

Views of Inclusion

A Comparative Study of Parents' Perceptions in South Africa and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Parent participation is considered to be a vital component in the education of students with disabilities. Parents' roles in pivotal changes in special education—specifically, inclusion—are acknowledged, and their rights are protected in special education law. However, their perspectives are not always understood or considered in the decision-making process. In this study, parents of children with disabilities in South Africa and in a midwestern state of the United States participated in focus group discussions regarding inclusive education. The results indicated that parent perceptions, experiences, and barriers to effective family-school partnerships and parent advocacy were remarkably similar on the two continents. Implications and recommendations for preservice teacher education are discussed.

The Voices of parents and their involvement in the education of their children have been a positive force in education. Research studies over many years have documented the benefits of a collaborative relationship between home and school. These benefits include higher grades and test scores, positive attitudes and improved behavior, more successful programs, and more successful schools (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Henderson, 1987; Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2006).

In special education, the United States has had a long and rich history of parent advocacy, resulting in groundbreaking changes in the education of students with disabilities. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was the culmination of a process that spanned many years, and the role of parents in advocacy and litigation in that process has been well documented. Parent advocacy has indeed also been a driving force in the move toward including students with disabilities in general education in many schools throughout the country (Soodak, 2004).

A cornerstone of the U.S. system is the protection of parents' rights and the affording of the right to due process. Moreover, parents are integral members of the multidisciplinary team responsible for evaluation and placement decisions, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004. However, legal rights do not necessarily translate into an effective partnership: As Henley, Ramsey, and Algozzine (2002) explained, a "built-in mechanism for teacher-parent collaboration does not guarantee successful outcomes. Success or failure depends on trust, mutual respect, and cooperation" (p. 380).

In South Africa, the voice of parents was silent for many years, and parental involvement was limited to fundraising by parent organizations at schools (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, Kitching, & Eloff, 2005). With the emergence of a new democratic South Africa in 1994, the role of parents in the education of children with disabilities has changed dramatically. Parents are now considered to be "integral partners in developing a more inclusive system, where decision making and the responsibility for outcomes are shared" (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff, Pettipher, & Oswald, 2004, p. 81). This new important role has officially been recognized in legislation and policies, such as the South Africa Schools Act (1996), and the *Education White Paper 6* (Department of National Education, 2001).

Empowered by this recognition, parents in South Africa became strong advocates of the inclusion movement in the nineties. A good example of this trend is the placement of children with Down syndrome in mainstream schools as a result of parents' recognition of the academic and social benefits of mainstream settings (Belknap, Roberts, & Nyewe, 1999; Schoeman, 1997).

Although parental rights are now legally protected and their influence recognized in both the United States and South Africa, Soodak (2004) claimed that parents' perspectives are not always adequately understood or considered in educational decision making. Soodak further noted that the move to inclusive education must include parents' perspectives because they are the primary stakeholders in the success of inclusive education. To fully embrace inclusive education and to ensure sustainability, all stakeholders must take ownership of the process (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000). Research by Soodak and Erwin (2000) indicated that parents become effective partners in the inclusionary process only when they perceive that they and their children are accepted members of the school community. An open-door policy to make parents feel welcome at any time is most important; moreover, schools that are committed to effective partnerships must make an effort to hear what parents want for their children (Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

According to Garrick Duhaney and Salend (2000), parents generally support inclusion because it promotes acceptance, which is crucial to their children's social and emotional development. Parental concerns regarding inclusion were also identified, and those concerns included the availability of qualified personnel and a lack of expertise in implementing inclusion. Salend and Garrick Duhaney (2002) listed other possible concerns of parents: the quality of their involvement, frustration with the school's failure to provide inclusive placements, and the effect of inclusion on their children's academic, social, and behavioral development. Soodak and Erwin (2000) argued that the challenges faced by parents and their experiences with inclusive education could depend on geographical region, specifically referring to segregated states in the United States. If challenges do indeed depend on geographical regions within the United States, how would challenges differ on two different continents?

A fundamental question that should precede any comparison of inclusive education is that of definition. The British Psychological Society defined *inclusion* as rejecting segregation for any reason, making learning more meaningful and relevant for all learners, and restructuring policies and curricula to meet diverse learning needs (cited in Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). A South African view, as expressed by Swart et al. (2004), seems to agree with the preceding definition: Inclusion cannot simply be defined as the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream schools where accessibility and support systems are available. An inclusive school is built on shared responsibility and a sense of belonging—a community where diversity and human relations are valued. Inclusion in South Africa recognizes that every child can learn and belongs in the mainstream of both school and community life. The South Africa Schools Act (1996) acknowledged parents' rights to place children in neighborhood schools. The development of full-service schools and the strengthening of existing special schools are envisioned in the new inclusive education system. This will provide parents with more options once the system is established. The current reality is that general education schools have to deal with the demands.

In the United States, *inclusion* is broadly defined as placing students with disabilities full time in general education classrooms with special education support services provided in the general education classroom (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2002). Definitions of full inclusion, on the other hand, usually require that all students with disabilities (regardless of the type or severity) attend their neighborhood schools and be placed in general education. Moreover, general education assumes primary responsibility for all students with disabilities (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003).

Experience has taught the first author that inclusion can be interpreted very differently depending on the school district. The notion of all students with disabilities attending their neighborhood schools is widely accepted in the case of high-incidence disabilities; however, programs for students with severe or low-incidence disabilities are not always available at the neighborhood school, and those students might be bussed to a school in the district that provides such programs. Furthermore, students with mild mental retardation are still often placed in self-contained classrooms for the majority of the school day, albeit in their neighborhood school. Also, all support is not necessarily provided in the general education classroom; thus, there might still be a reliance on pullout programs.

The purpose of this collaborative research study by researchers at three South African universities and a midwestern university in the United States was to compare the perceptions of parents regarding inclusion across three geographical and cultural regions. In the midwestern state, inclusion was introduced in 1991 with a pilot program that included 20 school districts. South African schools officially introduced inclusion in 2001, although individual children have been included in some schools since 1994. We wanted to investigate whether a relatively longer history of inclusive education would have any effect on parents' perceptions. Also, do different political, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds affect parents' expectations and experiences of their children's education? Finally, what can we learn from the voices of parents globally to develop a successful home-school partnership that will benefit all children's education?

METHOD:

Participants:

Parents of children with disabilities in inclusive education in two provinces in South Africa, and two school corporations in a midwestern U.S. state, participated in this study. Principals, district personnel, and support groups identified the participants in South Africa; in the United States, special education directors identified the parents. In both countries, parents were selected who were informed about inclusion and who would be willing to share information about their experiences.

We invited parents to contact us if they were interested in participating and explained the purpose and nature of the project. Parents were assured that participation was voluntary, and they signed consent forms. No incentives were offered. In South Africa, volunteers were 32 parents (7 fathers and 25 mothers); in the United States, we had 10 parents (5 mothers from each school district) who volunteered to participate in the focus group discussions. Table 1 presents ages and nature of children's disabilities.

Procedure

South African parents from urban school districts in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces participated in six focus group discussions. The two focus group discussions in the United States were conducted in two school districts (one urban, the other including urban and rural schools) in different parts of a Midwestern state.

In all cases, we interviewed parents of children who were either fully included in general education classes or were in self-contained settings in general education schools and were included to a lesser degree in some classes. The leading question at each interview, "Tell me about your experiences regarding your child's inclusion," was followed by specific questions about the placement process and the choices that parents made regarding placement, acceptance by general education peers, and the nature of their collaboration with teachers. All focus group

interviews were facilitated by the researchers—two at each discussion in South Africa, one researcher at both focus group discussions in the United States. The researchers also transcribed the audiotaped interviews. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 90 min each, and facilitators ensured that each parent participated.

We analyzed the data for themes using the constant comparative method as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Merriam, 1998; Morse & Richards, 2002). The constant comparative method consists of a simultaneous process of inductive category coding and a comparison of all units of meaning. The focus of this analysis was on perceptions of parents regarding the inclusion of their children with disabilities. The units of meaning were compared with each other and subsequently grouped with similar units of meaning (i.e., categorized). New categories were formed as new units of meaning emerged. South African researchers analyzed their data during a 2-day work session attended by all four members of the team; their American colleague analyzed the data from the two focus groups independently and sent the raw data and the analysis to the South African collaborators. Themes that emerged from the data included parents' rights, parents as advocates, concerns about social aspects and placement decisions, training and the willingness of teachers to work with students with disabilities, student acceptance, and having a child with a disability.

To enhance reliability and internal validity, we made every attempt to use appropriate sampling techniques and build a trail of evidence (tapes with raw data, interview schedules, data reduction and data construction products). Parents' comments are identified by country and nature of the child's disability (e.g., U.S. F1 or South Africa M6; see Table 1).

RESULTS:

The major themes in this comparative study include parents' rights, parental advocacy, social aspects, placement decisions, resilience, general education teachers, general education students' acceptance, and having a child with a disability.

Rights of Parents

Whereas parents' rights emerged as a major theme in both the U.S. and South African focus group discussions, subthemes of alienation and empty promises became evident during the data analysis in both countries. Parents often seemed to feel disenfranchised in case conference meetings and during the IEP process in the United States, as voiced by one parent:

It's one thing to explain the rights and another to respect the rights. Because we all get this booklet that says these are your rights, but if you go into a meeting and you still feel like you're being steamrolled, and it's them against you, then who cares what these rights are. (U.S. M5)

Over and over again the theme of “you against them” (South Africa F5) surfaced: “*Because there's eight of them and two of us . . . but still it seems like we're going into their environment, and it's they who are in charge*” (U.S. M5).

Alienation was not created just by the number of people present at the meeting; professional jargon and processes that are not fully explained were other areas that posed serious problems for parents, specifically at IEP meetings. Soodak (2004) described such scenarios: “During these meetings parents were consistently outnumbered by school personnel, and were often unable to

understand the professional jargon being used” (p. 264). Participants in our focus groups specifically addressed these issues that become major obstacles in fostering effective communication and nurturing environments:

There’s really a lack of educating the parents and taking them through what the experts know, letting them into the process. Not that it’s a conscious “me against you,” but so many of the terms, even IEP, I still have to think, yeah, OK, I know what that means. (U.S. M4)

Another parent whose son was recently diagnosed echoed the same concern:

“You do kind of have to feel your way along. Because I had never dealt with special education—so you just arrive and they assume you know what to ask for” (U.S. M4).

It is not only those unfamiliar with special education procedures or limited educational experiences who are aware of the difficulties:

It’s my field, but I think of all these other people who maybe didn’t even finish high school, so their educational experience is much more limited. The schools might not sponsor it [informational meetings for parents] because they might not want such empowered parents, because they’re going to be asked to do more and be held accountable more. (U.S. F3)

Or as another remarked,

“It’s very intimidating for my husband who has a master’s degree in business, and he feels totally lost at our case conferences” (U.S. M5).

The discussion about IEP meetings took a new direction in one of the focus group discussions - the topic of empty promises:

When I first started teaching a long time ago, we would say, well, we can’t do that, we don’t have the funds. Now we promise people anything, but we don’t follow through. . . . And that’s dangerous also, because we can promise you anything on paper, but does it really get done? The parents have gotten more savvy, they are demanding more. And just to please them we will say anything, and we don’t follow through. (U.S. M5)

One of the participants in our study described her frustration with empty promises and a process that she perceived as meaningless: *“If the teachers come with goals already written and they all say their piece of what they think, then you think, OK, what’s the process here, because you already have set the goals” (U.S. M5).*

In the South African sample, the social and educational inclusion of their children encompasses for parents an acknowledgment of the fact that their children have the right to grow up in the community in which the family lives. The school administration’s recognition of parents’ and children’s rights therefore plays a major role in the motivation, choices, and options regarding educational placement (Engelbrecht et al., 2005): A principal’s remark to a parent that her child belonged in the school, even if she had to come in a diaper was *“... you bring her. She belongs here” (South Africa F3)*, was valued as an administrator’s philosophy that supported inclusion. Whereas many parents are aware of their rights and often demand the acceptance of their child at a mainstream school, some are not well informed and simply accept a school’s reluctance or refusal to place their child. The painful journey of finding an inclusive school includes having to *“knock on doors and see which one is open” (South Africa M1).*

Parent as Advocates

Parents in our study were actively involved in their children's education, and they were at times probably seen as demanding in their attempts to educate teachers and society. Teachers, on the other hand, who have traditionally believed in their training, knowledge, and authority to make decisions, now have to consider parents as partners and experts (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). A mother from the U.S. group stated, "*I observed . . . and caught a lot of flak for doing that. We had to teach the school a lot of things because they hadn't had a physically challenged kid in the school system, in the regular class*" (F2). Or, as another mother remarked,

He has a new teacher this year, and I don't think she is experienced and I'm not sure she knows how to handle me [laughs] given my constant input. I prepare the teachers for that—kind of teach them a little bit about what he has in his IEP, making sure they understand the IEP. (U.S. M1)

Parents from the U.S. group explained their roles as advocates, which ranged from advocating to keeping the same paraprofessional ("*She needs that comfort zone*"; F2), and meeting with teachers to go over IEP goals.

The importance of commitment and active involvement was echoed by South African parents:

I do not think it [inclusion] is going to be successful if the parent is not involved. So yes, I would say commitment is certainly the most important thing. You cannot think, okay, the school must now simply do it, and leave the child to it. That is not going to work. (South Africa F1)

All parents were intensely aware of the importance of a supportive relationship with the teachers: "*The most important thing is the teacher and parent relationship . . . the school must know you are there for them*" (South Africa F2). Parents were not only willing to be supportive, but were willing to assist and be actively engaged: "*It's a matter of you staying on top of it. That's your job*" (South Africa F4).

These parents, both South African and American, were not frustrated with their roles as advocates, contrary to the findings of Turnbull and Ruef (1997) that parents expressed frustration with being advocates to create inclusive settings. They were, however, aware of the challenge of being assertive as advocates for their children, but also supportive in their roles as members of a collaborative team (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). Whereas all parents interviewed agreed on the parent's role as advocate, another level of commitment became evident in the South African interviews. In South Africa, this commitment involves emotional and financial sacrifices—for example, the cost of extra tutoring to enable a child to remain in a mainstream school (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). South African parents could also be responsible for the cost of related services, such as physical therapy, speech therapy, and occupational therapy. In one case, a parent hired a classroom assistant for her child at her own cost; another parent drove to school to help her child up the stairs at least once a day (South Africa F1)

Social Aspects, Placement Decisions, and Resilience

The emotional and social aspects of inclusion, including a concern for their children's social acceptance, emerged strongly from the South African and midwestern groups. Guralnick, Connor, and Hammond (1995) found rejection of their children by peers in integrated settings to be a major concern for mothers. In our study, a South African parent expressed her fears:

I think the main worry when you put your child in inclusive education is, how are the teachers going to cope, how is he going to cope, your own child? Is he going to cope, is he going to be happy? And what are the other children going to do with this child in school? (South Africa F1)

In addition to concerns about coping skills, there was the nagging thought about friendships. Although South African parents generally reported that their children encountered positive social experiences in inclusive settings, strong friendships were not necessarily formed: *“She is friendly with everybody, and everybody is friendly with her. You understand—friendly. But to have an intimate friend, build an intimate friendship, is very difficult for her”* (South Africa F1).

All groups voiced their desire for their children to fit in: *“She does need to really be with children with normal speech on a regular basis; that’s really overall our biggest concern for her”* (U.S. F5). Swart et al. (2004) found that South African parents desired to raise their children as “normally” as possible—that their children had to meet the demands of society and school had to accept them, not ostracize or pity them (Swart et al., 2004). Parent motivation in pursuing an inclusive placement for their children was indeed a major theme emerging from the South African interviews in our study. U.S. parents agreed: *“I would tell any parent to include their kid”* (U.S. F2). Or, as another stated, *“This way they can feel they’re out there with any other kid”* (U.S. M2).

On both continents, parents considered society and its views on people with disabilities. The following comments came from the South African groups: *“That’s actually where we need to start, is at . . . our neighbors, our community, our church . . . and why shouldn’t they be included?”* (M6). Another parent justified the placement as, *“We did the right thing, because the world must see them.”* A U.S. parent explained her decision: *“It’s good for the kids, it’s good for the community. My gosh, those people need to know what’s out there”* (U.S. M3).

A participant in the South African focus group discussions explained the desire to see her child living in a normalized society:

I cannot hide my child away, she must learn. . . . It does not help if we keep her locked up for eighteen years, and then all of a sudden I say to her, there’s the world, now you must find a place for yourself. (M2)

Parents also commented on their children’s determination to be like everybody else. These children had to experience major adjustments and face many challenges (e.g., limited mobility, a pressure to succeed, exhaustion from having to keep up with the pace of the class), but were determined to fit in (Swart et al., 2004). Many parents in the South African group felt that their children did not view themselves as having a disability—they referred to their children’s attempts to participate in extramural activities and their fierce independence. In short, *“they displayed resilience to the demands that inclusion places on them”* (Swart et al., 2004, p. 101). We found the same resilience mentioned in the U.S. group: *“She does everything all the other kids do; that’s what she wants. She wants to be just another kid”* (U.S. F2). A mother of a student with Down syndrome described her daughter as *“being 11, thinking she’s 17, and mentally she’s 4—she carries an attitude with her, she’s just determined”* (U.S. F5).

There were also comments about children’s aversion to labels and anything that might connect them to their disability: *“I don’t want to wear those [hearing aids]”* (U.S. F1). Many parents commented on their children’s wish not to be singled out, specifically referring to pullout programs that accent differences. A mother explained her son’s difficulties as follows: *“My oldest*

son [with LD] went to resource room a little bit. . . . He really hated that label and refused to accept any help that way” (U.S. M1). On the other hand, one of the mothers stated that her son (with autism) thrived on the one on- one attention that he got in a resource room and loved going there (U.S. M3).

General Education Teachers

According to the results of a study by Turnbull and Ruef (1997), parents cited several issues as drawbacks to inclusion, including frustration with the lack of training of teachers and administrators. South African parents are well aware of the fact that teachers are not necessarily trained to work with students with disabilities (Swart et al., 2004).

The same could be said of the parents from the United States. One mother’s comment from this group, *“I can say my son was pretty much a guinea pig; I have nothing bad to say, they had done very well. The only thing I can say is they could have been trained a lot better”* (U.S. M3), is certainly not accusing the teachers of failing to try, but rather blaming their inadequate training. This view was reflected in another’s complaint: *“We need more inservice. The teacher I am with right now [interpreting for another deaf student] she asks me a lot of questions because they just aren’t as prepared. They don’t know what to expect, and a lot of them are scared”* (U.S. F1). Whereas South African parents do not necessarily expect teachers to know everything right away, they *“need to be prepared to learn”* (South Africa F1). A lack of training could also explain the ignorance about certain disabilities, according to one parent: *“More and more kids [are] diagnosed with autism and the teachers are not aware; they think of autism as the Rain Man–type situation with the rocking and all that stuff, and it’s not that at all”* (U.S. M3, italics added).

Often, a lack of experience was simply seen as the problem: *“Most teachers don’t know what it’s like to have a special needs child in their classroom until the first day of school when the kid shows up”* (U.S. F2). A person in the U.S. group felt that at least some of the teachers were to blame:

I think that’s the only problem I’ve had, is some of the teachers haven’t fully read those IEPs, and so we’ve had a few conflicts; they don’t understand, they don’t know what they’re dealing with, so my only concern is that teachers are more prepared and fully read the IEP. (U.S. M2)

Parents were also appreciative of the teachers’ efforts and dedication: *“They constantly make modifications, and it has been good”* (U.S. M3).

In addition to having expertise with students with disabilities, what are parents looking for in general education teachers? Davern (1999) found that parents wanted personnel who desired to understand parents’ lives and involve them in planning. They looked for excitement, sensitivity, and honesty in teachers. These expectations were also mentioned in our focus groups.

Several parents complained about teachers who failed to make an effort to get information about a student, or worse, who were unwilling to accommodate students: *“[they were] not interested . . . not really in the mood for extra hassles”* (South Africa M2). A South African parent also pointed out that teachers were not always positive: *“If she’s make-believe positive . . . then you don’t know how to act as a parent.”* Some parents felt disempowered by this attitude; others saw it as an opportunity to foster a collaborative spirit. It is interesting to note that a negative attitude from the teacher was not necessarily perceived as an unwillingness to help, but rather as a fear of the unknown and a lack of knowledge (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). South African parents also felt

that the teacher's disposition was crucial: *"When the teacher is positive . . . as a mother I don't worry so much."* A U.S. participant noted, *"I think it's just the personality. One teacher is gung ho - 'Bring her in, I'm ready,' and the next teacher is [saying this in a timid voice] 'Well, she's in my classroom and I'll do the best I can'?"* (U.S. F2).

From the same group, there was a remark that *"The younger ones give me what I need - more enthusiastic"* (U.S. F1). More recent graduates were also favored by another parent:

The teachers now are more prepared because these disabilities are more discussed, more open than older teachers had. They [younger teachers] have more energy. Energy has a lot to do with it. Older teachers are more set in their ways; they don't want to change. A lot of it sometimes is just, "More work for the teacher. I don't want to do any more work." You know what? I don't either. (U.S. F1)

At least one mother from the U.S. group was well aware of the problematic nature of including her child in general education:

[She] carries a lot of baggage wherever she goes; an aide, her special desk, a computer, her printer, her scanner, her walker, her power chair—usually she takes up a whole wall in the classroom—so one teacher has to redo her whole room for this one little girl. (U.S. F2)

On the other hand, there was also praise for teachers' efforts. A South African parent felt reassured by a teacher's enthusiasm and positive attitude: *"The first day of school, the Grade 1 teacher said to me I mustn't worry, because she's got all the stuff on the Internet, and her husband bought her some books on inclusive education, so she was very well prepared"* (South Africa F2). One of the parents in the U.S. group expressed her appreciation for her son's teachers: *"I really have found wonderful teachers. They want to help, they want to understand"* (U.S. M4). The importance of understanding, or at least the attempt by teachers to understand parents' position, cannot be overemphasized.

Acceptance by General Education Students

Considering the importance of social acceptance as voiced by mothers of students with special needs, the role of general education peers in successful inclusion is crucial. Soodak (2004) referred to attitudinal barriers and the concern of parents that their children might experience rejection.

Parents in our focus groups seemed to find peer acceptance less of a problem than anticipated: *"And the kids at school, just because they're around it, are OK; they tune it out. It's not like they stop and stare, like a lot of adults do"* (U.S. M3). Another parent explained a change in attitude:

My son, he's not made fun of as much as years ago; now the kids are taught better, and they understand better because they see more and don't think, they have a disability and they can't be like us; they can't be our friend, they're not smart. (U.S. M2)

South African parents also commented that the general education students stopped noticing the disability and that they demonstrated a positive attitude toward their peers with disabilities. This manifested in a willingness to assist them with various tasks (e.g., carrying bags, writing down homework).

Having a Child With a Disability

Although it was not one of the focus group questions, parents spontaneously initiated their experiences with having a child with a disability. In retrospect, they seemed compelled to talk about these experiences in the supportive environment that these focus groups offered. The frustrations ranged from diagnosis and labeling to their children's struggles and their perceptions of the general public's ignorance pertaining to disabilities:

The biggest thing for us was just simple clarity [undiagnosed for many years]. I look at it now and I think, why didn't I ask more questions. But when silence is delivered, I just assumed there was no diagnosis. We seemed to get vagueness everywhere. (U.S. M4)

Dealing with a disability certainly intensifies when students reach adolescence. A mother in the U.S. group described her son's struggles in high school *"even more than academics, is the depression he's had dealing with his disabilities and being different."* According to this participant, her son and one or two friends with similar problems called themselves *"brain chipped."* They also felt that *"if you have a disability, you are invisible"* (U.S. M5). It is important to note that being "invisible" to peers can be as devastating to children as outright rejection.

South African parents, in spite of positive comments about acceptance by the peer group, also cited unfortunate incidents when their children were ridiculed at school. As one parent commented, *"They do say things and you feel like you want to cry, and you don't know what to do, you're so helpless, but that's always going to be there"* (South Africa M2)

Finally, dealing with ignorance as an attitudinal barrier (Soodak, 2004), some voiced the agony of a lack of support even from family members accusing them of poor parenting (U.S. M4). The notion of walking in someone's shoes, often cited in the literature, was also expressed here:

When I see different children doing things, I don't automatically think it's because their parents are not disciplining them, because you don't know until you walked in their shoes, until you know the situation. (U.S. M2)

A mother of a son with autism explained her experiences:

Somebody's not in Wal-Mart lying on the ground and throwing a fit because they have a discipline problem. There could be more going on in that situation. How many times in Wal-Mart have you had people staring at you, "why can't you control your child?" And I'm finally at a point and say, "Hey lady, stop staring." (U.S. M3)

The same participant also said, I just have to think about it when . . . in junior high how my son with autism is going to be oblivious to what some of those people are saying, but maybe not, who knows what's going to happen. I mean, having a child with a disability, I get real emotional [starts crying], it has definitely been a blessing, not only for my own family, but to the school corporation, because it has really opened up people's eyes, and it has made my family and even my extended family being accepting. (U.S. M3)

Discussion

In spite of distinct differences in context, the perceptions and experiences of parents in South Africa and a midwestern U.S. state were remarkably similar. There was no indication that the different political, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds affected parents' expectations or experiences of their children's education in inclusive settings. Thus, whether the voice of parents has been a decisive force in groundbreaking changes throughout the history of special education, as in the United States, or a relatively new phenomenon, as in South Africa, the small victories as well as the unresolved issues and concerns expressed here deserve our focus.

Many of the findings in our study corroborated the results of earlier studies done in the United States. The notion of empty promises is implied in Soodak and Erwin's (2000) description of issues surrounding parents' involvement in the IEP process:

The process used to develop the child's IEP conveys a strong message to parents about the distribution of power in situations that were intended to be collaborative. When parents were given limited time for meetings with professionals, provided with meaningless mass-produced documents, or when they were merely asked to sign a completed IEP, the message that parents received is that they and their children were not considered important. (p. 40)

Indeed, the sense of belonging and shared ownership that is inherent in the philosophy of inclusive education has yet to be experienced by many of the parents in our study.

The extent to which parents were involved and served as advocates for their children varied within all groups that participated in this study; the same applied to levels of frustration and satisfaction with their children's educational experiences. The findings of this study are consistent with the results obtained in an earlier study (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997) that suggested that parents who feel compelled to be strong advocates for services may view themselves as opponents rather than members of a team. Furthermore, Bennett et al. pointed out that positive relationships with team members decreased when parents increased their advocacy efforts. It is important to note, however, that in all cases, the parents in our study expressed appreciation for support from administrators and teachers after they had vented their frustration.

Study Limitations

Data collected by different researchers may have resulted in nuanced differences, especially because the questions were open ended. However, the data were examined collectively, and every attempt was made to ensure interrater reliability during the process. Certain factors might have had an effect on parents' perception of inclusive education, including the nature of the child's disability as well as the fact that all learners were in different stages of inclusion.

Implications for Practice

A strong parent-school partnership is an essential element in the success of inclusionary placements (Garrick Duhane & Salend, 2000). Soodak (2004) emphasized the need for schools to create an empowering context for parents and professionals. To foster such collaborative partnerships, school administrators and teachers must emphasize trust and respect for effective communication between parents and teachers. This is not a new idea; unfortunately, however, there is the danger of paying lip service to many truths that have been advocated

for years. Schools must adopt a proactive approach that will outline specific ways to accomplish and to evaluate these goals.

An ongoing evaluation of inclusive education is important for all school districts. Whereas the academic and social success of students is usually well monitored, parents' views throughout the process must be included in all evaluations. The need for ongoing evaluation of the inclusionary process is also important for another reason: Soodak (2004) argued that parents' perspectives are likely to change over time; parents may become disillusioned as a result of negative experiences with inclusion.

It is also important to remember that parents should be treated as individuals, just like their children. Each parent has a unique view of his or her child. Administrators and teachers must understand the parent's perspective, but "*this is difficult to do if the parent is pitied or patronized*" (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2006, p. 384). In a study of inclusive education in Canada, Pivik, McComas, and LaFlamme (2002) noted physical and attitudinal barriers to successful inclusive education. Whereas our study focused on the voice of parents, theirs pertained to students' voice. The message, however, is well heeded: School is a microcosm of the world, and to understand the realities of parents of students with disabilities, we have to guard against any possible attitudinal barriers.

In light of the comments of some of the parents that experienced teachers might be less inclined to adapt their classrooms and practices to accommodate the needs of students with more severe disabilities, it is clear that there is a need for ongoing training at the inservice level. Teacher training colleges must ensure that general education preservice teachers, especially at the secondary level, are able to meet the needs of students with different exceptionalities in their classrooms. To be effective teachers in an inclusive classroom, preservice teachers need more than coursework—they must demonstrate a willingness to work with students with special needs and a disposition to embrace diversity in the classroom.

Finally, preservice teachers also need to be trained in more thorough approaches to working with parents during case conferences, when conducting parent-teacher conferences, and when implementing general strategies to involve parents and to view them as stakeholders. Having parents of students with disabilities as guest speakers in classrooms at the undergraduate or graduate level can certainly give students some perspective, but can these once or twice a semester encounters, or the requisite interview with a parent, truly raise awareness of the challenges they encounter? Preservice teachers need additional, in-depth experiences in interacting with parents of students with disabilities. This could be accomplished through service learning at agencies dealing with adults and children with disabilities, shadowing early childhood professionals making home visits, and attending case conferences and parent-teacher conferences.

Henley, Ramsey, and Algozzine (2006) described the current relationship between school and home using words such as *separation*, *detachment*, and *isolation*. The effect of this eroding relationship is clearly detrimental to student progress. Establishing collaborative relationships should therefore be a priority in teacher education programs, and every effort should be made to take this beyond theory to an experiential level.

Finally, the importance of international collaboration and dialogue cannot be overemphasized. The voices of parents from different countries in this study revealed overlapping, but also unique issues; acknowledging those issues can be empowering to all parties involved in the inclusion debate (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2000). Booth (2000) contended that a comparative

perspective challenges one's own assumptions and parochial concepts, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Indeed, we found this to be the case in our comparative study.

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TABLE 1. Characteristics of Children of Participating Parents by Country

Student	Nature of disability	Grade placement
South Africa		
F1	Spina bifida, mobility impairment	7
F2	Traumatic brain injury	6
M1	Muscular dystrophy	3
M2	Down syndrome	2
F3	Spina bifida	4
F4	Trisomy 14, hepatitis B, developmental delay	1
M3	Tourette's syndrome, behavioral and social problems	5
F5	Spina bifida, mobility impairment	4
F6	Growth impairment, learning problems	2
M4	Specific learning disabilities	6
M5	Specific learning disabilities	7
M6	Down syndrome	1
M7	Down syndrome	Kindergarten
M8	Down syndrome	4
F7	Down syndrome	1
M9	Down syndrome	3
Midwest U.S. state		
M1	Specific learning disability	6
F1	Deafness	12
F2	Cerebral palsy	3
M2	Deafness	6
M3	Autism	2
F3	Cerebral palsy	Preschool
M4	Asperger syndrome	7
F4	Vater syndrome	9
M1	Specific learning disability	6
F1	Deafness	12

Note. F = female student; M = male student.

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