Establishing Partnerships with Families
of Children with Disabilities
from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

Laurelyn H. Cantor
University of Manitoba
Abstract

Schools are serving a growing number of students in inclusive special education programs from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Using qualitative inquiry data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with six families from a variety of ethno-cultural backgrounds, family structures, and children with various types of disabilities. The findings which emerged from the data indicated five major themes: a) the value of family, b) attitudes towards disability c) factors influencing parental participation, d) parental participation and advocacy, and e) sources of support. Major factors that interfered in parental participation had to do with language barriers, which included both English language proficiency, as well as difficulty in understanding special education terminology and practices. This study offers strategies for educators to establish partnerships with families and implications for teacher education programs and future research.
The traditional patterns of communication between schools and families are not keeping pace with the increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic orientations of students receiving special education services. Communication between parents and educators has frequently been complex. It becomes even more so when different cultures are represented (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

In creating partnerships with the families of children with disabilities receiving special education services in inclusive classrooms, it is essential for educators to consider the family’s cultural interpretation of disability (Lamorez, 2002; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Dunst and Paget (1991) define a partnership as “an association of two or more people in pursuit of a common goal or joint interest” (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994). Families of children with disabilities from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have perspectives towards the etiology and treatment of disabilities that differ from the North American biomedical model. For instance, the same problem may or may not be perceived as a disability in different societies (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Family members' beliefs about the cause of their child’s disability influence their expectations about their child’s behaviour, their goals for their child, and their involvement in special education services.

Culture, as defined by Misra (1994), is the “collective beliefs and knowledge that govern social behaviour. Culture includes the language of the people, their standards and perceptions, the ways in which they display anger or joy and the gestures they use during a conversation” (p. 145). These aspects of life are influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, social status, and geographical location (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Banks (2001) sees the essence of a culture not in its artifacts, food or clothing,
but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. According to Banks, it is the attitudes, values, and beliefs that distinguish one group from another. Diversity refers to the ways in which we differ from each other. It is a concept that refers both to our uniqueness as individuals and to our sense of belonging or identification within a socio-cultural group.

In considering ways of getting to know families from a range of backgrounds, educators need to extend their conventional understanding of what a family is. There is no prototype that represents “the family” (O’Shea, O’Shea, Algozzine, & Hammite, 2001). The size of the family structure is an important variable. For example, single parent, two parent, communal, adoptive, foster, extended, and blended families all represent different patterns of family structure. Many cultural groups rely on large extended families that share responsibilities and provide support to each other. Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) describe the importance of understanding how families differ and how such differences impact on the meaning of a child’s disability within the family.

The study took place in Winnipeg, Manitoba, a large, urban centre in Western Canada with a total population of 661,730 (Winnipeg Free Press, January 22, 2003). The purpose of this study was to: a) describe the expectations of the families of children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in regards to their children’s education, including the respective roles of both home and school, b) identify factors which affected parental participation in their children’s inclusive education, and c) develop strategies to increase involvement in the home-school partnership, based on interpretation of the data. It was hoped that this study would
raise questions and concerns for professional discussion and further research regarding the involvement of families of children with disabilities from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in collaborative partnerships with schools.

**Literature Review**

Four major areas which underlie the home-school partnership for families with children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were explored. In the first segment, multiculturalism from a Canadian perspective, including education policy and practice, as well as Manitoba’s policies on multicultural education and inclusion were discussed. Theoretical interpretations of the perspectives of families of different cultures on disability and special education, parent-professional collaboration in education and possible reasons for non-participation by culturally and linguistically diverse families also were explored.

In its 135th year, Canada celebrates a long history of multiculturalism. When European settlers brought their own cultures to North America, they encountered Aboriginal peoples with rich, diverse cultures who spoke many languages. Although Canada has been multicultural from its beginning, both the nature of multiculturalism as well as our perceptions of it has changed. The adaptation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) was a turning point in our identity and equality as Canadians. The Charter protects these basic rights and freedoms of all Canadians that are considered necessary to preserving Canada as a free and democratic society.

Basically, Manitoba educators have adopted a philosophy of inclusion as the foundation for the delivery of special education. The most accepted delivery model is grounded in inclusive philosophy combined with a continuum of programming and
supports (Freeze, Bravi & Rampaul, 1990). First choice for students with disabilities is in regular education classes in neighborhood public schools with their same age peers (Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, 2001) There is the general sense that Manitoba is moving towards inclusive practice. However, the interpretations and implementation of the policies of inclusion are inconsistent from division to division and school to school.

Up until very recently, there was no mandate in Manitoba law for inclusion of students with disabilities. On April 30, 2003, proposed legislation was introduced by the Manitoba Education and Youth Minister that will ensure access to appropriate educational programming for students with special needs. Bill 17, the Public Schools Amendment Act, addresses recommendations of the 1999 Manitoba Special Education Review, and Manitoba Education, Training and Youth’s philosophy of inclusion (Government of Manitoba, 2003).

Historically, special education has been approached as student-centered and teacher-directed. The role of families within the education process has been awarded varying degrees of emphasis. The family systems theory promotes the importance of understanding various aspects of the family in order to effectively meet the needs of both the child and the family. Another theory by Bronfenbrenner (Fine, 1995), the ecological theory, places the family within its own microsystem, interacting with many other systems. In order to work effectively with the family, it is important to understand the influence of other systems on the child and family. The systems-ecological perspective of Fine (1995) combined these two theories, an approach which facilitates the process of collaborative decision-making between the family and school. An
ecosystemic view of the child-family context encourages exploration of the family’s connectedness to community resources, the involvement of extended family, the nature of the family’s social support network, and the meaning of ethnic, cultural, and religious factors (Fine & Gardner, 1994).

Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) merged family systems perspectives with special education practices and applied them to the families of students with disabilities. By shifting to a family focus, the student is no longer viewed in isolation, but within the context of his or her own family. Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) proposed a family systems framework to organize four major perspectives which include: 1) family characteristics which focus on the descriptive elements of the family that shape each family’s individuality, 2) family interactions which focuses on the relationships that occur among family members, 3) family function, which refers to the tasks family members perform to meet individual and collective needs such as economic or educational needs, and 4) the family life cycle which represents the sequences of changes that affect families over time.

Parent-professional collaboration is very important as a means of improving education for all students. Friend and Cook (1996) define interpersonal collaboration as “a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal” (p. 6). Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) refer to collaboration as “the dynamic process of families and professionals equally sharing their resources in order to make decisions jointly” (p. 13). Thousand, Villa, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin (1996) discuss collaboration as an
essential element in the successful development of partnerships between schools and parents, enabling schools to meet diverse student needs through shared expertise.

Many educators recognize that families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds participate to a lesser extent in special education decision-making than families from the dominant or mainstream culture (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Parette & Hogan, 2000). Historically, many families from culturally diverse backgrounds have had to overcome barriers to their effective participation in the regular and special education process (Garcia & Malkin, 1993).

A major question is to determine whether parents of students with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds feel co-equal with school professionals. Parents may want a more active role, yet may defer educational decisions to professionals who are perceived to be the experts in the education of children with disabilities (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Parette & Petch-Hogan, 2000). Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) have indicated that the prevailing model of professionalism is a barrier that significantly impedes collaboration.

Educators need to be aware that children and families who have emigrated from a culture that is very different from the Canadian culture are adjusting to many changes simultaneously. Families may perceive their roles differently with respect to seeking help, problem-solving, decision-making, child rearing, or interactions with authority (Beverly & Thomas, 1999, p. 23).

Parental participation may be affected by their cultural views of disability and its causation. These differences often affect parental understanding of the assessment and diagnosis process, as well as the development of educational goals (Harry, 2002).
Families who have recently immigrated to Canada may hold values that are more consistent with their country of origin. Limited English language proficiency may interfere with a family’s capacity to access appropriate resources (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

Logistical barriers such as time constraints, lack of transportation, lack of child care, and work obligations also may prevent parents from participating in their children’s special education programs (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Barriers also include the lack of sociocultural diversity in the educational work force, as well as parental mistrust due to minority overrepresentation within special education programs (Rock, 2000).

While the barriers for participation are complex, educators can create opportunities for active parental participation which, in turn may promote the establishment of equal partnerships between home and school in the education of students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse families. Through interviews with families of children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, I hope to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that affect parental participation in their children’s inclusive education in Manitoba.

**Method**

Having identified these areas of study, which depend upon an exploration of individual expression, a qualitative research methodology was chosen as an appropriate technique. Six families from a wide range of cultural backgrounds with children with various types of disabilities were interviewed. Each family system was regarded as unique. In view of increasing recognition that partnerships should not be limited to parents only, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and others who were considered vital
resources in supporting educational outcomes for the child with disabilities, were invited to participate at the discretion of the parents (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

The interviews were semi structured in the ethnographic tradition (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Ethnography is a descriptive study in which the researcher tries to illustrate what people say and how they act in their daily lives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

After approval by my thesis committee, and ethics approval, letters were sent to disability support groups and ethno-cultural groups in Winnipeg. Nominations of the six families were selected based on the recommendations of program directors and agency administrators of the disability support groups and ethno-cultural groups.

The families that were selected for the study were diverse on several dimensions: (a) ethnicity, (b) country of origin, (c) first language, (d) age of their child, (e) type of disability, and (f) family structure. Figure 1 portrays the six families in this study.

All six families in the study lived in Winnipeg. However, there were many reasons why they immigrated, or relocated to Winnipeg. Therefore, diversity results not only from different national origins, but also from unique circumstances concerning the settlement of a group of people in Winnipeg.

Pseudonyms have been assigned to the families, other participants, schools and community agencies to ensure confidentiality.

The data for this study were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six families of children with disabilities from diverse backgrounds. The scope of information gathered, the nature of questions asked, and the family's comfort
### Participants in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of family members who participated in interviews</th>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Name of Child</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Type of disability (as documented)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother – Ruth</td>
<td>single mother foster parent</td>
<td>Swahili</td>
<td>Uganda, Africa</td>
<td>Carley</td>
<td>5½</td>
<td>Fetal Alcohol Effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother – Mrs. Lai&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Father – Mr. Lai&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Daughter – Cam Son – Tanh Grandmother Interpreter</td>
<td>two parent-family extended family</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Cam Tanh</td>
<td>18 10</td>
<td>Orthopedic impairments “ ” “ ”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother – Sharlene</td>
<td>single mother</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Canada&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Jordan Nathan</td>
<td>14 7</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) ADHD and congenital scoliosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother – Florence Grandfather – Lou</td>
<td>grandparents</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Canada&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother – Heather Father – Kyle</td>
<td>two parents foster parents</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Canada&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cognitive Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother – Mrs. Chen&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; Interpreter</td>
<td>two parents extended family</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Raymond</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cognitive Disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Pseudonyms were assigned for children and family members.

<sup>a</sup> Titles used during introduction

<sup>b</sup> Aboriginal descent
level with the interviews determined the length of each interview and the number of interviews required for each family.

To gain understanding of each family as a system, a Discussion Guide for Gathering Information was utilized. Questions concerning the areas of family, culture, diversity, disability, and home and school collaboration, were open-ended, sensitive to the family’s needs, and followed the issues the interviewees were most interested in addressing. To ensure that the interview questions were culturally sensitive, I reviewed the questions with a cultural mediator or the interpreter before each interview. I was sensitive to the family’s perceptions of the intrusiveness or relevance of my questions, as well as their comfort level with my manner as I gathered family information. Ongoing interpretation of the data guided me in refocusing interviews according to the emergent themes, as well as concerns particular to each of the families. While the interviews were organized around specific questions, not every family was asked every question. Very often, responses to some questions led to discussions of other questions.

In two cases, I did not speak the language of the family, so an interpreter was vital in assisting with the interview. Ideally, a mediator who is able to provide linguistic and cultural mediation by facilitating clear communication and understanding about home and school cultures, would be available to all families from diverse cultures with children with disabilities (Fowler & Hooper, 1998).

In interviewing the families, I took the role of observer as participant (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) interacting in the proceedings to allow for a comfortable interpersonal climate. Educators can examine the cultural base of their own belief system by exploring their own perspectives and how they have been shaped, in order to realize
how their assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices impact relationships with their students and families (Harry, 1992). I also let the families know how grateful I was for their willing participation in this study, and presented each family an honorarium for twenty-five dollars.

I analyzed the data using the constant comparative approach by Glaser and Strauss (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998), an inductive approach in which observations, comments and quotes are coded according to the type of information revealed. The framework for the analysis required analyzing both the ethnographic information, as well as the answers to the research questions as reflected in the interview schedule.

Findings

The findings that emerged from the data collection and the process of interpretation resulted in five main themes that form the core of the findings of this study: (a) the value of family, (b) attitudes towards disability, (c) factors influencing parental participation, (d) parental participation and advocacy, and (e) sources of support. The five themes address the main research questions describing the participation of families of children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in their children’s education, the importance of knowing how cultural values and beliefs influence family relationships and attitudes towards disability is recognized. Factors which affected the participation of families in their children’s education were found to include language barriers and feelings of cultural disrespect and disregard. It was also discovered that all of the families participated in their children’s education with the schools. Another factor which affected parental participation was their source of support networks.
In the first theme, the value of family from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds is explored. Extended family relationships were important in all of the families. One family relied on the grandparents for daycare, homework supervision, and to attend school events. Two single mothers relied on family members to provide support and encouragement.

Both the Lai family from Vietnam and Mr. and Mrs. Chen from China immigrated to Canada on a sponsorship program to be reunited with extended family in Winnipeg. In both the Vietnamese and Chinese cultures, the family is considered the basic unit of society and the central focus of the individual's life. This family-centered orientation contrasts with the more Western individualist values of independence, self-reliance, and competitiveness.

Florence and Lou are responsible for their grandson, Marcus, as well as his siblings. They are involved in caring for their grandchildren while their daughter-in-law is at work, as well as helping with homework, and in the decision-making process for Marcus' education. In Aboriginal cultures, elders are highly respected and play a particularly important role in decision making and childcare.

The second theme is concerned with attitudes towards disability. Families may possess a variety of culturally based perspectives concerning the etiology of their children's disabilities, and definite views about treatment.

When Ruth became a foster parent to Carley, Ruth knew that Carley had been diagnosed with FAE. I asked Ruth how she felt when she listened to other parents at a parent support group discuss their children, and she answered, “More comfortable. I know what kind of kid I have.” Ruth mentioned that Carley’s doctor would like to put
Carley on medication for her behaviour. Ruth was quite reluctant, “At the same time I think she doesn’t need it, because I think she’s doing okay. She just needs attention.”

Cam and Tanh Lai began having problems with standing and walking while they were living in Vietnam. Mr. and Mrs. Lai took them for traditional Asian health care practices, such as exercise, acupuncture and nutritional practices. Mr. and Mrs. Lai were hoping to obtain a medical diagnosis from Canadian doctors. The interpreter conveyed that, “They will try treatment and medication,” which indicates that they are willing to utilize a pluralistic system of care that blends traditional medicine with Western medicine.

Factors influencing parental participation is examined as a third theme. In this study, I found that all six families wanted to be involved in their children’s education. Parental participation took various forms, including monitoring of homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, phone calls, and informal meetings with teachers. However, some families reported that there were challenges that may have discouraged or prevented them from being more involved. In this study, there were two major factors that interfered with parental participation: a) language barriers, and b) feelings of cultural disrespect or disregard.

Language barriers were particularly influential in determining the amount of involvement each of the families had with the schools. Even when families have an interpreter, translations were not accurate with respect to the terms and procedures related to special education services.

Another barrier to promoting effective home-school partnerships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds, was the lack of sensitivity to cultural differences.
This may result form either a reluctance to accommodate cultural differences or a lack of knowledge.

Sharlene felt that school personnel had been “quite condescending” and that “maybe it’s cultural.” She started questioning “attitudes towards me I didn’t like. One time they asked me what grade level that I completed in school, and I’m thinking ‘this has nothing to do with the kids’ academic ability’.”

The fourth theme has to do with parental advocacy. All of the families were participatory in terms of homework and behavioral concerns identified by teachers, as well as attending meetings with their children’s teachers. Every family expressed belief in the value of education.

By using a family educator to help her understand her sons’ disabilities and learning problems, Sharlene was proactive in advocating for her children. She also tried to access information concerning tests and funding, so that she would have more knowledge when requesting support from the school.

Florence and Lou also were very committed to advocating for their grandson, Marcus. They felt an overwhelming sense of powerlessness when their efforts to participate at the school were rejected. Lou felt that he needed an interventionist to provide advocacy.

The fifth theme in this study deals with the families’ sources of support. Families of children with disabilities adjust to the presence of a child with a disability within their family at the same time as they cope with the same pressures that every family faces in Canadian society. From the interviews with the families in the study, it was discovered that all six families relied on interpersonal support systems to help them with their
children with disabilities. These supports included spouses, extended family, cultural associations, parent support groups, ethno-cultural agencies, foster care agencies, and the police.

Both the Lai family from Vietnam and Mr. and Mrs. Chen from China contacted an ethno-cultural program to receive assistance in gaining access to services in Winnipeg. Both families also required the services of qualified interpreters, not only to translate from one language to another, but also to serve as a liaison or cultural mediator between two cultures. The Lai family and the Chen family both relied on support from extended family members and cultural associations.

Becoming foster parents to a teenager with disabilities has enabled Heather and Kyle to develop their capabilities to meet many challenges. They have relied on each other to provide support and encouragement in their journey as foster parents. They also have the support of extended family members who have accepted Trevor as part of their family. Heather and Kyle have contacted Trevor’s teachers on a regular basis, and the social worker from the foster care agency also was involved. Heather and Kyle also relied on support from the police, when Trevor was long overdue.

The families in this study relied on supports which included family members, as well as disability and ethno-cultural support groups. The support received from these networks helped the families with coping strategies and seeking information about their children’s disabilities. Talking about their needs and recognizing issues they all shared as families of children with disabilities form diverse cultures, empowered the families to be better equipped to advocate for their children.
Establishing Partnerships

Strategies to Facilitate Home-School Partnerships

Based on the interpretations of the data, as well as suggestions by Thorp, 1997; Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) and Lynch and Hanson (2002), I propose the following guidelines to increase involvement in the home-school partnerships of the families with children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

1. Educators need to explore their own cultural experiences, values and attitudes. Cultural self-awareness occurs by exploring your own heritage, including country of origin, reasons for immigration, and language. Religion, education, political tendencies, photographs, books, and oral narratives through the recollection of parents and grandparents all reveal clues to your family’s past. All cultures have “built-in biases” (Lynch & Hansen, 2002) and only by examining our own values, beliefs, and customs is it possible to become truly sensitive to someone else’s culture.

2. Educators need to learn as much as possible from families about their cultural experiences, values, and attitudes. By becoming a “cultural researcher” (Thorp, 1997) through reading, interaction and involvement, it is possible to learn about the feelings, beliefs, and practices of others. Participating in the community and learning the language of another culture also are ways of increasing cross-cultural understanding. For example, educators need to attend to family structures that do not reflect Canadian norms. In particular, they need to expand the parent-school partnership to a family-school partnership that allows for participation of grandparents, aunts, uncles, elders, and advocates at the discretion of the parents.

3. One of the most important steps in developing collaborative partnerships is building an atmosphere of trust and respect. As educators come to respect the beliefs
and values of the family, they become able to communicate their efforts in areas that can help facilitate the collaborative relationship (Harry, Kalyanpur & Day, 1999). Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) suggested that educators adopt a “posture of cultural reciprocity” in which educators engage in discussions with families regarding culture values and practices, acknowledging differences, and developing a reflective practice that will lead to effective parent-professional partnerships. Families should be included in decisions affecting their children on both ethical and professional grounds, and because family members provide valuable information on the nature of the student’s difficulties. For example, educators need to attend to the negative attitudes some families’ experience within their cultural community. In addition, special educators may need to expand their horizon of treatment options to include complimentary therapies derived from oriental medicine, such as acupuncture, and Aboriginal healing traditions. A distrust of western medicines for conditions such as ADHD may mean that special educators and clinicians need to provide more information to families so they can make informed choices.

4. Educators need to listen, as well as to talk and avoid using “jargon” in an attempt to maintain clarity in the sharing of information. Educators can help families become involved in the information-sharing process by asking parents questions that encourage them to respond, exploring problems associated with test results, offering several recommendations as options to a situation, encouraging parents to include extended family or community members who can help with the interaction and arranging for an interpreter who is culturally sensitive. For example, inclusive special education handbooks, with a glossary of terms and clear descriptions of possible provisions and
family participation in decision-making, in the first language of the families, might help overcome the problem of limited proficiency in English. Furthermore, a family advocate-interpreter-educator, provided through disability, advocacy, and ethno-cultural organizations, might help mediate and ameliorate the family-school partnership. Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger, a psychologist and educator at Syracuse University believed that people in institutional care needed independent representation by people in the community to advocate for them. This idea of citizen advocacy could be extended to support families of children with disabilities from diverse cultures.

Implications

Teacher education programs in special education need to assume the initiative in preparing educators to develop family-appropriate and culturally-appropriate partnerships to benefit children with disabilities. A course focusing on family-professional partnerships would provide preservice teachers in special education with both the knowledge regarding best practices and the skills to actively include the families in the educational process. Theories and research that support family-centered practices should be explored. To increase understanding of family perspectives, the effects of a child with a disability on the family should be studied in the framework of family systems theory, and Fine’s ecosystemic perspective (Fine 1995). For inclusive special educators already in the field, professional development opportunities should be designed to meet the needs of these teachers. Teachers should have opportunities to understand and practice those competencies necessary for developing and maintaining effective family-school partnerships.
Teacher preparation programs in special education should also be required to include coursework in the study of cross-cultural practices relating to families and disabilities. The course should be presented with a practical emphasis that requires students to explore their own perspectives and how their assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices influence their work with families of children with disabilities. Educators also need to develop culturally appropriate observation and interview skills.

This study has significant implications for future research. One important implication is the potential of qualitative methods to gain sensitive information about a variety of family systems. Educators need to identify factors that families and professionals consider important in building positive partnerships. It is important for educators to find out the families’ preferences for the ways in which they wish to be involved in their children’s education. A home-school partnership is enhanced when the family members are involved in developing a family involvement plan.

Understanding parents’ perspectives and goals for their children, and ways in which the families are similar to and different from our own, provides the basis for working together. Asking parents how we can complement their efforts, supports this type of partnership.

This study also has implications that demonstrate that inclusive special education practices in Manitoba need further clarification to ensure that all students with disabilities receive “appropriate educational programming” (Government of Manitoba, April 30, 2003).

This research has implications for helping parents to participate as effective partners by providing parent education and awareness training programs that would
empower parents. Parent training models that are based on a group counseling and support model, as opposed to a teaching model, may be more culturally relevant. This model allows families to share experiences within their own cultural context. Researchers should invite school districts to nominate teams interested in implementing improved models of professional practice as they relate to the family-school partnership for children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Better communication and joint problem-solving lead to greater consistency between families and professionals. The concept of “partnerships” acknowledges that both families and schools are required to educate children for their role in society. Partnerships with families of children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds make it possible that ideas and resources will be shared to increase all students’ chances for success.

About the Author

Laurelyn Cantor is currently a Ph.D. student in Inclusive Special Education at the University of Manitoba. Laurelyn is also the Coordinator of Campus Life Manitoba, an initiative at the University of Manitoba that provides supports for students with cognitive disabilities to audit academic courses and participate in recreational activities, clubs, and other campus activities.

Laurelyn’s research interests include family/professional collaboration, family narratives, exploring issues of diversity, accessing community resources and professional development.
References


Manitoba Education, Training and Youth. (2001). *Schools in Manitoba*. 


