Communication Between Home and School About Children With Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Primary Schools

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International and Australian studies have reported growing scrutiny of communication between home and school. Increased reliance on negotiated curriculum for all students generally and for students with disabilities specifically, has increased the urgent need to investigate this communication. In particular, the pervasive but person-specific effects of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) on student learning require collaborative program design matched to the needs, abilities, and learning styles of an individual child. Frequent communication between the parents and regular classroom teachers about a student with ASD enables parents and teachers to share their knowledge from their different contexts when designing individualised education programs. As there are many students with ASD in Queensland primary schools, the nature of home-school communication about these students with ASD warrants exploration.

Introduction

Changes in the role of school-based professionals have required changes in home-school relationships. For decades, schools have been expected to develop working partnerships with parents. Characteristic relationships between parents and teachers have varied across different eras, systems, and cultures. Recently, policy considerations have pressed the notion that schools are accountable to parents and the wider community. When teachers have a professional position on accountability that values communication with parents, then meaningful accountability can occur. Respect for teachers has been a long-held assumption across most cultures. When parents respect the contribution that schools make to their child's learning, then home is more likely to become actively involved in educational decision making. In this two-way partnership, communication plays a vital role between stakeholders and affects the kinds of relationship that can develop (Decker & Decker, 2003).

Strategies to enhance home-school collaboration have concentrated on schools accepting the lead in reconceptualising the role of "teacher" and "parent" (Epstein, 2001). In reflecting on traditional roles of these school and home stakeholders, Gascoigne (1995) summarised: "The fault lies not in the role that each professional plays, but in the assumption that the professionals form one group, and parents another" (p. 45). School communities have been urged to recognise and value the different skills, experience, and knowledge that home and school stakeholders bring to collaboration in order to enhance

teaching and learning. Schools have been encouraged to develop working partnerships between parents and teachers. The collegiality, mutual support, joint problem solving, and communication involved these partnerships are the vehicle for a transforming vision of school culture (Epstein, 2001).

Porter (2002) outlined a six-step evolution of parent-professional relationships. With each new step, previous practice was either added to or adapted, rather than replaced. In Step 1 (i.e., professional dominance of the relationship), parents ceded educational decision-making about their children to school professionals because they tended to defer to high standing of teachers, with their specialised knowledge. In Step 2 (routine communication), this dominance faded, and teachers tended to communicate more routinely with parents but still held the decisive position. In Step 3 (parallel cooperation), home and school stakeholders tended to work along side each other (e.g., parents in the uniform shop and teachers in the classroom). In Step 4 (coordination), the emphasis of the relationship had shifted to teaching parents skills so that they could work with their children at home. In Step 5 (collaboration), the most recent focus of progressive change in practice has been that parents and teachers plan curriculum together. Porter (2002) made recommendations for a sixth step towards relationship-building practice. She suggested that home stakeholders would become employers of state employed educators who would, therefore, be expected to meet individual student and family needs (employer-employee).

A continuum of these stepped relationships and partnerships between parents and teachers may be a more realistic model of contemporary practices across regular, inclusive, and special educational settings. That is, recommended practice has shifted along the continuum towards more equitable relationships and more active partnerships. Currently, there is still a range of practice across schools, which can be described in terms of Porter's earlier steps. Moreover, the forms of communication that support higher-level relationships have been identified and promoted in the literature, but their use is localised rather than widespread.

The scope of home-school communication issues

There has been substantial research on home-school collaboration (Decker & Decker, 2003). Hendrick (1997) summarised the main purpose of this collaboration: "When parents and professionals combine knowledge about services and the child, a plan of action may be developed that supports the child's overall growth and development. Professionals have information and resources that are useful for parents while parents have specific knowledge about their child that professionals can use to guide their decision making" (p. 119). Such negotiations focus on knowledge sharing and discussion among various stakeholders (e.g., parents, specialist staff, regular teachers) that identifies and builds upon the needs, abilities, and learning styles of individual students. For students with special needs, this sharing and discussion ultimately leads to meaningful individual education plans (IEPs).

Extensive research has been conducted on how home-school communication can be used to assist curriculum decision making and teaching approaches. Much of this work has concentrated on how teachers can actively engage parents of children with disabilities

in communications related to IEP meetings and personalised goal setting (e.g., Clark, 2000; Dabkowski, 2004; Jordan, Reyes-Blanes, Peel, Peel, & Lane, 1998; Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Other work has focused on ways to foster functional home-school communication in the critical areas of child assessment, health, behaviour, and everyday problem solving (e.g., Hall, Wolfe, & Bollig, 2003; Williams & Cartledge, 1997). In many cases, however, barriers have undermined the potential benefits of home-school communications. Some barriers are home-based. Turnbull and Turnbull (1997) have identified emotional, familial, cultural, and relational issues as important home-based barriers. Others are school-based, with barriers including teacher attitude and skills, work-related factors, and school wide issues.

Forms of home-school communication also have been examined. According to Hornby (2001), the primary methods of maintaining home-school communication have included (a) informal contacts and social events, (b) telephone contacts, (c) written communications, (d) parent-teacher meetings, and (e) home visits. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) reported that parents tend to prefer more informal and frequent forms of communication (e.g., written communications), because these methods seem to produce more consistency and alignment of learning across settings. Turnbull and Turnbull also recommended the use of diverse written communications, ranging from occasional notes, letters, and daily log books to progress reports, handouts, and newsletters. Not surprisingly, the most commonly used form of written communication is the daily log (Powell, 1980) or home-to-school notebook (Hall et al., 2003). This two-way form of communication is seen to construct an ongoing documentation of problem solving and child progress that promotes congruent educational decision making and coordinates programming efforts. In contrast, the use of technology-based communication tools such as e-mail is increasingly being suggested for brief and urgent communications (Salend, 2005). Teachers need to be highly sensitive to two aspects of their communications with families, whatever the form of the communication. First, parents should help to determine the forms of communication if meaningful commitment to and engagement in home-school communication is to be realised (Decker & Decker, 2003). Second, teachers need to adjust their forms of communication to fit cultural patterns and socioeconomic realities (Salend, 2005).

A relatively small set of studies have been focused on specific communication practices. These studies have typically examined the amount and kind of communication practices and have evaluated the effectiveness of certain practices (Brady, Peters, Gamel-McCormick, & Venuto, 2004). Some small-scale studies have used face-to-face methods of inquiry (i.e., either group or individual) to investigate practice dynamics. Some larger scale studies have used traditional survey methods. For example, Elliot (2003) involved 36 parents of very young students in five separate focus groups meetings. Key descriptive findings from individual quotations highlighted parent preference for two-way communication about the daily experiences of their child and their impact on the child's short- and long-term learning. All parents commented that they expected communications to link home and school experiences. By contrast, Brady et al. 2004) examined talk between professionals and families during one-to-one home visits. They analysed interactions with 15 families. Greater family participation in communication was

linked to indirect teacher talk. Specifically, praising, encouraging, accepting ideas, and asking questions were found to be effective, indirect teacher strategies. Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, and Jayanthi (2001) conducted a robust nationwide US survey of communication practices around homework. Parents ranked ordered a number of strategies that schools, teachers, and parents could use to improve communication around homework. Parents of children with disabilities (N = 120) and of typically developing children (N = 400) were in substantial agreement about strategies and technologies for improving parent-teacher communication. Parents of children with disability, however, gave a higher ranking to attending meetings and designating a single teacher for school-home contact. Parents of children without disability gave a higher ranking to student reminders about homework requirements, by both parents and teachers. It appeared that the more complex problems around homework for student with disabilities needed more face-to-face discussion with teachers.

For the most part, recommendations from the literature have provided extensive but generic practical advice on how teachers can change their home-school communications to match the evolving collaborative programming environment. Recommendations to accommodate students with high support needs in inclusive settings have been placing more pressure and responsibilities on local teachers and parents. This pervasive, developmental disorder described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) involves social and communication impairments as well as a limited range of highly individualised activities and interests. Students with ASD will tend to use inappropriate behaviours to communicate their needs and wants at home and school. Their limited proficiency in performing developmentally appropriate communication affects their capacity to share ideas, information, and emotions (Ashman & Elkins, 2005). Generally, students with Asperger's Syndrome experience less impairing communication and related social challenges and less stereotypical repetitive moments than students with classic ASD (Attwood, 1998). Nevertheless, the impact of either form of ASD adds complexity to the needs, abilities, and learning styles of the student and restricts their social interactions. Parents and teachers of students with ASD need to adopt extra responsibilities in facilitating communication at home and at school (Wood et al., 2004). Moreover, communication about the students between home and school becomes important, both to help the child to share events with people in the alternative settings and to help parents and teachers to coordinate educational information.

Although there have been some broad recommendations in the literature about the forms and frequencies of effective communication patterns, there is a lack of specificity and contextual relevance. The large number of students with ASD in Queensland primary schools warrants an investigation into the nature of home-school communication about this student population.

Research aim and questions

A broad plan for this exploratory study is to investigate the form, frequency, and content of home-school communication that are currently used and valued by parents and regular classroom teachers who support students with ASD. From this review of the literature,

five research questions have been extracted for investigation in two primary schools in south-east Queensland.

1. What types of communication now occur among the school community, and when do these communications occur?
2. What value is placed on home-school communication by stakeholders and what, specifically, is valued?
3. What are the facilitators to home-school communication?
4. What are the barriers to home-school communication?
5. What other issues are there with home-school communication?

Exploration of these five questions will provide rich qualitative and quantitative information about the home-school communication currently in place at each school. A major innovation of this study is that it will build research questions around the 5Rs Framework (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester, 2000). Table 1 presents the research questions sorted according to the 5Rs framework.

Table 1

Research questions sorted according to the 5Rs framework (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester, 2000)

RESEARCH QUESTION [a]	5RS FRAMEWORK
What types of communication now occur among the school community and when do these communications occur? (Dabkowski, 2004; Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Salend, 2005; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Wood et al., 2004)	*Reporting* (i.e., description of events) What can you report about these communication events? What observations did you make?
What value is placed on home-school communication by stakeholders? (Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Porter, 2002; Salend, 2005; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997)	*Responding* (i.e., an emotional response to events) How did these events make you feel? Did they prompt you to form any questions about home-school communication events?
What are the facilitators to home-school communication? (Porter, 2002; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001) What are the barriers to home-school communication? (Turnbull & Turnbull 1997, 2001)	*Relating* (i.e., an emotional link between this response and prior history of affective experiences) How do these events relate to your own skills? How do these events relate to your experiences? How do these events relate to your understanding?
What other issues do you have with home-school communication? (Hammitte & Nelson, 2002; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).	*Reasoning* (i.e., cognitive response to and interpretation of events) How might these events change your present home-school communication practice and that of other school community members? *Reconstructing* (i.e., cognitive analysis of impact and implications of events) How might these events change your future home-school communication practice and that of other school community members?

[a] For each question, citations list some key research literature relevant to the question.

Application of the five components (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing) in the framework tends to produce increased depth of emotionally based and cognitively based reflection (Martschinke, Waugh, Beamish, & Davies, 2004). In this study, the framework should encourage individual parent and teacher participants to elaborate on previous, present, and future (i.e., expected) communication experiences across the emotional-cognitive dyad of reflection about communication practices.

Method

Case study design is routinely considered appropriate methodology to explore multiple variables that are too complex for survey and experimental approaches (Yin, 1994). The proposed study will use an exploratory two-case embedded design. Information in two school settings will be collected and analysed in order to consider the range, richness, and complexity of home-school communication about students with severe disabilities. It is acknowledged that this limited study might be specific to parents and teachers in these contexts and may not, therefore, be generalisable beyond these contexts. Data about local practice, however, are urgently needed to foster improvement in parent-teacher communications.

Preliminary tasks

School selection and relationship building are important first steps in the establishment of the study. School selection will first involve contact with the Brisbane South district of the Department of Education in order to obtain a short list of primary schools that support at least 10 students with ASD. The Executive Director Schools will be requested to provide written authorisation that will enable access to relevant schools. Principals will be contacted by telephone, informed of the study, and asked to provide confirmatory data about the ASD population at that school. Schools with 10 or more ASD students will be invited to participate in the study. The principal will then be contacted by e-mail within a week of the phone call and formally asked to participate in the study. Two schools will be selected from those expressing interest. Selection will be based on a criterion of administrative support and, then, number of students with ASD.

Relationship building will begin with a subsequent telephone call to principals at the two schools. These principals will be asked to nominate a staff member who will assist the researcher with the coordination of study activities. At a second meeting prior to the first study activity, this contact person will be asked to assemble school documents related to home-school communication.

Participants

Targeted participant groups will be members of two school communities in the Brisbane South school district of the state department of Education. Parents and regular classroom teachers of primary students with ASD involved at each of two schools will be invited to participate in all data collection activities. The parents will be required to be living full-time with their child, and the regular classroom teachers will require a minimum of one semester's experience in supporting students with ASD. The nominated contact person from each school site will also assist in participant recruitment.

Research activities

Parents and regular classroom teachers from the two schools will be involved in three research activities: (a) focus groups, (b) individual home-school communication recording, and (c) face-to-face interviews. This multimodal approach to data gathering will ensure a sufficiently rich corpus of data to enable investigators to understand the interactive dynamics of communication practices.

Activity 1: Focus group

The four focus groups will comprise a parent and teacher group at each school. Approximately, six participants and the researcher as facilitator will be involved in each discussion. The coordinator of activities at each school will introduce each of the potential participants and the researcher at the beginning of the focus group session. Refreshments and several ice-breaker questions will be used to build a "thoughtful" environment for interaction (Krueger, 1994, p. 113). The first of these questions will be designed to engage each parent or teacher one at a time. Each group will be reminded of the purpose of and procedures for the study as presented in an information sheet. Components of the focus group tasks will be outlined, and potential participants will be reminded that their involvement is voluntary. Before asking the first focus group question, the members of each group will be asked to listen to the responses of other members and then build upon such contributions throughout the group session. Participants will be informed that the aim of the discussion is to obtain a collective point of view on the topic's presented questions and, therefore, individual responses will remain confidential (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). In anticipation of "the flow of conversation" (Krueger, 1994, p. 115), participants will be reminded to concentrate on the specific home-school communications at their school. The *six research questions* will be placed on a wall chart for the purpose of "controlling the topic" during the discussion (Vaughn et al., p. 81). These questions will form the general structure that helps to keep the participants on the topic within the time frame. Additional questions will probe the details that individuals develop in response.

After a focus group discussion has ended, the researcher will briefly explain the next two activities and invite focus group participants to volunteer to take part in these activities. Interested participants will remain to collect materials for the next activity.

Activity 2: Individual home-school communication recording

All participants from the focus group will be invited to complete an individual home-school communication recording and subsequently to participate in a face-to-face interview (Activity 3). This second activity will require individual parents and teachers to generate a quantitative catalogue of the types and frequency of actual home-school communication practice in which they engage over the subsequent 4 weeks. A starter list of home-school communication forms will be generated from the types of communication mentioned in school documentation. Participants will add (a) descriptions and perhaps samples of extra communication forms they use and (b) tally marks next to each listed communication form to progressively record the frequency of all home-school interactions. An extensive survey of the literature will be used to generate and substantiate a comprehensive listing of communicative variations that

supplement the 11 forms already identified by Salend. Thus, participants will be able to refer to a complete catalogue of practices as they document their own practices. Participants will be asked to rank order how highly they value each communication form by placing a "1" next to the most valued form then subsequent numbers next to remaining forms, until all are ranked. They will then return the communication record to the researcher in a provided self-addressed envelope.

Activity 3: Face-to-face interviews

The researcher will commence each interview by referring individual participants to the record of home-school communications that they have previously compiled. A semi-structured script will be link these records of actual home-school experience to previous, present, and future experiences using the five research questions. Table 1 presents the script for discussions in which participants will be requested to describe experiences (reporting), react emotionally (responding), make connections (relating), consider current practice (reasoning), and suggest better ways of communicating in the future (reconstructing).

Data collection

Responses to the Activity 1: Focus group and Activity 3: Face-to-face interviews will be collected using an audio tape recorder. Activity 2: Individual home-school communication recording will involve the parent and teacher participants generating (a) a list of all the home-school communications, (b) a frequency count of the forms of communication that are used, and (c) a relative rating of each form, over a 4-week period. The document searches will involve review, by the researcher, of pertinent school documents related to home-school communication and will not directly involve participants.

Data analysis

Separate and combined content analysis (CA) of the focus group, interview transcripts, and school documents on home-school communication will be used to identify key categories and themes of responding (Silverman, 2002). Leximancer (Smith, 2002) will be used to identify the frequency and connectedness of concepts across the activities. There will be two lines of CA analysis: (a) an analysis of the lived experience of home-school communication using the focus group and interview data, complemented by (b) an analysis of idealised experience using the documents generated by members of the school community. Analyses will focus on the extent to which individual participant responses, parent and teacher responses as distinct groups, and school documents on home school communication, converge around the five research questions.

Conclusion

This review of the literature has indicated that regular schools have been strongly encouraged to engage parents in active communications for 30 years. Such interactions do not typically occur as parents insist that they should and as state policy directions require that they should. Investigations have almost exclusively focused on communications during mandated IEP meetings, with most research conducted in the USA. A growing body of recent research has highlighted the value of informal ongoing

communications as a means of encouraging active home-school interaction within and beyond the IEP meeting. As there are many students with ASD in Queensland primary schools, it is timely to review the home school communication practices that support these students. Outcomes from the preliminary tasks will be reported at the conference.

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