

Reconstructing special educators' knowledge about families with members in the autistic spectrum through befriending experiences

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The role of parents within special education teacher preparation programs has been widely recognized. Traditional approaches for preparing special educators to interact with parents of children with special needs have been mainly classroom based promoting a narrow view of the disability, as a construct isolated from its micro-level social context (i.e., the home). Befriending has been increasingly supported as an emerging approach for the social support of vulnerable families in the community. Drawing upon the limitations of the traditional approaches and the need for reforming special education teacher training towards experiential learning and greater community engagement, in this paper we will share the insights from the development of a three-year befriending project between a university department and two charities of parents with members in the autistic spectrum. Overall, the scheme involved 35 families with persons in the autistic spectrum and 75 befrienders, the majority of which (n=60) were trainee special education teachers. Finally, we will discuss how befriending, viewed as a process for reconstructing special education teachers' knowledge about families with persons in the autistic spectrum, can be embedded within curricula in special education teacher training programs.

The traditional learning context of special education teacher preparation on family issues and its conceptual implications

The need to incorporate courses on the importance of home as a context for the development and learning of children with disabilities in special education teacher training programs has been long recognized by legislators and teachers themselves (IDEA, 1997; Knight & Wadsworth, 1998; Lava, Recchia & Giovacco-Johnson, 2004). In spite of the agreement on this view, there is a gap between teachers' beliefs about the important role of parents in the education of children with special needs and their practices, creating many barriers for their successful collaboration with families (Lake, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

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In the national context of Greece, parents of children with special needs report problems in their collaboration with special teachers in public education and describe teachers as discouraging and distant in their contacts with them (Polychronopoulou, 2004).

One explanation for this gap may lie in the curriculum of their training as special educators. In particular, the absence of pre-service training and course work in family-related topics within teacher preparation programs has been proposed as a contributing factor to the reticence of special educators to embrace family-professional collaboration (Bailey, Simeonsson, Yoder & Huntington, 1990; Brantlinger, 1991). There is a wealth of evidence that teacher education programs do not generally address this critical issue, despite the theoretical, legislative and empirical impetus for including at least one course on family issues in all teacher preparation programs (Gallagher, Malone, Cleghorne & Helms, 1997; Rupiper & Marvin, 2004).

In Knight & Wadsworth's review (1999) of all special education programs throughout the U.S., teacher preparation on family issues was found to be poor for elementary and secondary special educators, in contrast with the early childhood teacher preparation programs which have been increasingly focused on family-centred approaches (Rupiper & Marvin, 2004). Additionally, a major finding in Conderman, Morin and Stephens's (2005) recent nationwide study on special education student practicums was that greater attention was given to traditional paper-type assignments in assessment and instruction, whereas less attention was directed to collaboration or consultation skills (i.e., working with parents).

Although some efforts have been made towards expanding student special teachers' knowledge in this area, they remain largely classroom based with important conceptual implications for the perception of disability per se and the people with disabilities in society by prospective teachers. Traditional instruction in teacher preparation programs is restricted solely on lecture-type instruction promoting the view that the disability is a construct isolated from its micro-level social context (i.e., the home). In consequence, student teachers develop restricted perspectives on disability, lacking a wider understanding of the natural context of disability, despite the urge for teachers to become more aware of the complexity of disabled people's life and experiences. In addition, the lack of attention to building relationships between teachers and families in the community cultivates in teachers the perception of themselves as individual leaders of children's learning with little attention to the importance of collaboration with parents, who also share the interest and responsibility for students' learning and success in schools.

Furthermore, classroom based practices do not support the continuing need for special education teachers to become more empathetic and considerate professionals. Teacher education is going through an era of transformation: teachers need to be active citizens with greater community awareness and not only skill-oriented professionals (Butcher et al, 2003). Teachers need to understand the struggles inherent in parenting, as well as the struggles that individual families face. This knowledge could help them develop empathy and understanding and move away from defensive responses in their encounters with parents (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). For teachers to be effective educators they need to possess the skill of empathy, in the sense that they can place themselves "inside the shoes" of their students, appreciate and understand the frustrations experienced by persons with disabilities.

Teachers' empathic mindset will foster a positive classroom climate, which in turn will enhance students' motivation and well-being (Brooks, 2005).

In addition, the emerging direction of initial education for special education teachers as we move on to the 21st century is to offer opportunities for teachers not only to improve their teaching skills for students but also to develop other qualities, which will foster better relationships with parents. Students with special needs are increasingly more heterogeneous in their classrooms and they come from diverse family contexts with different needs. Besides, parents of children with disabilities seem to place a great value on the level of trust they feel towards the education professionals, which in turn affects the degree of their engagement in their parental role with teachers (Stoner & Angell, 2006). Given the persistent needs of these families, teachers need to deepen their understanding and increase their empathy, respect and sensitivity to the complex backgrounds of children with special needs in their schools.

This transformation of the role of teachers in special education has led to the application of learning models based in the community, such as field training and service learning as appropriate approaches for fostering student teachers' active participation in their learning (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine, & Rude, 1998). Within the last two decades, teacher educators have placed a great emphasis on the need for quality field experiences for individuals preparing to be teachers. Extensive field experiences have been identified as one of the most significant features of special teacher education programs, determining the quality of special education teacher preparation (Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005; O'Shea, Hammite, Mainzer, & Crutchfield, 2000). This new pedagogy has been found to have important personal and social benefits for the students involved. According to Ensign's study (2002), an extensive experiential assignment as a base for an entire special education course was found to be an effective and meaningful way for students to develop empathy for students with special needs and to learn course content. Despite the emerging call for a reform in teacher education towards greater community engagement of staff and students as an expression of the corporate citizenship of the university (Butcher et al, 2003), most teacher education programs have established links and partnerships with schools and other agencies rather than charities for people with disabilities (Prater & Sileo, 2002).

The need for prospective teachers and administrators to acquire field experiences working specifically with families and community organizations has been succinctly captured by a dean of one school of education in a major study of schools, colleges and departments of education in the U.S.: "they need to go into the communities to dialogue with families" (Epstein & Sanders, 2006, p.105). The transformative power of experiential learning for future teachers is rarely questioned. Preservice teachers who became engaged in unfamiliar settings (interactions with students and families whose culture and life experiences were different from their own) demonstrated a re-construction of their knowledge base, their dispositions, and skills to function multiculturally as advocates for all children (Romo & Chavez, 2006).

The professional growth of teachers is increasingly considered as a process that should be connected to their learning contexts as well as challenge them to expand and enrich their perceptions of these contexts. In addition, there is growing need to look for alternative community based practices as sources of experiential learning for prospective special educators. On the grounds of these considerations, a special form of volunteering, defined as befriending, might offer a promising alternative for achieving these aims. It may offer insights and empower student special educators in their efforts to understand better and approach with greater confidence parents with children with special needs.

How befriending might enhance the goals of special education teacher preparation on family issues

Befriending is a distinct form of volunteering, which involves a new relationship (not necessarily friendship) between two or more individuals, initiated and monitored by a voluntary agency (Dean & Goodlad, 1998). Befriending is a developing service within charities for vulnerable people in the community, who experience social isolation despite community care services. As the social welfare system seems to be unable to cover most of the social needs of these groups in the population, befriending is an emerging resource for expanding the social support of vulnerable families in the community (McGowan & Jowett, 2003). It is a volunteer strategy with the great potential to create and strengthen the social networks of people in need. A large study on the delivery of befriending services in the UK revealed that it is not necessarily a reciprocal relationship and befrienders feel a sense of responsibility to see the befriended person regularly and with a purpose to offer companionship and opportunities to participate in social activities in the community

(Dean & Goodlad, 1998). This relationship may represent for the isolated family consistent quality time with another "interested" person, experienced in an atmosphere of positive regard. After all, it can be a "valuable lifeline" not only for the people with disabilities but also for those affected by it, such as parents and siblings.

Befriending albeit different from service-learning has the potential to offer valuable knowledge and insights. Service learning is a distinct form of learning as it involves regularly scheduled field experience integrated within the formal curriculum of a course, intended to promote critical reflection upon and illumination of course material (Karayan & Gathercoal, 2005; Miettinen, 2000). Service learning experiences with peers with disabilities paired with weekly reflective journals in higher education has been found to transform participant teachers' prior notions of the nature of relationships with people with disabilities and other disability-related issues (Smith, 2003).

Befriending has certain features and qualities that differentiate it from other field-based experiences for students. Students feel free to engage in any teaching or helping responsibility for the students or the families. This experience allows them to come out from the "shield" of the teacher and approach people with disabilities and their families from another perspective. Befriending can also help trainee teachers guard against developing another generation of "professionals" and "clients".

Befriending is an alternative process for reaching the above goals and build bridges between universities and the community. It can be a new paradigm for nurturing a strong community value in students, in the sense that students develop deeper respect for the needs of other people in the community. Befriending has been found to create a learning opportunity for students while also serving the needs of a community group (Mavropoulou et al, in press). Befriending is in line with other inquiry-oriented strategies for the professional growth of teachers: it requires the thoughtful assessment of needs and implementation of activities for meeting these needs, as well as continuous reflection on decisions and actions, thereby reinforcing critical thinking skills.

Furthermore, the experience of befriending may inspire graduate teachers to develop volunteering tasks for parents, as one aspect of their involvement within schools. Through their participation in befriending schemes, their perception of the role of parents in school-family relationships can be expanded to view parents as more actively involved in the education of their children. Through this process teachers become better prepared for

implementing parent involvement activities in their schools.

Befriending can serve as another vehicle for creating strong relationships between students and their peers, their instructors and members in the community within schools of education. Graduate teachers have repeatedly underlined the power of relationships with others as a means of supporting their learning in a cohort-model of teacher preparation program (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006).

The aim of this paper is to discuss how befriending families with members with disabilities could be embedded within the field training of teacher education curricula for special educators. The main argument is that the integration of befriending activities with this group of families into special education teacher preparation programs provides an alternative avenue for those preparing to teach in order to gain a deep and extensive knowledge of the contexts of their students' lives. The objective of this paper is to recount the experiences of student special teachers, of the tutor and the parents of persons in the autistic spectrum participating in the scheme. Their reflections illustrate how this experience has contributed to the raising of teachers' awareness of the family context for these individuals and the reconstruction of their knowledge, with a deeper appreciation of the complexities of students' life situations.

The rationale and methodology of a pilot befriending scheme in Greece

The pilot befriending project was initiated from parent members of two Charities for persons in the autistic spectrum located in central Greece. The purpose of the scheme was to respond to the needs of local families, who had approached executive members of the charities with the request to have any kind of support in coping with the strains of having a child with autism. In response to this need, the pilot scheme was designed and implemented in partnership with a faculty member (SM, first author) at the Department of Special Education at the University of Thessaly and was offered as a volunteering activity for students without being incorporated within the formal, academic curriculum. Since 2003, the scheme has effectively served 35 families with persons in the autistic spectrum (age range: 3-27yrs) and the greater majority (n= 60, out of 75) of volunteers trained as befrienders were student special education teachers (for further details see Mavropoulou, in press).

The operation of the scheme included the following stages: a) assessment of family needs, b) recruitment and selection of volunteers, c) training, d) befriending, and e) evaluation of the

scheme. Initially, each family completed a short questionnaire indicating their needs for having a befriender and the length of time for this service. Following that, the scheme was advertised in the local media and within the university premises and a sufficient number of applicants were recruited. A separate record was created for each applicant, containing a short questionnaire indicating his/her available time, other personal details and a brief cv describing other volunteering experiences and personal interests. Besides, the tutor administered a semi-structured interview to each applicant for gaining a better knowledge of their views and expectations related to this role (Mavropoulou, Nikolaraizi & Seremetidou, in press). Following that stage, all participants received group training by the tutor on aspects covering the role of the volunteer, the nature of befriending as well as issues more specific to autism and communication with families. In the next phase, all volunteers were matched with individual families. All befrienders had to complete a reflective report following their visit to the family, giving a full account of their activities, the challenges they faced and the solutions they tried. For the support of befrienders, they were required to attend scheduled group meetings and encouraged to ask for individual conferences with the university tutor to cover their personal and immediate concerns. After the completion of befriending, each volunteer was administered a semi-structured interview by the tutor, with the aim to examine their perceptions on the gains they acquired and the challenges they faced in befriending persons with autism and their families.

Through their written journals and contributions to the support meetings, befrienders described a broad range of activities they had carried out with the befriended persons, depending on the needs and preferences of the families. In some cases, befrienders were involved in developing leisure skills or abilities for cooperation on structured paper-and-pencil activities in children's homes. In other cases, they went out for a walk to a park or to a café and in a few cases befrienders had devoted their whole time listening and talking with a parent at home.

Reflections from the befrienders, the tutor and the parents

The analysis of interviews of a group of student special teachers (n= 17) before and after their participation in the project revealed significant gains for their professional role (Mavropoulou et al, in press). With respect to their perceptions of family needs, befrienders developed a deeper awareness of the strain and the complex demands of having a child with autism.

Prior to their befriending experience, their views on family needs were based on their theoretical knowledge. Most participants expected that parents would feel socially isolated, with a strong need for social contact in their own context, as a consequence of having a child in the autistic spectrum. As one participant explained:

"Other people may feel awkward in visiting them in their home, because they have a child with autism and they do not know his/her reactions. Also the parents may not want to visit other people because they are anxious for the frustration this change of environment may bring to their own child, or for any damage their child may cause in someone's home." (#12)

Following their participation, they developed an insight of the parents' intense need to have a break from the severe demands of caring for a person with autism and they felt that all parents do indeed need a short relief or just "a pair of hands" to help them out in their everyday struggle. As one befriender shared:

"I believe that it is vital for her to have free personal time, except the times that her child is at school which is not enough for doing as much. She had told us that for the last eleven years she's never been to a café, to the movies or to church, not even on Easter. All these things seem very simple to us but when you hear someone else saying all this, you feel that it is important." (# 17).

Moreover, they became more aware of the interplay between the children's behaviours and the needs of parents. They felt that the parents with the less able and dependent children were desperate for any kind of help, whereas parents of more able children were grateful to them just for offering companionship to their teenagers. Within this context, they showed sympathy and understanding to the parents' concerns and some of them developed close relationships with some individuals with autism and their parents.

One befriender to an adolescent with autism commented:

"It feels different to meet him every week, not in class, but in his home at a specified time. I felt that he is an individual, beyond his autism and I could have this kind of close relationship with him, which gave me a lot of satisfaction." (# 9).

Another important aspect of the befriending relationship was their personal communication with parents, approaching them as listeners beyond their role as student special education teachers. Before their involvement in the scheme, most of the befrienders anticipated that parents of children with autism would need support on general practical and emotional aspects of their lives. Following their experience they referred to the deeper need for parents to have someone they could trust for being available for their child and their need to have someone to talk with. One befriender voiced an analytical observation on the feelings of a mother:

"His mother needs the company of someone, whom she can trust for sharing her concerns without the fear of being negatively judged or rejected because she has a child with a problem." (# 17).

Further, they frequently reflected on the connections they had drawn from their befriending experience with their theoretical knowledge acquired through their formal training. Some student teachers explained that through their befriending they acquired a more realistic perspective of the impact of autism into family life. As one befriender reflected:

"The real picture of the life for a family with a child with autism is different from what you read in the literature. Autism changes everything within a family." (# 10).

Reflecting on the dual role of the coordinator of the scheme and university tutor has yielded valuable insights for several aspects of those roles. The process of carrying out individual interviews with the students lead to a better knowledge about their previous experience with other people with disabilities, their concerns, their temperament, their motives, and their personal interests.

This knowledge, being essential for making a successful match between each befriender and a family, formed a good foundation for building a closer connection with each student.

Further, the practice of training students as befrienders in small groups has offered the opportunity for leading group discussions on issues related with autism spectrum disorders, heavily based on the students' existing knowledge and queries. Within this context of training, students were encouraged to voice their own concerns and understandings, giving insights for the delivery of the instructional material through my lectures. Through these conversations with the students, we could easily become aware of their stereotypes, their misconceptions and gaps in theoretical knowledge as prospective special teachers.

This process of gaining deeper awareness of the students' minds towards persons with autism and their families was continued through the analysis of their reflective journals and the discussions in group support meetings. In addition, students were encouraged to share the difficulties, as well as the rewards of their befriending experience with the other befrienders in the group discussion. This process helped our understanding of their expectations as befrienders and guided their reflective thinking about their actions in their interactions with persons with autism and their families. Through this role the tutor herself had to develop empathy, so that the befrienders would feel connected and supported by the coordinator. Showing respect for their challenges and giving positive feedback for their creative problem-solving skills empowered students in their befriending role.

Another important consideration emerging out of the discussions with the students and their reflections was related with the poor coverage of family-related issues in courses taught in the formal curriculum of their training. The effective communication with parents was a common theme of discussion with befrienders. Although student special education teachers responded eagerly to the parents' need to talk with them, sharing their interest for their own child, they also acknowledged their lack of skills in supporting adequately parents in their problems (Mavropoulou et al, in press). This input from students highlighted the need for incorporating family-related issues to a greater extent within their teacher training.

The feedback from parents was mainly positive and received through their informal contact with the tutor and befrienders' comments on parents' reactions. Parents greatly appreciated the presence of the befriender and most families continued their participation in the scheme.

They felt privileged to have someone being involved and making genuine efforts to interact with their offspring. This feeling was frequently expressed by the parents of adolescents and adults with autism, since they felt that it would be even more difficult for the befrienders to motivate and support persons of this age. Some parents acknowledged the ideas they had gained by observing how another person interacted successfully with their child during free play, or more structured activities, such as self-care or eye-hand integration skills. Their major concern was related with the change of the befriender and they wished that the same befrienders would be committed to the same family for as long as possible.

Recommendations for teacher training

There is a paradigm shift in teacher education, moving from theory driven training to experiential and reflective learning (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004; Sileo et al, 1998; Swick, 1999). While field experience may be a partial solution to the problem of developing teachers who are more sensitive to the aware of the needs of their students and their families, there is an emerging consensus that field experience alone without reflection may have little effect on attitudes (Bain, Mills, Ballantyne & Packer, 2002). Additionally, university tutors can guide graduates to implement effectively family and community involvement programs and practices as future professionals (Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

Befriending could be further developed along the same lines as service learning and maintain its volunteering context. The volunteering experience could be offered as an option for some students and closely connected to specific academic goals, which are facilitated by reflection, discussion and integration with course material. All preservice special teachers need to assess their self-knowledge and scrutinize the various beliefs which underpin their practices, and re-examine their stereotypes and dispositions. Within this context, they could be given opportunities to enquire and reflect upon their theoretical knowledge through their personal experiences, so that they become reflective practitioners.

Moreover, participating in befriending schemes can help student teachers move beyond stereotyping and can stimulate deeper forms of civic engagement, a significant aim of future teacher education programs. Special education teachers need to be active citizens and professionals who practice their civic responsibility towards persons in need in the community.

There is a strong call for teachers in special education to develop their awareness for the social contexts of learning and adopt another perspective, communicating sensitivity, empathy and understanding for their students' real lives. In this paper, we argue that for these issues to be addressed and accommodated within teacher

training, we need to re-construct "what" special education teachers need to learn about families of persons with special needs and re-examine alternative instructional methods that may serve better this aim for the benefit of learners with disabilities.

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