

12-2-2019

Teachers' Perceptions of the Home-School Collaboration: Enhancing Learning for Children with Autism

Chana S. Josilowski
Capella University, shiffyjay@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the Communication Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons, and the Special Education and Teaching Commons

Recommended APA Citation

Josilowski, C. S. (2019). Teachers' Perceptions of the Home-School Collaboration: Enhancing Learning for Children with Autism. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(12), 3008-3021. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss12/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Teachers' Perceptions of the Home-School Collaboration: Enhancing Learning for Children with Autism

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the relationship between teachers and students' families and address the deficiencies in the body of research regarding the performance gap between children with autism and their age-equivalent peers. The research question was: How do teachers of children with autism perceive the home-school collaboration and its impact on learning? Ten state-certified special educators with at least 3 years' experience teaching children with autism, and experience collaborating with their students' families participated in face-to-face interviews, answering 8 open-ended questions in this generic qualitative study. Inductive thematic analysis yielded 6 themes: (a) collaboration improves learning, (b) communication is vital, (c) collaboration supports overall student improvement, (d) challenges impact collaboration, (e) parental involvement is imperative, and (f) teachers find ways to promote parental engagement. A strong home-school connection improved students' ability to grasp material in the classroom, decreased the children's anxiety and enhanced their sense of security; also, involved parents reinforced the learning process at home. Recommendations for future research include studying a larger sample to increase generalizability and covering a larger geographic area for better representation of the population.

Keywords

Collaboration, Teacher, Perceptions, Autism, School, Home, Learning, Generic Qualitative Methodology, Thematic Analysis

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Teachers' Perceptions of the Home-School Collaboration: Enhancing Learning for Children with Autism

Chana S. Josilowski

Capella University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

This study aimed to explore the relationship between teachers and students' families and address the deficiencies in the body of research regarding the performance gap between children with autism and their age-equivalent peers. The research question was: How do teachers of children with autism perceive the home-school collaboration and its impact on learning? Ten state-certified special educators with at least 3 years' experience teaching children with autism, and experience collaborating with their students' families participated in face-to-face interviews, answering 8 open-ended questions in this generic qualitative study. Inductive thematic analysis yielded 6 themes: (a) collaboration improves learning, (b) communication is vital, (c) collaboration supports overall student improvement, (d) challenges impact collaboration, (e) parental involvement is imperative, and (f) teachers find ways to promote parental engagement. A strong home-school connection improved students' ability to grasp material in the classroom, decreased the children's anxiety and enhanced their sense of security; also, involved parents reinforced the learning process at home. Recommendations for future research include studying a larger sample to increase generalizability and covering a larger geographic area for better representation of the population. Keywords: Collaboration, Teacher, Perceptions, Autism, School, Home, Learning, Generic Qualitative Methodology, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

The home-school connection affects children's whole beings and impacts not only their learning at school but also their learning at home (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, teachers must be aware of this connection and moreover, of how the home-school relationship impacts a child's learning. Teachers' perceptions and views of an issue in their classrooms often result in some sort of action (Bandura, 1993). This study investigated teachers' perceptions of the home-school collaboration and its purpose specifically for students with autism. By understanding teachers' perceptions, professionals and educators will be able to more effectively assist children with their learning.

Teachers of children with autism gain a special connection to their students, resulting in a unique channel of communication (Quill, 1995). This bond results in the teacher's understanding the child's needs. However, teachers can become too emotionally involved in the classroom (Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet, 2015), which can lead them to lose sight of the important factors outside of the classroom that might affect a child's ability to learn. Cultivating a strong relationship with parents can help prevent this oversight or neglect of influences (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). One aim of this study is to enable teachers to provide insight to how they relate to and involve parents in their children's education and how that interaction affects the ability to learn of children with autism. By understanding the home-school collaboration, teachers have the power to make every possible effort to eliminate

obstacles that stand in a child's way of success (Pianta et al., 2002). Obstacles may be the home environment or within the home-school collaboration itself.

Methods

Research Design

Generic qualitative inquiry was utilized to successfully complete this research. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used in order to fully capture teachers' experiences and perspectives about the home-school collaboration and its effect on children's learning outcomes. A generic qualitative research methodology was appropriate in this study to accurately answer the research question. Qualitative methods of research allow researchers or practitioners to investigate individuals' experiences with a certain aspect of their lives (Patton, 2014). Generic qualitative research methodology is a unique form of qualitative research. According to Caelli, Ray, and Mill (2003), generic qualitative methodology "is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies" (p. 4). Instead, generic qualitative research is used when researchers want to gain a complete understanding of a subject from their participants' perspectives, as generic qualitative research emphasizes individuals' reports of a real-life experience (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). While investigating from a generic qualitative perspective, a researcher learns about people's thoughts, perspectives, opinions, and attitudes about a topic or experience they had (Percy et al., 2015). Because this study focused on teachers' perceptions of the collaboration between a child with autism's school and parents, it was appropriate to use the generic qualitative research design.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through use of qualitative interviews. In a qualitative interview, the researcher creates interview questions based on their understanding of the topic and knowledge in the field. Additionally, semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with opportunities to add prompting questions to encourage clarification and elaboration (Percy et al., 2015).

According to Patton (2014), researchers who conduct interviews must be direct with the questions and ensure that all the questions are relevant to the topic. Additionally, questions should be free of any bias (Patton, 2014). The researcher created the interview questions for this study in order to prompt responses that were relevant to the study and would result in the necessary information to answer the research question. To ensure that the questions met the criteria of sound interview questions, the interview questions were reviewed with various qualitative experts during residencies who have had decades of experience as practitioners and are renowned researchers in the field. This input by subject matter experts allowed for improved validity of the study and ensured that each question would yield results necessary to answer the research question. The eight interview questions used in this study were as follows:

1. Starting from the beginning, can you tell me about your experiences with home-school collaboration with students with autism?
2. How would you describe the collaboration with the parents?
3. How is learning facilitated in the home-school collaboration?
4. What are the challenges in the home-school collaboration?
5. How do you perceive parents of children with autism's ability to collaborate with their child's school?

6. What kind of experiences have you had with children whose parents were involved in the collaboration between the home and school?
7. Are there any special experiences in the home-school collaboration that stand out for you?
8. Is there anything I have not asked you that think is important to know about the home-school collaboration?

Teachers of children with autism were purposefully sampled, who comprise the participants of interest for this study. Participants were 10 teachers of children with autism who were currently teaching during the time which the study took place. The teachers all had state certified special education licenses and a minimum of three years' experience teaching children with autism. The length of their experience working with children with autism ranged between 3 and 10 years. When it was determined that the participant met the inclusion criteria, an interview was scheduled. Participants also reported to have been engaged in the collaboration with parents while working with children with autism. Their experience provided them with insights on the home-school collaboration. Their experiences enabled the teachers to report and reflect on how the home-school collaboration enhanced the learning process of students with autism. Additionally, all teachers had knowledge in the field of teaching children with autism. All had completed a formal education and obtained state certification.

Recruitment of the participants finished when data saturation was met. Data saturation was identified in this study when information reviewed in the interviews began to reflect data already gathered from previous participants. When no new information emerged, it meant to the researcher that data saturation had been attained (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data Generation and Collection in Steps

Data collection for this generic qualitative research study proceeded through semi-structured conversational interviews. The initial meetings with the participants ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length and included signing the consent form, answering any questions participants had regarding the study, and conducting the interview itself. The interview questions were open-ended, not leading, and free from pre-suppositions. Although the questions used during the data collection process had been developed prior to the interview, additional prompting questions served to solicit elaboration or further information (Percy et al., 2015).

The entire interview was recorded using two digital recording devices. The data were then transcribed word-for-word by the researcher (Patton, 2014). Sampling was complete when no new information was being attained during the interviews and no new codes emerged in subsequent analysis. Once all data collection procedures were completed, data analysis for the study began in order to determine the answer to the research question, "How do teachers of children with autism perceive the home-school collaboration and its impact on learning?"

Data Analysis

Data analysis in steps with illustrations of a study plays a key role in the results, which emerge from the study. The reasoning for this influence is that the data analysis method determines the perspective from which a researcher will examine the data. The purpose of this study, to capture the perceptions of teachers of children with autism, was addressed by identifying similarities amongst participants' responses to the interview questions through use of inductive thematic analysis.

Inductive thematic analysis allows a researcher to attribute meaning to the patterns and establish themes within the data (Percy et al., 2015). Analysis of the responses from the interviews allowed organization, processing, and interpretation of the teachers' perceptions in order to answer the research question. The data analysis process which followed in this study included multiple steps, as described by Percy et al. (2015).

Data analysis began with coding, reading the transcribed interview of the first participant, and screening the data for relevant information that provided important information on teachers' perceptions of the home-school collaboration and the learning of students with autism. Once the data had been coded, the responses were screened for similarities in order to develop patterns within each interview. The similar relevant responses were clustered together.

The next step began with synthesis of patterns to develop themes across the data. Patterns were grouped based on their similarities in meaning and how they related to the research question. New summary statements were provided about each group of patterns, which resulted in the formation of themes. Member checking, detailed below, was the next step. Finally, all participants' responses were combined into patterns and themes. The data were joined together into a synthesis. This synthesis informed the researcher on teachers' perceptions of the home-school link and its impact on learning in children with autism.

Steps to Ensure Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Research Practice

During this study, participants had two contacts with the researcher. The first was the interview itself, and the other was to conduct member checking. Member checking is a procedure wherein a researcher completes the data analysis phase and then sends the analysis to the participants so that they can confirm that all the information reflects what the participants reported and actually meant to convey about the topic (Carlson, 2010). According to Creswell (2007), member checking is an "an attempt to assess the 'accuracy'" (p. 206) of research by returning to the participants to critically review what the researcher has found and to see what the researcher may have missed.

In this study, member checking was accomplished in two ways. First, the researcher discussed the analysis with the participants and asked follow-up questions during the analysis phase of the data to fill in any gaps in the interviews and provide more details where needed. For example, one participant stated that, "I find that when the parents collaborate, and they are on the same page as us it makes it that much easier." This statement needed more information as to what the teacher meant by "same page," which had not been clarified during the interview. Therefore, during member checking, the participant elaborated, stating that "same page" mean when "[parents] agree with what we are doing in school and believe that it is skills their child should be working on."

Once each transcribed interview was analyzed, another way member checking was accomplished was by e-mailing the analysis to the participants and reviewing it with them to ensure that they agreed with the patterns identified in the data. Participants were generally pleased with their analysis and stated that it aligned with their perceptions and thoughts.

Ethical considerations included protecting the sample of teachers of children with autism. Participants granted their informed consent before any data collection procedures began (Beahrs & Gutheil, 2014). The confidentiality of the participants was carefully safeguarded.

In order to ensure that all participants were aware of procedures and agreed to the conditions of the study, each was provided with a detailed description of all procedures prior to beginning any data collection. Additionally, each participant received informed consent forms. Teachers who participated in a face-to-face interview were handed the consent form

upon their arrival for the interview. Participants who participated in a Skype interview received the consent form via U.S. mail, and returned the form via U.S. mail as well.

To further ensure that the study did not provide any harm to participants, all aspects of the study, including a very detailed research plan had been approved by Capella University's institutional review board (IRB). After review, the IRB concluded that this study did not present any ethical challenges or threats to the participants.

Results

Description of the Sample

A population in a study are the people who meet the inclusion criteria and can contribute to the study. In this study, 10 teachers of children with autism comprised the sample, the individuals who actually participated. Purposeful sampling was the method of recruitment, and each participant recruited to the study met the inclusion criteria of the study.

Results of Qualitative Analysis

This study utilized inductive thematic analysis to develop six themes. Following is a detailed explanation of each one of the themes that includes supportive excerpts from the data.

Improving learning. Based on teachers' perceptions, when the home and school collaborate, learning improves for children with autism. In this study, teachers reported that when collaboration was ongoing, they noticed that the material and specific terminologies used at school, were used at home as well. For example, if a teacher used the phrase "calm body," to remind a child to remain calm, the parent began using that same phrase to help a child stay calm at home, too. In other words, the students were generalizing what they had learned in school: "Being that we follow the social thinking curriculum, all our terms and lingos get carried over in the home." These terms became familiar to the students with involved parents faster than to their peers whose parents were less active. Participants also found that the ideas being focused on in school were being reinforced in the home environment. As a result, the students had more exposure to the material and were able to generalize what they learned in school. For example, if a teacher was working with a student on remaining calm when there was a change in schedule, they would inform the parents so the family could practice the skill at home. This procedure resulted in the child's understanding the concept and practicing it throughout the day in a variety of environments at school as well as in the home.

Participants in the study noted that the collaboration strengthened learning because the material was reinforced multiple times throughout the day, even when the child was at home. One participant stated, "If the family knows what you are doing and how you're doing it, they can do it at home, too. This way the skills can generalize." One teacher commented about a child who had trouble preparing his medication. When the teachers communicated with the parents, she learned about the struggle the parent had each morning getting the child to independently taking their medication. The teacher created a program individually tailored to one student, wherein the child practiced and learned to count and sort his pills successfully. This participant perceived successful learning every time she collaborated with the parents of the child with autism who struggled to obtain a skill. Teacher's noted that with collaboration, "whatever we are focusing on throughout the school day is going to be carried over."

Communication. According to participants, communication plays a vital role in successful collaboration. Teachers noted that communication is the essence of collaboration. One participant mentioned that "a major part of collaboration just boils down to communication." Communication happens both ways. Teachers communicate with parents,

and parents communicate with teachers. Communication has to be frequent and consistent for the collaboration to work. Teachers noted they must constantly initiate collaboration through various forms of communication.

Based on results of my analysis, teachers take a lot of time to communicate with parents. They communicate via phone calls and extensive conversations. Teachers also write text messages and e-mails for quick updates to parents. Participants in the study also noted that their students have communication notebooks that teachers may use to report to parents about their child's daily progress and to suggest ways to reinforce the material in the home. Teachers found that communication was key in effective collaboration.

Overall student improvement. Teachers who participated in the study found that when home-school collaboration occurred, the behavior of a child with autism was positively impacted and changed for the better. Children with autism may display rigidity in their daily activities, resulting in friction at home and in school. One teacher noted that she was working on a social story with a child, in order to improve challenging behavior both at home and in school. Social stories provide an opportunity for a teacher to use a puppet character with the purpose of showing the child's feelings, experiences, and actions. This technique helps a child reflect on their actions, thoughts, and behaviors. Social stories were successful when the teacher and the parents worked together to address the child's aggressive behaviors towards his parents and siblings. The teacher shared feedback from a parent who stated, "She did do this strategy of social stories at home, and she commented to me that it made a tremendous difference, and her son was much calmer at home."

Teachers also perceived that collaboration gave a child a sense of calmness and security as well. When teachers and parents work together, the child feels more secure. One teacher noted that her students "know that we know everything that is going on. They feel safer, and they want us to help them." Strong communication between a teacher and a parent enhances the child's confidence. One participant quoted a parent who stated, "He was just a happier kid and more confident, and we saw the change with him in school."

With collaboration, overall behavior improves for a child with autism, resulting in a better home environment. Teachers noted that when the home and school formed a connection, they were able to address challenges and work through the challenges together. The results of the collaboration process facilitated the development of a healthy family environment. One participant stated, "It really worked out really nicely. It was so nice to see results from the beginning, and it changed the whole family dynamics." Another teacher stated that when the child was at home, "the other children felt safe around him." With collaboration, parent-child relationships and sibling relationships can be mended.

Challenges. In the process of forming relationships with parents, some challenges occur. Teachers reported that some parents were in denial about the diagnosis and struggles of their child with autism, which interfered with the success of the collaboration: "Some parents are more in denial, and they really are not interested in collaborating with school." Teachers reported these parents distance themselves from the school and lack interest in any school involvement: "I have one or two parents who are sort of in denial, and do not wish to collaborate, and just let whatever goes on in school." The teachers reported that denial was a big stumbling block for many parents, and that a parent's denial resulted in lower success rates for their children.

Another challenge faced by teachers is motivating parents to become involved in their child's school. One teacher noted, "The challenges I have, is having parents on board with projects you want to do." Another participant found it difficult to get the parent to agree to participate in general: "If they're ready then it could work. But first they have to be willing and open and ready to do it." Having parents become involved and play an active role in their child's education is still a struggle for many teachers.

Parents and teachers both have a lot of responsibilities and scheduling can be challenging. While working with others, there are always schedules and time differences to overcome. One teacher commented, "It's not easy to follow through. Parents have a lot of other things to be busy with, you know." Parents and teachers both have a lot of responsibilities and run a tight schedule: "The parents are busy, and the parents and I are on different schedules." Teachers noted that collaborating often with parents can be very time consuming, stating that "the phone calls and collaboration is very time-consuming." While teachers and parents are both running different schedules, teachers reported that they needed to make an extra effort to find time to communicate.

Parental involvement is imperative. Successful collaboration, as defined by the participants, can transpire only when the parents are involved. Teachers who participated in the study noted that parents have to cooperate and be involved. Otherwise, the collaboration cannot exist. One teacher specified, "Sometimes when the student gets home and you're not in contact with the parents, and the parent doesn't want to work on it at home, it can get very difficult." Teachers realized that the parents who wanted the collaboration played that important role in their child's life. One participant noticed that "in general when a parent wants to be in tuned with their child's needs, invested, and wants to help, they really do."

The parents' role is vital in the home-school collaboration. It represents the parents' active role in their child's education. They are a building block in their child's learning experience. A teacher stated, "I definitely talk to the parents about things that we are working on, and you know, ways that she can go about helping me in my goals." Teachers in this study recognized the vital role parents play in their child's learning process.

Aside from being an important part of the child's educational journey, a parent is also able to inform the school and help them create the best possible educational program. One teacher noted, "If we know what is going on at home, we can help them learn much better." Another teacher also commented, "If the staff in the classroom are collaborating with the family, then you know the important things that are going on in the kid's life." Teachers appreciate parents' input, as they understand how important parents' involvement is for a child's success: "You can use all that to help teach and make things relevant to the child."

Special education teachers of children with autism also believed that children of collaborating parents were more successful than their peers. One teacher claimed, "You could see the difference between the students whose parents do collaborate and have the school and home collaboration." They felt that those children performed better: "You could see these students, whose parents don't collaborate, are not progressing as much as the student whose parents are involved." This response validated the important role a parent plays in the child's learning, a role that impacts the child to the degree that when there is no collaboration, it their learning may be impeded.

Ways to promote parental engagement. According to participants, for teachers to realize the importance of parental involvement in school is not enough. Teachers need to promote the collaboration and encourage parents to participate. One way teachers promote parental engagement is through parent training workshops. Trainings cover many topics, including applied behavior analysis, a well-known method of teaching children with autism. One participant noted, "We like to give the parents the basic understanding of why it is so important to use this ABA methodology." The ABA methodology can enhance the development of academic, social, and emotional skills. Teachers expressed that with parent involvement, "The family knows what you're doing in the classroom and how you're teaching." Understanding and initiating ways to promote parental engagement results in improving the quality of parental involvement. This improvement is a major part of a successful collaboration.

When parents are engaged, they feel a sense of support. Participants in the study realized that parents actually needed the support in order to pull through challenging times and

stay focused on the collaboration: “The parent just needs that extra support not even specifically with this child, but the home situation.” Another teacher found that “some of them have really big families, a lot of little kids, the husband may not be home all the time, and let's say, they may not have] the support at home to do it.” The teachers concluded that the parents needed support to collaborate; therefore, many of the teachers initiated ways to continuously reinforce the parent-teacher contact. One participant stated, “We don't give up as easily, and say, okay, the parent is not going to collaborate. We are not going to try.” Teachers expressed their understanding that the parents need encouragement.

While continuously encouraging and involving parents, teachers also kept in mind that the ability to collaborate varies from parent to parent. Although it is important to have high expectations, teachers also mentioned the need to respect individual differences. A participant stated, “It depends on the parent, and it depends on the child. Each one is really an individual case.” Another teacher mentioned, “I think it is individual to each parent.” The teachers expressed that every parent has their strengths and weaknesses, and not all parents have the same ability to collaborate.

Discussion

The teachers' descriptions of their experiences and perceptions of home-school collaboration yielded a clear understanding of the benefits and challenges of the process of collaboration. More specifically, the teachers asserted that collaboration benefits students with autism, the parents of these students, and the schools the children attend.

Throughout the course of this study, a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences emerged. Teachers want what is best for their students. They attempt every possible way to help them perform and learn. Teachers also strongly encourage the home-school connection, knowing its benefit for students learning. According to Scheidecker and Freeman (2015), teachers go out of their way to provide the best education for their students and engage in best practices. Scheidecker and Freeman's work demonstrated and reinforced the findings of this study, which reported about teachers' desire to help their students reach their potential. Although teachers identified many benefits to the home-school collaboration, they described some challenges as well.

Challenges that teachers faced while trying to engage parents were parents' lack of interest in their child's school. Hughes et al. (2015), suggested that stress may cause parents to disconnect and become uninvolved in their child's education. The teachers who participated in this study also reported this phenomenon and described that parents who were not involved compromised their child's learning and success. These uninvolved parents stand in stark contrast to those who take an active role. Additionally, teachers specifically noted that engaging in the collaboration yielded results which benefitted the child, the parent, and the teachers themselves.

Benefits for the Student

A new idea discovered in the results of this study was that the home-school collaboration offered emotional support to the child. Children benefitted from having the important adults in their lives actively interested and invested in their educations. The home-school collaboration served as emotional support for the child. Research suggested that students with autism need support far beyond the area of academics (Bolic Baric, Hellberg, Kjellberg, & Hemmingsson, 2016). According to Bolic Baric et al. (2016), students needed psychosocial and emotional supports through support groups, parent involvement, and specialized

instruction in order to learn. This research confirmed the important role parental involvement plays in providing emotional support, a key factor for a child with autism's learning.

Benefits for the Parents

Parents who engage in collaboration receive much-needed support from the teacher speaking to them and sharing various strategies. Teachers noticed that the parents expressed relief after a long conversation with their child's teacher. Previous researchers suggested that engaging in a collaborative relationship with the school supports a parent (Soutullo, Smith-Bonahue, Sanders-Smith, & Navia, 2016). Strategies a teacher can share include ways to reinforce positive behaviors and methods for reducing challenging behaviors. For example, teachers in the study reported using social stories to help parents with their child's behavior. According to Thompson and Johnston (2013), social stories are a common method used to help a child understand their feelings and emotions, serving as a tool to help them regulate their feelings. With collaboration, a parent can also reinforce material their child learns at school, as well as inform a teacher of skills a child may need to improve. Parents become informed as to what is being taught in school and are able to reinforce it in the home.

How Learning Is Improved

With a collaborative relationship with parents, teachers reported they were more informed about the children's specific needs and abilities, and they could design appropriate instruction. Collaborating provided a unique opportunity for teachers to engage in discussions with parents and therapists. According to Jones et al. (2014), when teachers understand children better, they are able to teach them more effectively. This understanding often comes from parents' reports of their child, which deliver a better understanding to the teacher (Jones et al., 2014). In the current study, teachers learned about children's unique ways of expressing themselves, along with their unique educational levels. Parents also reported on specific sounds or behaviors which a child used to communicate certain feelings, such as hunger or fatigue.

Results of the study indicated that when a child's parent was involved, the children were able to better understand the material and generalize the information. Teachers reported that when a child's parent maintained an open collaborative relationship with the child's teacher, it enhanced the child's academic, social, and emotional learning. Cheung and Pomerantz (2012) suggested that students benefit from the home-school collaboration. Teachers reported that when the child knew that their mom was invested and supported their education, they felt more confident in completing their work.

Challenges and Overcoming Obstacles

One challenge that the teachers reported was finding ways to engage parents in the collaboration process. The teachers offered several possible explanations for uninvolved parents. Teachers' responses to surveys indicated that some parents seemed to be in denial about their child's need for additional support, and this avoidance of reality may have caused parents to avoid interacting with school officials who wished to discuss the child's needs.

The teachers described that they responded by accepting the difficulties parents had with engaging in the home-school collaboration. The teachers reported providing support in an understanding manner and offering resources, information, and training to educate parents about their children's conditions and educational needs. Teachers expressed the importance of not giving up and continuing to try to overcome the parents' reluctance in order to make the home-school collaborating successful. One participant noted that if they could not reach a

parent on the phone or through the child's communication notebook, they waited until the parent came in for a meeting or school event to initiate collaborative efforts.

Another challenge that teachers faced while collaborating was finding the time in their busy schedule for these conversations and extensive meetings. Research suggests that teachers are very pressured by curriculum demands and instruction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). These demands leave little time for extra planning and engaging parents. In attempt to overcome this obstacle, teachers reported that they would create a system of talking to parents once a week or once a month and limit the length of those conversations.

Details on the power that the connection between a teacher and parent contains also emerged. The connection between the home and a child's teacher contains the potential to help a child succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. This study revealed that when a teacher is consistently communicating with the home, a child's learning improves. As Cheung and Pomerantz (2012) suggested, the collaboration between the home and school promotes learning in children with autism. Additionally, when the child is aware that their parent is involved, they feel more confident (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). This improvement is a result of the support that they are receiving for their hard efforts. Children with autism truly benefit from their parents' involvement.

A primary contribution from this study was a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the teachers' experiences and perceptions of the home-school collaboration. This comprehensive understanding offers insight into how to structure the home-school collaboration process to achieve academic progress for students with autism. To form a successful collaborative relationship with a parent, teachers described the importance of being determined to create that connection, trying to reach out to parents multiple times and in various ways, and remaining available and understanding to parents.

A teacher needs to be aware of any obstacles that may impede the success of the home-school collaboration. Oftentimes, according to participants, parents may experience denial of the extra support their child needs, and poor communication or lack of interest may prove to delay the collaboration or even disconnect the home and school. However, teachers have noticed the difference in a child with autism's progress, which they attributed to their relationship with the parent. This progress and improvement serves as a source of motivation for the teachers to continue to pursue the collaboration and solicit parents' cooperation and contributions.

While stressing the importance of the collaboration, teachers reported the process they employed to get the parents involved and detailed the outcomes they noticed. Whether it was through their communication notebooks, phone conversations, or parent-teacher conferences, this study provided details on the benefits of these methods of communication. For example, forming that home-school connection helped one teacher offer emotional support to the parents and strategies to assist the parents in the home. Additionally, the child became more confident and motivated to learn.

Another discovery of this research was the effect the collaboration has on the child with autism. Aside from improving the child's learning, a benefit strongly supported in the literature available in the field, a child's emotional well-being was also impacted with increased confidence and reduced anxiety that derives from knowing that their parent is supporting them in their learning. Results of this study indicated that when a child knows that their parent is involved and invested in their education, they gain a sense of security. Thus, the collaboration provides support for them and promotes higher levels of confidence in their work.

Limitations

The sample in this study consisted of only 10 participants. With a small number of participants, it is difficult to assume that the participants will represent the population at large. In this case, the population was all teachers of children with autism. All researchers strive to select participants who are a good representation of the population; however, the smaller the population size, the more difficult it is to suggest that the results are generalizable to the other members of the population.

Moreover, this research project utilized participants from only two schools, which may have caused the sample to be non-representative and homogenous, further limiting the generalizability of the findings. These schools provided permission for the researcher to place signs in the school for recruitment, but because all participants were taken from a concentrated area and not from various different schools, it is less likely that the participants represented the population at large. Sampling teachers of children with autism from schools for children with special needs or from a larger geographic area might have added additional insights to this research.

The design of the study featured some drawbacks as well. For example, this study utilized criteria-based purposeful sampling. The sampling strategy was purposeful in that the researcher recruited participants according to a pre-determined set of criteria, resulting in a focused sample that provided rich content and information applicable to the research question. On the downside, however, this sampling method may have excluded individuals who would have provided important and relevant information. One inclusion criterion was that a participant must be currently teaching; however, retired teachers or teachers who chose another career may have had relevant information to share.

In a generic qualitative study utilizing inductive analysis, most of the answers and interpretations in the study are based on the researcher's understanding of participants' reports and statements. The researcher may misunderstand or misinterpret a phrase. This aspect of qualitative inquiry may also have limited the outcomes on the study. In order to mitigate these risks, the researcher audio recorded and carefully transcribed the data retrieved from the interviews.

Another limitation of this study was the fact that all of the data collected during the data collection process involved the interviewing of teachers. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions that were pre-constructed by the researcher. Responses to the questions were dependent on the participants' ability to accurately verbalize their experiences and perceptions of their experiences collaborating with parents. Therefore, the data was truly reliant on the participants' expressive skills. If they misrepresented their perceptions, the data may have been inaccurate.

Implications for Practice

A strong connection between the home and school helps a child become successful in their learning (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Knowledge of teachers' perspectives of the home-school collaboration and how it impacts learning in children with autism can help psychologists and educators significantly improve their practices (McInerney, 2013). The ecological systems theory is a well-known theory that guides the practice of many professionals (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). If teachers and other professionals are aware and have a better understanding of the home-school collaboration in children with autism, they will be able to understand parents and teachers more effectively (McInerney, 2013). This knowledge will also result in educational psychologists' better understanding the factors that impact a child with autism and how their teachers understand it. This information also shows that a child with autism is also impacted

by influences in their microsystem and mesosystem, just like any typically developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

It is important for teachers to be more aware of the need for collaboration between a child's home and school. This awareness will assist teachers in bridging the gap between the home and school. When parents are informed and know what their child is doing in school and their capabilities, they can encourage and motivate them on their own level (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Exploration of the home-school collaboration from a teacher's perspective may lead to academic success for children with autism, as the professionals around them will collaborate and gain an understanding of systems factors which impact their learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Recommendations for Further Research

Research available in the field of educational psychology suggested that learning is greatly enhanced when a parent connects with their child's school (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). Throughout the course of this study, vital information emerged. The following recommendations for future studies will support the goal of continuing the trend of delivering relevant and new ideas to the field.

Understanding the way teachers perceive the home-school collaboration and various aspects of pedagogy is an important area to pursue. Researchers have indicated that teachers' perceptions play a vital role in their teaching and relationships with others in their career (Park & Ham, 2014). This topic is worth further study; however, future researchers might recruit larger, more diverse samples that reflect geographic differences and different types of schools, including public, private and charter schools.

According to Percy et al. (2015), data collected in a study can include interviews, field notes, journals, and other records or documentation. For this research, data solely relied on the information collected from individual interviews. A recommendation for future research would be to review and include additional sources of data. Possibilities include a communication notebook, call logs, parent training feedback forms, surveys, and agendas. Students' standardized test scores or other measures of student learning and improvement could also serve as a source of data heretofore unexplored. With these types of information, the entire collaboration process and students' progress could be understood with increased clarity.

In order to continue expanding the knowledge in the field of psychology, researchers might also conduct this study from a quantitative perspective to capture the extent to which the collaboration impacts learning. Researchers should adjust their focus to include how long or how often communication should take place and the level of performance that results.

Lastly, future researchers might focus particularly on how teachers are assessing learning in their classroom for children with autism. A comparison of assessment results should also be made between the results of children with autism and the results of typically developing children whose parents are involved in the home-school collaboration. This might provide additional insights into the actual learning growth the child has made when their parents were involved.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2016). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx?item=3>
- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist, 28*(2), 117-148.
- Beahrs, J. O., & Gutheil, T. G. (2014). Informed consent in psychotherapy. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 158*(1), 4-10.
- Bolic Baric, V., Hellberg, K., Kjellberg, A., & Hemmingsson, H. (2016). Support for learning goes beyond academic support: Voices of students with Asperger's disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Autism, 20*(2), 183-195.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In M. Gauvain & M. Cole (Eds.), *Readings on the development of children* (2nd ed., pp. 37-43). New York, NY: Freeman.
- Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). "Clear as mud": Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(2), 1-24.
- Carlson, J. A. (2010). Avoiding traps in member checking. *The Qualitative Report, 15*(5), 1,102-1,113. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss5/4>
- Cheung, C. S.-S., & Pomerantz, E. M. (2012). Why does parents' involvement enhance children's achievement? The role of parent-oriented motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104*(3), 820-832.
- Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., & Perry, N. E. (2012). School climate and social-emotional learning: Predicting teacher stress, job satisfaction, and teaching efficacy. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104*(4), 1,189-1,204.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(9), 1,408-1,416. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss9/3>
- Hagenauer, G., Hascher, T., & Volet, S. E. (2015). Teacher emotions in the classroom: associations with students' engagement, classroom discipline and the interpersonal teacher-student relationship. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 30*(4), 385-403.
- Hughes, S. O., Power, T. G., Liu, Y., Sharp, C., & Nicklas, T. A. (2015). Parent emotional distress and feeding styles in low-income families. The role of parent depression and parenting stress. *Appetite, 92*, 337-342.
- Jones, J. E., Kessler-Jones, A., Thompson, M. K., Young, K., Anderson, A. J., & Strand, D. M. (2014). Zoning in on parents' needs: Understanding parents' perspectives in order to provide person-centered care. *Epilepsy & Behavior, 37*, 191-197. doi:10.1016/j.yebeh.2014.06.029
- McInerney, D. M. (2013). *Educational psychology: Constructing learning*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Higher Education.
- Park, J. H., & Ham, S. H. (2014). Whose perception of principal instructional leadership? Principal-teacher perceptual (dis)agreement and its influence on teacher collaboration. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36*(3), 450-469.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Percy, W., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(2), 76-85. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss2/7>
- Pianta, R. C., La Paro, K. M., Payne, C., Cox, M. J., & Bradley, R. (2002). The relation of kindergarten classroom environment to teacher, family, and school characteristics and child outcomes. *The Elementary School Journal*, 102(3), 225-238.
- Quill, K. A. (1995). *Teaching children with autism: Strategies to enhance communication and socialization*. New York, NY: Cengage Learning.
- Scheidecker, D., & Freeman, W. (2015). *Bringing out the best in students: How legendary teachers motivate kids*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing.
- Soutullo, O. R., Smith-Bonahue, T. M., Sanders-Smith, S. C., & Navia, L. E. (2016). Discouraging partnerships? Teachers' perspectives on immigration-related barriers to family-school collaboration. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 31(2), 226-240.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Thompson, R. M., & Johnston, S. (2013). Use of social stories to improve self-regulation in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics*, 33(3), 271-284.

Author Note

I earned my Bachelor of Science degree in Behavioral Sciences from Mercy College and then went on to pursue my Master's in General and Special Education from Mercy College as well. With a deep passion for learning and teaching, I continued on to earn my PhD in Educational Psychology from Capella University. I started off my career as a teacher for children with autism in a private school in NY. While teaching, I began taking on administrative responsibilities, facilitated trainings, and also began tutoring and mentoring graduate learners from a local college. Facilitating trainings, professional developments, and working with college student, is what led me to develop a passion for higher education and a drive to explore and expand the body of existing knowledge in the field. I am fortunate enough to be a professor, faculty-led researcher, and course designer, which affords me the opportunity to work with learners on achieving their educational goals. I also work as an administrator in a school for students with disabilities. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: shiffyjay@gmail.com.

Copyright 2019: Chana S. Josilowski and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Josilowski, C. S. (2019). Teachers' perceptions of the home-school collaboration: Enhancing learning for children with autism *The Qualitative Report*, 24(12), 3008-3021. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss12/5>
