Leveraging Teachable Moments: Enlisting Teacher Candidates in the Empowerment of Parents of Children with Disabilities

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Abstract: Minority parents of children with disabilities are often marginalized in special education. With this injustice in mind, this paper reports on research on the potential of special education teacher candidates to participate in the empowerment of these parents as advocates for their children's rights.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Special Education, Parental Rights

Introduction

Four decades after the passage of Public Law 94-142, the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents of children with disabilities are often prevented from being effective advocates for their children (Ong-Dean, 2009). This is particularly true of minority and poor families (Doucet, 2011; Hyman, Rivkin, & Rosenbaum, 2011). While IDEA articulates procedural protections for parents in painstaking detail, much of the time they are sidelined, unprepared to be effective advocates (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003; Wakelin, 2008). The difficulty of navigating the complexity of the law's procedural protections, a culture of institutional and professional hegemony, and the ascendency of "expert" discourses in special education have systematically marginalized parents' voices and restricted parental participation (Ong-Dean, 2009; Morgan, 2005; Skrtic & Kent, 2013). Only the most capable parents with access to adequate economic, cultural, and social capital are able to challenge institutions and professionals and fight for their children's rights to under IDEA (Trainor, 2010).

Thus, despite IDEA's legal assurances and ethical prescriptions, special education—its structures, practices, and professional culture—is often complicit in the marginalization of parents of children with disabilities. The system and the discourses it perpetuates have distorted and watered down society's promise of justice to children with disabilities. Yet, IDEA's promise endures. Therefore, if the system cannot keep that promise, it is up to committed individuals to do so. This is where teacher education can show its commitment to the empowerment of parents and social justice. As it is, special educators play a role in the systemic disenfranchisement of parents but this does not have to be. Special education teachers are insiders who are in a position to assist parents in their advocacy for their children (Hale, 2013). The present research demonstrates the potential of teacher candidates to develop dispositions toward respect for and collaboration with parents and therefore become their advocates rather than their adversaries. It is up to us, special education teacher educators, to identify that potential in all teacher candidates and leverage it into "teachable moments" in which to support and encourage the development of such dispositions and to prepare teacher candidates to recognize the need for parental empowerment and resist the oppressive culture of professional dominance in special education. A central purpose of teacher education must be to prepare future and novice special education

teachers to understand, respect, and advocate for parents of children with disabilities. Special education teachers who are disposed to be true advocates for children with disabilities and their parents can become agents of needed change (Connor, Valle, & Hale, 2012).

In this paper, I describe the findings of research based on interviews with special education teacher candidates at the end of their masters in special education degree program. I start with an overview of the literature showing the historic and ongoing failures of special education to make good on IDEA's guaranty of empowerment of parents of children in special education. Next, I describe the theoretical frameworks that inform my analysis of the research participants' narratives. Subsequently, I describe my findings. Finally, I outline my conclusions and the implications of this research.

Parents and Special Education

Soon after the 1975 enactment Public Law 94-142 (IDEA), in became apparent that parents were frequently unaware of their rights under the law and that the obfuscations of professional discourse contributed to their ignorance. Compounding this, educators often excluded them from meaningful participation in their children's Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning meetings (Valle, 2011). Culturally and linguistically diverse parents in particular experienced bias and disenfranchisement, regularly reporting being denied respect and support (Harry, 2008).

Parental dissatisfaction with special education remains common today. Interviews with parents show many feel that special educators are doing little or nothing to satisfy their children's needs (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Many parents tell of their children's rights being denied (Barton, 2007), and describe a lack of cooperative and supportive relationships with professionals (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004).

Social class position plays an important part in determining parental success in securing access to needed services for their children. Middle-class parents of children with disabilities are commonly more proactive advocates. They are generally more skilled than working-class and poor parents at employing social capital (access to social networks) to acquiring information and professional guidance (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). More privileged parents are also more likely to obtain expertise and technical knowledge, such as knowledge of their children's rights under IDEA (Trainor, 2010) and are more apt to participate in IEP meetings (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012). Accordingly, they are more effective than lower income parents at advocating for their children.

Cultural and linguistically diverse parents of children with disabilities often experience discriminatory bias and institutional barriers in their dealings with educators. They face cultural biases (Alvarez-McHatton, 2005; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005) and prejudiced judgments of their parenting (Alvarez-McHatton, 2005; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005; Kalyanpur, Maya, & Harry, 2004; Klingner & Harry, 2006). They are often sidelined in the special education process due to failure of professionals to support them in overcoming procedural barriers and/or supply procedural knowledge (Angelov & Anderson, 2012; Kalyanpur, Maya, & Harry, 2004; Klingner & Harry, 2006) or deliver acceptable translation services (Alvarez-McHatton, 2005; Klingner & Harry, 2006).

Theoretical Frameworks

This paper employs two theoretical frameworks. Disability Studies in Education (DSE) provides a critical lens—informed by a commitment to social justice—on the education of children with disabilities. Positioning Theory is a tool of narrative analysis that reveals how individuals and/or groups judge others against normative standards.

Disability Studies in Education

Disability Studies in Education is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that takes a critical view of special education practices and knowledge traditions. A DSE perspective differs from those found in traditional special education in many fundamental ways. DSE contests the medical model of disability that is central to special education practice and research. Rather than seeing disability as an intrinsic characteristic of the individual, DSE recognizes disability as a socially constructed phenomenon as well as a civil/human rights issue. While this social model of disability acknowledges that individual differences may result from impairments due to neurological, biological, cognitive, or psychological variations, it identifies disability as the product of social, political, economic, and cultural structures and practices. Impairment is a part of natural human variation but disability (always considered a negative characteristic) is a form of oppression resulting from normative expectations and interactions in the context of social life (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). DSE is committed to listening to and respecting the perspectives of individuals with disabilities and their families. Consequently, parents should be involved in all phases of educational planning for their children, and should be seen as an important source of knowledge and an essential alternative perspective on their children‘s needs. Special education teacher education informed by DSE principles prepares teacher candidates to recognize the parental role as such and to see themselves as advocates for their students and parents (Ashby, 2012; Nishimura, 2011).

Positioning Theory

Positioning theory focuses on how speech acts of individuals, groups, organizations, etc. position others in storylines in the context of a local moral landscape. Positions are collections of beliefs about the ways in which rights and duties are distributed in the course of interactions. The local moral landscape enforces particular normative limitations and opportunities for action within a storyline. The positioning act determines the distribution of the rights and duties within human interactions and delimits the repertoire of potential actions of positioned individuals (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). Positions also indicate expectations of how individuals should carry out their rights, duties, and obligations. Positions are dynamic; they change with changes in social setting and with transformations in positioning individuals’ perspectives and beliefs. At the level of individual interaction, examining a position requires paying attention to discursive practices and interpretation of speech and other discursive acts (e.g. gestures, expressions). Attention to discursive acts reveals storylines that emerge from significant episodes and/or discursive patterns (McVee, 2011).

The Research

The focus of this research is to explore special education teacher candidates' understandings of parents of children with disabilities. The participants in the study were 10 teacher candidates completing their Masters program in special education. Nine of the participants are native born working-to-middle class European Americans living in a Northeastern urban center in the United States. The tenth, Sonya, is a Russian immigrant. They participated in approximately 45-minute interviews in which they recounted their experiences with special education students and their parents. Their narratives provide windows into their dispositions relative to parents, parenting, and parental involvement in special education. Analysis of the participants' narratives mostly focused on the role parents played in the participants' narratives. Analysis of the transcripts revealed various storylines in which most of the participants positioned themselves as professionals, unquestioningly affiliating themselves with professional knowledge and practices. They often positioned parents as "in denial" of their children's disabilities, disengaged from their education, and even negligent in their care. Sonya alone expressed only emotional understanding with and desire to advocate for parents of children with disabilities. This is likely due to the fact that she is a parent and has a strong sense of social justice. Yet, while the other participants' characterizations of parents were largely negative and deficit driven, interesting contradictions (recognitions of parental rights and sociocultural context) emerged from the participants' narratives. These contradictions are key to the central argument in this paper—that despite the overwhelming negativity of the participants' positionings, hopeful avenues remain for teacher educators to influence dispositions, broaden perspectives, and engage compassion and understanding.

Discussion of Findings

Parent-Professional Encounters in Special Education as Moral Landscape

To interpret the participants' positionings, the storylines construed from discursive acts embedded in their narratives must be placed in the context of a moral landscape or domain. As noted above, individuals' speech acts represent storylines in the context of local moral landscapes. The local context of speech acts is infused with moral ascriptions and normative standards. This is the local moral landscape or domain through which storylines are woven and according to which individuals are positioned as participants in those storylines (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009).

Local contexts and macro-social forces contribute to constructing the local moral landscape through which storylines are drawn (Anderson, 2009). The participants' exposure to the perspectives of their cooperating teachers and their encounters with parents contributed to the local context. Macro-forces such as sociocultural biases and master narratives of "good" parenting also played a part in rendering the local moral landscape.

One important feature of the local moral landscapes through which the participants' storylines flowed is the morally fraught character of parent-professional encounters in special education. Special education is a professional field that endows practitioners with significant

moral gravitas. Educators who enter the profession often do so out of a sense of benevolent humanitarianism, an unquestioned assumption of always acting in the best interests of children with disabilities. This presumption of benevolent intentions limits their willingness and readiness to reflect on special education practices and effectively inoculates them against outside criticism (Ware, 2002). Therefore, they are heavily invested in the rightness of their decisions. According to Hargreaves (2001), our moral choices and judgments and our sense of moral purpose are infused with emotional significance. Accordingly, special education teachers bring strong emotions (and emotional vulnerability) to parent-professional encounters. Parents, of course, also bring morally charged emotions to these encounters. Consequently, interactions between parents and professionals occur within a moral landscape infused with powerful emotions. Another feature of the moral landscapes in which the participants' storylines play is professional assumptions of knowledge about "right" parenting practices. Professionals are taught to believe that the knowledge bases of child development and developmental psychology are scientifically based and universally applicable across cultures. Therefore, they often see deviations from received norms as deviant or "wrong" parenting, requiring remediation (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). That which professionals often practice and generally endorse as "good" parenting is also reflective of class-based assumptions. The middle class model of interventionist and assertive parenting forms the basis of popular discourse and professional judgment and intervention (Lareau, 2003). In encounters between professionals and parents, issues of knowledge, compliance, authority, and morality often structure the moral landscape. Parents can be positioned as resistant to professional knowledge and authority. When they fail to comply with professionally condoned parenting practices, they can be positioned as morally suspect (Frigerio, Montali, & Fine, 2013).

It is important to insert a qualification at this point. As noted above and as will be shown below, most of the participants' representations of parents were overwhelmingly negative. Parents were depicted as disengaged and even negligent. While analysis of the participants' narratives indicate biases and preconceptions, it is only fair to acknowledge that in some cases their representations of parental behaviors may have been in some way accurate. Some parents, of course, do behave negligently just as some teachers show indifference to the needs of their students.

Positioning Selves as Professionals

Despite the fact that most of the participants were not yet working teachers at the time of their interviews, their narratives show that many of them positioned themselves as professionals. In other words, they took on perspectives of professional educators. This is evident from the ways in which they aligned themselves with professional knowledge and practices. Rarely is professional authority challenged in their parent storylines. For example, when Patricia complained about parents not coming to school for parent-teacher conferences, etc., she stated, "There's so many different ways they (the school/teachers) try to reach out to family members and it's just they don't want any involvement it seems." Katelyn made a similar comment relative to parents' failure to be in touch with the school where she was doing her student teaching. She said, "The school tries to reach out to parents, for them to come. They have different things set up and the parents just don't show up." Denise found it absurd that a father in her storyline would question professional wisdom about his son's place in special education. In Catherine's storyline,

she felt conflicted when her cooperating teacher tried to enlist her in forcing an intervention on a parent. While she was strongly averse to undermining the parent's autonomy, she did not doubt the teacher's benevolent intent. After all, she "did want the best for the child," Catherine believes. In fact, she questioned herself for hesitating to call child services. Jenny did not question a teacher's improbable claim that a mother kept her son "in a carriage and with the bottle until kindergarten" despite having been extremely critical of the woman's treatment of another child only moments before. When these teacher candidates were in a position to weigh the validity of professional against parental perspectives, they consistently aligned with teachers and schools.

Sociocultural Prepositioning

Prepositioning discourse identifies biographical "facts" and/or perceived character traits for the purpose of justifying positioning (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). Most of the participants (7Seven of the 10) prepositioned parents by directly or indirectly attributing their perceived negative behaviors to characteristics related to their sociocultural and/or class status. Katelyn, Rebecca, and Denise directly associated sociocultural/class status with negative parental behavior. Rebecca expressed a belief that "parents really need to be held accountable… especially in schools… where you have kids… from lower socioeconomic backgrounds." Katelyn attributed parents' failure to "show up" at meetings etc. to there being "a lot of English language learners at the school." Denise described a mother's apparent indifference to her son's threat of suicide to her being "of a background where I feel like [her son] might be forgotten a little bit." Later, she was more explicit about what she meant by "background" when she ascribed her students' poor behavior to "some of these parents [being] English language learners themselves." Patricia and Catherine alluded to parents' poverty and minority status in their storylines. By way of supporting her storyline of disengaged and negligent parents, Patricia told of a student saying that "her sister was arrested for shooting someone and she was in jail." She also recounted that she had heard from teachers about "a child who was born addicted to crack. A crack baby." Young people jailed for gunplay evokes urban gang membership and the crack baby trope emerged in the 1980s as code for urban Black drug addiction (Alexander, 2010). Seemingly implying poverty, Patricia asserted, "The children were being neglected"—that "they were dirty" and "smelled terrible." Similarly, Catherine spoke about a mother who sent her daughter to school with "holes in her clothing. Her shoes were, like, basically caked with mud" and she had "ringworm on her head." Both Patricia and Catherine were expressing disgust at the parents' conduct. Disgust is an emotion of moral revulsion of directed at the sociocultural other. It functions as a mechanism of social exclusion, employed when people's behavior or appearance violates culturally established tastes or standards (Hargreaves, 2004).

Knowledge and Authority

Disparities in power and authority represent a major barrier to successful parent-professional partnership (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Schools maintain their dominance in relations with parents through claims of authority associated with professional knowledge/expertise (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). The mechanisms of this dominance are often professionals' use of exclusionary expert language, disregard for familial knowledge, and their expectations of parental passivity (Valle, 2011).

It is a function of the sociocultural context of teaching that educators feel threatened when their professional expertise is resisted, ignored, or doubted. Teachers retreat emotionally, taking professional distance from parents when they feel their professional bona fides are being questioned. This distance, of course, often leads to emotional misunderstanding and misinterpretation of parental intentions (Hargreaves, 2001). Accordingly, special educators will become defensive when parents challenge, ignore, or refute their professional knowledge/authority. Such resistance is seen as a violation of the boundary between the professional realm and the world of clients. In response to such violations, educators are moved to defend themselves, their professional expertise, and professionalism in general (Valle & Aponte, 2002). Defensiveness and emotional misunderstanding can lead to recriminations. Parents who fail to comply with or recognize professional authority may be positioned as also failing to assume moral responsibility for the well-being of their children (Frigerio, Montali, & Fine, 2013).

Several of the participants positioned parents in ways that indicate moral judgment for failing or refusing to recognize professional authority. Some positioned parents as "in denial," or refusing to accept professional judgments about their children's disablement or level of impairment. Others positioned parents as disengaged because they failed to assume their prescribed role in the educational process (e.g., homework enforcement) and/or negligent because they failed to respond to their children's needs in professionally acknowledged ways. In each case, these parents were positioned as morally suspect for failing to acknowledge professional expertise or follow professional prescriptions.

Three of the research participants represented the parents as "in denial" in their storylines. Catherine and Rebecca positioned parents in storylines where their state of denial risked detrimental or dangerous consequences for their children. Catherine was concerned that a mother she considered negligent in multiple ways would not "acknowledge the fact that [her daughter had] an emotional disability." Accordingly, she felt the mother "really wasn't in tune to what I feel like a parent should be doing if your child has a disability." Rebecca positioned parents as dangerously in denial or over optimistic about their child's ability to complete homework. This was a hospitalized child, who, according to Rebecca, "threatened or tried to commit suicide" as a result of his parents pushing him to complete his work. The parents "believed that he's capable. I don't necessarily agree that he could've gotten through all of it. And they were pushing him and he threatened to kill himself."

In Denise's storyline, a father was positioned as foolish for his attempted denial of professional knowledge and wisdom. The storyline played out in an IEP meeting in which Denise and her co-teacher met with the parents of one of their students. Because the boy had been held back, the teachers felt he needed to continue in special education. While the mother was willing to sign the child's IEP immediately, the father resisted saying, "'Wait a minute. I want to take it home and read it. When you think you can get out of special ed?'" Denise related her co-teacher's response in a tone of stating the obvious: "'He's been left back. He needs this extra help. Taking him out would be detrimental to him doing well.'" In the end, the parents signed the IEP, as written. "The mom said to sign it and they signed it," Denise concluded, as if it had always been a foregone conclusion.

In several of the participants' storylines, parents were positioned as in violation of prescriptions for "right" parental involvement or “healthy” levels of attention to their children’s needs. Parents were depicted as not responding to educators' efforts to engage them, failing to be available to support their children's learning, and/or even attending to their hygiene. Four of the participants (Jim, Patricia, Rebecca, and Katelyn) described parents as unavailable or unresponsive despite schools' efforts to reach out to them. They depicted parents as absent or unreachable. For example, Katelyn related, "I've been noticing in the school I'm at now. They have a lot of difficulty getting in touch with parents, let alone the parents reaching out to the teacher." Patricia reported that of the nine students in the self-contained class where she did her student teaching, "only two kids had parents who came in and actually represented them for report cards, parent-teacher conferences." In these participants' storylines, schools made extensive efforts to engage parents but to no avail. For example, Katelyn recounted that despite the school always providing "a translator and all the notices sent home are double-sided" parents "just don't show up." According to Rebecca, parents of children with disabilities who are "not involved" or "are really not reachable" are violating an implicit contract. She believes "that a parent of a special ed child" who has "agreed to go through the [special education eligibility] evaluation and acknowledge that their child… has different needs" should be "already willing to work with the school."

Denise, Patricia, and Catherine positioned parents as failing to acknowledge their prescribed support role in the school’s efforts to teach their children. Catherine and Patricia criticized parents for not enforcing or supporting students’ homework completion. Both of them cite this failure as further evidence in a larger picture of parental failure. Denise positioned the parents of a "cute little boy" who "can't identify letters or numbers and he's in the first grade" as failing to "partake in any part of his education." Given his academic deficits, she imagines that his parents “would want to be more involved." But they were not. Denise “can tell the difference between the kids whose parents are involved and the kids whose parents aren’t involved.” Children of good parents “always have their homework done. They come into school prepared. You know who’s doing their reading at home, who’s doing their letters at home. When things come back on time.”

The parents in Catherine, Patricia, Denise, and Jenny’s storylines were positioned as negligent parents, failing to adequately address their children’s needs. As discussed above, Catherine and Patricia's storylines positioned parents as neglecting their children's most basic needs. These parents were positioned as neglectful of their children's hygiene – sending their children to school in dirty and/or tattered clothes, "smelling terrible" (Patricia), and with untreated ringworm (Catherine). In her storyline, Patricia also positioned parents as neglectful of their children's emotional needs. She recounted that the students she worked with were "just desperate for love and attention." Both Patricia and Catherine considered reporting the parents in their storylines to Child Services.

Jenny and Denise attributed problematic student behavior and emotional volatility to parental neglect. Denise positioned a mother as refusing to appropriately respond to her son's disruptive behavior and emotional volatility. She did not even respond to his threat of suicide.

She explained the woman's apparent indifference by saying that he had "been in six different schools. And he's of a background where I feel like he might be forgotten a little bit." "Forgotten" clearly implies neglect. The "of the background" part of her comment was discussed above.

Jenny positioned the parents of two brothers she believed to be emotionally disturbed as infantilizing and enabling the boys, thus neglecting their parental responsibility to provide structure and discipline. She thinks "the parents like baby them." She even heard that the mother kept the youngest "in a carriage and with a bottle up until kindergarten." She speculated, "The fact that both are with IEP's and behave the way they do, makes me, I guess, a little skeptical" (about the mother).

Destabilized Positionings as "Teaching Moments""

While initially, most of the participants' positionings of parents appear largely deficit-based and generally negative, many of their storylines are complex, nuanced, and contain intriguing contradictions. These contradictions potentially represent purchase points [HD2] for teacher educators who seek to encourage parent-professional partnership. These contradictions represent potential "teachable moments" in which teacher candidates' own thoughts and/or feelings may become the foundation for the development of compassion and understanding towards parents.

Denise, Rebecca, and Katelyn positioned parents in negative storylines in which they portrayed them as disengaged yet each identified circumstance that appear to mitigate the negativity of their depictions. Both Katelyn and Denise demonstrated some recognition of the social context of parental involvement for the culturally linguistically diverse. Katelyn expressed concern that the parents of the students where she did her teaching were somewhat absent and unreachable yet then she was able to list some of the barriers that culturally linguistically diverse parents must face. She speculated that parents might feel embarrassed about not understanding the curriculum being taught their children. She also suggested that they might not be able to meet with or contact teachers because they work day and night. While Denise had a more comprehensive list of complaints about parents, she also recognized the culturally linguistically diverse parents face many barriers (transportation among others) that may keep them from getting involved "the way they want to."

Despite positioning parents of children "from lower socioeconomic backgrounds" as absent and unaccountable, Rebecca, of all the participants, articulated one of the most complete understandings of parental empowerment under IDEA. She recognized parents as potential sources of expertise and acknowledged that they "should also have input if they disagree or if they think something needs to be changed" in the education of their children. "The parent, I guess, is the professional of their child," she admitted then added that while professional expertise should be acknowledged, "the parent definitely should have the ability to override it…." This acknowledgment of the value of parental input and recognition of parental rights indicates a potential for becoming an advocate for her students' parents.

An encouraging contradiction is embedded in Catherine's storyline of the negligent parent who sent her child to school "filthy." Even though she believed the student was being

endangered by her mother's negligence, she "felt torn" when her cooperating teacher asked her to help document the mother's apparent neglect and subsequent resistance to intervention. She "didn't want to go against [the parent's] wishes." She found being asked to do so "a very traumatic experience." Catherine's positionings are complex. It is clear that she positions the mother as dangerously negligent and the child as a victim. Yet, she also positions the mother as having the right to maintain her parental autonomy. Subsequently, the cooperating teacher and her did not have the right to violate her familial sovereignty. Catherine's inclination to recognize parental rights and authority is in complete alignment with the spirit and letter of IDEA.

Despite the negativity of Jenny's positioning of the permissive and infantilizing mother she saw as possibly responsible for both her sons' emotional disturbance, her narrative revealed a potential grain of doubt and therefore openness to alternative interpretation. In the midst of her narrative, she recalled, "The big thing I remember from your (my) class is 'don't blame it on the parents because you never know what's going on behind the scenes.'" While she goes on to restate her misgivings about the mother, she does show some recognition that she does not see the entire picture and that her assumptions are perhaps inappropriate.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

Most of the participants engaged at some level in the seemingly pervasive conflict between professionals and parents. They fell into well-established modes of representation of parents in general, and minority parents in particular. They expressed a sense of discursive alliance with the teaching profession and with the discourse of mainstream special education. In general, they saw parents as in denial, disengaged, and/or negligent. Nine out of ten (excepting Sonya) positioned parents as in some way deficient in their storylines. From a DSE perspective, these results are further evidence of the mechanisms inherent in special education that contribute to professional dominance in parent-professional relations. This dominance, of course, functions to maintain the historical and ongoing denial of social justice to children with disabilities and their parents. As noted above, despite IDEA's explicit provisions for parental empowerment, a culture of professional hegemony and institutional barriers deny children with disabilities effective advocacy of their parents.

Yet, embedded in the participants' narratives is evidence of counter currents that offer more hopeful interpretation for those who seek social justice for children in special education. These budding teachers have within them the makings of compassionate advocates for parents of children with disabilities. As demonstrated above, the participants' positionings included many complicating and destabilizing contradictions. To varying degrees, they expressed sensitivity to the social context of parenting and recognition of parents' rights. The potential represented by these contradictions is the take away message of this research. The question is, though, how can we as special education teacher educators profit from the opportunities this potential represents and parley sensitivity and recognition into compassion and commitment to parental empowerment in special education.

Implications

How might special education teacher educators take advantage of and/or encourage the sorts of teachable moments presented by the participants? Can teacher educators create opportunities to destabilize biased positionings? Viewed through the lens of positioning theory, it is clear that the participants' negative positioning of parents had two problematic sources. They positioned themselves as the professional arbiters of sanctified knowledge of disability and as judges of appropriate parental participation and they positioned parents as being in some way deficient and/or in violation of moral standards. For the most part, they did not question the source or veracity of the standards to which they held parents nor did they show adequate curiosity or desire to know about the circumstances of the parents' lives.

It is up to teacher educators to provide teacher candidates with tools to develop self-knowledge and to develop understanding of the lived experience of parents. For future teachers to develop dispositions that encourage them to position parents as rightful advocates for their children's rights under IDEA and empower partners in the special education process, teacher educators must support their students in becoming aware of and reflective about their beliefs, biases, and attitudes relative to disability and parental involvement in special education. Teacher educators must also prepare and encourage teacher candidates to be attentive, aware, and respectful of their students and their parents' lived experience of disability and special education.

Pedagogical strategies and curricular structures may be helpful in supporting reflexivity and encouraging awareness of parental perspectives. One method of supporting the development of self-reflection and critical awareness is to ask teacher candidates to write critical autobiographies that focus on analysis of the personal impact of their encounters with disabilities (Baglieri, 2008; Jones, 2011; Oyler, 2011; Rice, 2006). Also, to allow teacher candidates opportunities to peer across the professional-family divide and experience the actual voices of parents, candidates can be asked to read the autobiographies and family narratives of parents dealing with their children's disabilities. Additionally, parents can be invited to teacher education classrooms to tell their stories (Ashby, 2012; Baglieri, 2008; Jones, 2011; Peters & Reid, 2009; Rice, 2006).

Besides establishing assignments and other curricular elements to support candidates in developing self-understanding and knowledge of the lived experience of parenting children with disabilities, teacher educators need to be able to recognize and take advantage of opportunities, teachable moments where candidates' rigid preconceptions can be challenged and perhaps destabilized. One of my recent classroom experiences may provide a useful example. In a class session after having assigned a "disability autobiography" to my students, I had an interesting exchange with a student that may be illustrative. The disability autobiography assignment asked students to explore ways in which their encounters with disability had helped form their current beliefs and attitudes. In their autobiographies, several of the students described witnessing and/or experiencing teachers who were insensitive or even abusive toward students with disabilities. Also, many of the students described past experiences that helped them realize that individuals should not be reduced to their disabled identity; they should be seen as different not deficient. At one point in the class discussion, a student expressed frustration with a parent who resisted

accepting her child's disability and therefore special education services. I suggested that the parent had been "in denial," hoping to expose this common teacher bias. She agreed enthusiastically. Since, I had pointed out earlier that many of the students' autobiographies had shown understanding and care for individuals with disabilities, I was able to tell the student that it was clear that she only wanted to help the child and that the parents had nothing to fear from her. She clearly felt reassured by this. Then I asked her if she felt she could vouch that the child's next teacher or the teacher after that would be as trust worthy. She was a kind and respectful teacher who would see past the child's disability but could she guarantee all teachers would be so? All of the students listening responded strongly to this question, several murmuring "No." She also responded in the negative. I continued. Therefore, could she understand these parents' fears and the reasonableness of their resistance? The student responded yes and many of her peers nodded in agreement. The students' autobiographical reflections had provided me with the basis for an impromptu session of Socratic probing. The student and her peers' preconceptions were challenged and they were placed, at least momentarily, in a state of cognitive dissonance. With focused and consistent effort (and perhaps some luck), the state of conceptual flux that accompanies cognitive dissonance might tip the balance of belief toward substantive change.

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