult adjustment process in accepting a child’s ASD diagnosis.

Based on these perceptions of parents, teachers discussed having “careful conversations” with parents about their child’s development and performance in the general education classroom. Teachers explained that parents were often uncomfortable with their
child being the focus of concern for the school or teachers – so they recognized that expressing concern about a student has to be done in a very sensitive manner. Teachers explained this further by stating, “I use parent conferences as a teaching tool to talk to parents about what is working at school for their child while trying to educate parents about autism.” Thus, teachers felt they needed to educate and empower parents toward becoming informed advocates for their children and youth with ASD. They emphasized that parents need to understand ASD, and also the vast array of services and supports available in the school and community.

**Need for Collaboration and Advocacy**

The discussion of having “careful conversations” with parents led teachers to elaborate further on the need for collaboration and advocacy with/from parents to ensure the success of students with ASD. Teachers stressed the critical importance of parental advocacy. As one elementary teacher emphasized, “The more aware, educated, and involved the parent is with their child’s autism characteristics – the more successful the child is going to be.” Many teachers at the high school level discussed how students are on their own in high school because parents do not typically come in and advocate for their adolescent’s needs. As one teacher emphasized, “when these kids with ASD get to high school, they are on their own unless the parents advocate for them which is not very common.” All teachers recognized how helpful it would be to obtain information from parents about “helpful hints, behaviors, clues, or whatever about the student with ASD rather than waiting three to four weeks going through a steep learning curve trying to figure out what works and doesn’t work for students with ASD.” A teacher emphasized this important parental advocacy role by stating: “Parents understand what makes their kid tick or NOT – they know their kid more than anybody else.” Thus, the critical importance of parental collaboration and advocacy was highlighted by teachers.

Middle and high school teachers also emphasized the importance of adolescents’ self-advocacy skills. Teachers perceived parents to be struggling with explaining the ASD diagnosis with their child. One teacher noted, “Parents are really struggling with how do we tell them they have autism?” Though teachers sympathized with parents’ dilemmas, there was a perception that delaying diagnosis-related discussions was problematic. One teacher stated, “There are times when parents try to hide stuff (about their child’s ASD diagnosis) from their children. Thus, they are not making it easy for their son or daughter.” Further, teachers at the high school level discussed how difficult it was for students with ASD to make adjustments to changing class schedules with different teachers and students every period. A high school teacher emphasized, “these students need to know how to say ‘these are my strengths and this is what I need help with’.” High school teachers recognized that if the adolescent with ASD or his or her parents did not have advocacy skills, it often takes a long time for the teacher to learn how to accommodate for the student with ASD within an inclusive education setting. They felt it was important for the adolescent to advocate about the accommodations he or she might need to be successful in school.

Another important area of concern related to parent involvement and advocacy related to the promotion of the child’s or adolescent’s social skills. Teachers discussed how their curricula are so academically focused causing them to have little time or resources to facilitate the child’s or adolescent’s social skills. As teachers, “we need for parents to teach social skills”. However, teachers recognized the importance of their roles in connecting students with ASD with accepting and supportive peers. Teachers discussed grouping students who are socially awkward with more socially competent peers for class work and lunch groups but were concerned about their own abilities and resources to promote appropriate social behaviors.

Teachers at the middle and high school levels stressed the importance of appropriate interpersonal interactions for adolescents. As one teacher stated, “It doesn’t really matter about the academics but it is the interpersonal interactions that are more important for college, for working at Burger King or IBM. These adolescents need appropriate behaviors for the work place.” Thus, teachers were quite concerned about the social skills of their stu-
dents with ASD, but felt they needed strong collaboration and advocacy from the parent to promote students’ social competence.

Positive Examples of Collaboration and Advocacy

Teachers also provided many examples of parental advocacy promoting the child’s and adolescent’s school success. Such examples included information sharing, Circle of Friends (Taylor, 1997) networks, and IEP information sheets or booklets to assist the teachers in understanding their children and youth with ASD. More information regarding these strategies is provided below.

Helpful parent implemented strategies for facilitating the child’s or adolescent’s social skills included working with the sibling of the student with ASD to promote the youth’s social skills and a Circle of Friends model (Taylor, 1997). One particular example shared was when parents supported their child’s social skills by encouraging the sibling who is typically developing to mentor their sibling with ASD in needed social skills. As one teacher stated, “In the past, we have had older siblings help their sibling with autism be more social by introducing him to their friends and by being the sibling’s social coach.” Alternatively a Circle of Friends approach (Taylor, 1997) was noted in which parents facilitated a group of friends and peers for their adolescent with autism to accompany that adolescent to certain social outings but also for social interactions at school such as lunch groups, club meetings, and school sponsored sporting events. Other examples of parents providing supports regarding their child’s or adolescent’s social skills included parents who created a social group for students with ASD where they could “hang out” together. Teachers felt this approach helped parents and students with ASD find a social group and feel a sense of belonging in the high school setting.

Examples of positive parent-professional information exchange included teachers and parents sharing “goal sheets” from students’ IEPs. Teachers also shared how helpful parents have been who have shared booklets or information sheets about their child or adolescent with ASD at the beginning of the school year or semester. This information included the child’s characteristics, particular interests, IEP goals and objectives, and classroom accommodations. As one teacher explained, “If parents can help me understand their child better – it helps me support them in an inclusive classroom so much better.” Teachers stressed that the information parents can and are willing to share about their child or adolescent is so much more helpful than what they can decipher from an IEP or educational team meeting.

Clearly, teachers’ perceptions of parents influenced their descriptions of parent-professional collaboration and parental advocacy. Perceptions of parents ranged from being over involved and unrealistic about the supports that their children might need in school to being under involved because of their lack of advocacy skills or their struggle with the acceptance of their child’s autism diagnosis. Regardless of these different perceptions of parents, all teachers recognized how critical home-school collaboration is to ensure students’ with ASD success.

Also, parent information and advocacy was viewed as essential for teachers and peers to understand and accept students with ASD. Positive examples included parents sharing information about their child with the class, parents promoting their child or youth’s social skills, and parents sharing specific information about the child’s or adolescent’s learning strengths and needs with teachers. Thus, the teachers recognized that students with ASD as well as teachers themselves need information and support from parents.

Discussion

Results from this study provide insight into teachers’ perceptions regarding partnering with parents. Teachers shared information in several areas such as the need for parental advocacy and information sharing to their struggles with collaborating with “over involved parents” adding to our understanding of partnerships and collaboration between parents and professionals. This information can inform both practice and research. Following is a discussion of specific implications for practice, limitations, and future directions for research.
Implications for Practice

This study highlights several areas for professionals to consider when working with parents. There is a strong need for increased teacher awareness and understanding of parent experiences and needs. Based on what teachers in this study shared and other research exploring parent experiences, several implications for practice emerge. Below are suggested strategies for teachers when working with parents.

Recognize a continuum of parent involvement. In this study, many teachers had the perception that parents are “over involved” or “under involved” in their child/adolescent’s schooling. This is consistent with other research that found educational professionals wanted parents to be involved, but did not value parents who gave too much input (Bezdek et al., 2010). Though teachers would like parents to be involved, there are particular ways in which they would like parents to do so. Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear what this balance would look like, making it difficult for parents to know what level or type of involvement they should have related to their child/adolescent’s schooling. In addition, not all parents have skills or resources that promote partnering with schools. In this study, teachers reported understanding that not all parents knew how to help support teachers, which is consistent with other research indicating that many professionals realize parents may not have the time, resources, or skills to carry out supports at home (Bezdek et al., 2010). Providing a variety of ways in which parents can be involved may help parents find ways to be involved that work for them (Rodriquez et al., 2014). Professionals need to recognize that there is a continuum of parent involvement and meet parents where they are. Parents will be involved at differing levels of intensity based on their individual skills and resources. Evidence based person centered planning tools like Making Action Plans (MAPS; Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989) can assist parents in providing input for goal development in IEP meetings (Wells & Sheehey, 2012).

Provide extra support during diagnostic process. The disconnection between parents and teachers may begin during the diagnostic process. In this study teachers reported perceptions of parents struggling with their child’s diagnosis of ASD, noting parents seemed to have feelings of guilt or unrealistic expectations of what professionals could provide. However, other research has highlighted that many parents report feelings of frustration and a need to “fight” for their children during the diagnostic process (Braiden et al., 2010). Parents also have reported feelings of confusion during the process (Braiden et al., 2010) and lack of information from professionals once a diagnosis is made (Osborne & Reed, 2008). Parents have reported feeling like they are on their own to locate information (Glaazar & Overall, 2012). Teachers may be underestimating the amount of support or unaware of the type of support parents need during the diagnostic process and immediately following diagnosis. This period of time is likely to set the foundation for future partnership and collaboration. If parents are feeling unsupported and teachers are feeling like parents are steeped in guilt or harboring feelings of anger, there is little room for productive collaboration. Professionals might consider targeting this time period as one for providing extra support and focusing on the parent-professional relationship. Recognizing that parents are dealing with a lot of stress, frustration, and other emotions during this time period could help professionals understand parents’ perspectives. In addition, providing information about the process, roles of professionals on the team, interpretation of diagnostic results, and information on resources is a key need of parents.

Support for parents in their advocacy roles. Despite this potential disconnection, some teachers in this study reported having “careful conversations” with parents in order to foster collaboration. Teachers emphasized the need for parents to advocate for their children. Other research has found that parents are most likely to be involved when teachers invite them (Anderson & Minke, 2007) and parents need guidance on how to be involved in their child/adolescent’s education (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). It may be necessary for teachers to provide coaching on how to effectively advocate during these “careful conversations.” Parents may need guidance on how to advocate and are already looking to teachers for support and information. Teachers in this
study also indicated that middle and high school students should be learning how to self-advocate. Self-advocacy is an essential skill to help students prepare for maximum independence in adulthood. Professionals may need to facilitate the process for helping parents and youth advocate. Parents may need support in working with their children to learn to self-advocate, as well.

**Target key areas for ongoing collaboration.** A particular area that teachers in this study noted needing support from parents is in the area of social skill development. Teachers noted that academic curricula are heavily focused on academics, not leaving much time for targeting social skill development. Teachers shared that parents often had helpful strategies related to fostering social skill development such as working with a sibling or using a Circle of Friends Model (Taylor, 1997). Teachers appreciated ideas from parents and help in implementing social skills related strategies. Research has found that partnerships between parents and teachers are critical when it comes to social skill development (Murray et al., 2009). It may be helpful for teachers to explicitly tell parents how helpful their input is in this area. Parents may not realize their help is desired and needed.

Teachers in this study also shared other strategies that helped support a positive parent-teacher relationship. One included the exchange of goal sheets from students' IEPs. Another was parent-created information booklets given to teachers to help get to know students. These strategies could be used at any time throughout the school year, but key times that may be overlooked are during the annual IEP meeting and at the beginning of the school year. Parents have reported a desire for IEP meetings to be more collaborative than they typically are (Fish, 2006). School professionals may create unintentional barriers to collaboration during IEP meetings by using jargon (Barclift, 2010) and putting parents in a position to listen or answer questions (Childre & Chambers, 2005) instead of working together to develop the IEP. Changing the way IEP meetings are carried out may be a pivotal area for building collaborative relationships with parents. Specifically, eliminating jargon, making space for parents to share, and integrating parents' ideas could have a noticeable positive impact on the parent-professional relationship.

**Limitations**
The results of this study need to be considered in light of its limitations. Although this study targeted educators across grade levels from multiple schools, all participants were from one school district. In addition, the participants in this study were volunteers. It is possible that those who volunteered had particularly positive or particularly challenging experiences related to inclusion or working with students who have ASD. This sample may not be representative of all school professionals. Further, a systematic investigation of parent perceptions of partnerships would enhance the study’s results by obtaining viewpoints from multiple stakeholders in the partnership process. Finally, because this investigation was a component of a larger study aimed at understanding teachers’ perceptions of the social support needs of students with ASD, teacher preparation practices, and current strategies most helpful for the inclusion of students with ASD, the emphasis of the focus group questions was not entirely on parent-professional collaboration. Therefore, participating teachers may not have had the opportunity to fully elaborate on their perspectives of parent-professional collaboration.

**Future Research Directions**
Future research should continue to identify variables associated with successful collaboration and strong parent-teacher partnerships. Though some variables have been identified by parents, less is known about what teachers view as helpful collaboration strategies. Further, even the variables that have been identified are broadly defined (such as open communication) and would benefit from specific, concrete strategy identification. For example, in this study, teachers reported wanting parents to advocate for their children, but noted concerns with parents being too involved or not involved enough. Identifying what that specifically entails would be helpful to both parents and teachers. Relatedly, research is needed on evaluating the effectiveness of collaboration techniques. In addition to needing
research identifying specific techniques that might be effective, research is needed to evaluate what works in different situations for different individuals.

Moreover, further research is needed on professional preparation in collaboration. Future research should work toward identifying what is needed to prepare school staff with collaboration skills, as well as identifying the best timing of providing education. Providing this education in pre-professional programs will likely look different than providing it in professional development to practicing teachers. Also, general education teachers and special education teachers are prepared differently than each other, as they are prepared for different roles. However, as more schools move toward inclusive models, there is more overlap in their jobs than there has been historically, highlighting the need for all educators to be skilled in promoting and sustaining positive collaboration with parents. Further, parents may benefit from participation in trainings related to collaboration with school staff. It is important to develop and evaluate appropriate and effective learning opportunities for parents.

Finally, future research should strive for diverse samples. Including participants from many different schools, across different regions of the country is important. Also, including participants across racial and ethnic groups is essential.

Conclusion

This study adds to the research body on parent-professional collaboration. Specifically, it helps fill a gap in our understanding of teacher perceptions of parents, which is an area with very little research. Understanding how both parents and teachers perceive their partnership (or lack thereof) provides valuable information for potential changes to practice and new directions for future research. In addition, a greater understanding and appreciation of parent-professional partnerships will yield better outcomes for children and youth with ASD and other disabilities in schools.

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