An Analysis of Factors That Contribute to Parent–School Conflict in Special Education

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ABSTRACT

Understanding factors that escalate conflict, and understanding how conflicts are perceived, particularly by parents, is necessary in developing appropriate response strategies. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that escalate and deescalate parent–school conflict from the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities, school administrators, and media tors. Data from 44 telephone interviews were transcribed and then analyzed. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze data. Eight categories of factors that escalate parent–school conflict in special education were identified: discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs, knowledge, service delivery, reciprocal power, constraints, valuation, communication, and trust. Implications for preventing and handling conflict are discussed.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND PARENTS rests on two Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) principles: parent participation and procedural due process. In defining the parameters of an appropriate educational program for children with disabilities, the regulations of IDEA (1997) legitimize the parent role by granting parents the opportunity for shared decision making with schools (Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999). IDEA provides mechanisms to resolve conflicts between parents and school officials. The confrontation itself gives parents and schools an opportunity to determine what each wants for the student and how it might be possible to achieve desired outcomes.

IDEA 1997 made significant changes in the way parents, teachers, and administrators go about the important work of ensuring quality education and early intervention for some 5.8 million children with disabilities in the United States (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 1998). The IDEA Amendments of 1997 significantly enhanced the role of parents in the special education process. Expanded parental involvement is evident throughout IDEA in the specific areas of evaluation, eligibility, Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, discipline, procedural safeguards, and mediation (CEC, 1998).

In the process of designing and implementing an appropriate program for a student with a disability, differences of opinion inevitably arise between parents, school officials, and other professionals involved with the student. It is not always easy to understand what is right and what is legal in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Knowing what is legal and what is right, and knowing whether it is in a person’s best interest to pursue one or the other if they are not the same, can create conflict for an individual, a family, a group, or an entire organization (Dobbs, Primm, & Primm, 1991).

Definition and Development of Conflict

There are probably as many definitions of conflict as there are occasions for its occurrence (Kolb & Putnam, 1991). For the purposes of this study, conflict is defined as real or perceived differences that arise from specific educational circumstances that engender negative emotion as a consequence (Deutsch, 1973).
Most conflicts—large or small, interpersonal or international—follow a similar pattern. As Deutsch (1973) suggested (see Figure 1), conflict develops when people interact and perceive incompatible differences or threats to their resources, needs, or values. The point of conflict happens when people behave in response to this interaction. Depending on the response, the conflict escalates or deescalates. Putnam and Folger (1988) suggested that most conflicts involve a series of actions and reactions, moves and countermoves, communication strategies, perceptions, and interpretations of messages that directly affect substantial outcomes.

A wide range of issues may give rise to conflict. Deutsch (1973) identified five types of conflicts: control of resources, personal preferences, differences in values, what is reality and what is not, and the nature of the relationship between parties (e.g., short or long term, temporary or lasting).

**Parent-School Conflict in Special Education**

Conflict is a part of the human condition and is inevitable. Conflict itself is not always the problem; rather, the way conflict is handled and the outcomes of the conflict are problematic (Deutsch, 1973). Therefore, it is critical to learn ways to diminish the negative aspects of inevitable conflict and to create constructive solutions before conflict creates damage.

Unfortunately, the literature on conflict and responses to conflict in special education is limited. Most of the literature consists of position papers that expose the ills of due process hearings and the benefits of mediation, rather than empirically based studies. We have gained knowledge about the issues giving rise to conflict through studies of due process hearings. Hearings provide some basis for which to anticipate the issues likely to be disputed (Arizona Department of Education, 1993). Smith (1981) reported that almost 90% of issues leading to requests for due process hearings were related to placement. Budoff, Orenstein, and Abramson (1981) identified services, placement, and identification as the primary disputes in hearings. Kammerlohr, Henderson, and Rock (1983) noted that objections to placement were the issues in the majority of cases, and the Government Accounting Office (1989) identified placement, eligibility, appropriateness, procedural issues, and related services as the main issues in hearings.

Another theme in the literature is the adversarial nature of due process proceedings (Ballard, Ramirez, & Weintraub, 1982; Budoff & Orenstein, 1982; Goldberg & Kuriloff, 1991; Strickland, 1982; Zirkel, 1994), with mention of mediation as an alternative. Most of these data-based studies report information collected from parent surveys; few studies report in-depth interviews with parents who have been involved in mediation.

Common themes from these data-based studies suggest that mediation is a time-efficient, inexpensive, and emotionally comfortable process (Budoff & Orenstein, 1985; Forbis, 1994; Singer & Nace, 1985). Mediation was reported as more favorable than due process hearings by parents in comparative studies (Lake, 1991; Regan, 1990; Turnbull & McGinley, 1987; Vitello, 1990). Rates of mediation agreements appear to increase as states gain more experience with mediation (Sykes, 1990). Parents and school officials have generally reported that they could communicate their concerns in mediation (Budoff & Orenstein, 1985; Dobbs et al., 1991).

A third theme, the costs of conflict for parents and school systems, is frequently addressed in the literature on parent-school conflict. The damaging effects of conflict can be measured in many ways, involving monetary costs, weakened or destroyed relationships, and stress (Budoff & Orenstein, 1982; Fielder, 1986; Fish, 1990; Folberg & Taylor, 1984; Goldberg, 1995; Strickland, 1982). For example, conflict can weaken parents' confidence in schools and cause stress for both families and school officials. Parents have reported feeling overwhelmed by the conflict, and this stress may be exacerbated in situations such as single-parent families, foster or adoptive homes, homeless families, and families with a large number of children (Fish, 1990).
Probably the most frequently reported cost of conflict is financial. Although IDEA provides parents options to challenge school decisions, the costs of conflict can be burdensome. Imagine paying up to $30,000 for someone to determine what is right and what is legal concerning your child’s educational program. Crowley, Smith, and David (1991) reported that costs of due process hearings in Illinois could range from $5,000 to $30,000 when expenditures for the hearing officer, attorneys’ fees, court transcripts, staff time, and other costs were included. Zirkel (1994) provided an example of a due process hearing, concerning a child in Pennsylvania, that spanned 19 sessions and almost 2 years from filing until the final decision was granted. The cost for the transcript alone was $27,000. The cost for the hearing officer, including travel expenses, was $20,000. Other due process hearings have lasted from 25 days to as long as several months, resulting in even higher costs (Schrag, 1996). The passage of the Handicapped Children’s Protection Act (HCPA) of 1986 resulted in increased costs to school districts, in that attorneys’ fees are sometimes recoverable in administrative and civil action proceedings, including prehearing settlements. IDEA 1997 imposed some additional parameters to the recovery of attorneys’ fees.

Need for Research

Little is known about the experiences and perspectives of those who are involved in special education conflicts, particularly the parents’ perspective. Understanding how conflicts are handled from the parents’ point of view, particularly how the situations that escalate conflict are handled, is critical to developing appropriate response strategies. Further, understanding how conflicts are resolved should contribute to improvement and expansion of options available to families and schools. Across the country, a broader continuum of alternative dispute-resolution approaches and options is being implemented. Peer mediation, use of ombudspersons, panel mediations, and forms of arbitration are emerging as viable conflict-resolution options (Schrag, 1996). In special education there is a significant trend to focus on resolving disputes as early as possible. Preventive strategies such as parent-professional partnerships, peer mediation, and ongoing staff development are effective in encouraging cooperative school community cultures (Schrag, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to identify factors that escalate and deescalate parent–school conflict in special education. Massachusetts was selected as a desirable site for this study because of its history in using alternative dispute resolution processes in special education.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study included 22 parents, 16 school officials, and 6 mediators (n = 44). All parents had participated in a special education appeals process under Chapter 766 (a Massachusetts special education law), involving a request for mediation or a due process hearing. School officials participants were either principals (n = 13) or directors of special education programs (n = 3). Mediators were from the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA), which has authority to resolve educational disputes under Section 603 of the Code of Massachusetts Regulations (C.M.R. 28.00).

Procedure

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, parents were notified of the study by BSEA, which sent letters to 438 parents in two separate mailings. Each parent who received a letter had rejected his or her child’s educational plan and had filed an appeal with BSEA. The first mailing did not yield a sufficient number of responses; thus a second mailing was conducted. Parents from the 1995–1996 and the 1996–1997 school years received letters that described the study, invited them to participate, and included the address and telephone number of the first author. Thirty-nine parents contacted the first author about the study. Interviews were conducted with 22 parents.

School officials’ names were accessed from Massachusetts Department of Education directories. A letter was sent to every fifth principal in the directory, so that a total of 370 letters were sent. The number of school officials who inquired about the study was 20; 16 school officials agreed to participate. All the 8 mediators employed at BSEA were invited by letter to participate in the telephone interviews; 6 of them participated in the interview process.

Each volunteer participant scheduled a convenient interview time and was told of his or her eligibility to receive a copy of research results upon completion of the study. Each participant received a stamped, self-addressed envelope to return the signed consent forms. Interview times were agreed upon either by telephone or in writing at the time the consent agreement was completed.

Interviews

Specific open-ended interview questions were developed for each of the three groups in the study: parents, school officials, and mediators. These interview questions were used to ensure consistency across respondents. Primary questions included the following, which were adjusted to be appropriate for administrators and mediators:

1. What were the critical incidents that led to the request for mediation?
2. Are there things that you or the school could have done to decrease the conflict?
3. Were there factors that contributed to the conflict other than the actual issues of disagreement?
4. Why do you think the conflict was not resolved at the school level?

5. Are there things you wish you had done differently at the first sign of conflict or in the midst of a parent-school conflict?

6. What other actions could be taken to help parents and schools resolve special education conflicts?

Interview guides were field tested with a select group of respondents in Virginia and Tennessee. The researchers revised the content and sequence of questions with input from these individuals and from the director of mediation at BSEA.

The first author explained the purposes, risks, benefits, and telephone interview procedures both in the initial telephone call and again in a written informed consent form. Individual telephone interviews were conducted using the interview guides. Efforts to maintain anonymity and confidentiality were discussed, and opportunities were given for respondents to have their questions answered.

Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length (average 45 minutes). The interviewer used clarifying questions and probes as needed to solicit respondents’ perspectives and experiences (e.g., Can you tell me more about that? Could you give me an example?). Interview questions were adjusted for those who had experience with more than one mediation. Each interview session was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

**Data Collection**

Parent interviews with 21 mothers and 1 father were completed during a 2-month period. Each parent participant was the child’s biological parent, except 1 foster parent and 1 surrogate parent. The majority of parents (82%) were currently living in 2-parent families (n = 18), and 4 parents were single parents. Sixty-five percent of parents had completed high school, and 33% of parents had completed 1–6 years of college. Only 1 parent had not completed high school. The majority of parents (67%) had experienced one special education mediation; 7 parents had been through mediation more than once. Of the total number of mediations discussed in this study (33), 25 (76%) resulted in signed mediation agreements.

For the 28 children described by parents, the ages ranged from 4 to 20 years (X = 13 years), and 64% of children were male. The type of schools children were attending was reported: 67.9% of children were attending public schools, 10.7% were attending private schools, 10.7% were attending school of choice, and 10.7% were in college. Of the disability categories reported, the most frequent was learning disabilities (60.7% of students).

School officials’ administrative experience ranged from 1 year to 14 years (X = 6.6 years), and 79% indicated that they had been involved in training for conflict resolution. Mediators had an average of 11.2 years of work experience, and most reported a variety of training experiences that prepared them for their work; 67% of the mediators had also provided training for others.

**Data Analysis**

The first author coded data using grounded theory strategies proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The data were coded using three levels of coding (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding). In the first step of open coding, conceptual labels were developed for the actions and events that were described in the transcripts. For example, comments related to needing to know more about legal rights or special education processes were labeled “need for information.” Next, the related events, issues, and actions were grouped into categories. These groups of like concepts became a provisional category. For example, the conceptual labels “lack of factual information,” “lack of legal information,” “misunderstanding of parental rights,” “not understanding the operation of educational systems,” and “inability to judge program quality” were factors that participants reported to cause conflict. These types of responses formed the category “knowledge.” The eight final categories that emerged from the data reflected responses across parents, mediators, and administrators. Potential properties and dimensions were uncovered for each category, using a coding paradigm—axial coding—that involved asking questions about conditions, contexts, actions, strategies, and consequences of reported parent—school conflicts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 99–115). The following types of questions were asked in rereading the transcripts: How was knowledge helpful in resolving conflicts? What types of knowledge were lacking? Under what conditions did lack of knowledge appear to escalate conflicts? When did participants become aware that their knowledge was insufficient? How did participants gain knowledge that allowed them to judge the quality of educational programs?

The final stage, selective coding, involved integrating the categories in order to form a general description and an analytic description of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 121–124). Memos and visual diagrams helped illuminate links between conditions and consequences that escalated conflict. Emerging patterns were checked against the data through rereading of transcripts and checking of code notes. Categories of relationships were negated, supported, or extended into a conceptual framework that depicts components of parent—school conflict.

An interrater reliability check was applied in two ways. First, an independent coder read the cross-case synopses of all 44 cases (presented graphically in large-print chart format), and discussed cases after initial coding. Rationales for coding decisions were discussed, and some of the category codes were changed as a result.

A second, more formal, interrater reliability process was applied by having an additional rater code 25% of the interview transcripts into the 5 major categories. Interrater relia-
Findings

Eight factors that escalate or deescalate conflict were identified: discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs, knowledge, service delivery, constraints, valuation, reciprocal power, communication, and trust. It is important to understand that the identified categories are not mutually exclusive; in any given conflict situation many factors from various categories may operate simultaneously to escalate, deescalate, or contain conflict.

Figure 2 shows the eight categories and illustrates the interactive and dynamic nature of the identified categories, indicating that trust or lack of trust can be viewed as a foundational element in many issues involving conflict between parties.

Discrepant Views of a Child or a Child’s Needs

Discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs was identified as a category of factors that initiate or escalate conflict in 90% of participant interviews. When parents spoke of differences between their view of their own child and a school’s view, they offered two conclusions that might explain how a parent and a school could view a child differently. The first conclusion was a perception by parents that the school did not see a child as an individual with unique strengths and abilities. The second conclusion was that school personnel described a child from a deficit-model perspective, which parents received unfavorably.

Parents expressed concern that seeing a child as an individual was critical to arriving at agreement about services. One parent stated, “The most important thing is to find a school that will recognize your child as an individual.” Another parent expressed her disappointment that school personnel had limited understanding of her son’s needs and stated, “I wish they would have had a really good grasp of the difficulties that he had day to day, getting up in the morning, getting himself ready. You know, there’s so much more to it than just the educational piece.”

One parent offered a summarizing statement of the importance of viewing a child’s individual strengths and abilities:

He needs to be recognized as an individual, with individual strengths and abilities. . . . There was only room for what they wanted to provide and what they felt was adequate. It wasn’t adequate for him. . . . I realized these people had no ability to look at him as an individual, and help him as an individual strive for what he wanted to get. They were interested in keeping him where they thought he belonged.

Parents and mediators expressed strong opinions about how schools and parents justifiably viewed children differently. Though the differences were understandable, often the lenses school personnel chose to look through were quite different from the lenses chosen by parents. The lens chosen determines what is seen as problematic and what receives attention through school programming. Parents reported that schools focused too often on a child’s weaknesses and did not seem to take into account what the whole child was like. School personnel reported that parents became single-minded and sometimes selected “one right thing,” and excluded acceptable program offerings.

Another factor that was reported to initiate conflict was the parental perception that school personnel viewed a child from a deficit perspective. This was captured repeatedly in parents’ descriptions. They expressed feelings of frustration and sadness when school personnel described in detail what their children could not do. One parent stated, “Every time I went to a team meeting, you know, everything was negative. There was never anything good to say about my daughter—I mean, she never did anything good.”

Another parent described her frustration at repeatedly being told what her child could not do. She stated,
I often think if [school staff] could do one-on-one instead of [coming] with five people, telling me Susie can’t do this, and Susie can’t do that, and Susie can’t this, and Susie can’t that. And I am thinking, What about “Susie can do this and Susie can do that”?  

A mediator offered this assessment of how differences occur between a parent’s and a school’s view of a particular child:

Parents may have observed stuff in working with their child that’s going to be very important news to the school. I see this happen every once in a while, where the school says the kid doesn’t know his colors or numbers, and, you know, is that pre-readiness? The parent says, no, he can do this.

And the fact is both statements may be true. But, they are situation dependent... We have to get past thinking that are mutually exclusive observations. And to come to realize that, like us, kids are different in different circumstances. And people’s observations are what they know. And they can and should inform each other.

**Knowledge**

Mediators indicated that lack of problem-solving knowledge and lack of strategies for communication among school officials and parents escalated conflicts. All groups interviewed expressed that if parents, teachers, and school officials were more knowledgeable, conflicts could be more easily prevented or contained. When asked what actions could be taken to improve conflict-resolution practices, the need for knowledge was expressed repeatedly by parents, school officials, and mediators. A parent offered this perspective:

I think there probably should be far more parent education when kids are initially brought into the system. You’re sort of left out there hanging. It’s all new to you, and unless you happen to hit on the right people to help you out, you’re just lost. Just lost. You don’t have a clue as to why your child is having a problem generally. You don’t have a clue where to go; you don’t know what they need. There needs to be far more parent education early on.

A school official suggested that special education directors and school personnel have a responsibility to provide knowledge to parents because if the information parents are seeking is not available from the school system, parents will seek help elsewhere:

I think we hurt ourselves... in the sense that sometimes we are just not there for the parent.

Sometimes when we are not there, when we get so tied up with our own day and we are not providing the support that the parent needs, then the parent ends up looking elsewhere. When [parents] connect with an outside agency or talk to another parent who has a child out of the district, we have failed.

An imbalance of knowledge was mentioned by parents as a source of frustration when attempting to advocate for their children. One parent shared:

What is really hard is we go in there and... the special education director... knows the rules and regulations, everybody else knows the rules and regulations. You know, I think at that point there should be something, at least to help. On the parent side, a lot of people don’t have $35 per hour to get an advocate. It puts you at a disadvantage.

Parents seek knowledge to guide the practical actions that constitute advocacy for their own children. Parents, mediators, and school officials spoke of “judgmental knowledge”—that is, how a parent knows enough to make a good judgment about evaluations, or any area of service delivery. Mediators and parents reported that parents have difficulty telling whether knowledge is sufficient or dependable.

Parents reported that they first became aware that their knowledge was insufficient to accomplish what needed to be done when they found themselves facing adversity for the first time. A sense of security surrounded some parents in that they felt they knew their child’s disability well, and the school should know what to do. It was only when the first crisis hit that their knowledge was unable to serve them effectively. The first test of parents’ knowledge often came when they had to work through their first conflict over their child’s educational program.

**Service Delivery**

Parents reported the involvement of independent evaluators and advocates to assist with the gray areas of disagreements over quality of services, definition of inclusive services, instructional programs, and case management of integrated services. Parents stated that a school’s inability to substantiate and sufficiently answer their questions about services was an indicator that something was amiss with how services were actually being given to a child.

Lack of program options was discussed fully by parents, school personnel, and mediators. Shortsightedness in the planning of programs and not recognizing children’s needs prior to the time that services were needed was discussed in several interviews. Two mediators gave their thoughts on the issue of service delivery from the perspective of planning in advance and continuously reassessing the school system’s options for service delivery. One mediator stated:
Who should be designing programs? . . . Should it be the school administrator sitting in his office with the door closed, designing programs? . . . It’s no secret what kids are coming up each year. . . . So there’s a possibility of planning occurring early, and shouldn’t the planning involve those parents? I mean, if you have a parent who’s been involved in designing a program, . . . how likely is she to walk away from it? So I think program planning and design could involve parents at an early stage. That would create less dissatisfaction and get some actual new ideas from whatever they brought to the table.

Another mediator referenced the need for school personnel to be creatively planning at all times:

Well, I think that schools actually do this, but [they need to] pay extra attention to continually reviewing their program options. You know, know what the program looks like that the parent wants—review within their system. Really, is there another option we could consider here?

Along the same lines of thinking, one mediator suggested that when a parent desires a private placement, it would be advisable for the school to enter into a dialogue about the desired program:

Ask questions. If a parent comes in and says I found this new program down the road 50 miles, and I want that for my child, it’s an error to say we don’t do that or we’re not going to provide that. The best response is, “Come in. Have a cup of coffee. Tell me about it. What did you like about the program? You went and saw it, did your son see it? What did he like? How were you treated? What did you see there that particularly impressed you?” Because it’s the answers to those questions that reveal a person’s needs and interests. . . . So try to think of your negotiation without walls, without artificial boundaries between what you can do and what you can’t do.

**Constraints**

Constraints, in this study, were categorized as constraints on resources of time, money, personnel, and materials. Parents, special education directors, and mediators all mentioned the constraint of financial resources as a source of escalating conflicts. As the gatekeepers of funds, school officials were keenly aware of the position they are required to perform to successfully manage budgets. One special education director presented her concerns in this manner:

There is no funding help. I am looking at a budget in two towns right now for between $50,000 and $150,000, and for a small town, that is a lot of money. If we have two students move in, it just kills us if they need an out-of-district placement. I went to school to teach and work with people with special needs; I didn’t go to fight about the costs of education. Our funding structure—that’s a big issue.

Fiscal constraints not only prompted conflict but also generated two kinds of turf battles mentioned in the interviews. Some parents of students with severe disabilities stated that the special education budgets were being taken up by overidentification of students with mild disabilities, not leaving enough funds to students with more severe needs. Some parents of children with mild to moderate disabilities expressed that kids with severe needs used a large percentage of the special education budget, leaving little money for serving kids with mild disabilities. A similar scenario was portrayed among discussions with principals, only the turf battle for dollars was expressed to be between general education and special education funding. A parent expressed concern and embarrassment that she found herself in the middle of such turf battles and stated, “A parent should not be made to feel guilty because the child needs services, or that he is costly, or more costly than another child in the community.”

A parent who worked as a special education advocate reported that “masked issues” often hid fiscal constraints. She described being in team meetings that ended abruptly. Parents became confused about why services couldn’t be provided. School officials were not able to use lack of funds as a reason to deny services, but parents strongly felt that money was the underlying reason. Because no one could truthfully state that lack of services was due to lack of funds, other reasons were offered to parents. In some cases, parents became suspicious that the reasons stated were not the real reasons for denying services to their children.

**Valuation**

The valuation category of factors that escalate and deescalate conflict is defined as who and what people care for and about. When parents reported feeling devalued in the parent–school relationship or when they gave examples of perceived devaluation of their children, conflict escalated. The consequences of feeling devalued emotionally affected both parents and school officials.

Being valued as a partner in the parent–school relationship was important to both parents and school administrators. Examples of feeling devalued were reported when either party felt it was being lied to, or suspected that important information was being withheld. School officials also reported instances in which conflict escalated because parents withheld information or school personnel believed that a parent was not completely honest with them. A parent also described the feeling of being treated in a condescending manner and recounted those feelings:
Instead of making accommodations for him, it was just a lot of deception, a lot of manipulation, and a lot of head patting. I felt like I was constantly being just patted on the head and told to go home and everything would be fine. And they hardly ever listened to the concerns with an open ear at all. It was just “go away, you’re bothering me.” I think they were trying to humor me and they wanted me to just be happy with what they wanted to give.

School officials, likewise, reported that when parents chose not to share their feelings honestly and openly, situations were made more difficult for them. A special education director stated:

Many, many times, if I had known what the parent had been up against, I might have been able to intervene, before they got to the point of breaking. And unfortunately, it’s hard not to personalize when a parent goes immediately to a hearing without having spoken to me. . . . I really value my relationship with parents, so if a parent goes to a hearing without ever having spoken to me, it tells me something was wrong there. . . . I think one of the most important things parents can do is somehow contact the [special education] director and say, “This is my problem, this is what I am looking for as a resolution, and what do you see?”

One special education director spoke of feelings of injustice when parents hit him with issues suddenly, without warning:

Parents may not be happy with something, but they don’t tell us. And then . . . they show up with their lawyer or their advocate. . . . And so I guess [it’s important to get] parents to talk to the school system and explain what they’re unhappy with, and see if we can work it out before the lawyers and advocates come along, because that causes a lot of stress.

A parent recounted a personal experience in which he remembered feeling devalued:

I guess he’s retired now [special education director], he’s not there anymore, but he was very belligerent and insulting, and when you tried to talk to him one on one, when there were no other witnesses, he would say things like, “Well, your son is retarded. There is nothing else we can do for him. You had better accept the fact.” And he said all kinds of insults like this, which put parents such as myself on the defensive.

One parent expressed regret that her school did not value children like her son enough to help them prepare to reach their goals in life:

One of my sons wants to own his own bakery one day. They don’t want him to go to vo-tech next year. Is that right? I mean, this is what he needs. You know, it’s almost like they want to wash their hands of these kids. Teach them how to bag a grocery bag, and that’s fine, and go down and get a little minimum wage job and that’s a living.

The value of school as a provider of hope was suggested in several interviews. Parents reported looking to their school as the experts and the people who should know what to do. Parents expressed disappointment when they realized their school’s shortcomings. One parent described how she felt when she realized that her child was not able to be served in her local public school:

It also can be very disappointing and a big let-down when you realize the limitations of the public school system. It’s more disappointing than learning about the limitations of your child. When your child is diagnosed with special needs or whatever, you know, you go through a grief process. Well, you also go through a grief process when you realize the special education system has a disorder.

Another parent expressed these views and hopes about valuing students:

Everyone has special needs, everyone needs accommodations—needs to be recognized as an individual with individual strengths and abilities. Unless that happens, the educational system is failing in every way.

Reciprocal Power

Data from this study support the concept that power is used by both parents and schools in attempts to resolve conflict. Parents and school employees revealed bases of power and tactical maneuvers that were employed either consciously or unconsciously in an attempt to get what they wanted. A parent described the interactive power play between the school system and herself in this manner:

No matter how angry I got, the angrier they got back. The angrier I got, the worse the response was. I’m sure I was very annoying to them, . . . but they’re very good at wearing you down. And I was worn down a number of times. It was fighting, all the time. It was like pushing back the water. No matter where you pushed, you were met with resistance everywhere.
A parent described that her tenacity was powerful enough to turn a situation to her favor after she demonstrated that she was not going to back down:

I think [the special education director] wanted to see how far she could push before I would relent and whether it was going to be worth her while to fight me. After leaving a meeting with my advocate, we walked out shaking our heads, and she said, “What was that all about?” I said, “You don’t know? It was all about power.” I guess [the special education director] has decided that it’s not worth her while to fight. Since then she hasn’t given me any more grief.

Another parent’s tenacity resulted in getting the services she desired for her daughter. She described the process that resulted in a superintendent granting her wish after she had been unsuccessful in team meetings and in mediation:

I wonder if [the special education director] thought in one sense that I wouldn’t take it any further—that it was a challenge on her part, that it was her position to say no... to see how far I would take it. And then once I got to the next level, she knew that I wasn’t going to go home. My thought process on it was that the head of the special education department is the pit bull to keep parents away from the superintendent. Once you get past the pit bull, then something can happen.

Regardless of how the dynamics of power played out in individual cases, parents, school officials, and mediators recognized the human costs of the consequences of such conflicts and uses of power. A parent who went through a hearing and later became an educational advocate described the impact of her experience:

It was torture, I’m sure it was torture for them, too, because I made it miserable. You know, their misery increased every time mine did... Actually it was settled a week before the hearing, and [the school] did everything that they were supposed to do. But it took 2 years. And for that 2 years, I look back, and I wonder how I ever lived through it. It’s right there in your face at the forefront of everything, all day, everyday, and sleeping at night and the whole thing. It just takes over your life.

Communication

Frequency of communication, lack of communication, lack of follow up, misunderstood communications, and timing of clarifying attempts were given as factors that escalate conflicts between parents and schools. All parties used lack of communication as a tactic to distance themselves from conflict. The perception of withholding information was identified as a factor that escalated conflicts.

The number of persons involved in team meetings was reported as a deterrent to full expression. A large number of meeting participants were reported as being intimidating to parents. Parents felt as though school officials brought in everyone who knew about the child to help clarify difficult issues at team meetings. Parents reported that this was intimidating and did not allow them to discuss or communicate their feelings.

Simply not listening or being heard was a communication factor that escalated conflicts. Communication perceived as untrue or deceitful was a factor that escalated conflicts. What do we know about communication that deescalates conflicts? During the mediation sessions, most participants stated that they could fully express the issues that were meaningful to them. Some expressed that this was the first time they felt that they could really get out the compelling issues, feelings, and needs they had been experiencing throughout the conflict. Parents and school officials often pointed to mediation as the first real ability to communicate after several unsuccessful attempts at having authentic communication. In the presence of a neutral third party, parents and school officials felt safe enough to reveal their innermost needs and were able to describe the importance of their deeply held positions.

Trust

If trust was intact, parents felt a certain amount of predictability and security about the actions of school personnel. They were able to tolerate negative events periodically, without attaching too much importance to any one single event. They generally could verbalize that school personnel were professionally capable and were considerate of their children’s needs. These parents appeared willing to give school personnel the benefit of the doubt when minor events became problematic in the course of a school week.

Conversely, parents in broken trust relationships with schools described having difficulty accepting suggestions from school personnel. Parents in this group reported that they were less satisfied and less inclined to see their parent-school relationship as one of mutual benefit. They expected fewer positive outcomes from their schools and viewed personnel as being uncaring, unresponsive, or detrimental to their children’s well-being. Parents in broken-trust relationships lacked the confidence to fully accept school personnel’s demonstration of good-faith efforts. After a point, they no longer maintained hope that the parent-school relationship had value in and of itself or provided benefit to the child. Parents reported turning points in their ability to trust and remembered the point at which they were no longer willing to risk the hurt and disappointment that may result if they took the risk of trusting again. It was at this point that parents requested out-of-district placements, changes of schools, mediation, or due process hearings.
The consequences of broken trust resulted in widening discrepant views between parents and schools, and resulted in an unwillingness to take the risks necessary to continue communicating about the needs of children. It appears that conciliatory attitudes could be maintained as long as trust was intact. When trust was broken, parents felt they could not continue to work with or try to understand school officials' positions. School officials were in some cases unaware of the point at which a parent chose to stop trusting or believing in the ability of school personnel to make things right for a particular child.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Much has been written about parent–school partnerships and collaboration, but, professionally, little is written about how to maintain collaboration in the face of adversity. This study provides a framework of factors (see Figure 2) that contribute to conflict between parents and schools. The identification of these factors provides a broader understanding of what contributes to parent–school conflict and illustrates the interactive and dynamic nature of the identified factors. Another value of this study is that it makes conflict more understandable by making the factors that lead to conflict explicit. This study also provides practitioners with examples of situations that escalate conflict.

The core category in Figure 2, discrepant views, refers to differences in how parents and schools view a child’s needs. When parents and schools have different views of a child or a child’s needs, conflict tends to escalate until the discrepancies are reduced or eliminated. It is important to examine where discrepant views originate and to learn how to narrow the gap between a parent’s view and a school’s view. Taking constructive steps to reduce discrepant views involves identifying the underlying needs of parents and separating needs from positions. In educational planning, it is helpful if schools consider family routines, what may be problematic about those routines, childcare tasks, sources of family support, and roles of family members. Listening and incorporating parents’ perceptions of long- and short-term goals for their children help to narrow the gap between opposing views. It is important for educators to explain the goals they want for children, but to be careful not to overshadow parental or student goals.

Historically, educators who focused on the etiology of learning problems from a deficit perspective did so with the hope of developing interventions to ameliorate or minimize these problems (Trent, Arlties, & Englert, 1998). However, a child’s disability is only a small part of who that child is (Van der Klijf & Kunc, 1994). The language used in special education has been deficit laden, and parents are often offended by language that describes only the difficulties children experience. Attention needs to be paid to the whole child, and his or her abilities, strengths, aspirations, and needs. Educators also need to provide opportunities for parents to describe their children and their dreams for their children, and to include parents’ perceptions in educational planning. This sharing of parent and school perspectives and viewing the child as a whole person provides a firm foundation for good parent–school partnerships.

Individual special education cases can be complex technically, programmatically, and legally. In attempting to offer appropriate services, it is not uncommon for school systems to wrestle with issues of constraints on time, personnel, or other resources. Service-delivery issues such as nature and length of services, as well as program options, are affected by budgetary constraints. A constraint identified in this study that appears to be underidentified in the professional literature is constraints on team functioning. IEP teams are empowered to make decisions regarding children’s education, but only to a certain financial level. When costly programs or services are recommended, the team may cease to function as a team. At this point in an ongoing conflict, an administrator, rather than the IEP team, is likely to become the chief decision maker. This was identified by parents and advocates as a critical factor that may escalate special education conflicts. How can IEP teams continue to function under such circumstances? This question is outside the range of this study, but is worthy of additional investigation.

Parents questioned their ability to advocate for their children without proper knowledge in the categories of organizational knowledge, disability knowledge, judgmental knowledge, legal knowledge, and conflict management knowledge. Parents reported that it was difficult to know whether services offered for their children were really appropriate without adequate knowledge. Even when parents paid to secure advocates or attorneys, they questioned their ability to judge which private service providers were reputable. Mediators in this study reported that knowledge of conflict-resolution strategies and improved communication skills were needed by parents and school officials.

Past studies have identified an imbalance of power between schools and parents, suggesting that parents are overpowered by school systems (Fisch, 1990; Goldberg, 1989; Strickland, 1982). Results of this study reframe the imbalance of power issue as a reciprocity of power. This study suggests that bases of power exist within individuals, and that power shifts back and forth between parents and school officials. Parents reported using power to get what they wanted. As stated by a special education mediator, “A parent who will take you to the cleaners at any cost is in a very powerful position.”

Power struggles can be decreased if educators focus on relationships. Educators who develop strong, reciprocal relationships with children and parents and who use good communication skills provide a foundation for satisfying and productive relationships. In these relationships, parents feel valued and respected, and conflicts are more easily addressed. Maintaining conciliatory attitudes in conjunction with being able to apply sound problem-solving skills can build confidence that problems can be solved. However, good intentions are often not enough. Both parents and school officials need good communication, problem-solving, and negotiation skills.
As parties involved in conflict gain these skills, conflicts may feel less threatening.

In this study, parents reported that when trust was broken, actions on the part of the school to remedy the situation were perceived as “too little, too late.” It is important that trust be maintained, and one effort school systems can make in this area is to respond to conflicts early, before trust is broken. A continuing responsibility of parents and educators is to protect the trusting relationship. California has pioneered programs in early response to special education conflict (Schrag, 1996). These models should be shared in an effort to educate school officials on the value of preserving trust in parent-school relationships.

Learning to disagree without devaluing the opposing party is essential if working relationships are to survive. A challenge to parents and educators is to maintain an attitude of conciliation and collaboration when disagreements arise. Some researchers have considered conflict to be destructive if the parties involved are dissatisfied with the outcomes and feel that they have lost as a result of the conflict (Deutsch, 1973). Constructive conflict, on the other hand, exists if the involved parties are satisfied with the outcomes and feel that they have gained as a result of the conflict.

Although often people view conflict in negative terms, a number of important and positive effects have been attributed to conflict, including preventing stagnation, stimulating creative problem solving, contributing to self-assessment and skill testing, and engendering personal, organizational, and societal change (Filley, 1975). A goal of parent-school relationships is to view conflict as an opportunity for growth and change. Conflicts can serve a purpose and can result in improved services to students.

This study was limited to a small volunteer population in one state. Replication of this study in other areas of the country may provide a basis for confirming or elaborating on the factors we have identified. Quantitative studies will help us understand factors that escalate conflict in a much larger population. The work that is being implemented in specific states that focuses on early intervention and response to conflict needs to be evaluated and shared. Future research should focus on developing strategies for early response to parent-school conflict and maintaining effective parent-school partnerships.


REFERENCES


Manuscript received December 9, 1998
Revision received February 24, 1999
Initial acceptance November 9, 1999
Final acceptance January 26, 2000

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