Urban African American Families' Perceptions of Cultural Sensitivity Within the Special Education System

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Parent involvement in special education is federally mandated and has gained increasing emphasis in recent reauthorizations of federal special education law. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments of 1997 contain the strongest language yet emphasizing the role of parents in designing and implementing special education services (USC, 1998). The topic of parent satisfaction with the special education system has been studied over the previous 2 decades to facilitate development of practices that engender the support and participation of parents and families (Filer & Mahoney, 1996; Freeman, Alkin, & Kasari, 1999; McWilliam, et al., 1995; Plunge & Krotchwill, 1995, Rynack, Downing, Morrison, & Williams, 1996). Further, the results can be used to inform educational policy and to shape how services are designed and provided.

In previous research, an emphasis has been placed on recruiting parent participants based on the disability of the child receiving special education services (i.e., parents of children who have learning disabilities). Although most existing studies of parent satisfaction have not reported the ethnic composition of their sample, those that have reported this information have been conducted with primarily Caucasian participants.

In this excellent and timely study, Zionts and her colleagues studied the families of 24 African American children having severe emotional or cognitive disabilities and who were receiving special educational services in urban communities. They were interviewed about their perceptions of cultural sensitivity demonstrated by the school district. This information included their perceptions of the level of consideration of cultural beliefs and values within the services and supports provided by the district and by other community resources.

Semistructured interviews were conducted and analyzed for common themes across families. Six themes emerged: a) respect for parents and children by school personnel, b) perceived negativity toward child and/or parents by school, c) need for information and assistance using community support services, d) desire for greater cultural understanding and demonstrated acceptance of differences by school personnel, and f) improved teacher-parent and parent-parent partnerships. For nearly all of the respondents, the level of parental satisfaction was closely related to feeling that they were respected by the school personnel.

References