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## Overcoming Barriers to Effective Parental Partnerships: Implications for Professionals in an Educational Setting

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The importance of parental involvement in the education of their children is an issue which has gained much attention over the years. Academic success has been found to be influenced by parental support and involvement (Chapman & Heward, 1982; Correa, 1989; McGenney, 1969; Rich, 1987; Tinajero, 1992). Formal recognition of the significance of parental involvement has been indicated by initiatives such as Public Law 99-457 Part H in the United States (Sontag & Schacht, 1994) and the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training document, *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (1993), in Canada.

Speech language pathologists typically try to involve parents in the assessment and intervention of a child's communication skills (Westernoff, 1991). Despite these attempts, professionals working in multicultural contexts are reported to have limited contacts with parents of minority students and to provide a narrow range of service (Harry, 1992b) than.... It appears that parents often remain untapped resources (Garcia & Malkin, 1993). Given the importance of parental commitment, professionals must become aware of factors which may impede their service delivery to families from diverse backgrounds. For some professionals, lack of competency and experience working with clients and families from diverse populations may interfere with the development of partnerships that encourage parental involvement and support for the children.

Unfortunately, many speech language pathologists for example, do not appear to be competent in working with clients from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (American Speech Language Hearing Association, 1984; American Speech Language Hearing Association, 1985; Damico & Nye, 1990; Roseberry-McKibbin & Eicholtz, 1990). Des Bois' 1989 survey of clinicians in Montreal, Quebec found that 40% of the respondents did not feel they were competent to work with minority groups, 79% had not received pertinent training, and 100% felt that their knowledge of multicultural, multilingual matters was below average (Crago, 1993). A study at Howard University in the United States indicated that approximately 75% of the speech language pathologists surveyed believed that they were not competent in working with bilingual or nonstandard -English speaking clients (Taylor, 1993).

Lack of clinical competence and experience working with diverse populations can contribute to misunderstandings between professionals and parents. We are often not aware of how deeply our beliefs are conditioned by our own cultural experiences and tend to think that they have universal validity (Harry,

Torguson, Katkavich, & Guerrero, 1993). By interpreting the actions of parents through our own cultural experiences, we can unwittingly create barriers to parental involvement in children's formal learning process. For example, parents can erroneously be judged to be uninvolved in their child's education, unaccepting of identified handicapping conditions (Nuru, 1993), or seen as lacking the sophistication necessary to manage information (Correa, 1989).

All professionals working with families of differing cultures need to be aware of barriers which interfere in the development of effective partnerships. Three potential barriers identified in the literature which warrant discussion include (a) cultural interpretations of handicapping conditions, (b) differing perceptions of the education system, and (c) differing perceptions of the roles of professionals and parents.

### **Cultural Interpretation of Handicapping Conditions**

Professionals in North America hold certain beliefs regarding disabilities and treatment. Speech language pathologists, for example, are trained to identify and treat disabilities affecting voice production, speech sounds, language comprehension, and how language is used expressively. While handicapping conditions can be found in all societies (Miller, 1984a), what constitutes a disability in one culture may not do so in another. Disabilities are not identically viewed across cultures (Cheng, 1993). For example, some American Indian cultures purportedly do not have a word for stuttering in their languages (Cooper & Cooper, 1993). Differing views of disability have implications for the identification of disorders as well as for intervention. Four factors appear to affect how cultures interpret language and learning handicaps: (a) whether that culture recognizes the concept of a specific disorder, (b) how that culture interprets language behaviors, (c) cultural tolerance of disabilities, and (d) the social implications of a disability within the culture.

Speech language pathologists are familiar with different categories of disabilities. However, some of these categories may be quite alien to parents from differing cultures. The disabilities identified in one culture may not be seen to exist in another. For example the concept of an unseen disability such as a learning disability may be unfamiliar to parents from some cultures (Cheng, 1991). Clinicians working on the assumption that parents are familiar with the same categories of disabilities are likely to experience misunderstandings in their interactions.

Different cultures may have varying interpretations of language use and behaviors (Miller, 1984b; Van Kleeck, 1994). Speech language pathologists analyzing language samples to identify a language disability need to consider cultural interpretations of those observations. For example, Crago (1990) cites her explanation of a talkative Inuit boy as indicating advanced language skills and contrasts this with an Inuit teacher's interpretation of the same behavior as indicating a possible learning problem. This variance in perspective resulted from the expectation for children to learn primarily through observation in the Inuit culture.

Not only do cultures differ in their definition of what constitutes a disability, they also may differ in their tolerance of that behavior. For example, some families may acknowledge developmental delays but not agree with the extent to which it is disabling, since they may have a greater tolerance of differing developmental patterns (Harris, 1993; Harry, 1992b).

The social implications of a disability may differ across cultures. For example, a handicapping condition may be viewed as a stigma or as punishment for parental or ancestral deeds. The culture may have a fatalistic attitude towards disabilities, believing the condition to be outside of human control (Chan, 1986), or the family may view the disability as a gift or blessing (Cheng, 1993).

## **Differing Perceptions of the Education System**

The education system varies from country to country and from rural to urban setting. Three factors related to how the education system is perceived may affect partnerships between professionals and parents. These include (a) cultural view of the importance of education, (b) parents' knowledge of North American education systems, and (c) professionals' knowledge of educational systems in other countries.

The importance of schooling is not equally viewed in different countries. For example, education in Japan is highly revered, while for political reasons it is less well perceived in Laos (Cheng, 1993). This may affect parental support for their children's education.

Parents from varying cultures may initially interpret the education system based on the knowledge they have of the system in which they were educated (Herrera & Wooden, 1988). The system of their childhood and that of their child may be vastly different. Parents may have minimal knowledge of North American school systems (Harry, 1992a). As a result, they may not be able to find resources and services as readily as parents who are familiar with the system.

Professionals working with children from differing countries need to be aware of the school system of the children's homeland and the respective differences between education systems. In addition to being relevant for diagnostic purposes (Westernoff, 1991), this may have implications for intervention. For example, students who are from education systems which emphasize group performance may need some assistance to adjust to a North American system which typically values individualistic efforts (Cheng, 1993).

## **Differing Perceptions of the Roles of Professionals and Parents**

Another potential barrier to developing effective parental partnerships pertains to how each member of the team views the role of the other. Interpretation of each others' roles and responsibilities may differ from that which actually exists.

Parents may have certain expectations regarding the behavior and skills of professionals in the school system. For instance, they may believe that the professional has the expertise to solve the child's problems and may therefore defer decisions to the professional (Correa, 1989). In addition, they may be unfamiliar with the concept of parental involvement and interpret invitations to collaborate as an indication of the professional's limitations (Chan, 1986). While some cultures have great respect and reverence for educators (Cheng, 1991), professionals may find that alternative practitioners or resources have been involved in the student's care (Correa, 1989; Hanson, Lynch, & Wayman, 1990).

Similarly, speech language pathologists have certain expectations regarding parental performance. We often assume, for example, that the parents see their children's communication skills as being of the utmost importance. As a result, we overlook the possibility that parents have other priorities which may take precedence over our recommendations. Parents may be concerned with providing for the child's survival needs such as food, housing, and clothing (Correa, 1989). Professionals need to realize that parents may be unable to attend to all the developmental needs of their child when meeting basic needs is their current concern (Roberts, 1990).

Steps to overcome barriers which often occur when professionals work with parents of different cultures must be identified and employed. Recommendations to enhance cross cultural partnerships include (a) increasing information that is available to parents, (b) promoting parental involvement, (c) recognizing the

significance of culture (d) extending professional roles, and (e) furthering professional development. A discussion of strategies to implement these recommendations follows.

### **Increase Information Available to Parents**

Parents need more information in order to make educational decisions and to support their child's formal education. They have the right to be informed about available resources and their responsibilities, rights, and choices (Chan, 1986). Furthermore, parents need to know the language skills that their children require to be successful in school, so they can provide assistance at home (Cheng, 1991; Tinajero, 1992). Strategies to assist the professional to provide relevant and appropriate information to parents have been identified in the literature and are summarized below.

It is essential that professionals provide information in the most comfortable language for parents by working with interpreters, translators, or cultural and linguistic informants. Recommendations for working with interpretive personnel have been discussed at length (e.g., Cheng, 1991; Langdon, 1991; Fradd, 1993). Key factors to consider include (a) matching the dialect and culture of the interpretive personnel with that of the parents (Fradd, 1993), (b) training and practicing with interpretive personnel prior to meeting with parents (Correa, 1989), (c) using interpretative support in all forms of interaction with parents (e.g., telephone calls, formal and informal meetings) (Fradd, 1993), (d) providing written information at suitable reading levels (Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1991), (e) being aware of potential pitfalls in the interpretive process (e.g., direct translations resulting in unintended meanings) (Correa, 1989), and (f) cultivating partnerships with interpretive personnel for the mutual development of skills (Westernoff, 1992).

Another strategy professionals can employ to facilitate exchange of information with parents is to promote a safe, comfortable environment in meetings by: (a) welcoming parents to bring a friend or family member; (b) providing frequent opportunities for questions; (c) reinforcing participation by telling parents how their contributions are helpful to the child and school; (d) providing opportunities to meet with a targeted professional after meetings to discuss parental perceptions or additional questions (Correa, 1989); and (e) scheduling meetings that do not conflict with other parental obligations.

Providing relevant information to parents can be facilitated when professionals use effective communication strategies, such as (a) providing examples to illustrate messages (Correa, 1989); (b) using visual material (e.g., gestures, diagrams, the child's work samples) (Ramsey, 1987); (c) simplifying language by using shorter sentences and speaking more slowly (Ramsey, 1987); (d) avoiding educational vocabulary, jargon, and idioms which may be unfamiliar to parents (Correa, 1989); and (e) learning greetings in other languages (Ramsey, 1987).

Sharing information through parent partnerships can also be fostered by adopting a collaborative approach, while keeping in mind that some parents may be unfamiliar with the experience of working together with professionals in the educational setting. Professionals may achieve this by: (a) explaining recommendations, (b) offering alternative suggestions, (c) finding out parents' reasons for rejecting certain recommendations, and (d) maintaining personal contact with parents, even if communication is difficult (Cheng, 1991).

It would be helpful to create opportunities for communication among culturally and linguistically different parents who have experience and who understand how schools work and those who do not have this knowledge (Ruiz, 1991). Examples include: (a) providing small group seminars (Ruiz, 1991); (b) creating support groups (Ruiz, 1991) or networking opportunities; (c) facilitating informal communication; and (d)

accessing cultural groups, centers, and agencies in the community which provide information and services for parents (Ramsey, 1987; Cheng, 1991).

### **Promote Parental Involvement**

Given the influence that parents have in their child's development, it is important to encourage their involvement as powerful resources in their child's formal education. Strategies to achieve this are summarized below.

It is essential to acknowledge that parental participation is equally as valuable as that of professionals (Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1991; Harry, 1992b). For example parents play a critical role in maintaining their child's first language skills which support the development of subsequent languages (Cummins, 1991; Ramsey, 1987). Parents can also be involved in the assessment process, using tools such as ethnographic interviewing (Harry, 1992b; Westby, 1990) and collaboration (Cheng, 1991; Fradd, 1993).

Regular parental involvement can be encouraged in the daily life of the school through participation in (a) events and clubs; (b) general parent meetings; (c) daytime family drop ins (Fitzgerald, 1993); (d) advisory council meetings, (e) classroom, library, and playground activities (Cummins, 1991); and (f) training other parents (Correa, 1989).

In addition, increased parental participation could be encouraged by recognizing parents as valuable multicultural resources. This can be achieved by inviting parents to (a) speak about cultural and racial topics; (b) participate in international events such as those featuring customs, food, and dress (Correa, 1989); (c) translate parent information or articles for newsletters, and (d) assist educators in responding effectively to multicultural issues (Cummins, 1991; Garcia & Malkin, 1993).

### **Recognize the Significance of Culture**

Awareness of how behaviors, beliefs, and values stem from personal, professional, and parental cultures is critical to cultivating effective partnerships. Reciprocal acculturation involves helping the parents to develop skills for coping with the school system of the dominant culture and learning to adapt our practices to diverse cultures (Correa, 1989). We may experience resistance to change in our roles from within ourselves and among other professionals (Dean, Spencer, & Taylor, 1993). Various strategies can increase our awareness of the significance of culture, including (a) acknowledging different cultural perspectives; (b) gathering and analyzing ethnographic information about the family's culture; (c) determining the extent to which the family has acculturated (i.e., modified its customs and activities to blend with the mainstream culture); (d) examining the family's orientation to specific child rearing issues (e.g., primary care giver, decision making, eating practices, sleeping patterns); (e) clarifying our values and assumptions as professionals (Hanson et al., 1990); (f) learning how to work within the boundaries that are comfortable for families; and (g) sharing views of the larger culture to increase understanding and improve the family's ability to negotiate within it (Hanson et al., 1990).

### **Extend Professional Roles**

The roles, skills, and characteristics of professionals can be extended to work more effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse parents.

Additional roles for professionals include acting as (a) advocates of parental rights and responsibilities (Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1991; Correa, 1989); (b) allies seeking services and resources to support family needs (Correa, 1989); and (c) culture brokers providing the link between the mainstream and diverse cultures through education and mediation (Correa, 1989).

Professionals need to develop additional skills, including the ability to (a) collaborate to determine mutually acceptable goals as opposed to reeducating parents when their goals and expectations are in conflict with those of the school (Garcia & Malkin, 1993); (b) participating as a team member, being fair in considering information presented by others; and (c) being agreeable in decision making (Fradd, 1993).

Various professional characteristics can facilitate parental interactions, including (a) sensitivity and flexibility, enabling the school's and the professional's agendas to be put on temporary hold while focusing on the needs of the family (Roberts, 1990); (b) patience, displayed by the professional's ability to remain calm and take time to listen and reflect (Fradd, 1993); and (c) trustworthiness, as portrayed by a consistent approach, the demonstration of first hand knowledge of the child, clarity about the goals of fair assessment, appropriate placement and instruction, and freedom from cultural and racial bias in educational decision making (Fradd, 1993).

### **Professional Development**

Current perceptions of professional competency in working with culturally and linguistically diverse clients reflect the need for ongoing education. As the North American population continues to diversify, cultural and linguistic issues become essential components of university training programs and professional affiliations. With increased recognition and appreciation of the power of parental partnerships, the need for training in working with family systems becomes evident.

Professionals can increase their knowledge base through participation in workshops, inservices, study groups, and collaborative activities (Damico & Hamayan, 1992). It is also recommended that professionals increase their sensitivity, learn how to assess family needs and preferences for communication, and adapt interventions to families' strengths, desires, and needs (Correa, 1989). The approach of a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987) is an important step in helping professionals learn from experiences with culturally and linguistically diverse families to better address the needs of a changing society.

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