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MAKING DECISIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FACTORS AFFECTING DECISION MAKING PROCESSES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Karen J McLachlan

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the experiences and perspectives of parents and caregivers and professionals in the education of students with special needs. Special education is reviewed and the move towards parent-professional partnerships is examined. In the past, there has been little critical evaluation of the role of parents in educational decision-making. This study recognises the difficulties encountered by parents, caregivers and professionals in creating efficient partnerships. Without documenting the experiences of the people significantly concerned in the education of children with special needs, many erroneous assumptions may be made.

The study involves using semi-structured interview questions to record the narratives of 21 parents and caregivers of children with special needs and 7 professionals. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with each person. The findings suggested that whilst professionals considered their open approach enabled parents and caregivers to be fully informed, comments made by parents contradicted this view. Many parents expressed feelings of isolation and neglect as they remained ignorant of educational decisions and starved of information. Comments by participants are used to illustrate significant themes which emerged from the interviews.

A participant questionnaire summarises relevant issues derived from the interview questions and provides the data presented in computer generated charts. In most cases, the responses indicated agreement with the statements.

An analysis of the data shows many parents and caregivers have not been included in significant aspects of their child’s education. Although there are compelling reasons for their non-participation, if recent educational policy aims to include students and their families in educational decision-making, there is much work to be done by educators to foster effective parent/professional partnerships.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was motivated by a desire to hear the stories of parents and caregivers of students with special needs and of the professionals who work with them.

I owe a particular debt to the parents and caregivers who agreed to take part in this study. Among them are Mrs Rakete, Mrs Maera, Mrs Pere, Mrs Newton, Mrs Leafa, Mrs van der Struys, Mrs Elsley, Mrs Pellow, Mrs Galvin and Mr and Mrs Kingi. The research was dependent on their participation and I sincerely thank them for inviting me into their homes and talking to me with such frankness and honesty. I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues for their time in recruiting parent and caregiver participants and their wholehearted willingness and enthusiasm to take part in this study.

My particular thanks to my supervisors, Dr Ken Ryba and Roseanna Bourke for their unselfish and generous advice, their professional approach, their tolerance and their good humour in the compilation of this thesis.

Finally I extend special thanks to my husband, Stewart, my family and my friends for their unfailing support and enduring patience throughout the course of this research. Without their forbearance, this research would not have been possible.
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