FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AMONG CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Family-school partnerships are essential to student achievement; however, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families encounter several unique barriers occluding them from collaborating with the school. Furthermore, little research focuses on CLD families of children with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to understand family-school partnerships among CLD families. Using a mixed methods approach based upon 146 responses to a national web-based survey, we answered two research questions: (1) How do CLD families of children with disabilities perceive their partnerships with the school? and (2) What advice do CLD families have for professionals about family-school partnerships? On average, participants reported that their schools “sometimes” engaged in positive family-school partnership practices. Through open-ended responses, participants also offered several ways that teachers can cultivate better partnerships with CLD families of children with disabilities. Suggestions included: building trust, being respectful, having equal partnerships with parents, encouraging open and honest communication, following the Individualized Education Programs (IEP) of their children, having professional skills, appropriately addressing behavior, acknowledging cultural differences, and conducting radical change. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: families, diversity, partnerships, disability
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INTRODUCTION

In special education in the United States, family-school partnerships are recognized as crucial to student achievement. Family-school partnerships are defined by Summers et al. (2005) as, “...mutually supportive interactions between families and professionals, focused on meeting the needs of children and families” (p. 66). Family-school partnerships are especially important for children with disabilities and their families for several reasons. First, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004; P.L. 108-446), the American special education law, requires parent involvement. IDEA mandates that parental consent be provided before the initiation of any evaluation or initial special education placement. In addition, research has shown that strong family-school partnerships are related to effective educational programming for children with disabilities (Stoner et al., 2005). When parents and schools forge strong partnerships, students are more likely to receive appropriate individualized education programs (IEP; Fish, 2008). Yet, when parents and schools have poor partnerships, parents (namely, mothers) experience significantly greater stress (Burke & Hodapp, 2014).

Unfortunately, most of the literature about family-school partnerships is fragmented, reflecting small sample sizes with limited generalizability (Burke, 2012). Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004) wrote a seminal article about a qualitative study that identified the components of family-school partnerships. With 33 focus groups and 32 individual interviews, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) identified six indicators of collaborative family-school partnerships: (1) communication, (2) commitment, (3) equality, (4) professional skills, (5) trust, and (6) respect. The theme of communication was focused on both the quality and quantity of communication between the families and professionals to enable effective coordination among all members of the team. Commitment was described as feelings of loyalty to the family and child, as well as a shared belief in the importance of the identified goals. Next, the theme of equality focused on all members feeling equally powerful in their ability to influence outcomes. Professional Skills referred to the need for all team members to demonstrate competence in addressing the child’s needs. The next theme, trust, was defined as knowing that other members of the partnership could be relied upon. Last, respect was defined as all members of the partnership treating each other with esteem (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

Although the identification of these themes of family-school partnerships included culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) family’s perspectives, Blue-Banning and colleagues did not specifically examine the perceptions of CLD families, separate from White families. A nebulous term, the term “CLD families” refers to families who do not belong to the mainstream
culture (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2014). Currently, 46.7% of students who receive special education services in the United States are from CLD backgrounds (Office of Special Education Programs, 2014). Unfortunately, in the United States, most research about families of individuals with disabilities and family-school partnerships overlooks CLD families and instead focuses on White, middle-class families (Harry, 2002). However, there are reasons that suggest it may be even more important to examine family-school partnerships among CLD families.

Of the little research about CLD families of children with disabilities, we know that CLD families face unique barriers in forging collaborative partnerships with the schools. In a review of family-school partnerships among CLD families, Harry (2008) identified four barriers to family-school partnerships: cross-cultural differences in communication, cultural conflicts in the setting of goals, deficit-based views of CLD families, and differential views of the caregiver role. Additional barriers to successful family-school partnerships include: unavailability of documents in the native language of the family (Shapiro, Monzon, Rueda, Gomez, & Blacher, 2004), disrespectful communication (Lo, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2004), and difficulty understanding jargon (Lo, 2008).

The school system faces challenges in partnering with CLD families as well. The school as a whole may engage in culturally insensitive or ethnocentric practices (Jung, 2011). For example, the school may view CLD families as uncommitted and less skilled at parenting (Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002). Some schools perceive CLD families as passive and uninvolved (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997). Additionally, few teachers feel prepared to teach CLD students and collaborate with their families (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). These barriers likely contribute to the finding that CLD families are frequently disengaged in collaborative efforts with the school (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000).

In addition to facing great barriers, CLD families are also disproportionately more likely to receive special education services (Ford, 2012). For example, from 1998-2007, the percentage of 6-21 year olds served under IDEA increased for all racial and ethnic groups other than White (Aud, Fox, Kewal, & Ramani, 2010). The public school population is becoming even more diverse and multi-cultural each year. Still further, the CLD students served in American public schools now come from increasingly complex backgrounds that may blend many cultures and religions. Minority groups are disproportionately more prevalent in high-incidence diagnoses such as mild intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and learning disabilities. Because CLD families are over-represented in receiving special education services and face greater obstacles in collaborating with schools, it is important to examine their perceptions of their family-school partnerships.
Although CLD families are over-represented in American special education (Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middleberg, 2011), their voices are the least likely to be heard by professionals; little research examines CLD families of children with disabilities, the barriers they face in working with schools, and how to improve their family-school partnerships (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Using a mixed methods approach based upon responses to a national web-based survey, we had two research questions: (1) How do CLD families of children with disabilities perceive their partnerships with the school? and (2) What advice do CLD families have for professionals about family-school partnerships?

**METHOD**

**Participants**

A total of 146 CLD mothers of children with disabilities participated in this study. All participants lived in the United States. Of these respondents, 41.8% (n = 61) were African American, 30.1% (n = 44) were Hispanic, 8.22% (n = 16) were Asian, and 28.1% (n = 41) reported that they were an “other” (e.g., mixed race) race. Ranging from 28 to 58 years of age, respondents averaged 42.16 years (SD = 6.28). Over half (67.1%) of the respondents were married. Regarding educational background and income, 57.5% (n = 84) of the respondents had college or graduate degrees and 56.8% (n = 83) of the respondents had annual incomes under $50,000.

Children of these respondents were predominantly male (69.9%) and averaged 11.22 years (SD = 4.09; range = 4 to 21 years). Students had a variety of disabilities, including autism (49.3% or n = 72), learning disability (30.8% or n = 45), intellectual disabilities (15.8% or n = 23), other health condition (15.1% or n = 22) and behavioral disorder (11.6% or n = 17). Participants could report that their children had more than one type of disability (e.g., an intellectual disability and a health condition). We did not subsume a disability category into another disability category; rather, in this paper, we present the disability categories as indicated by the respondents.

**Recruitment**

To attain a diverse and national sample, we recruited participants through multiple ways. We sent flyers and emails to local, state, and national parent support group agencies. We also sent e-mails to each of the 7,843 agencies listed in the A-Z Yellow Pages for Disabilities (http://www.yellowpagesforkids.com/help/az.htm). Within each e-mail, we provided information about the study, including a link to the web-based survey. Each e-mail also included the recruitment flyer for agencies to forward to their constituencies (i.e., parents of individuals with disabilities).
Procedures

Participants completed a 163-item web-based survey about family-school partnerships. Five items were open-ended questions related to family-school partnerships; the remaining items were close-ended questions related to the parent, child with a disability, and family-school partnership. The survey was created based upon extant literature about family-school partnerships (e.g., Burke, 2012; Turnbull et al., 2014). Ten parents and professionals (e.g., parent advocates, social workers, teachers) reviewed the survey and provided feedback. The ten parents and professionals were contacted by the first author because of their interest in family-school partnerships; they reflected various CLD backgrounds, types of disabilities of their offspring, and geographic locations. Although the survey was only available in English, one parent, who was an English language learner, completed the survey to ensure that the items were accessible. Upon revision, the institutional review board approved the study. The questionnaire was then put onto a secure website of the University. As survey responses accumulated, they were stored on the REDCap program (Harris et al., 2009) and were downloaded periodically to guard against computer malfunctions. The study was posted on the internet from December 2010 until June 2011.

Measures

Quantitative measure: Family-Professional Partnership Scale. Designed to gauge the family’s satisfaction with their relationship with the school, the Family-Professional Partnership Scale is comprised of two factors, with nine items apiece (Summers et al., 2005), based on the themes identified by Blue-Banning and colleagues (2004). In the Child-Focused Relationship subscale, parents rated items concerning the degree to which they felt satisfied that their child’s school personnel (for example): has the skills to help the child succeed; builds on the child’s strengths; treats the child with dignity; keeps the child safe; and speaks up for the child’s best interests when working with other service providers. In the Family-Focused Relationship subscale, items concerned the degree to which respondents felt that school staff members (for example): are available to them; are friendly; are honest (even when imparting bad news); use words that parents understand; listen non-judgmentally; and respect the family’s values and beliefs. For each item, participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from never (1) to very often (5).

Qualitative measure: Open-ended questions. We asked participants: “What advice do you have for teachers in working with parents?” There was no character limit for the response. This question appeared at the end of the survey. All respondents included in this study answered this question.
Analyses

Quantitative analyses. Using the sample from this study, we calculated Cronbach’s alphas for the *Family-Professional Partnership Scale* to determine whether the scale represented a single construct. Next, we imputed missing values for the scale, with mean scores substituted for missing values following the guidelines of Harrell (2001). We conducted this imputation in order to include as many cases as possible in the analyses. We then calculated mean scores for each subscale (only when missing values accounted for < 5% of the subscale), by summing the values for each item and dividing by nine. We conducted descriptive statistics for each subscale to familiarize ourselves with the data, and to compare the ratings of our respondents to those from the original study by Summers et al. (2005).

Qualitative analyses. We coded all of the open-ended responses using a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first and second authors independently reviewed each response and assigned a descriptive code to the text. The two authors then compared codes and came to a consensus about codes; each piece of data was notated with a code. Each code was continuously and independently compared with all of the other codes to see if the new data represented a novel idea or should be part of an existing code (Creswell, 2003). We discussed and agreed upon codes before we returned to the data to independently recode the text using the agreed upon codes. Next, we grouped the codes into categories and then grouped the categories into themes. We also searched for negative cases to further refine themes (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

RESULTS

CLD Family-School Partnerships

The *Child-Focused Relationship* and the *Family-Focused Relationship* subscale each had high Cronbach’s alphas (i.e., .95 and .94). On the *Child-Professional Relationship* subscale, CLD families had a mean score of 3.01 (SD = 1.10) indicating a mean rating of “occasionally.” Regarding the *Family-Focused Relationship* subscale, CLD families had a mean score of 3.45 (SD = 1.08), also indicating an average score of “occasionally.” The lowest scoring items included the extent to which the child’s IEP team: “Helps you gain the skills or information to get what your child needs,” and “Speaks up for your child’s best interests when working with other teachers and service providers.” These items were scored, on average, at 2.32 (SD = 1.28) and 2.66 (SD = 1.40), respectively. The highest scoring items included the extent to which the child’s IEP team: “Uses words that you understand,” and “Keeps your child safe when your child is in their care.” On average, these items were scored at 4.10 (SD = 1.05) and 3.75 (SD = 1.20), respectively. Notably, only the “Uses words that you understand” item was, on average, in the often range of the Likert
scale (i.e. rating of 4); none of the items had means in the very often range (i.e. rating of 5). See Table 1 for individual item average scores.

We also provided reference values for the Family-Professional Partnership Scale from the initial study of the scale (Summers et al., 2005). In the Summers et al. (2005) sample, 47.4% (n = 138) of the 291 respondents were from White, Non-Hispanic backgrounds. When comparing the scores between this study’s CLD sample and the Summers and colleagues (2005) sample, mean scores from our sample were consistently lower across all items. See Table 1.

Table 1. *Quantitative Responses for the Family-Professional Partnership Scale Items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean (SD) Current Study</th>
<th>Mean (SD) Summers et al. (2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-Focused Subscale</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep your child safe</td>
<td>3.75 (1.20)</td>
<td>4.36 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat your child with dignity</td>
<td>3.48 (1.26)</td>
<td>4.23 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let you know about the good things your child does</td>
<td>3.17 (1.31)</td>
<td>4.09 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value your opinion about your child’s strengths</td>
<td>3.10 (1.41)</td>
<td>3.98 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build on your child’s strengths</td>
<td>3.05 (1.41)</td>
<td>3.88 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide services that meet the individual needs of your child</td>
<td>2.83 (1.29)</td>
<td>3.67 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the skills to help your child succeed</td>
<td>2.68 (1.27)</td>
<td>3.80 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak up for your child’s best interests</td>
<td>2.66 (1.40)</td>
<td>3.67 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help you gain the skills or information to get what your child needs</td>
<td>2.32 (1.28)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family-Focused Subscale</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use words that you understand</td>
<td>4.10 (1.05)</td>
<td>4.36 (.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect your family’s privacy</td>
<td>3.66 (1.22)</td>
<td>4.21 (.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are friendly</td>
<td>3.64 (1.25)</td>
<td>4.41 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show respect for your family’s beliefs and values</td>
<td>3.50 (1.38)</td>
<td>4.23 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are available when you need them</td>
<td>3.43 (1.22)</td>
<td>3.99 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are honest even when they have bad news</td>
<td>3.28 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.04 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay attention to what you have to say</td>
<td>3.26 (1.30)</td>
<td>4.13 (1.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen without judging your child or family</td>
<td>3.24 (1.38)</td>
<td>4.07 (1.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are people that you can depend on and trust</td>
<td>2.94(1.40)</td>
<td>4.11 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Likert Scale: 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (occasionally), 4 (often), 5 (very often).
Advice for Professionals about Family-School Partnerships

Some of the advice given by CLD respondents aligned with the six principles of family-school partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2014). Parents recommended that teachers should focus on communication, equality, professional skills, respect, commitment and trust. Additionally, participants had some advice that did not align with the Blue-Banning et al. (2014) article. Some participants recommended that teachers address behavior in a positive way, follow their children’s IEPs, acknowledge cultural differences, and have some radical approaches.

Communication. Many (36.30% or n = 53) parents wanted teachers to communicate by sharing resources, asking questions, being honest, listening, and allowing parents to observe. An African-American mother of a child with a learning disability reported that, initially, the school did not want to address her son’s needs. However, after time, she has developed a working relationship with the teacher. She stated that teachers should:

Communicate! A parent cannot help you decipher how best to help the child if you provide no feedback to the parent on what is going on in the classroom regularly. Do not wait for required meetings. Send a note, email, a phone call. Anything. Take 5 minutes to let parents know what is happening so you can both share information that may help.

Parents wanted consistent, responsive, and frequent communication with teachers. Another parent, who indicated her race was “other” and had a child with a traumatic brain injury, stated, “Have open communication. Have daily e-mails for good and bad situations. Phone calls on good and bad days.” The theme of communication seemed important to many parents.

Equality. Because parents had expertise about their children, 23.3% (n = 34) of parents wanted the school to consider them as equal partners. As stated by an African American mother of an adolescent with cerebral palsy, “I would tell them [teachers] to listen to the parents – they know their child better than anyone does. Also, don’t underestimate them simply because they may not be as educated.” Parents wanted teachers to value their perspectives. A parent (from an “other” race) who had a child with multiple disabilities described her struggle to collaborate with the school. She stated:

Parents are not beneath you. In a perfect world, we should both work together for the best interest of the child. Parents sometimes know more about the child’s disability. Respect this! We are not dumb! We want to be taken seriously!

Parents felt that teachers should recognize them as equal partners.
**Professional skills.** Also, 19.18% \((n = 28)\) of parents wanted teachers to be open to new ideas and capitalize on their children’s strengths. An Asian-American mother of a child with autism described her positive family-school partnership. She wrote,

Think outside the box. The child can do more than you think if you just give them other ways to show what they know. Always work from their strengths. Just because all your students have an IEP does not mean that they still all should be taught the same way with the same tools etc. Provide a variety of ways to present materials and a variety of ways that the students can demonstrate their knowledge back to you.

By recognizing each student as an individual, parents felt that teachers could better support children with disabilities. Parents also encouraged teachers to seek out information and training about disabilities. They suggested that teachers be aware of their professional limitations and training needs. For example, an African-American parent, who felt that the school could not meet the needs of her child with autism, encouraged teachers that “If you cannot provide support, if you lack a technique to effectively help a child with a disability, then admit it and seek out what training you need to be an effective teacher.” Put simply by an Asian father, “You are a part of my child’s team. If you’re offered training, take it.”

**Respect.** Additionally, 17.12% \((n = 25)\) of parents wanted teachers to be respectful not only toward children with disabilities but also toward parents. A Latino mother of a child with autism reported poor experiences with the school including instances of racial discrimination. She stated that teachers:

…need to respect their parents’ decisions even if they do not agree with it. They cannot insist that the parent do something that they do not want to do. Do not bully or push the parent to do what they do not want to do.

Parents desired respect from teachers in understanding the challenges of child-rearing.

**Commitment.** Of the participants, 9.59% \((n = 14)\) of parents wanted teachers to prioritize their child and advocate for their child’s needs. A Latino mother of a young child with a learning disability reported a strong partnership with the school. When writing about advice to teachers, she wrote that teachers should “continue caring and to always make sure the child is a priority.”

Parents felt that teachers should always focus on the needs of the child. An Asian parent of a child with a developmental delay stated, “Take time to get to know the student…a little goes a long way. If the parent knows that you really care then the parent will try harder to make sure we can work together.”

**Trust.** Of the sample, 9.59% \((n = 14)\) of parents wanted teachers to be forthcoming regarding what the school can provide and what resources they need to support the student. An
African-American parent of a teenager with autism stated, “Be honest about what you cannot do and what you need from the parent to help you with their child.” Only when teachers were forthcoming did parents feel they could develop trusting relationships with them. Another African-American parent of a young adult with autism was also a special education teacher. Reflecting on her professional background and personal experiences with the school, she suggested, “You can only benefit if you work hard to get the parents on our side, and I promise you, if you advocate for your special needs children, their parents will support you.”

**Addressing problem behaviors.** Some (7.53% or n = 11) participants recommended that teachers use positive reinforcement and function-based strategies to address problem behaviors. A Latino parent of a child with Asperger’s syndrome stated:

> We want our children’s teachers to be on the child’s side. Please do not try to guess what the child was thinking or why he decided to take that action. When it comes to children with disabilities, we cannot assume that they think like we would.

Instead of examining the topography of the behavior, parents wanted teachers to identify the reason for the behavior. One parent, who indicated she was from an “other” race and had a child with a learning disability, stated, “Slow down and stop blaming a student’s behavior for problems in their education.” Some parents also seemed to want schools to focus on other topics (e.g., academics) in addition to behavior.

**Learning the culture of the family.** Additionally, 6.16% (n = 9) of parents also commented that teachers should learn about the cultures of students and their families. Relatedly, teachers should not judge families based upon their cultural values. An Asian-American parent of a child with autism stated, “Accept different values, cultures, parenting styles and alternative diets.” An African-American parent of a teenager with a behavior disorder stated, “Learn about the culture of the child. Families pick up right away if you are uncomfortable with them due to their ethnic background”. Parents felt teachers should be non-judgmental regarding cultural values.

**Complying with the IEP.** Other parents (5.48% or n = 8) commented on compliance issues with the school. These parents wanted teachers to implement their children’s IEP. An African-American parent of multiple children with disabilities simply wrote “PLEASE READ THE IEP.” Similarly, a parent who marked that he was from an “other” race stated “Read the IEP and work with the parent not just the school.” To collaborate with families, parents felt that teachers must first comply with the law.

**Conducting radical changes.** Some (5.48% or n = 8) CLD participants had more radical suggestions for teachers. These parents suggested that teachers leave the teaching field or sue schools of education for insufficiently preparing them to teach. A parent of mixed race expressed her struggle with the school. She felt the school was not equipped to educate her child with a
disability. She stated, “Sue their schools of education at their Universities for not teaching them what a good reading tutor knows.”

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, we quantitatively and qualitatively examined the perspectives of 146 CLD parents of children with disabilities with respect to family-school partnerships. We found that, compared to the original sample (Summers et al., 2005), CLD families reported lower ratings of child-focused and family-focused relationship partnerships. Also, CLD participants recommended some similar and some different advice for teachers to cultivate stronger partnerships with families. Below, we discuss our findings as well as implications for future research and practice.

**CLD Family-School Partnerships**

With respect to the perceptions of CLD families’ partnerships with schools, we found that many CLD families do not report optimal partnerships with the schools. Based upon the Child-Focused Relationship subscale, participants reported that the school only “sometimes” engaged in positive practices related to their children. With respect to the Family-Focused Relationship, participants also fell within the “sometimes” range of positive practices. Compared to the scores from respondents in the Summers et al., (2005) study, it seems that the family-school partnership practices could improve among CLD families.

CLD respondents indicated that many targeted efforts need to be made to improve family-school partnerships. From examining the individual items of the Family-Professional Partnership Scale, it seems that CLD parents feel the school is not advocating on behalf of their children with disabilities. Still further, there is a feeling of distrust among parents toward the school. Given these deficits, schools may want to make clear efforts demonstrating to parents their advocacy on behalf of their children. Teachers may want to communicate to parents how they work with other service providers to ensure their children receive appropriate services. Also, teachers should be forthcoming about information that parents should know; by being forthcoming and honest, CLD parents and schools may develop a stronger partnership.

**Advice for Professionals about Family-School Partnerships**

To some extent, the CLD families’ advice for schools aligns with the six principles of family-school partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). CLD parents want teachers to demonstrate commitment, have frequent communication, possess professional skills, be respectful, trust the parents, and treat parents equally. However, CLD participants also mentioned four unique suggestions for ways to improve family-school partnerships. First, participants discussed the
importance of teachers using function-based and positive reinforcement strategies to address problem behavior. Given that CLD (versus White) children with disabilities are more likely to be labeled as having a behavior disorder and more likely to receive punitive punishments (Losen, 2011), it is understandable that parents want an increased emphasis on function-based strategies to address behavior. This approach to addressing problem behavior, with the identification of a functionally equivalent replacement behavior also aligns with the CLD parents’ suggestion to shift from punishment to address problem behaviors toward positive reinforcement for appropriate behaviors.

Participants also wanted teachers to learn their cultures and values as well as follow their children’s IEPs. Given that most of the teaching workforce is not comprised of CLD individuals (Thorp, 1997), it is essential that teachers extend their efforts to learn the backgrounds of their students and their families. In this way, parents and teachers may garner an understanding for one another. Notably, parents wanted teachers to comply with the IEPs of their children. The IDEA, the federal special education law in the United States, mandates compliance with IEPs. However, despite this federal law, CLD families felt that the school was not implementing the IEPs as written. Based upon previous studies, the lack of implementation of IEPs may be disproportionately high among CLD (versus White) families (Williams, 2007; Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arugelles, 2002). It seems clear that greater attention needs to focus on complying with the IEPs for CLD families.

Finally, some parents had radical ideas about teachers and collaboration. Participants insisted that collaboration was not possible in the current educational climate. Also, participants suggested that teachers leave the field of education altogether. These participants seem especially upset about parent-school collaboration and special education at large.

Implications for Research

Future research needs to continue to include CLD families to better understand how the experiences of these families in special education differ from non-minority families. Furthermore, future research may extend beyond the label of “CLD” to examine distinct differences between and within racially, ethnically, and linguistically different populations (Ford, 2012). For example, do African American families face different obstacles than Latino families in developing collaborative family-school partnerships? Additionally, research should go beyond the label of “Latino,” for instance, to examine whether the degree of acculturation, English proficiency, and origin affects parent concerns.

Implications for Teachers

Our results indicate that teachers should show interest in the cultural background of families. To do this, teachers may ask parents questions about their backgrounds, seek outside
resources to learn about different cultures, or construct classroom activities to incorporate their cultures into the school day. In addition to learning about their students’ cultures, teachers should reflect on their own background and approach to diversity. Although unintentional, teachers may sometimes rely on their own beliefs and approaches to intervention while discounting an approach that is more meaningful to the family. Some questions that may be used to guide such self-reflection can include: “How is your communication style (with parents and students) influenced by your culture?” and “What are some classroom activities that may be based on your personal, cultural perspective?” (White, Zion, & Kozleski, 2005).

The CLD population comprises a growing percentage of our schools; relatedly, teachers must be prepared to work collaboratively with diverse students and families. Given the importance of family-school partnerships for all students with disabilities, it is vital to build strong partnerships with CLD families. By being culturally sensitive to the needs of CLD families, teachers will be able to better collaborate with families and work toward meaningful student achievement.

REFERENCES


