

## PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS FOR FAMILY-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP: THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILIES

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### **Abstract**

*Understanding the family perspective on partnering with teachers is critical for restructuring practices in preparing teachers to partner with families. In this study, the context of a course which was designed to prepare special education teachers for family-professional partnerships is used to examine how families of students with special needs view their role in school-family relationships, what they think about teachers partnering with families, and how teacher preparation programs might respond to the challenges that arise from the family perspective. Data were collected through surveys, interviews and focus group discussions and were analyzed using mixed-methods. Families reported that direct experience with families was essential to prepare teachers to work with them. They also made it clear that there was a mismatch between families' understanding of family-professional partnership and that of professionals. These findings have important implications for the design and content of teacher preparation programs.*

**Key words:** Teacher preparation, special education, partnership, families, collaboration

## ÖZEL EĞİTİM ÖĞRETMENLERİNİN AİLE-PROFESYONEL İŞBİRLİĞİNE HAZIRLANMASI: ENGELLİ ÇOCUKLARI OLAN AİLELERİN GÖRÜŞLERİ

### **Özet**

Ailelerin aile-profesyonel ilişkileri hakkındaki düşüncelerini/görüşlerini anlamak öğretmen yetiştirme programlarımızı yapılandırmak ve öğretmenleri aile işbirliği konusunda etkili bir şekilde hazırlamakta kritik bir öneme sahiptir. Bu araştırmada, özel eğitim öğretmenlerini aile işbirliği konusunda hazırlamak için dizayn edilmiş bir kurs ortamını kullanarak engelli çocuklara sahip ailelerin öğretmenlerle işbirliği hakkındaki düşüncelerini inceleme yoluna gittik ve öğretmen yetiştirme programlarının aile yaklaşımlarından doğabilecek zorluklara nasıl cevap verebileceğini tayin etmeye çalıştık. Anket, görüşme ve küçük gurup toplantıları veri toplama yöntemleri olarak kullanılmıştır. Aile bireyleri öğretmenlerin ailelerle işbirliği için hazırlanmalarında ailelerle birebir görüşmelerin ve bu alanda stajların önemini vurguladılar. Buna ilaveten aileler, kendi profesyonel-aile işbirliği anlayışları ile profesyonellerin anlayışları arasında bir uyumsuzluk olduğunu dile getirdiler. Bu bulgular öğretmen yetiştirme programlarını dizayn etmede ve içeriğini oluşturmada önemli etkilere sahip ipuçları sağlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Öğretmen eğitimi, özel eğitim, ortaklık, aileler, işbirliği

## **Introduction**

The transformation of America from an industrial to an information based society and rapid demographic shifts have brought cultural and economic changes. Increasing cultural, racial and linguistic diversity, the widening gap between social classes due to the mounting income inequalities, rising individualism, and changing roles in the labor market have substantially altered family patterns (Bianchi & Spain 1996; Casper & Bianchi 2002; Ruggles 1997; Thornton et al. 2001; Thornton & Young-Demarco 2001) Currently, American families are very different from the nuclear family depicted in the past. These changes have altered the relationships between families and schools. Families now expect schools to assume many roles besides teaching their children (Butera et al., 2005).

Social, economic, and cultural changes have altered schools as well. The roles of schools have shifted from the tradition of preparing students for the competitive and demanding global market to preparing them for more complicated lives in a global society (McLaren, 2003). As the function of education transformed, the expectations, roles, needs, and qualities of all parties involved in education have changed accordingly. Schools now are not only expected to teach children, they also must make sure that their students are well-fed, their academic, social and psychological needs are met, they are safe, and are prepared for life both at school and at home in addition to their traditional role of teaching (Butera et al., 2005). Furthermore, with rising accountability demands to meet, schools are increasingly pressured to meet standards described by federal, state, and local policies (Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2005, (p.161); "Washington's heavy hand" *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2005).

The significance of parent-professional partnership to support the education of children becomes greater under these new societal circumstances. Studies overwhelmingly demonstrate that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement (Baker & Soden, 1998; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Epstein, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Floyd, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The undeniable role of families in children's schooling continues to be emphasized, and the changed conditions demand families and schools to be viewed as partners (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Shartrand et al., 1997).

### ***Family Involvement in a Climate of Change***

A new understanding of family involvement has altered practices in terms of who is involved, how are they involved, and the nature of family involvement practices. In the past, "involvement in schools" meant only involving parents; now it is important that all family members impacting child's life are involved (Turnbull &

Turnbull, 1997). At the same time, family involvement activities have become more inclusive. Families from diverse backgrounds now are encouraged to participate in family involvement activities in contrast to earlier involvement practices that largely included small, privileged parent groups (Ouimette, Feldman, & Tung, 2004).

Traditionally, family involvement activities have been unidirectional in which parents provided something for the school (i.e., volunteer time). In the new paradigm of family involvement, families are seen as equal partners with whom school professionals work collaboratively. The expertise of each partner, both parent and professional, is valued (Beckman, 1996; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994). Various types of family involvement are recognized as beneficial. Parents are members of advisory boards; they participate in program development and evaluation; they are viewed as life-long teachers of their children at home and as informed partners with the school. They are recognized as lobbyists and advocates who can be very powerful before boards of education (Bodner-Johnson & Sass-Lehrer, 1999).

In special education settings, family involvement is no longer a matter of simply having the parents participate in educational planning via the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. Historically, federal and state mandates have outlined an important role for families of students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) outlines an increasingly active role for families with each reauthorization (Giallourakis, 2002). Parents are to be intimately involved in special education as partners in the entire process of educating their child. Because of the complicated needs of many students in special education, the involvement of families becomes even more important. Decisions of any sort are to be arrived at through consensus building with families. The basis for this new paradigm is that all family members, including the extended family, contribute to children's learning and have a great deal of knowledge and expertise about their children's development (Bodner-Johnson & Sass-Lehrer, 1999).

The life span perspective in special education has also contributed to a change in the role of families in special education. Instead of a narrow focus on children's school achievement, a more holistic view that accounts for quality of life issues requires that focus be on the child and his or her whole family (Shartrand et al., 1997; Ryan & Adams, 1998). The interrelatedness of the various contexts that surround the child and family implies that ongoing decisions will impact long-term quality of life issues (Winton & Bailey, 1994). Under such circumstances, to be part of the child's learning and development, families must be supported and must participate in educational matters (Berk, 1997; Bowes, 2000; Bowes and Hayes, 1999).

For three reasons, it is imperative that teacher education programs use more comprehensive methods to prepare "special education teachers" to promote family involvement. First, teachers must be prepared to understand that disability is not only a physiological or mental condition, but also is influenced by the person's

environment (Parker et al., 2000). Therefore, teachers need to have the knowledge of family systems and an understanding of families' role in supporting the child's development (CEC, 1998). Second, teachers must develop an awareness of environmental influences, such as the family's role in the child's learning, in order to enhance their ability to support student learning in environments other than school (CEC, 1998). The need to individualize teaching and learning strategies for a student with disabilities requires special education teachers to cooperate with families to design activities that are personally meaningful for each student and relevant to each student's daily life within their families. Awareness of family strengths will also assist teachers in utilizing families as valuable resources to meet the child's needs. Third, there is a shift in teachers' role from a traditional model in which teachers are dominant, exclusive, and professionals who assume the full responsibility for educating students with special needs toward teachers being partners with other professionals and families. This shift makes it necessary for special educators to gain a new understanding of the value of their potential partners. Working with families requires special education teachers to have a sufficient instructional knowledge base, effective interaction skills, and the disposition to understand and value differences in family backgrounds and to meet the needs of each family in a personalized manner. Bodner-Johnson and Sass-Lehrer (1999) state that regardless of the various ways available for parents and teachers to interact with each other concerning a child's learning and school experiences, effective school practice that promotes family involvement depends on how supportive teachers are of collaborative parent-teacher partnerships. Therefore, it is important that teacher education programs equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to help them develop positive attitudes towards families and collaborate with them as equal partners (Brownell & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

### ***Teacher Education for the New Paradigm***

Clearly, changes in the way professionals and parents collaborate with one another have implications for personnel preparation. Research indicates that teachers who have positive attitudes towards family-professional partnership are more likely to facilitate family empowerment (Trivette, Dunst & Hamby, 1996). Lack of effective teacher preparation in involving families in schooling raises a barrier to effective family partnerships (U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), 1997).

According to the report by Shartrand et al. (1997), family involvement training needs to be available to teachers working with students of all ages, yet, only a handful of programs require or offer courses in family involvement. Teacher education programs that do address family involvement most frequently offer it as part of a course rather than as a cohesive part of the program (Epstein, 2001; Harris, Jacobson, & Hemmer, 2004; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Shartrand, et al., 1997). A majority of courses that address family involvement lack comprehensive content and are

limited in scope. They might focus merely on such aspects of family involvement as methods of working with parents as their children's lifelong teachers or strategies for parent-teacher conferences (Boussard, 2000; Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

Another problem is that the emphasis on family involvement in teacher education programs declines progressively from early childhood programs through high school (Shartrand, et al., 1997). Most course work that addresses family involvement is offered in early childhood teacher preparation programs while in other programs this aspect of teacher preparation tends to be ignored (Epstein, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Teacher preparation programs in special education are second to early childhood in offering specific coursework addressing family involvement (Epstein, 2001). However, the number of courses offered declines in programs preparing the teachers of older children and course content is often not comprehensive. Despite the emphasis that the Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Acts put on the importance of family involvement in special education, personnel preparation programs still fail to adequately address the important professional competencies by offering substantial preparation in family involvement (Brownell et al., 2005; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Harvard Family Study Report, 1997; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Prater et al., 2000; Shartrand, et al., 1997; Whittaker, 2000).

#### ***Preparing Special Educators for Family-Professional Partnerships at Indiana University***

At a large public university in the Midwest, Indiana University, a course entitled "Families in School and Society" (K548) is the vehicle through which the dynamics of family-professional partnership are studied. The overall purpose of K548 is to enhance student knowledge and skills needed for providing services to individuals with disabilities within family and community contexts. Four sections of the course typically are taught through distance education using two-way interactive video. In addition, all sections of the course use web-based instructional activities. Course activities include a Family Project. The intent of including this component was to expand students' experience and understanding of family perspective on disability within the context of school and society. Each student is required to become acquainted with a family that included a member with a disability. Students are to visit the family at least four times throughout the semester, scheduling time to listen to the family story and offer to provide the family with some minor assistance in return (e.g., babysitting, tutoring with homework). Students are asked to use the project to reflect about family circumstances and their perspectives about strengths, needs and preferences for personalized and relevant family support. Students are required to keep records of their visits in a journal.

As a part of a larger project in which a group of researchers examined the perspectives of involved stakeholders in the course (instructors, teachers, and families), we analyzed data collected from family members of students with special needs participating in the Family Project in an effort to expand the knowledge base needed to develop professional strategies in partnering with families. Our perspective included the notion that, although the content of courses teacher education programs present to its trainees about families is generated from a professional perspective, the need to develop knowledge of the contexts in which these partnerships occur is critical (McLeod, 2000; Shartrand et al., 1997; Tichenor, 1997). Families' thoughts regarding the content of such courses, the skills to be targeted in these courses, and how families view their role in family-professional partnerships and in teacher preparation process, have not been thoroughly investigated. Our purpose was to inform our practice by research that takes the family perspective into account.

Despite the importance of family-professional partnerships in special education, little is known about effective methods for preparing special education teachers to partner with families. We wanted to provide detail about what families mean by partnership and family involvement in education. In this study, we have chosen to explore what families think of our method used for preparing teachers in this domain and how they view family professional partnerships in general.

Our overall objective was to gather data from families to guide teacher preparation and, consequently, teacher practices in the field with regard to partnering with families in special education. The following questions provided focus for our study:

- 1) What are the perceived outcomes for families who participated in the family project? Did they enjoy the process and find it helpful to their family? Did they find it intrusive?
- 2) What did families think about our method of preparing teachers to partner with families?
- 3) How did families perceive family-professional partnership?

## **Methods**

### **Survey**

Eighty-nine families involved in K548 Family Projects were asked to participate in this study by completing a questionnaire. The survey was based on a review of the literature and designed to ascertain the opinion of families about the effectiveness of Family Project in preparing teachers for family partnership, the effects of this type of practicum on both teachers and participant families, about parents' expectations of

teachers in terms of parent involvement, and about how families view the school and the teachers (See Appendix 1).

Surveys were sent to families via the students and families were provided with a stamped envelop in which to return it. Twenty-nine family members returned the questionnaires. Both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were employed to the collected survey data. Responses to the Likert scale questions were analyzed by calculating descriptive data (frequencies, means and standard deviations) at the item level. The qualitative methodology used was text analysis in which comments at the end of the survey were put into categories and analyzed.

### ***Interviews/ Focus Groups***

Four family members participating in the family projects agreed to participate in interviews and/or focus group discussions that sought to gather more in depth data about family experiences with the family project and their experiences with professional-family partnerships in general. (See Table 1 for information about study participants.) Interviews were conducted either face to face or via phone and were accompanied by running field notes composed on the spot and expanded immediately afterwards. The focus group was videotaped and transcribed in its entirety.

In order to analyze the interview and focus group data, we employed the strategies described in the literature on qualitative research methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lecompte, Millroy & Priessle, 1992; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Merriam, 2002). The first phase of intensive data analysis involved organizing each data set (survey data, interview data, and focus group data) chronologically and reading each set several times, jotting down notes in the margin and keeping a separate running record of major ideas that cut across data types and sets with sections of the data read by three researcher team members. In this way, data were reduced, consolidated and interpreted to some extent with a large number of themes identified for each data set. Employing constant comparative methods, tentative themes, categories, properties and hypotheses emerged and were tested against the cross-case data in each set, seeking to disconfirm our emerging findings and question our emerging hypotheses. Thirteen preliminary themes emerged from this data analysis and were described. At this point a descriptive case was written for each theme. Working in teams of two or three, the data sets were reassembled and coded for the presence of each theme.

In order to ensure that our findings were credible and reliable, we employed a number of strategies. We used multiple data sources including multiple methods, participants and situations to triangulate our data and increase reliability. We also used member checking twice by providing study participants with summaries of our impressions interviews and asking them whether we “got it right” or needed to add

something. In three instances, study participants corrected minor errors we had made interpreting what they told us. Working in team of three, we coded data by hand and checked for agreement between researchers using qualitative methods for establishing inter-rater agreement (McMillen & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 2002). The final data reduction process at this phase involved clustering themes into larger categories related to our research questions. In some cases themes that were closely related were collapsed. In other cases, data not considered directly related to the research purposes were set aside or dropped from the data set.

## Results

### Survey

Data from the Likert scale questions were analyzed by calculating descriptive data (frequencies, means and standard deviations) at the item level while comments written at the end of the survey were analyzed using text analysis. Overall, survey data demonstrated that families who participated in the Family Project viewed the project positively and reported learning from this experience.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive Data of the Family Survey*

Item Deviation	N = 29	
	Mean	Standard
1) Teachers need to learn more about families.	4.41	.64
2) Families need to learn more about teachers.	4.24	.64
3) Educating teachers about families is beneficial.	4.56	.51
4) Teachers should visit the homes of their students.	3.59	1.05
5) A students' education is impacted by teacher-family relationships.	4.36	.74
6) Participating in this project has been beneficial for our family.	3.93	.59
7) This family project is a good way to help teachers be more effective in working with families.	4.20	.41
8) The teacher who talked with us in doing this project appeared to have learned a lot from the experience.	4.28	.59
9) Good teacher-family relationships can improve children's education.	4.55	.51
10) Our family enjoyed participating in this family project.	4.24	.58
11) I would participate in this family project again.	4.28	.65
12) The family project needs to be changed.	2.28	.65

In the survey data, families expressed their strong opinion on the necessity of knowing about their child's teachers and the teachers knowing about families more. Educating teachers about families through hands on experiences was seen as a necessity and families believed that student's education is highly impacted by teacher-family relationships. A family member commented, "The more a teacher knows a family, I feel, the more a teacher is going to understand the student. The better a teacher understands a student, the better they will be able to teach that student." However, families had different perspectives on home visits. Some of the participants have seen no benefits in teachers visiting students' homes while others believed in the benefits of the teacher getting to know the family better but also stated that the place should not matter.

Family members agreed that this project is a good way to prepare teachers for working with families more effectively and stated that they have sensed that the teacher trainees who came to their homes for this project learned a great deal from this project. Family members also expressed their enjoyment of participating in this project and their interest in participating again. Most family members did not see any need for the family project to be changed in order to be more effective while some made a variety of specific suggestions about how to improve the course in specific and personnel preparation of special educators in general.

#### ***Interviews/Focus group***

##### *Who Are We as a Family?*

Our interviewees described their families to us as more like than unlike other families. However, one unique experience as a family included being stigmatized due to the presence of disability. Families expressed resentments about this attitude toward them. They emphasized to us that as a family they did not want to be singled out as different. Anne explained that:

*You know people who don't have kids like Brian think "She must feel really bad all the time." But you know, it's really not like that. I mean Brian is a good kid. He's really funny and good most of the time. Sure we have concerns, but we're not sad all the time*

*Later, Anne remarked, "Maybe we have to do things differently sometimes, but we do get things done. We are just a bit busier sometimes." In another example, Ellen tells of an incident at her son's school. She was instructed by the principal to sign in every time she came to school after a teacher complained about her. Ellen elaborated: "I do not mind signing in, if this is the policy. It should be for everybody, not only me. They should not have singled me out because of that communication I had with my son's teacher and the principal."*

Despite the fact that interviewees did not want their family to be viewed as different, the special attention parents wanted to receive from teachers and schools meant that they also wanted to be acknowledged as having special needs. Mary's comment about communicating with teachers presented this dilemma:

*There must be better ways to communicate with teachers. I don't want to be singled out. I don't want other parents to think "Oh, here we go again. She's talking with Mary again. Why is she not doing the same for us too?" But I have to talk to her.*

Interviewees described the impact of the child with special needs on their family. On the one hand, they were anxious to acknowledge the needs of the entire family unit and avoid singling out the child with a disability as requiring special attention. As Anne commented, "A kid with a disability can't always dominate the family." Mary gave us a description of how this she negotiates this. In her family, all the children are required to wait for their mother to sit down to eat and Sally is no exception. She is also expected to fit in with the neighborhood children often playing in their yard. This idea that all children in the family have equal expectations in the family was described as important to all our interviewees who emphasized that all children in the family needed special attention. Mary pointed out that "It's a good thing I could be a stay-at-home mom so they all could have their own individual attention."

On the other hand, the idea that the child with a disability was a "regular" member of the family was emphasized even as our interviewees insisted that the child with special needs presented special, ongoing, and intense needs for assistance to the family. Mary described after school at her house as a time when Sally's siblings do their homework and then take over her own role of be "working with her." She insisted, "We must work with her constantly because she will forget things that I teach her. Because you don't know when it's going to click with her. It's just her brain is wired differently and they need to understand this and be patient."

#### *The Ideal Teacher- Parent Relationship*

Family members interviewed had strong opinions about what teacher characteristics were important to enhancing their partnerships with them. Communication is essential, according to our interviewees, and teachers should be active in establishing it with them. Pat explained, "Teachers should be able to listen to what I have to say and respond to my and my child's needs. I might look like an adversary, but they should know that parents are there to help." Like Pat, other interviewees described negative experiences with teachers, most often because they felt a teacher did not take the time to communicate with them. Under these circumstances, they felt it was necessary for parents to be active and advocate constantly for ensuring that their child's needs were met. Pat talked about her child's teachers by explaining she had to advocate. She monitors the assessment process

and asks for extra evaluations. She makes certain that her child receives the services to which she is entitled. Pat pointed out the need to do this by saying:

*They deny services; do not tell us about what kind of help they can give us if we don't ask... They do not know about procedures, law, and services they are supposed to provide. They may be lacking the knowledge or they know but they might be finding saying 'no' easier so they wouldn't be kept accountable for the things they are supposed to be doing.*

Ellen also described the necessity of monitoring her child's performance and the services he receives. She thinks that this should not be necessary but adds that "If parents are not willing to establish relationships with teachers and not initiating (them), teachers should call them and ask them to establish relationships if necessary. Ellen regretted that she had to be assertive about what she wanted the school to do for her son and she went on to say, "I am tired of demanding things, my child's rights. It shouldn't be us who is demanding, we should not be forced to do that... Teachers should be encouraging when parents contact them and collaborate with them."

Frequently, family members described personality characteristics that would help them work in a partnership with teachers. Mary points out that "it depends on the personality of the person... patience is important." Ellen described an ideal teacher as "open-minded, creative and a good listener." Later she went on to talk about when she was most comfortable with her son's teachers when "they are open, welcoming, honest and responsive...."

Family members wanted teachers to take the time to get to know them. In talking about a teacher she appreciated, Ellen commented, "I'm very comfortable with his inclusion teacher and also his classroom teacher. They have taken the time to get to know Joe, us and his disability and our feelings." This aspect of relationship building was often described in a unidirectional fashion. Teachers should listen to families, our interviewees insisted.

Family members interviewed wanted information about their child's disability and how to help them. Both Pam and Ellen described feeling somewhat abandoned by teachers who did not give them more information about what to expect. Ellen told us about learning her son had Asperger's Syndrome and then being "left" with questions and no direction about what to do. In a similar vein, Mary explained, "I am willing to work with my child, help the school, but they should provide me with some strategies." They all reported feeling at times like they needed to do more teaching in these circumstances than they would have liked. Mary explains, "We do most of the teaching at home and they love it because we are doing their work."

Family members wanted teachers to help them make contact with resources. They especially wanted teachers to help them connect with "other parents who are

more knowledgeable,” especially those with a child who has a similar disability. Mary described her experience in a classroom where she was helping. She saw a child with Down Syndrome and asked the teacher whether she could have the telephone number of the child in order to offer the family information about services available to help them. When the teacher responded with regret that she could not give her the number, as it would violate confidentiality, Mary gave the teacher her number to give to the parents. In reflecting about this Mary said, “Teachers can hook these parents up with some other parents who are more knowledgeable.”

Teaching was hard work, according to our interviewees, but teachers should make the effort to go beyond the traditional role of teacher as instructor even when it might interfere with their personal lives. For example, in talking about whether teachers understood the amount of work involved in parenting a child with a disability, Mary mentioned that teachers who are also parents might be more likely to understand their perspective. However, Ellen was quick to point out that when her child’s teacher is not a parent, they are more available to her and to her child. Teachers without children, she says, “have more time to spend with their students...They seem to be more committed to their work.”

Interviewed family members emphasized the importance of professional development. Teaching skills were seen as important so teachers were well equipped to teach children and maintain high expectations for them. Mary described it as follows, “ They need to be well-trained in special education. They need to know about the specifics to teach those students.” Teachers should also “make sure parents knew their rights.”, according to our interviewees. They also described the importance of teachers actively seeking “up to date information” on disability and related research. Ellen included “interested in continuing their education” in her list of qualities she thought were important in an ideal teacher. Pam felt that teacher licensing should depend on ongoing professional development activities. Similarly, Mary Ann described a teacher that she thought was “good” as “willing to learn...” Later she goes on to explain that the teacher wanted to understand more about Down Syndrome and she “came over and got books from me.”

#### *Schools and the Future*

Interviewees described schools as places that were not particularly open to parents. They felt schools were not welcoming to them although they often acknowledged that “big picture” issues sometimes interfered with the ability of schools to be more accommodating. Schools have many pressures, interviewees pointed out. Mary explained that “ teachers are so concerned about (*standardized testing*) so they don’t want to bother with Sally...There are so many kids and they all need something. “ Pat also recognized the pressures on schools and she said, “Schools do not recognize the call for help. One teacher told me that if they refer too

many students for special education they would be called troublemakers by their principals and superintendents...”

Participants shared their views about school administrators not being sympathetic to their needs or actually being deceitful. This was evident in Ellen’s story about her offer to help in the classroom was turned down by the teacher after her communication with the principal.

*I offered help to the teacher saying that I am available during the day and I can come to class and help her like an aide and the teacher said, “oh yes we could always use extra hands,” but then after a day or two when I asked her about wanting me to come she said “no, we do not need any help.” I guess the principal is not so willing to have families around (at least me I guess) because they do not want them to have the chance to observe everything happening at school being around.*

Pat thought school administrators lacked motivation or resources to help students with disabilities in their school. She complained, “They have different reimbursement rates for different disabilities. They get the money (more than the money they spend on each regular education student) but they don’t spend that extra money on our kids.”

The lack of time and resources to address important issues was viewed by our interviewees as explaining in part why schools are not more accommodating to parents. Pat points out that many schools “do not take enough time for IEP meetings.” Mary describes it this way: “They are understaffed and there are so many kids to deal with. They never have enough time.” Pat thinks that teachers need to have office hours. “They need to put in more hours. If I can’t talk to them before class, during class or after then when can I talk to them? They should have office hours.”

Coordinating services was also acknowledged as problematic by our interviewees. The school often fails to coordinate services well. Mary described needing to put a great deal of effort into arranging for this.

*“Well, we have nine adults in her life right now: therapists and teachers. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language therapists and me. It’s hard to get them together and I feel like I have to do it. Make it possible for us all to be on the same page. It’s hard to have to do it.”*

In terms of their relationship with support networks, interviewees provided mixed descriptions of their impact on family life. Ellen described enjoying participating in support group activities and feels that she has learned a good deal from other parents, but, on the other hand, Mary tells us that they are “downers.”

Similarly, home visits were viewed as both an opportunity to see one another in different roles and as an intrusion. Anne enjoyed having her son's teacher come to their house and told us:

*I never had participated in (a home visit) before. I don't think I ever did. John (her son's current teacher and a student in the class) was the only one. I think Brian thought it was odd at first. But I think it's good for him to see his teachers in other settings. So he comes to understand that they have other roles too. I guess it's good for all of us to understand where one another are coming from so, yes, I think it would be a good thing. It just takes the relationship a little further in understanding. We enjoyed it. It helps teachers and parents to see each other in a different light. That we are all people with other things to do besides parenting."*

In thinking about her previous experiences with home visits, Mary explained,

*"I hated them! Our kids older and they were a pain in the neck. I thought to put Brittany in kindergarten earlier. She was ready, I thought and I asked but the school said no. The home visitors were always upset with Brittany. You know here's this lady coming to play with her baby with all these neat toys. She didn't understand. She wanted to do it too. I could only pass her off to friends so many times."*

## **Discussion**

The findings from our study demonstrate the importance of examining family perspective about family-professional partnerships. It became clear that what professionals think of effective practice might not be preferred practice by families. Home visits were one important example of this. We also came to see that what we meant and understood by "family-professional partnership" was not the same with what families understood and expected.

The families in our study emphasized that the opportunity provided by the Family Project to listen to the perspectives of families firsthand benefited trainees and families. Overall, they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on the contributions of families to student learning and the importance of family-professional partnerships. They also liked having the opportunity to share their own family stories and they appreciated being involved in teacher education. By helping teachers see what a real family with a child with special needs looks like in day-to-day life, helping them understand their perspective and, their experiences and finally telling them their story the families believed they helped teachers better establish partnerships with families of students with special needs. In a way, the families in our study felt that they were helping other families of students with special needs by helping prepare more understanding teachers for them. All 29 families participating in the survey and 4 families included in the interview/focus group discussion stated that they enjoyed participating in the project and would participate again.

Families believed that hands on experiences through which teacher trainees are exposed to real family circumstances were essential for preparing teachers to partner with families. Families reported that this kind of experience would help teachers avoid biased assumptions about families who have a child with a disability by giving them the chance to see families from a different perspective, and realize that they are just like other families after all. The families in this study found this project to be a powerful tool that helps teachers develop the necessary dispositions that allow for establishing meaningful partnerships with families of students with special needs. The project was also viewed as an opportunity for teachers to practice needed skills for interpersonal relationships. Families thought that this project provided teacher trainees the opportunity to test the applicability of what they have been taught in their program to real life experiences.

Examining the data collected from family perspectives causes us to remain concerned about the difficulties in bringing substantial change to family-professional partnerships regardless of promising methods. Participants viewed their role as “fighting constantly for their children’s rights, doing most of the teaching at home, doing the hard part of the job.” We felt that this was troubling because this attitude was quite likely to interfere with effective partnership building. Parents held teachers to very high standards even when they acknowledged that the responsibilities teachers had were overwhelming. Unfortunately, the families in this study had bad experiences with their children’s school in the past and these bad experiences shaped the way they viewed their current role in their children’s education. When families are placed in adversarial role, this role can serve as a barrier to establishing healthy and powerful relationships among families and professionals.

Families wanted professionals to listen to their views as well as understand and accept their perceptions of their child’s needs and functioning. However, in many instances it was hard to really understand their views and what they wanted because of the dilemmas that were present in their statements. For example, they did not want to be seen as different but they wanted special attention due to their special circumstances; they wanted teachers to work harder and put more time and effort into their job but also they acknowledged how hard a teacher’s job is, that teachers have their own lives too, and that they wouldn’t have liked to be a teacher themselves. They believed in the benefits of the teacher and the family getting to know each other but did not want teachers to be involved in what they consider to be family business. The families had mixed feelings about home visits because some parents felt threatened by visitors. However, it was interesting to see that all of the families reported that they liked participating in our project that had a home visitation component. The families in the project did not feel threatened by our teacher trainees even though in some instances these teacher trainees were their child’s teacher. Frequently they mentioned how important it is for teachers to avoid biased assumptions, be open to see families in different light, from a different perspective

under different circumstances and be responsive to what families want from them. However, they rarely delineated the roles of families in the family-professional partnership.

Family members had distinct views about their roles in their children's education, what family involvement meant, and what should be teachers' role in these processes. Families believed that teachers should listen to and seek to see and understand their reality. Families mostly implied that they are threatened by the power differences between themselves and teachers but when they are given the chance to be equal they kept negotiating for becoming the most powerful party involved in a child's education. This was evident when they felt threatened by the visit of their child's teacher as "teacher" but were not threatened by the teacher visiting as a student where the teacher was in a position who is in need for learning from the families. In the family project, the teachers approached the families from the position of a student seeking to learn from them. When the families spoke about their experience in the Family Project, they did not describe a reciprocal partnership. Instead, they were generally describing a relationship in which they viewed teachers as recipients, who after interacting with the families would align with the families' thoughts and expectations related to their child with disability.

We must also point to the fact that results of this research may be limited to those families with the potential and desire for active involvement in the study. Even though invitation to participate in the study was made to all families involved in the Families Course, researchers had to rely only on those parents who responded positively to the invitation, and agreement, especially for interviews and focus group discussion, came from reasonably well functioning, well educated, and very involved families. Further research with a larger and more diverse group of families might be beneficial to have a better understanding of family perspective regarding their relationships with professionals.

### **Implications**

The deficit model, in which teachers/school place the blame for student failure on the community/family from which the students come and whose culture, beliefs, and attitudes are different from theirs and, in which families tend to blame the school and teachers for not responding to the needs of their children, must be left far behind. Now it is time to abandon those adversarial attitudes and collaborate for a better understanding of each other to establish a healthy and productive partnership that will support children's learning and well being.

Our findings have implications for future family-professional partnership practices. For the partnership to be successful, it is clear that we don't only need to help teachers gain the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed to partner with families but also to make the preparation process beneficial to both sides (teachers

and families). Not only is it important to prepare educators to partner with families, we must also seek to help families have a better understanding of partnerships.

Partnership with families is a crucial element of teacher preparation programs if we desire future teachers to promote family involvement. At the same time, these interactions between teachers and families should be used as an opportunity for both parties to negotiate understandings, roles, and finally come up with best practices for effective and reciprocal partnership. The emphasis of teacher education must not only be on how we work with families, but also on how to understand the issues that families want us to be thinking about, their stories, their views, and how they define their roles and how we can help families understand us (professionals). Our hope is that this study, by providing an informed understanding of family perspective with regard to family-professional partnership, will help schools and families to begin forming more equal and effective partnerships based on a new understanding of each other's views.

Projects and coursework that challenge educators to explore their current beliefs and personal backgrounds while giving them the opportunity to form relationships with families different from their own may facilitate growth beyond what is elicited by traditional practicum settings and classroom activities (Butera, Matuga, & Riley, 1999). Programs that allow opportunities for contextual and psychological proximity to families can be powerful tools in teaching professionals to examine themselves in reference to others (Butera et al., 2005).

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**Appendix 1.**

**Family Questionnaire**

Circle the number that indicates your agreement with each of the following statements.

5	4	3	2	1
<b>strongly agree</b>	<b>agree</b>	<b>undecided</b>	<b>disagree</b>	<b>strongly disagree</b>
1. Teachers need to learn more about families.				
5	4	3	2	1
2. Families need to learn more about teachers.				
5	4	3	2	1
3. Educating teachers about families is beneficial.				
5	4	3	2	1
4. Teachers should visit the homes of their students.				
5	4	3	2	1
5. A student's education is impacted by teacher-family relationship.				
5	4	3	2	1
6. Participating in this project has not been beneficial for our family.				
5	4	3	2	1
7. This family project is a good way to help teachers be more effective in working with families.				
5	4	3	2	1
8. The teacher who talked with us in doing this project appeared to have learned a lot from the experience.				
5	4	3	2	1
9. Good family-teacher relationship can improve children's education.				
5	4	3	2	1
10. Our family enjoyed participating in this family project.				
5	4	3	2	1
11. I would participate in this family project again.				
5	4	3	2	1
12. The family project needs to be changed.				
5	4	3	2	1

Your suggestions and comments about the family project for this survey are very welcome! Use the back of the survey for this purpose. Thanks!