Family Expectations: One Dimension of Effective Family-Teacher Partnerships

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Abstract

Development of family-school partnerships is no longer a mutually exclusive responsibility reserved solely for special educators. All teachers are called to assume a more active role in these partnerships, which have not only been shown to increase family satisfaction but also to increase student achievement. To provide teachers with information to better engage in family partnerships, we studied the expectations of 257 families of students receiving special education. Specifically, we examined the effect of the child’s race, gender, and disability type on the family’s response. Only disability type produced a significant difference in the family’s preferred response theme. More families emphasized “relationship building” behaviors than any other theme.

Keywords: family-school relationships, family expectations, collaboration, family satisfaction
Family Expectations: One Dimension of Effective Family-Teacher Partnerships

The purpose of this study is to extend current findings on factors that influence expectations of families of special education students. During a family interview, families were encouraged to discuss their child’s education. From analysis of the family comments, an effort was made to determine if the information communicated by the family varied based on three specific variables associated with the child: type of disability, gender, and race.

Investigators wished to examine the expectations of families in order to determine if a pattern existed between families of different groups of children. Specifically, in this study, we investigated the following research questions:

• Is there a difference between observed frequency and expected frequency in response theme between genders?

• Is there a difference between observed frequency and expected frequency in response theme among the four identified racial or ethnic groups?

• Is there a difference between observed frequency and expected frequency in response theme among the seven identified disability types?

By analyzing results from the above questions we sought to answer the following practical questions faced by teachers and administrators: Would families of children with less severe disabilities feel increased need for teachers to challenge their child to develop to the fullest potential? Conversely, would families of children with more severe or physical conditions be more concerned with safety and care giving? Do families have differing expectations for the education of their child dependent on their child’s gender? Are family expectations influenced by race?
Review of the Literature

Legislation, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) has thrust collaboration with families into the national spotlight. Collaboration with families is no longer a mutually exclusive responsibility reserved solely for special education teachers. As IDEIA (2004) emphasized access to the general education curriculum, all teachers are now called to assume an active role in these partnerships. All teachers have increased contact with families of students in special education and play a larger role in developing the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and in determining appropriate accommodations and modifications (Patterson, Webb & Krudwig, 2009).

Parent involvement in education is widely regarded as critical to students’ success in school. On-going parent involvement has been linked to enhanced cognitive development, increased student achievement, and higher attendance and engagement in school (Alexander & Dore, 1999; Ouimette, Feldman & Tung, 2006; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Additionally, evidence exists that effective family-teacher partnerships support success in inclusive settings, aid in the development of more positive attitudes toward schooling, support teachers to better understand the family’s culture, and better prepares families to engage in effective partnerships across their child’s educational career (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Childre & Chambers, 2005; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Spann, Kohler & Soenksen, 2003; Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull, Poston, & Nelson, 2005; Xu & Filler, 2008).

Partnerships are mutually supportive interactions that demonstrate reciprocity and focus on meeting mutually agreed upon needs. Family-teacher partnerships are multi-level processes that encompass overlapping concepts in the literature: collaboration, family relations, family
satisfaction, loyalty, honesty, support, shared responsibility, shared decision-making and mutual goals (Keen, 2007; Summers et al., 2005). It is important to realize, however, that partnerships are not static relationships with consistent fifty-fifty give and take but are dynamic relationships operating on a flexible continuum of interactions (Alexander & Dore, 1999).

Identifying family concerns and the parameters families expect of their relationship with their child’s teacher can be challenging for teachers. Family expectations are influenced by each family’s unique characteristics, prior experiences, frames of reference, culture, needs and resources (Applequist, 2009; Beverly & Thomas, 1999; Lea, 2006; Ouimette et al., 2006; Xu & Filler, 2008). Frequently, families may not fully participate in their child’s education as they feel blamed or judged for their child’s problems or they may feel that they have limited power in decision making (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Childre & Chambers, 2005; Summers et al., 2005; Xu & Filler, 2008). Families, particularly those who have had previous negative experiences with an educational system, may not value partnering with their child’s teacher or the teacher and family may not agree as to what constitutes appropriate involvement (Alexander & Dore, 1999; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009).

A number of child-related factors may influence the establishment of productive alliances. Among these child-related influences are the child’s gender, race, and extent of the child’s disability. In addition, family-related factors can be an important component of family school partnerships. The family’s perspective toward schooling and their expectations for their child’s special education services may be influenced by variables such as family education level, socio-economic status, and urban versus rural location (Applequist, 2009). Families whose background or culture differs from the mainstream culture may hold dissimilar beliefs about treatment etiology. Additionally, misunderstanding and miscommunication may result when
families of children from diverse backgrounds do not feel their values are respected and their concerns addressed.

Starr, Fox, Cramer, and Singh (2006) suggested that families of children with learning disabilities were less satisfied than parents of either children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or children with intellectual disabilities, leading to a suggestion that teachers may be better able to form relationships with some groups of families relative to others. While Westling (1996, 1997) did not measure collaborative relationships per se, he reported that family experiences in the educational process vary by the extent of the child’s disability.

This present study can enlighten teachers of factors families find important and explores how the specific child-related variables being investigated influence the family’s expectations. We examined the experiences of 257 families of children who receive special education services in order to investigate if the child-related factors investigated influence the family’s expectations. We identified themes that families found important in shaping their expectations for the education of their child with a disability and investigated the factors of the child’s gender, race, or disability, to determine the influence, if any, of these factors on the development of these preferred family themes.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of families of children aged four to twenty-one with disabilities was solicited among families who were part of a larger interview process. All families involved volunteered to participate and no effort was made to recruit or assign families based on their known or perceived satisfaction with their child’s schooling.
Analysis of the demographic characteristics revealed that 63% of the students were male and 37% were female. By race, 71% were Caucasian, 11% African American, 5% Hispanic and 13% “other” or the race was not reported. The breakdown of students by seven most frequently occurring disability types is displayed in Table 1. To obtain “type of disability,” interviewers relied on family report of special education classification, but diagnosis was not verified.

Table 1

*Individual Participant Demographics by Disability Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnoses / Reported Condition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism Spectrum Disorder</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Disabilities /Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Disabilities/Speech Delay</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disabilities / Down Syndrome</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory Impairment</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/Behavior Disability (e.g. oppositional defiant, obsessive compulsive, post-traumatic disorder)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the majority of instances, the responder was the child’s mother; however, fathers, custodial family members, and foster family members were also responders. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face and most participants lived in close proximity to the two
universities in the northeast quadrant of a southern state. All participant students received special education services, although specific placement type was not solicited.

**Procedures**

**The interviews.** The investigation was coordinated by faculty members from two universities. Families were interviewed in order to learn about the family’s expectations for services for their child. During these interviews, no identifying information was recorded, thus anonymity was ensured. Interviewers received training in interviewing techniques, cultural and legal aspects of the special education process, terminology, and in utilizing the semi-structured interview guide provided by faculty coordinators.

In educational research, open-ended questioning and other qualitative methods are being used more frequently as these methods allow participants to tell of their experiences and expectations in their own words (Applequist, 2009; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Starr et al., 2006). For this effort, questions focused on family adjustment to having a child with a disability, family engagement with their child’s school and educational program, factors affecting family-school relationships, and family expectations. Following are examples of the open-ended questions asked of informants:

- How has the child’s disability affected your family? Other children in your family?
- How are you involved in setting your child’s IEP goals and placement decisions?
- How do you best communicate with your child’s teacher?
- What one thing would you like to tell your child’s teacher anonymously?

Interviews were conducted in English unless the interviewer’s and the family’s preferred language was not English.
Development of response theme matrix. Previous studies were located that explored categorizing family stories and expectations (Applequist, 2009; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Quiacho & Daoud, 2006; Summers et al., 2005). From these studies, common family attitudes were identified and a matrix was developed for categorizing responses. The themes included in the resulting matrix embody factors similar to those previously characterized in effective family-teacher partnerships: a sense of competence, commitment, equality, positive communication, respect, and trust. The matrix was then reviewed by educators and family members who provided suggestions to wording and organization to distill broad categories into meaningful themes. This exercise provided content validity for the Response Theme descriptors and resulted in development of four categories compiled into the Response Theme matrix shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Theme</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME # 1</strong> Relationship Building</td>
<td>This theme is characterized by family comments associated with the demonstration of behaviors by their child’s teacher to build good-will with families and that made them feel like full partners in the family/school relationship. For example, families wanted to receive frequent, timely, and straightforward communication in a manner understandable and accessible to them. They wanted this communication to include information on their child’s strengths and not concentrate solely on problems or “issues.” They appreciated being kept appraised of schoolwork, conferences and school activities. Families wanted teachers to keep promises and respect the needs of their child and family. These families wanted teachers to view them (the parent) as an expert on their own child and not undermine their information or requests. They wanted opportunities and resources to enable them to fully participate in their child’s education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME # 2</strong> Encouragement &amp; High Expectations</td>
<td>This theme is characterized by family comments associated with the expectations families have for how teachers support and facilitate learning. Most importantly, families wanted teachers to hold high expectations for their children regardless of special need. Families expressed concern that their child was not challenged. Families appreciated teachers who expected their children to achieve, challenged them to try, encouraged them, and who</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
celebrate this achievement. Families wanted their children to be treated as full members of the school community and expected teachers to be instrumental in facilitating this. Families expressed desire for their child to have access to the same core curriculum available to all children.

### THEME # 3
**Teacher Knowledge and Expertise**

This theme is characterized by family comments associated with the teacher’s knowledge of their child’s condition. For example, families wanted teachers who were qualified, informed, and alert to symptoms and characteristics of the condition. They wanted teachers who took the time to learn about their child’s strengths and challenges and who used the best techniques for teaching and motivation. They appreciated the teacher’s ability and willingness to solicit and share current information.

### THEME # 4
**Gratitude**

This theme is characterized by family comments associated with family expressions of thankfulness. These families used highly charged words to express thanks and gratitude to their child’s teacher. This theme is differentiated from the previous themes by the fact that family comments classified as “gratitude” did not express any expectations or request specific action for the teacher. For example, comments classified under previous themes could include statements such as “I wish she would…”, “I like it when…” “It’s important to me when…” Comments classified as gratitude simply expressed appreciation for the important role that the teacher had played in their child’s growth and development.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative research techniques, such as coding of family’s open-ended interview responses, has been determined appropriate for allowing families to describe their experiences and expectations, for understanding the nature of situations and relationships, and for discovering multiple perspectives (Applequist, 2009; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The use of semi-structured interview guidelines allows for a conversation-like discussion with follow-up based on the person’s response (Lodico et al., 2006).

In this effort, family comments were coded by the lead investigators using the Response Theme matrix. Following coding and data entry, 58 of the survey documents (22.5%) were
randomly reviewed for consistency in coding and accuracy of data entry by university graduate students not participating in the project. One error was noted for an inter-rater reliability rate of 98%. Following coding, quantitative analysis procedures were conducted using SPSS software. Data were analyzed through coding and the use of Chi-square tests of independence.

Chi-square ($\chi^2$) tests of independence were used to examine the difference between observed and expected frequency of two variables. Research questions examine the frequency of each of four response themes (dependent variable) for each of three independent variables: race, gender, and disability type. This analysis was undertaken to determine whether or not the first variable in each research question is related to—or independent of—the second variable. A two variable Chi-square test of independence is similar to the test for an interaction effect in ANOVA that asks: Is the outcome in one variable related to the outcome in some other variable?

Although a non-significant $\chi^2$ is desirable (i.e., no discrepancy between the model and the data) the $\chi^2$ values increase as a function of sample size, meaning that in a large sample a trivial amount of misfit can lead to a significant $\chi^2$ value. Previously, statisticians were concerned about the assumption of minimum expected frequency values for appropriate use and interpretation of chi-square. Today, the general rule is that chi-square can be used appropriately even if expected frequency values are lower than what was previously acceptable provided that the sample size is a minimum of five times the number of cells (Aron, Aron, & Coups, 2009). In this study, several cells had low frequencies, but the sample size was large enough to assume validity.

**Results**

Our overall goal in these analyses was to examine possible child-related factors that influence expectations of families of children receiving special education services. In examining
the effects of a number of child variables, the primary question was the extent to which the
dependent variables of race/ethnicity, gender, and disability type affected the dependent
variable, Response Theme. Independent chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences
on the basis of race/ethnicity, and gender. Family expectations varied significantly based on
disability type. Table 3 illustrates the total number and percentage of family comments under
each Response Theme.

Table 3

*Family Comment by Response Theme*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Theme</th>
<th>Number Responses</th>
<th>Percent Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement, High Expectations</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Knowledge and Expertise</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Gender**

Family Response Themes were analyzed by the gender of the child. Families of male
children were more concerned with the teacher providing “encouragement and high
expectations.” Conversely, families of female children were more concerned with “relationship
building.” The differences were small, however, (e.g., 34% compared to 31%) and the Pearson
Chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association between gender and
Response Theme, $\chi^2 (3, n=257) = .395$. 
Race

The second analysis examined the race or ethnicity of the student as a significant predictor of the family’s Response Theme. Students were classified as Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, other or race unknown. A Chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association between race and Response Theme, $\chi^2 (9, n=257) = .241$. All groups rated “relationship building” as their highest priority. Both Caucasian and African American families rated “encouragement and high expectations” similarly high. Interestingly, Hispanic families scored this theme fairly low (16%) but scored “teacher knowledge and expertise” at the same high rate as “relationship building” (41%).

Disability

The last step of the analysis examined the relationship between the disability type and the family’s expectations. The Chi-square test for independence indicated significant association between disability and Response Theme ($\chi^2 (18) = 30.812, p=.03$). Based on these results, there is a real association between disability type and Response Theme. In addition, the measured effect size presented a medium level of association (Phi = .346). The results of this analysis are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Comment by Disability Type</th>
<th>Response Theme</th>
<th>ASD</th>
<th>PI</th>
<th>ADHD</th>
<th>LD/CLD</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>SI</th>
<th>EBD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Building</td>
<td></td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement and High Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Knowledge and Expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While “relationship building” was named as important by families representing all disability types, the importance assigned to this Response Theme was significantly higher by families whose children had sensory disabilities, intellectual disabilities and those reporting Autism Spectrum Disorders. Families of children with learning disabilities, communication disorders, emotional and behavioral disabilities and physical disabilities valued a teacher’s “encouragement and high expectations” significantly higher than any other group. Respondents across all disability categories consistently expressed a high value for teachers who have “knowledge and expertise,” with this being the highest rated theme by families of children with ADHD.

Discussion

Our finding that families of all racial backgrounds were concerned that teachers possessed “knowledge and expertise” and demonstrate “relationship building” behaviors supports previous findings that race was not a factor in family expectations for their child’s schooling (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Culture and language differences do impact family-school relationships, however, family functioning and opportunities for involvement have been found to be more critical than race for impacting the child’s educational success (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Based on these results, teachers should show respect to all families, taking advantage of opportunities to communicate good news. Ask, don’t tell. Keep promises, returning phone calls and e-mails promptly. Celebrate a variety of customs and holidays ensuring multiple

Gratitude

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>14%</th>
<th>2%</th>
<th>8%</th>
<th>6%</th>
<th>21%</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder; PI = Physically Impaired; ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; LD/CLD = Learning Disability / Communication Disorder; ID = Intellectual Disability; SI = Sensory Impairment; EBD = Emotional and Behavior Disability
opportunities are available for family involvement. Assist families to ask questions, helping them to feel empowered. Accommodate cultural and language differences, using the services of a cultural mediator, as needed, to support a reciprocal relationship with each family.

Families of both male and female students valued a teacher with “knowledge and expertise” and who exhibited “encouragement and high expectations.” This analysis provides evidence that families have only slightly different expectations based on the child’s gender. No prior research was located analyzing family expectations based on gender. Based on these results, teachers should provide opportunities for all children to participate in a variety of activities. Ask about and communicate student strengths to create expectations for future successes. Provide ways to explore a variety of career choices (e.g., class speakers, field trips, virtual field trips, internet exploration, class newspaper or news broadcasts) and support goal setting with all students. Create a sense of shared ownership among the child, family, and teacher.

The type of disability experienced by the child had the greatest effect on the family’s response. The high value placed on “encouragement and high expectations” by families of children with physical impairments as well as a relatively high value by families of children with sensory impairments agrees with previous findings that families of children with sensory and orthopedic impairments hold high expectations for their children. Additionally, reportedly a large percentage of families of children with visual impairments, Cerebral Palsy and emotional and behavior disabilities value the teacher’s efforts to build a relationship with the family (Hernandez, Harry, Newman, & Cameto 2008; Westling 1997). These findings are consonant with our results. In contrast, Starr and colleagues (Starr et al., 2006) found families of children with learning disabilities to be particularly interested in teachers possessing knowledge and
expertise. Our findings marginally validate previous findings as while all families of our study valued “knowledge and expertise”; families of children with learning disabilities and with communication disorders expressed the highest value for “encouragement and high expectations.” Our families concur with previous findings that families seek and appreciate teachers who have etiology-specific knowledge (Starr et al., 2006).

Based on these results, teachers should take steps to learn about each child’s condition. Access current information and, as appropriate, make information and resources available to families. Consider how families handle situations at home, honor family suggestions for modifications and ensure appropriate modifications and accommodations are available. Support families to use modifications, as needed. Maintain high expectations and ensure all children are able to participate in all class activities.

The results of this study extend previous investigations by examining possible ways to categorize family expectations and by considering possible variables that could drive these expectations. Participants were not randomly selected; however, the fact that families volunteered to be interviewed helped increase diversity among responders. The lack of random sampling limits generalizability, nonetheless. No effort was made to ensure families were a representative sample of the cultural or linguistic diversity of the geographic area where the majority of interviews took place. No information on family demographics was solicited due to the overall nature of the interview; however, family demographics, such as socio-economic status could have had an impact on family expectations. It was felt that questioning families concerning personal variables such as socio-economic status, family composition or education level could compromise families’ willingness to participate. It is recommended that family demographic variables, particularly education level and socio-economic status, be included in
future research efforts. No information was collected on the type of educational placement experienced by the students although placement could have had an influence on family expectations. Future research is warranted into possible differences in family perceptions and expectations based on educational setting.

Other limitations potentially effecting generalizability of the study resulted from the use of convenience sampling techniques. Low frequencies occurred in several participant “disability type” groupings and unequal representation was seen in both age and racial/ethnic groupings (63% male, 71% Caucasian). The large sample size somewhat mitigated these concerns.

Furthermore, it should be noted that family expectations may be a relatively temporary state. There is no guarantee that, at a later date, these same families would respond similarly. Nonetheless, this study provides a window into the range of family expectations. The lack of clinical knowledge and skills in differentiating the range of family expectations can be a barrier to the establishment of effective teacher-family partnerships (Alexander & Dore, 1999) possibly accounting for why teachers form effective partnerships with some families but not others.

**Conclusions**

In this study, we examined the expectations of families of children with disabilities. Our findings have the potential to provide teachers with an increased awareness of differing family expectations. Individualized approaches to working with families are needed as our results demonstrate that no response profile fits any one family or any one set of child characteristics. Our Response Themes serve solely as points of dialogue to bolster understanding of collaborative family-teacher partnerships and are not intended to dictate family responses or classify families. The fact that we found only disability type significantly related to Response
Theme underscores the importance of teachers implementing models of effective practice with all families without attempting to categorize children or families.
References


