Chapter 4

Challenges and Strategies for Establishing Strong Partnerships: Special Education and CLD Families

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ABSTRACT

Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) struggle in schools, as do students with disabilities. The intersection of disability and diversity acts as a double jeopardy for these students. Though collaboration between schools and families in the design and implementation of special education services is a key mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, research shows that there continue to be obstacles to effective partnerships between schools and families of students with disabilities, which are even more prominent for families from diverse backgrounds. In this chapter, the authors review the literature and research on partnerships between schools and families of children with disabilities, paying particular attention to those families whose voices are often unheard. Specific research on the experiences of Middle Eastern, North African, and Southwest Asian families is highlighted, and strategies for working with CLD families whose children have disabilities are provided.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What are the main barriers to partnering with families who have children with disabilities and are also from CLD backgrounds?
- What are strategies to address common communication barriers when establishing partnerships with CLD families of children who have disabilities?
- How could the identification of the needs of multiply-marginalized students help promote educational reform in schools?

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- How can educators include disability in the discourse around student diversity when considering social justice and partnerships in schools?
- What are three concrete strategies for improving partnerships with CLD families who have children with disabilities?

Inclusive, good-quality education is a foundation for dynamic and equitable societies. -Desmond Tutu

INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds fall significantly behind their non-disabled peers from dominant cultures (Scott, Hauerwas, & Brown, 2013). The intersection of disability and CLD backgrounds acts as a double jeopardy for these students. The compounding effects of various forms of oppression, such as ableism and racism, marginalize these students and their families even further (Scott et al., 2013). Addressing the needs of these students by focusing on inclusivity that takes into account this intersectionality is crucial to any efforts set out to improve special education services and programs (Morgan et al., 2015). Researchers have pointed to positive family-school partnerships as one way to help improve special education services, and ultimately improve academic achievement (Sheldon, 2003).

Collaboration between schools and families in the design and implementation of special education services is a key mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) (Heward, 2012). Despite the fact that “[c]ollaboration and communication increased and improved during the 1990s and moved the family-professional partnership more toward one of “collective empowerment” (Murawski, Carter, Sileo, & Prater, 2012, p. 61), there remain significant challenges in the development of effective family-school partnerships in general. The obstacles to effective partnerships are even more prominent for CLD families, who face numerous barriers to participation, such as lower English language proficiency and lack of time or adequate resources (Rodriguez, Blatz & Elbaum, 2014). A consistent theme in the literature on this topic is that these barriers are heightened by cross-cultural differences in how disability is defined and conceptualized (Harry, 2008). The parental role in the education of students with disabilities is also culturally constructed as parents may have different ideas of what involvement and participation in their child’s education means (Diken, 2006; Harry, 2008). Therefore, the diversity of reactions to disability and different understandings of the potential parental role in education can make forming effective family-school partnerships with CLD families of students with disabilities very difficult.

The objectives of this chapter are: 1. to identify the key issues for CLD families of children with disabilities, 2. to review the literature and research on the partnerships between schools and these families, and 3. to recommend specific strategies for parents and educators as they strive to improve their collaboration on behalf of students.