

Parent–Teacher Conflict Related to Student Abilities: The Impact on Students and the Family–School Partnership

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Abstract

Family–school partnerships have a positive impact on both students and schools, yet they remain challenging to establish and maintain, particularly in the presence of parent–teacher conflict. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of parents, teachers, and students when parents and teachers disagreed about a student’s abilities; of particular importance was the perceived impact of these divergent accounts on students and the establishment of effective family–school partnerships. The goal of the study was to gain insights from these experiences that could help build effective family–school partnerships, even in the presence of conflict. This purpose was achieved through a qualitative investigation of parent, teacher, and student experiences when parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities diverged. Analysis of data collected from 10 in-depth interviews with students, parents, and teachers revealed four themes: impressionability of student attitudes, failure to resolve conflicts, challenging parents, and lack of teacher training. The themes “impressionability of student attitudes” and “failure to resolve conflicts” describe the perceived impact of discrepant parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities on students and the family–school partnership. The themes “challenging parents” and “lack of teacher training” represent two barriers to partnership development. Implications and recommendations are discussed that may help educators improve their partnership efforts.

Key Words: parents, teachers, perceptions, student ability, conflicts, family–school partnerships, training, professional development, communication

Introduction

The establishment of family–school partnerships is a research-supported movement with numerous benefits for students. Family–school partnerships are associated with superior grade point averages, standardized test scores, attendance, home and school behavior, social skills, and adaptation to school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). They also improve school programs, school climate, family services and support, parent skills and advocacy efforts, family–school–community connections, and support the work of teachers (Epstein, 2011).

Despite the many benefits of family–school partnerships, achieving these collaborative relationships remains challenging. Schools want parents to support their practices and teaching efforts, and parents want schools to be responsive to the unique needs of their family and child, but far too often, neither parents nor educators are collaboratively finding ways to maximize the educational experience and academic outcomes of students (Auerbach, 2012; Christenson, 2004; Wanat, 2010). More specifically, discrepant perspectives of a child or the child’s needs have been identified as a factor that initiates and escalates conflict between parents and teachers (Lake & Billingsley, 2000) and negatively impacts parental involvement in school programs (Patel & Stevens, 2010). Both parents and teachers may want what is best for a student, but their expectations and perceptions of a particular child can vary. This leaves educators and parents struggling to develop and foster family–school partnerships in a conflict-laden climate with limited knowledge about how best to handle these conflicts (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

Conflicts surrounding a student’s abilities are not uncommon in education. Parents and teachers disagree on issues such as placement in special education, placement in advanced courses, grades, retention and promotion, and playing time on sports teams. Nevertheless, little is understood about these experiences and their impact on family–school partnerships. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of parents, teachers, and students when parents and teachers disagree about a student’s abilities; of particular importance was the perceived impact of these divergent accounts on students and the establishment of effective family–school partnerships. The goal of the study was to gain insights from these experiences that could help build effective family–school partnerships, even in the presence of conflict.

Review of the Literature

For the purpose of this study, family-school partnerships are defined as ongoing, collaborative, and equitable relationships between parents and the entire school community (including teachers, administrators, counselors, special educators, school psychologists, and other school personnel) that utilize shared responsibility and power to develop an environment that maximizes each child's potential for success. This definition is based on descriptions of family-school partnerships in Christenson (2004), Epstein (2011), Ferlazzo (2011), and Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005). The following sections provide a description of the qualities necessary for effective partnerships and the barriers that impede partnership development.

Family-School Partnership Qualities

According to Epstein and Sheldon (2011), a review of multiple studies identified eight essential elements of effective family-school-community partnerships: leadership, teamwork, action plans, implementation of plans, funding, collegial support, evaluation, and networking. Christenson (2004) also identified many aspects of family-school partnerships, including: families and educators listening to the other's perspective; approaching individual differences as assets to the partnership; sharing of information to develop interventions; focusing on common interests; seeking input from each other; collaboratively developing a plan to address the needs of all parties; shared decision-making; establishing and communicating shared expectations of schoolwork and behavior; willingness and ability to appropriately handle conflict; refraining from placing blame; and shared commitment to success. Effective partnerships create schools that are welcoming, encouraging, and aware of student strengths and families that emphasize the importance of school in lifelong success (Epstein, 2011).

Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) identified four core beliefs that must exist in schools to build meaningful partnerships with families. First, educators must believe that all parents have aspirations for their children and desire the best for them. Second, educators must believe that all parents have the ability to support their children's development and learning. The third necessary educator belief is that teachers view parents as equals. The final belief is that educators, particularly school leaders, must assume primary responsibility for the establishment of effective partnerships with families.

Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004) investigated professional qualities associated with family-school partnerships of students with disabilities. They identified six common themes that contribute

to collaborative partnerships: communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect. Parent participants in Blue-Banning et al. emphasized the need for professionals to provide families with all of the information related to their child, even when these messages may be difficult for parents to hear, yet they also emphasized the need for professionals to demonstrate tact when communicating with families. Parents further believed that collaborative partnerships were established when professionals recognized the value of parent input and perspectives, and they expressed a desire for professionals who follow through on necessary actions or promises, can be trusted to attend to the physical and emotional needs of their students, and can be trusted to keep personal information confidential (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

Barriers to Family–School Partnerships

Many barriers exist that challenge the formation of family–school partnerships. Christenson (2004) categorizes these barriers as those affecting families, educators, and those directly related to the family–school relationship. For example, family barriers that interfere with positive partnerships include: assuming a passive role in the educational process, distrust of educators, and educator unresponsiveness to family needs and wishes. Educator barriers include: fear of conflict with parents, concerns about families' abilities to assist with school-related issues, negative communication with families regarding a child's academic progress, and difficulty seeing parents as partners in the educational process. Finally, barriers related to the family–school relationship include: communication that occurs strictly when problems arise, lack of information and resources about how collaboration between families and schools should occur, lack of perspective-taking from both parties, failure to accept a partnership orientation, a win–lose attitude when presented with a conflict, and varying perceptions of a child's performance (Christenson, 2004).

Effective family–school partnerships are challenging in the best of circumstances. But when parents and teachers disagree about educational decisions related to a child, these relationships are further complicated. Lake and Billingsley (2000) examined factors contributing to parent–school conflict in special education and identified the following eight factors: discrepant views of a child or child's needs, trust, communication, constraints, reciprocal power, valuation, service delivery, and knowledge. Their study did not directly investigate the impact of discrepant views on students; however, it provided evidence that the discrepant views "resulted in an unwillingness to take the risks necessary to continue communicating about the needs of the child" (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 249).

According to Christenson (2004), the willingness and ability to appropriately handle conflict are keys to the establishment of effective family–school partnerships. Relationships between parents and educators are often cordial when no source of dissension exists; however, when a conflict arises, it becomes much more difficult for educators and parents to work together in an effective and meaningful way (Cornille, Pestle, & Vanwy, 1999). When conflicts arise, shared goals and values serve as the foundation for effectively resolving disagreements. Rather than viewing conflict as the destruction of partnership efforts, conflict should be viewed as an opportunity to discuss desired goals of the school and parents and to work collaboratively to reach these goals (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Understanding the experiences of parents, teachers, and students in the presence of parent–teacher conflict related to a student’s abilities may provide insights about how to effectively resolve these conflicts. Research in this area could provide educators with the tools, knowledge, and skills necessary to resolve conflict and effectively partner with diverse families.

Method

Sample and Sampling Procedures

Participants were selected using two purposeful sampling techniques: criterion and snowball sampling. The criterion used for selection was direct involvement with parent–teacher conflict related to a student’s abilities. Snowball sampling was also used to select participants. Speaking with local educators served as a starting point for sampling, and participants were identified by referral from these educators. Participants were also asked to refer other potential participants.

Selected participants included three parents, three students, and four teachers who were directly involved in a conflict related to discrepant parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities. Including parents, teachers, and students as participants ensured that variations of the phenomenon were represented. Further, “exploring various perspectives...enriches the data collected and enhances understanding of influences that can boost student success and achievement” (Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010, p. 50).

College students served as student participants in the study. Two student participants were identified by speaking to college classes at a Midwestern university. The third student participant was obtained through snowball sampling. Though college students served as the sole informants for student data, they were asked to describe their experiences with the phenomenon that occurred during elementary or secondary school. College students, rather than elementary or secondary students, were selected because it was believed that college

students possessed the maturity and reflective abilities to understand the phenomenon and to clearly articulate their experiences with the phenomenon.

The sample consisted of only one male student participant, and all other participants were female. This was anticipated, as the percentage of female teachers is much larger than that of males (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Additionally, it was presumed that mothers were more likely than fathers to be involved in their children's education. This is supported by the various studies related to parental involvement that rely solely or primarily on mothers' reports (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Sy & Schulenberg, 2005).

The age of the college students participating in the study ranged between 21 and 24 years. The age of teacher and parent participants ranged between 26 and 57 years. Nine participants were White and one participant was Eurasian American, which was also anticipated as the vast majority of the Midwest population is White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The teaching experience of teacher participants ranged between 4 and 30 years.

Data Collection

Demographic, perceptual, and theoretical information was needed to fulfill the purpose of this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). To gather demographic data, each participant was asked to complete a personal data sheet related to his or her age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, and longevity within the school system of interest. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) recommend obtaining this type of demographic information to "help explain what may be underlying an individual's perceptions, as well as the similarities and differences in perceptions among participants" (p. 70). The personal data sheet was completed prior to the collection of perceptual information.

Perceptual information was collected related to participants' experiences with divergent parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities. Divergent perceptions were defined as any perceived variation between teachers and parents regarding a student's abilities. These abilities included but were not limited to academic, athletic, and behavioral abilities. For example, a parent may believe that his or her child has strong writing skills; whereas the teacher may perceive the student's writing skills as weak, or vice versa. Of the conflicts described by participants, six were related to student academic abilities, two were related to student behavioral abilities, one was related to both academic and athletic abilities, and one was related to both athletic and behavioral abilities. In addition, five of the conflicts described by participants involved students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Perceptual data was obtained by conducting in-depth interviews with 10 participants. Collecting data from this small sample allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is not possible to obtain when collecting data from larger samples (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Participant experiences represented 10 distinct conflicts. Participants from the same conflict were not selected for this study due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Individuals may contradict one another in their depiction of events, which could easily lead to adversarial, negative, and blaming discussions and ultimately hinder the development of family–school partnerships. Conducting individual interviews with participants from distinct conflicts allowed for an understanding of participant experiences without escalating conflict between teachers and parents.

Participants were asked to participate in a maximum of three in-depth, individual interviews. Student and parent data was obtained through one audiorecorded, face-to-face interview with each participant. In addition to the face-to-face interview, teachers participated in one audiorecorded phone interview to obtain data related to teacher training on the establishment of family–school partnerships. Three unique protocols were used when conducting interviews, though the same underlying themes were addressed in each protocol (see Appendix). Field notes collected during the interviews further informed the study. These notes were used to provide additional data, strengthen interpretations, and ultimately to provide further understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences (Shank, 2006).

Finally, theoretical information was obtained through an ongoing review of relevant literature. Key terms used to conduct this search included parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities, discrepant parent and teacher perceptions, parent and teacher expectations of students, parental school involvement, accuracy of parent and teacher reports, conflict between parents and teachers, and family–school partnerships.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on Creswell's (2007) modification of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method. Interview data was reduced to units of meaning, and these units were used to identify codes and themes. To identify codes, both First and Second Cycle coding methods were used. Initial Coding served as the primary First Cycle coding technique and allowed for a preliminary analysis of data that remained open to analytic possibilities and exploration (Saldaña, 2009). Focused Coding served as the primary Second Cycle method. This type of coding “requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). These codes were then categorized into broader themes to address the purpose of the study. These codes and themes are discussed in the Findings section below.

Trustworthiness

Due to small sample sizes, a frequent criticism of qualitative work is its lack of generalizability. However, the purpose of qualitative work is not to yield generalizable findings; rather, the purpose of qualitative work is to produce meaningful and useful results (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The meaningfulness and usefulness of a study's results are determined by its trustworthiness. Several validation strategies were employed in this study to strengthen its trustworthiness. Validation techniques included member checks, clarifying bias, and peer debriefing. Incorporating multiple perspectives also strengthened the validity of the study.

Limitations

The use of college students limited the sample to students and families who likely value education and have educational and career aspirations beyond secondary school. It is possible that many conflicts between parents and teachers involve students without college aspirations. It is also possible that these conflicts vary significantly in their presentation from students and families with college aspirations. The experiences of students who do not attend postsecondary school may vary dramatically in relation to the phenomenon, and limiting the sample to college students prevented these voices from emerging.

Similarly, parent participants in this study presented an additional limitation. Each of the three parent participants had earned a high school diploma and had completed three or more years of postsecondary education. The frequency of parent and teacher conflicts, as well as the parent characteristics most frequently associated with these conflicts, is currently unknown. However, it is possible that parents with limited educational backgrounds could provide insights and perspectives that vary dramatically from those perspectives portrayed in this study.

Finally, females served as the primary participants in the study. However, Shin, Nhan, Crittenden, Valenti, and Hong (2008) found greater disagreement between fathers and teachers with regard to student abilities than between mothers and teachers. Based on the findings of Shin et al., it is plausible that fathers may experience discrepant parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities differently than mothers. They may differ from mothers in terms of how they view the conflict, react to the conflict, and ultimately resolve the conflict. Understanding the potentially unique experiences of fathers in relation to discrepant parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities was not achieved in this study.

Findings

Analyzed data were categorized into four thematic units: impressionability of student attitudes, failure to resolve conflicts, challenging parents, and lack of teacher training. Between-group comparisons of students, parents, and teachers were considered in the analysis of codes and themes; however, minimal between-group differences existed. Patterns of divergence were also considered (i.e., high parent perceptions of ability versus low teacher perceptions of ability and vice versa), but there appeared to be variation in parent and teacher perceptions of ability across the conflicts.

Impressionability of Student Attitudes

Participants believed that student knowledge of divergent parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities could have a detrimental impact on the student's attitude. This finding represents the theme "impressionability of student attitudes." The codes used to describe this theme are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Impressionability of Student Attitudes

	Students			Teachers				Parents		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3
Students choose sides	X	X						X		
Neg. perception of teachers	X	X			X	X	X	X		
"Untouchable" attitude	X			X		X		X		
Anxiety and self-doubt	X	X	X							

An experience described below by Student 1 demonstrates how students develop a negative perception of teachers and ultimately choose sides between their teacher and parents:

I specifically remember one IEP meeting; my dad got so mad because they were just not getting the point that he walked out of the meeting. I mean, that was elementary school...but it was huge. So I kind of always felt like "okay, these teachers are really dumb" which didn't help my enthusiasm for doing the work that I didn't want to do.

Participants further believed that students developed an "untouchable" attitude when they were aware of the discrepancy between their parents and teachers. This "untouchable" attitude referred to students' belief that teachers could not hold them accountable for their work or behavior because their parent would protect or defend them. One teacher explained how she believed her

experience with divergent parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities created an “untouchable” attitude in the student:

I just feel like, especially in that situation, that she feels like she can do anything she wants and her mom is always going to back her—no matter if it’s bad or good—and everybody else is wrong but her. I mean, it’s like she can do whatever she wants, and her mom is going to be okay with it. Even though her mom probably really doesn’t agree, she is always going to back her. (Teacher 3)

Teacher 1 reported a similar experience. When asked how she believed the student was impacted by the disagreement between the parent and teacher, Teacher 1 responded:

I think it made him feel like he didn’t have to do anything he didn’t want to do...I mean he already had an attitude, but it really made his attitude worse in school the rest of that year. It was like, “I can do what I want....My mom and dad won’t let me be retained, so I don’t have to try so hard.” I think it made him not work as hard, made him more of a behavior issue, more of that pushing the line because, you know, “I can do what I want because my mom and dad don’t like you anyway.” I think when kids feel that at home, I think it definitely runs over into the classroom hugely. Kids know if their parents do not respect a teacher. I think that definitely caused some issues...which made him that much lower than he could have been and, once again, did not help his development.

Student participants reported experiencing anxiety or self-doubt as a result of the conflict between their parents and teachers:

When my parents and the teacher were arguing, I think I wasn’t even thinking about the project or the grade that I got on it, but more the fact that the teacher disagreed with what I did and the parent agreed with what I did and that they were not happy with each other. I think as a child, you’re wrapped up more in the parent and teacher’s emotions about the topic and not the topic itself. So I wasn’t even worried about the assignment at the time. I was just worried about how everybody was feeling and how they’re not getting along and how as a child you wish they would get along, because they’re both supposed to be helping you. (Student 2)

Failure to Resolve Conflicts

All participants indicated that when conflicts between parents and teachers arise, they often are left unresolved and continue to negatively impact the

family-school partnership. This finding represents the theme “failure to resolve conflicts.” The codes used to describe this theme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Failure to Resolve Conflicts

	Students			Teachers				Parents		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3
Termination of relationship	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Differential treatment		X						X	X	
Continued negative interactions	X	X		X		X				
Teacher fear of parents	X		X		X		X			X

Participants reported that the parent-teacher relationship was terminated after the conflict between parents and teachers occurred. When asked about the relationship between his mother and teacher after the disagreement, Student 3 stated, “My mom never talked with that teacher very much or never brought him up, so I don’t think it was a strong relationship. I don’t think they got along too well.” According to Parent 3:

When I realized the school wasn’t going to be of assistance, I just decided that I would find help elsewhere....We decided it would be easier to pursue other avenues because they just didn’t seem interested...and that is probably what upset me the most....When I realized they just weren’t going to do anything, I didn’t see any reason to push it, so I went outside of the school and started trying to find help for him.

Some participants believed that teachers treated students differently after the disagreement occurred. Parent 1 believed that her son was treated differently as soon as she requested for a teacher to change grades that were figured incorrectly, and Student 2 believed she was singled out by the teacher once her father confronted the teacher. According to Parent 1, “The teacher may, just because they’re mad at the parent, take it out on the kid. ‘Well, now you have a target on your back because your parent doesn’t agree with me.’”

Additionally, participants believed that negative interactions persisted between parents and teachers. Continued negative interactions were defined as harmful communication, attitudes, or behaviors between parents and teachers that occurred after the disagreement regarding the student’s abilities was initially addressed. According to Student 1:

I think once there’s a conflict...unless it is solved in a way that the parents are extremely happy about and it’s basically exactly what the parents wanted to happen, without much fight, I think there’s going to be

constant conflict for most of that student's education. I don't think it ever really goes away...and I think even if it was kind of solved, it never goes away unless it's resolved quickly and exactly how the parent wants it done....I think once it's on a negative foot that it's going to stay there.

Teacher 3 reported that the parent she experienced conflict with would "call all the other parents and tell them how horrible I was...I think she lied to a lot of parents about what was going on. I know she has tried to get me fired [by] the principal and superintendent."

Participants also reported that teachers developed a fear of parents as a result of the conflict. Student 3 reported that the manner in which parents approach the school can cause teachers to say, "that is that kid's mom that got mad at the other teacher...better watch out for him if he's in your class. His mom will get mad at you." The following statement by Student 1 illustrates the "differential treatment" and "teacher fear of parents" indicative of unresolved conflicts:

I think the teachers are going to start going "well this student is one of those ones with *those* kind of parents that are always going to come in and nitpick you in the class, and they're going to say you're a horrible teacher." And I think that affects how the student is treated in class.... It's kind of like they walk on eggshells around you, because they're afraid your parents are going to come raise he** about something.

A situation described by Teacher 2 further illustrates this theme and the "climate of fear" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 151) that develops when teachers encounter challenging parents:

I've had another parent before that specifically told me that I wasn't doing my job...of course, as a professional I take that personally...I didn't react. I told the parent, "I'm sorry you feel that way. Let me show you what we've done this year and how far he has come. I'm sorry he has not gone as far as you would like him to go, but this is the progress he has made. Let's focus on this, and this is where we want him to be next year...." They are a parent [with whom] now I always require my process coordinator to be sitting in with me, because I don't want to be personally attacked, and that's how I felt that day, when someone says something like that...I was really proud of myself. I didn't react at all....I take my job very, very seriously, so it really did affect me a lot. I moved on, and I focused on the positive...but they're a parent that I now flag....I still treat them the exact same way, but I don't like to be in conversations, just the two of us. I want to make sure there is someone else there with me at all times....It's real funny. She had that one comment, and she's never had any other comments again.

This experience described by Teacher 2 is further examined in the Discussion section. The purpose of closely examining her experience within the Discussion section is to address the need for improved conflict-resolution skills and to understand the overall impact of parent-teacher conflict on the development of family-school partnerships.

Challenging Parents

Participants described demanding and disengaged parents as presenting additional challenges to family-school partnership development (see Table 3). This finding represents the theme “challenging parents” and is illustrated by Parent 2:

I can so clearly see these certain parents who are just so...kind of had an entitlement attitude, you know, just like “well, my kid is disabled so you have to do this, and you have to provide this, and...” somehow that partnership relationship was not in place, and I know that the teaching staff and the paras were on the defense because they were being attacked when they really hadn’t done anything wrong. The other thing that is really a problem I think in the partnerships is when the teaching staff at the schools give so much to students and they can’t get *any* engagement from the families.

Table 3. Challenging Parents

	Students			Teachers				Parents		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3
Demanding parents		X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Disengaged parents					X		X		X	X

Teacher 2 also believed that parents adopted an “entitlement” attitude that hindered the establishment of family-school partnerships:

It’s beginning to be more of a “you need to give this to me” rather than “I need your help,” more of that entitlement....We have a student whose parent is like “we will *not* be here on time when school starts, and they will *not* be picked up on time when school ends, but I still *expect* you to provide my child breakfast, even if they are an hour late.” So I feel like our population is more of the “we’re entitled to this so you will provide it to me, but I’m going to break the rules.” So we’re trying to talk to them about what our expectations are and what the rules of our school are, [but] because they have this entitlement, it becomes more hostile towards us.

According to participants, when parents were either demanding or disengaged from educational processes, conflicts were even more difficult to resolve and often were not. Teacher 4 believed that some parents were so challenging to work with that successful partnerships were nearly impossible to create: “For the two or three of what I would call the ‘high flyer’ parents, the ones that you’re really going to hear from constantly...there isn’t anything that is enough.”

Though “demanding” parents created additional stress for teachers, participant responses suggested that these parent efforts were most effective in generating teacher response to concerns. When Student 2’s father confronted the coach about his division of varsity and junior varsity tennis players, the coach ultimately redivided the teams, and Student 2 was moved from the junior varsity squad to the varsity squad. Teacher 4 discussed one situation in which parent demands for constant communication with the school resulted in more meetings with school personnel than were typically provided for less demanding parents. On the other hand, the less-demanding advocacy efforts of Parent 2 and Parent 3 were largely unsuccessful. Parent 2 reported that year after year she made the same requests of school personnel without seeing results, and Parent 3 reported that she eventually sought the help of outside agencies because the school was unresponsive to her requests and concerns. Though demanding parents may create stress and anxiety for teachers, participant responses suggest that they are ultimately more successful in obtaining desired results for their children.

Lack of Teacher Training

In a follow-up phone interview, teacher participants were asked to respond to questions related to their training and preparation in building effective partnerships with families. They were asked to describe training opportunities in their teacher preparation programs as well as professional development provided by their school districts. All teacher participants indicated that they received no formal training in their teacher preparation programs regarding the establishment of family–school partnerships or effectively resolving conflict with parents (see Table 4). Teacher 1 reported having informal discussions in her educational psychology class. She also reported that she learned about working with families from her cooperating teacher in her student-teaching experience. Teacher 3 also indicated that the only training she received on family–school partnerships or conflict resolution was from her cooperating teacher.

Three of the four teacher participants also reported that the school districts in which they were employed provided no formal training or professional development on building family–school partnerships. Teacher 3 was the only teacher who described any training that aimed to establish partnerships with families;

however, she reported that the school district initially tried to implement partnership changes within the school, but partnership efforts quickly discontinued.

Table 4. Lack of Teacher Training

	Teachers			
	1	2	3	4
Preparation programs	X	X	X	X
On-site professional development	X	X		X

Discussion

Impact of Conflict on the Student and Family–School Partnership

The themes “impressionability of student attitudes” and “failure to resolve conflicts” describe the perceived impact of discrepant parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities on students and on the family–school partnership. According to participant responses, student attitudes are negatively influenced by divergent parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities, and these negative attitudes create challenges to the family–school partnership. How can a teacher have high expectations for a student when these expectations are unsupported by his parents? How can a parent respect a teacher who is unresponsive to her requests? How can a student respect a teacher when he believes his parents do not? How can a student feel confident in his abilities when he knows they are a source of dissension between his teacher and parent?

The impressionability of student attitudes suggests that parents and teachers must make the conscious decision whenever possible to keep the conflict private from students. Parents and teachers must appraise both their verbal and non-verbal behavior toward one another. When involved in a conflict, parents and teachers must take note of what they say about the other party, how they communicate with the other party, and their nonverbal behavior toward the other party in the presence of the child. Keeping the conflict private is likely a difficult task while the conflict still exists, which suggests the need for teachers and parents to resolve conflicts and reestablish positive relationships in a timely manner.

Unfortunately, participant responses suggest that once a conflict between parents and teachers occurs, it is often unresolved. This is represented by the theme “failure to resolve conflicts” and directly addresses how the family–school partnership is impacted by parent–teacher conflict. The situation previously described by Teacher 2 in the Findings section provides important insights related to the development of family–school partnerships in the presence of parent–teacher conflict. Closer examination of her experience focuses on three

areas: her personalization of the parent's comment, her attitudinal and behavioral changes as a result of the conflict, and her fear of the parent after the original confrontation. The purpose of closely examining Teacher 2's experience is not to criticize her behavior or question her practices; rather, the purpose is to understand the challenges that often interfere with effective conflict resolution between parents and teachers. Understanding these challenges may shed light on new ways of preparing both teachers and parents to effectively resolve conflicts.

First, Teacher 2 stated that because she is a professional, she took the parent's comment personally; however, it is worth considering that because teachers are professionals, they should *not* take parent comments personally. For example, professional counselors are trained to expect questioning, hurtful, perhaps even "attacking" statements from clients. This type of client behavior is referred to as "resistance," and it is often considered a natural part of the therapeutic process (Sommers-Flanigan & Sommers-Flanigan, 2012). When clients question, confront, speak rudely, or openly acknowledge dislike for the counselor or counseling process, counselors are trained to simply accept it as a part of the therapeutic process that must be managed and overcome. As discussed by participants, parents often communicate their desires, needs, and wants in a demanding manner. Though parents may be responding out of fear, stress, anxiety, worry, frustration, or intimidation, it is possible that they communicate their dissatisfaction with educational processes much like resistant clients communicate their dissatisfaction with counseling. Training teachers to anticipate this type of response from parents, much like counselors are trained to anticipate resistant clients, may help prepare teachers to resolve conflicts when challenging parent behaviors are presented.

The second point of reflection from Teacher 2's experience is related to her response to the parent's comment. Teacher 2 believed that she treated the parent no differently after the initial statement was made; however, her behavior suggests otherwise. After the parent questioned the teacher's performance, Teacher 2 always required her process coordinator to attend meetings—a practice that did not occur prior to the disagreement. She also avoided private conversations with the parent. Though the parent never made another negative comment toward Teacher 2, the parent was permanently "flagged." Teacher 2's failure to recognize her attitudinal and behavioral shift toward the parent may also suggest that she failed to recognize that the conflict was never truly resolved.

The final point of reflection is related to Teacher 2's fear of parents that was indicated by her frequent reliance on the process coordinator. At one point in the interview, Teacher 2 described the process coordinator as a "neutral party" between the parent and teacher. However, throughout most of the interview,

she described the process coordinator as someone who was primarily there to support and protect her. Teacher 2 relied on the process coordinator when presented with difficult or challenging situations with parents. Teacher 2's reliance on the process coordinator suggests that she feared the parent and doubted her own ability to appropriately handle conflicts and to successfully work with families. Teacher 2's fear of parents may be due, in part, to her lack of training in establishing family-school partnerships and in appropriately managing conflict with parents. Epstein (2011) also recognizes that teachers and administrators are fearful to work with families because they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively partner. Ultimately, the experiences of *all* participants in the study suggest that improved conflict resolution skills are needed by both teachers and parents.

Barriers to the Development of Family-School Partnerships

The themes "challenging parents" and "lack of teacher training" represent two major barriers to the establishment of family-school partnerships. When asked about family-school partnerships, one teacher participant responded, "family-school partnerships? Should I know what that means?" Though the teacher presumed that family-school partnerships related to open communication between parents and teachers, she had never heard the term and was uncertain of its meaning. Ultimately, teacher participants reported that they were neither trained to build relationships with families nor to effectively resolve conflicts with them. Failure to address family-school partnerships in teacher preparation programs may suggest to beginning teachers that partnering with families is not a priority, or it may also suggest that preparation programs erroneously assume that future teachers already possess the skills necessary to work with families. Regardless, the failure of training programs to adequately prepare teachers to develop partnerships suggests that teachers enter the workforce without the knowledge and skills necessary to work with families, and participant responses further suggest that school districts are doing little to fill this void.

Though teachers need more training on resolving conflicts with parents, they are not alone in their need for improved partnership efforts. Participants described specific parent qualities or behaviors that further challenged the development of family-school partnerships. Participants described these parents as either "demanding" or "disengaged." Gibbs (2005) describes these parenting extremes as the over-involved and the under-involved (as cited in Epstein, 2011). Disengaged parents were described as removed from all aspects of the educational process, whereas demanding parents used commands, force, or threats to obtain desired results for their children. Participants specifically

believed that the manner in which parents approach schools is often problematic. They described parent behaviors as attacking, rude, and occurring at inappropriate times, which can cause teachers to feel nervous, pressured, and tense. Teacher 4 described the impact of demanding parents on teachers:

I think it's a *lot* of stress on them.... They're also the ones filing the OCR [Office for Civil Rights] complaints and doing things like that, and you know, we can think, "Oh, well, it's not that big of a deal." Well, that's really scary when you're a teacher and you've never been through that kind of a legal process. I do think that is something that can really kind of weed teachers out of the profession because it is so stressful. I mean, I have seen a few teachers where either they're going home crying or they're just feeling really stressed.... When parents like that move out of the district, people want to have a party. You can just see the relief.

It is unclear as to whether or not parents intentionally employ “scare tactics” to obtain desired outcomes for their children, but it is clear that the behaviors that are intended to support their children further damage the family–school partnership. The manner in which parents approach schools may suggest that they lack the knowledge and skills to more appropriately advocate for their children. Though parents were often perceived by participants as demanding and attacking, their efforts to communicate with teachers were efforts to assist, support, and protect their children. According to Henderson et al. (2007), “problem parents” are “trying to be advocates, but they don’t know how to act constructively” (p. 151). The willingness of teachers to accept parent “demands” as well-intentioned advocacy may play a role in their ability to respond to parent concerns nondefensively and in a manner that supports partnership development. In addition, teacher responsiveness to demanding parents and unresponsiveness to less demanding parents raises concerns and may perpetuate the cycle of poor parent–teacher relationships.

Implications and Recommendations

So what changes can be made in practice and policy that will help parents and teachers overcome divergent perceptions of student abilities to build effective family–school partnerships? First, teacher and administrator preparation programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels should include explicit training on the development of family–school partnerships. Epstein (2011) suggests that teacher and administrator preparation programs require at least one course on family–school partnerships, provide more specific guidelines on course content, and increase teacher education faculty to meet the demands of added courses and content.

It may also be beneficial to train teachers in attending, listening, and responding skills. Attending, listening, and responding skills are techniques and strategies employed to fully attend to client dialogue, reflect understanding of messages, and build rapport with clients. They are used to improve communication with clients, establish relationships, and they often help overcome client resistance (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2012). By providing teacher training on basic attending, listening, and responding skills, teachers could learn the communication skills necessary to build rapport with parents, to effectively respond to parent concerns, and to create a positive working relationship with parents (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). As culture influences the manner in which families conceptualize and exert their role in educational processes (Henderson et al., 2007; Moosa, Karabenick, & Adams, 2001; Olivos, 2012), teacher training should also incorporate instruction on cultural differences and how these differences impact the use of listening and responding skills (Laosa, 2005; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Additionally, a simple recognition in preparation programs that teachers will encounter resistant or challenging parents may go a long way in defusing potential conflicts. Rather than viewing angry parents as personally attacking, teachers may begin to understand that challenging parents are an expected aspect of educational processes. Research to examine the impact of this type of training for teachers is needed.

Second, school systems should provide ongoing professional development for teachers and all school staff on how to partner effectively with parents. Professional development plans should incorporate topics related to family-school partnerships, such as how to build relationships with families, how to work with challenging families, and how to improve communication between families and schools. Family structures and educational mandates are constantly changing, and research on family-school partnerships is constantly expanding. It is not enough for teachers to receive family-school partnership training in their preparation programs, but they must also have professional development opportunities once employed as a teacher. This professional development would ensure that teachers have the latest strategies for working with families that are reflective of current family and school needs.

Third, school leaders must develop, implement, and enforce school partnership policies (Christenson, 2004). Research has demonstrated that even when school policies exist related to family-school partnerships, efforts to enforce them are nonexistent (Gordon, 2012). This lack of policy follow-through communicates to stakeholders that partnerships are only valued at a superficial level, and the creation of genuine partnerships with families is not a priority. When discussing essential aspects of family-school partnerships, only one

parent participant in the present study addressed the important role that policy plays in educational decisions and reform, and none of the teacher participants mentioned the need for policies related to family–school partnerships. It is as if participants desired family–school partnerships without understanding or recognizing the underlying, systemic changes that could support partnership efforts. According to Epstein (2011), “good policy is the first step on the path to partnerships” (p. 312).

Finally, improved parent advocacy skills are needed, and educators play a role in equipping parents with this knowledge. According to Henderson et al. (2007), schools need to “work with families, teachers, and other staff so that they can understand what it means to be an advocate, develop and use their advocacy skills, and learn how to resolve a problem” (p. 152). “Without good guidance, the under-involved wait for information and the over-involved set their own agendas, whether their actions benefit their children or not” (Epstein, 2011, p. 57). Henderson et al. suggest that schools can support parent advocacy by having a clear, proactive process for addressing problems, contacting families monthly to discuss student progress, and holding routine student-led conferences; additionally, they emphasize the need to provide parent support in a friendly, nonjudgmental manner.

Conclusion

Parents, students, and educators must work together to form effective, sustainable family–school partnerships. Perhaps in an ideal world, these partnerships could exist free of conflict. But like in any relationship, conflict is inevitable, and educators need information and resources to guide them in establishing and maintaining effective partnerships despite the presence of conflict. Strong partnerships can ensure that conflicts are successfully managed and resolved. “Good partnerships encourage questions and debates, and withstand disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained—even strengthened—after conflicts and differences have been resolved” (Epstein, 2011, p. 393). Ultimately, family–school partnerships are about maximizing student opportunities for success. When both parents and teachers learn to improve their partnership efforts and students remain at the heart of all relationships, family–school partnerships can be preserved—even in the presence of conflict.

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Appendix. Research Question and Interview Protocol Alignment

What are the experiences of parents, teachers, and students when parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities diverge?

Student Interview Questions:

- What messages did you receive from your parents regarding school?
- What messages did you receive from your parents about your school-related abilities?
- What messages did you receive from teachers regarding school?
- What messages did you receive from teachers regarding your school-related abilities?
- Tell me about an experience in which your parents and teachers disagreed about your abilities, or tell me about a situation in which you received varying messages from your parents and teachers regarding your school-related abilities.
- What, do you believe, are the reasons that your parents' and teachers' perceptions of your abilities or performance differed?
- In general, what messages do you believe students receive when parents and teachers disagree about their abilities?
- Is there anything else that you believe would help me better understand what is experienced when parents and teachers disagree about a student's abilities?

Teacher Interview Questions:

- Tell me about your interactions with parents as an educator.
- What role, if any, do your perceptions of a student's abilities have on the student?
- Tell me about a situation in which you disagreed with a parent regarding his or her child's abilities.
 - What was your perception of this student's abilities?
 - How did your perception differ from the parent's perception?
 - How did you handle this disagreement?
- What, do you believe, are the reasons that your perceptions and the parents' perceptions of the student's abilities or performance differed?
- What messages do you believe students receive when parents and teachers disagree about their abilities?
- Is there anything else that you believe would help me better understand what is experienced when parents and teachers disagree about a student's abilities?

Parent Interview Questions:

- Tell me about your interactions with educators as a parent.
- Tell me about a situation in which you disagreed with a teacher regarding your child's abilities.
 - What was your perception of your child's abilities?
 - How did your perception differ from the teacher's perception?
 - How did you know that your perception was different from that of the teacher?

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- How did you handle this disagreement?
- What messages do you believe students receive when parents and teachers disagree about their abilities?
- Is there anything else that you believe would help me better understand what is experienced when parents and teachers disagree about a student's abilities?

What are the perceived outcomes for students and the family–school partnership when parent and teacher perceptions of student abilities diverge?

Student Interview Questions:

- Describe the quality of family–school partnership between your parents and school prior to the disagreement about your abilities. What was your parents' relationship with the school prior to the disagreement?
- Describe the quality of family–school partnership between your parents and school after the disagreement about your abilities.
- In what ways, if any, were you impacted by these varying messages about your abilities?
- What long-term consequences, if any, do you believe these varying messages regarding your abilities will have on you?
- Do you believe your self-perceptions were influenced by your teachers' or parents' perceptions? If so, in what way(s)?
- Do you believe the conflict between your parent(s) and teacher(s) influenced the quality of family–school partnership established? If so, in what way(s)?
- In general, how do you think students are impacted, both immediately and long-term, by divergent or differing parent and teacher perceptions of their abilities?
- Is there anything else that you believe would help me better understand how the conflict between parents and teachers regarding a student's abilities influences the establishment of effective family–school partnerships?

Teacher Interview Questions:

- Tell me about a situation in which you disagreed with a parent regarding his or her child's abilities.
 - Describe the quality of family–school partnership established between the school and this parent prior to the disagreement.
 - Describe the quality of family–school partnership established between the school and this parent after the disagreement.
- What immediate impact, if any, do you believe this disagreement had on the student?
- What long-term consequences, if any, do you believe this disagreement had on the student?
- Do you believe the conflict between the parents and you influenced the quality of family–school partnership established? If so, in what way(s)?
- In general, how do you think students are impacted, both immediately and long-term, by divergent parent and teacher perceptions of their abilities?

- Is there anything else that you believe would help me better understand how the conflict between parents and teachers regarding a student's abilities influences the establishment of effective family-school partnerships?

Parent Interview Questions:

- Tell me about a situation in which you disagreed with a teacher regarding your child's abilities.
 - Describe the quality of family-school partnership established between you and the school prior to the disagreement.
 - Describe the quality of family-school partnership established between you and the school after the disagreement.
- What immediate impact, if any, do you believe this disagreement had on your child?
- What long-term consequences, if any, do you believe this disagreement had on your child?
- Do you believe the conflict between the teachers and you influenced the quality of family-school partnership established? If so, in what way(s)? Describe these experiences.
- In general, how do you think students are impacted, both immediately and long-term, by divergent parent and teacher perceptions of their abilities?
- Is there anything else that you believe would help me better understand how the conflict between parents and teachers regarding a student's abilities influences the establishment of effective family-school partnerships?

What changes can be made in practice and policy that will help parents and teachers overcome discrepant perceptions of student abilities to build effective family-school partnerships?

Student Interview Questions:

- I am interested in learning more about effective family-school partnerships. When I talk about family-school partnerships, I am referring to the way in which families and schools work together to help students succeed. In your opinion, what would good family-school partnerships look like?
- How do you think parents and teachers should handle situations in which their perceptions of student abilities differ?
 - What, if anything, do you wish the school would have done differently to resolve the conflict?
 - What, if anything, do you wish your parents would have done differently to resolve the conflict?
- What advice do you have that could help parents and teachers resolve conflicts to establish effective family-school partnerships?

Teacher Interview Questions:

- How would you define effective family-school partnerships?
- Tell me about a situation in which you disagreed with a parent regarding his or her child's abilities.

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- What, if anything, do you wish the parent would have done differently to resolve the conflict?
- What, if anything, do you wish you would have done differently to resolve the conflict?
- What, if anything, have you learned from this experience?
- How do you think parents and teachers should handle situations in which their perceptions of students' abilities differ?
- What advice do you have that could help parents and teachers resolve conflicts to establish effective family–school partnerships?

Parent Interview Questions:

- I am interested in learning more about effective family–school partnerships. When I talk about family–school partnerships, I am referring to the way in which families and schools work together to help students succeed. In your opinion, what would good family–school partnerships look like?
- Tell me about a situation in which you disagreed with a teacher regarding your child's abilities.
 - What, if anything, do you wish the school would have done differently to resolve the conflict?
 - What, if anything, do you wish you would have done differently to resolve the conflict?
- What, if anything, did you learn from this experience?
- How do you think parents and teachers should handle situations in which their perceptions of students' abilities differ?
- What advice do you have that could help parents and teachers resolve conflicts to establish effective family–school partnerships?