

# Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Barriers for Parents from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

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Over the past decade, parental involvement in the special education process has been an important topic for many researchers. The passage of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (PL 94-142) in 1975, and more recently the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (PL 101-476) in 1990 (IDEA), both recognized familial involvement and family-professional collaboration as indispensable to developing Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSPs) and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Cho & Brenner, 2003). Amendments to the IDEA in 1997 (Public Law 105-17, 1997) and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* in 2004 (Public Law 108-446) further improved parents' roles and increased their opportunities for participating in their children's education as a member of the IEP team.

A fundamental provision of the amendments to IDEA requires school professionals to involve parents of students with disabilities in the educational decision-making process, and to incorporate parents' knowledge of their children in the planning and designing of their children's educational services (Kalyanpar, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). Under these amendments, parents have become equal partners with school professionals when deciding the educational issues on behalf of their children. Since those legislative changes, a mounting body of literature has emphasized the positive impact of parents' involvement on children's success in school, and proposed diverse strategies to promote and facilitate the

collaboration between families and educational professionals.

In spite of theoretical validation and legal mandates in special education for parent participation, many studies have indicated that parents' roles in the IEP process are still not noticeable and influential and that too often they are not being treated as an equal partner with school professionals (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). In particular, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are typically not actively involved in the various components of IEPs, such as evaluation, developing IEP goals, and arranging intervention services related to their child's disability, regardless of their attendance in the IEP conference (Harry, 1992; Luft, 1995; Lynch & Stein, 1987).

A growing number of studies have sought to examine critical factors that may be a hindrance to efficient parental participation in the educational process. Key elements that adversely affect the level of participation of parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) have been identified, such as the family's acculturation level, limited English proficiency, the difference in values and attitudes toward disability, communication style different from mainstream families, and a lack of knowledge about the IEP process and the school infrastructure (Chun, 2001; Harry, 1992).

Chun's (2001) research identified professional educator's attitudes or perceptions which may establish potential barriers to family participation: (a) they stereotype or blame the parent, (b) they deny parental expertise and knowledge about the child, (c) they are insensitive to religious beliefs, family traditions, and cultural diversity, and (d) they withhold information and use educational jargon

and terminology about placement and programming options.

## Philosophical Discrepancy

Above all, contradicting values which coexist in legal mandates and predominate the system of special education have contributed to underlying impediments to parents' full participation in the special education decision-making process (Kalyanpar et al, 2000). Specifically, the ideal of parental equal rights mandated by the laws suggests equity, individual rights, and freedom of choices, whereas the special education system, which is founded on rationalism, seems to require the objective and scientifically based knowledge of professionals. For this reason, professionals' knowledge and suggestions are regarded as more reliable and valuable sources than parents' subjective and anecdotal descriptions in the decision-making process (Harry, 1992; Kalyanpar et al., 2000).

Furthermore, although there are these existing contradictions between the spirit of parental legal rights and the nature of the special education system, both of these concepts—the conceptions of individualism, equity, and self-advocacy guaranteed by law and in contrast the assumed expertise of professionals—typically represent Western mainstream values and behaviors. The entire IEP process in special education, including evaluation procedures, establishment of IEP goals, and parents' right precisely reflect these mainstream values.

Therefore, White, middle and upper class families have significant advantages when interacting with special education personnel, utilizing the educational services and systems, and exercising their legal rights compared to CLD families

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(Kalyanpar et al., 2000). Most mainstream families will not have initial barriers to accessing the educational system since their interactions and relationships with school educators are built on the basis of mutual communication and shared cultural and linguistic understandings during the IEP process.

On the other hand, for parents from CLD backgrounds, not only is there a conceptual discrepancy between the special education system and the ideal of equity guaranteed by law, but there are also prevalent mainstream values imbedded in the IEP process which may intrinsically and adversely affect their meaningful participation in the IEP. Luft (1995) stated that CLD families have obstacles in gaining appropriate educational services as well as in accessing, understanding, and making full use of their legal rights, and in advocating their children's rights.

Profound gaps between the perspectives of parents from CLD backgrounds and those of school professionals during the IEP process must be addressed (Harry, 1992; Luft, 1995). For example, for some families from CLD backgrounds, making decisions based on individual choice may not be readily understood as a parental right within their child's educational process because they tend to perceive such individual rights as inseparable from the group or social obligations. Also, some of the CLD parents tend not to argue or contradict school professionals because of their innate respect for authority. However, school professionals sometimes misinterpret parents' passive attitudes in the IEP process as a lack of interest, a sign of low self-esteem, or they believe that parents are satisfied with the decisions being made for their child.

In addition, CLD families are more likely to encounter systematic, bureaucratic, and communications barriers before they become meaningfully involved in their child's educational process. Several studies have shown that these aforementioned barriers influenced and created CLD families' low and passive participation in special education processes.

### **CLD Families' Perceptions of the Special Education Process**

The literature has indicated that compared to European American families, CLD families commonly exhibit lower levels of participation in and lack of knowledge about the special education process.

Thus, this results in communication barriers, feelings of isolation from the special education system, and often discrimination at the hands of school professionals.

Lynch and Stein (1987) compared parental involvement of each ethnic group and described the characteristics of Hispanic parents' participation. His study found that more Hispanic parents participated in the IEP process than African-American parents did, but both groups were significantly less involved than White parents. Ironically, most Hispanics believed that they were actively involved in the meetings although half of these parents lacked a basic knowledge of the special education process. Both Hispanic and African-American parents knew significantly less about the services their child was to receive and offered fewer suggestions than White parents. The White parents had much more knowledge about the special education related services available to their child. Luft (1995) mentioned similar issues in another study of Mexican immigrant families, where "the majority of parents were often confused and uninformed about the type of services their children were receiving" (p. 30).

In addition to these phenomena, school professionals' lack of collaboration with and their negative attitudes toward families from CLD backgrounds were frequently reported. In a study of Latino mothers' perspectives (Johanna, Lilia, Robert, Juan, & Jan, 2004), intrinsic concerns surfaced such as poor communication with educational professionals, lack of effort by professionals providing services, and negative attitudes toward Latino mothers and their children.

Gazar and Matuszny (2002) reported that a large percentage of Native American parents indicated that more communication with school staff would increase their involvement in the IEP process in the areas of the assessment practices and placement selections. Zions, Harrison, and Bellinger (2001) surveyed 24 urban African-American families for their perceptions of the special education system. More than one third of the parents reported that they did not feel that the school treated them as collaborators and that their children were perceived negatively by the school. In addition, most African-American parents were frustrated not only by their low social, cultural, and economic status but also by the lack of cultural understanding on the part of their children's typically Caucasian teachers.

In another survey conducted by Park,

Turnbull, and Park (2001), most Korean immigrant parents reported that language barriers, their lack of connections with professionals, their lack of information, and their different values and practices have isolated or prevented them from meaningful partnerships with education professionals. This limited parents in exercising the advocacy skills needed to represent their children's interests. The discrimination issues and linguistic bias by the professionals in evaluation were also reported, although it was "subtle" and not "explicit" (p. 161). Indeed, Korean parents believed that their children's potential was not fully supported by school professionals throughout a variety of interventions.

### **Barriers to CLD Parents in the IEP Procedures**

#### **Parents' Underlying Values**

The current research has shown that many CLD parents still strongly hold on to and cherish their traditional interpersonal values in relationships with school professionals, regardless of their degree of participation in and their duration of residency in American society. They perceive the amicable and kind attitudes of school professionals as a sign of personal interest or an authentic relationship and try to avoid direct confrontations and conflicts with school educators from the initial meetings on through the special education process. They seem to maintain a modest, compliant, and agreeable stance with school professionals in order to nurture good relationships on behalf of their children.

However, the interpersonal values held by these parents which foster their passive role results in them entrusting their children's education to the school professionals, both during the IEP process and beyond. This creates inherent obstacles and deep chasms in their ongoing communication with school professionals throughout the decision-making process. In addition, the CLD parents are not accustomed to the process of discussing their children's education with school professionals and they believe that school professionals' suggestions are final and inevitable decisions from the beginning of the IEP process, even when parents' opinions are completely divergent from those of the school professionals.

Thus, gradually the CLD parents experience strong feelings of isolation,

powerlessness, pressure, deprivation, and alienation from the special education process. These parents' feelings become too overwhelming for them to defend their opinions over those of school professionals. Under these pressured circumstances, the presence of many school educators *per se* is construed by parents as powerful authority to urge parents to conform to the school professionals' recommendations.

### **Structural Values Placed on School Professionals' Attitudes**

In the process of the IEP meeting, very often most CLD parents encounter diverse obstacles which hamper their effective involvement. Furthermore, these parents' limitations are reinforced not only by their lack of knowledge of their legal rights and the IEP process, but also by school professionals who evade their responsibility and allow parents to "remain unaware of their rights" (Harry 1992, p. 111). The school professionals' stance too often is to discourage parents from having an influential role in the decision-making process, which is accomplished by reserving abundant information on program selections or placement options. Eventually, these attitudes of school professionals result in an inauthentic process of IEP meetings for parents. School professionals too often are not willing to allot enough time to discuss issues that parents consider important, showing impatience through their gestures and facial expressions and rushing to terminate meetings.

Many CLD parents describe school professionals' inherent perspectives or attitudes toward parents as "obstinate," "rock," and "arrogant." If parents set about to increase their role, surface their opinions, and become more persistent during their child's IEP process, the more adamant the attitudes of school professionals become as they exhibit insensitive, aggressive, and impatient attitudes toward the parents. Consequently, the majority of parents are psychologically and emotionally disturbed by the feelings of isolation, frustration, resentment, and anger.

The creation of fundamental conflicts between CLD parents and school professionals is partly caused by Western positivistic values deeply rooted in the special education system and espoused by the educational professionals. As was noted earlier in the study by Kalyanpur et al. (2000), Western values underscore

scientific knowledge through structured observation and experimentation. From this systematic perception, it is taken for granted that school professionals' knowledge, interpretations, and their analysis in IEP process have greater priority than those of CLD parents as the source of reliable and dependable information. During the IEP meetings, for example, the school professional's elaborate articulation, at times using statistics and graphs to justify recommendations, will cause parents to be less confident in upholding their opinions, and to have an impression that the professional might be the only person qualified to make decisions.

Thus, in light of the educator's rationale, many suggestions or information emerging from parents' beliefs and observations will be regarded as unreliable, inconsistent, or inaccurate, and thus not to be reflected or used at the decision-making stages of the process. School professionals' attitudes as well as their inequitable decision-making processes often render immigrant parents no option other than to given up or to challenge and become confrontational, especially if they have to resort to legal actions.

### **Disparity in Communication Styles**

The CLD parents' inner conflicts and their psychological or emotional barriers are further deepened and broadened by the manner of speaking of school professionals, which these parents see as "inconsiderate," "distant," "cold," and even "cruel." Especially when discussing dispute issues, school professionals' clear, direct, or determined remarks are perceived by parents as an emotional shock or scar that exacerbates their hostility and resentment toward school professionals.

These profound gaps between parents and educators might be derived from their different communication styles—"high context communication" versus "low context communication." Low context communication emphasizes exactly what is said during the interaction. The communication is straightforward, specific, and logical. On the other hand, high context communication is heavily dependent on the subtle messages of the interaction such as body language, facial expression, and timing of silence (Lynch, 1992; Harry, 1992). Both the special education system and legislation about parental participation in the IEP process is based on these low context communication structures.

Parents from high context structures

are assumed to experience difficulty in effectively participating in low context structures. Harry (1992) describes the underlying perspectives between most parents from CLD backgrounds and school professionals as "personalism" versus "professionalism" (p. 181). The differing preconceived attitudes of both parties are among the potential factors contributing to the dichotomous nature of the decision-making process. These initial disparities between parents and school educators tend to be continued and their preconceived misunderstandings are compounded over time, resulting in ongoing negative interaction (Luft, 1995, p.25).

Harry (1992) offered a couple of implications and strategies for parents from CLD backgrounds:

- ◆ Parents need to be aware of their rights under the law, understand basic system of special education and develop effective interpersonal skills and confidence in working with school professionals. ( p.110)
- ◆ Advocacy training should be a central feature of parent support programs for working class and/or culturally different parents who have less individual power than mainstream families. Through group influence, they need to consciously acquire skills needed in dealing with schools and increase self-esteem. (p.94)

### **A Problem with Interpreters**

A level of limited English proficiency may not be a direct barrier in the special education decision making process, but it frequently serves as a significant disadvantage to CLD parents in communicating with school professionals. Therefore, CLD parents point to the importance of qualified and knowledgeable translators in the IEP process as well as for the ensuing written IEP documents that serve as follow up information. However, certain negative issues coupled with translators need to be addressed, specifically, the drawback of using school district translators because of their perceived "alliance with the school district" (Harry, 1992, p 182), their qualifications, and their potentially biased attitude toward parents.

Concerns are frequently expressed about translators' limited language proficiency level in both languages and



their their strong connection to the school district, both factors that adversely affect the deliverance of parents' critical issues to school professionals. For instance, it is pointed that they translate a large portion of school professionals' opinions but omit the main issues and opinions expressed by parents, and urge parents to comply with school professionals' recommendations in a forceful manner so as to end controversial issues or conflict between the parent and school professionals. In addition to the above mentioned problems, concerns about translators not being knowledgeable about the entire IEP process and special education terminology are also often raised.

Such unqualified, untrained translators as well as translators who have slanted views place immigrant parents in an even more vulnerable position when dealing with disputable issues. Most participants are confounded by their limited English skills, lack of an advocate, and unqualified school district translators. Parents might say that the "uneven table" of IEP meetings is dominated and controlled by school professionals and there is no way out but to accept school professionals' unwanted recommendations.

Moreover, oral interpretation is not enough for parents whose English level is limited to grip the flow of description by school professionals as well as the core elements of the IEP evaluation. Even the parents who have a basic understanding of English are too often unable to focus adequately to internally interpret the spoken words of school professionals (e.g., their sentence structure, the professional vocabulary) to grasp accurately the meaning of the conversation.

For these reasons, written and accurately translated documents would seem necessary to provide understanding of the entire range of issues that are being discussed during the meetings. Harry (1992) suggests that interpreters not only be fluently bilingual but also bicultural, so they are able to understand the subtle nuances of language, the interpersonal behavior, and the social status of the participants, in order to serve as an advocate or facilitator for parents from CLD background.

### Conclusion

The CLD parents cherish the ideological foundations of America, such as equality, individual dignity, freedom, and opportunity. The notion that op-

portunity is accessible to people according to their individual ability might be the most compelling motivation for parents to emigrate from their country of origin. For that reason, within the special education system, most parents have a common belief and expectation of potential benefits for their children through quality education.

In reality, the parents' role is limited without first establishing a workable and constructive relationship with school professionals as well as an effective intervention strategy for their children. As a result, parents' voices too often are still not heard and their opinions are not perceived as significant by school educators who lack a recognition of the value of cultural diversity.

The underlying cause of this may be that parents overly focus their attention on their child's performance, which may narrow their common perspectives, contribute to loss of an objective approach to their child's educational issues, and establish potential obstacles to effective communication. Their interpersonal relationship is also affected when it takes different forms, such as acquiescence, submission, or confrontation in communication with school educators. Such problematic attitudes toward dealing with school educators bring about strong feelings of excessive distress, anger, and hostility toward the school's infrastructure.

In this sense, parents may not be a "culturally deprived" group, but tend to be an emotionally and psychologically deprived group in dealing with the school system or mainstream society. Therefore, at this point, parents' individualistic values on education need to be built around the notion of self-advocacy and assertiveness which are needed for claiming their individual rights.

What is sorely needed is for immigrant parents to be more open to a variety of sources related to their child's educational issues by acquiring problem-solving attitudes and developing effective communicative competence, both of which are crucial factors in practical intervention strategies in the special education decision-making process.

On the other side, the school professionals' too often ethnocentric mainstream values tend to stigmatize and marginalize the CLD parents in the decision-making process. This insensitivity to traditional values of other ethnic groups by mainstream society has permeated the schools' infrastructure and educators' attitudes. Most school professionals are inclined to make judgments based only on what they

see, find, and believe, without contemplating unique individual circumstances and backgrounds. Their attitudes, which emerge from such limited perspectives, are overt and apparent at every stage of IEP processes.

Therefore, school professionals should examine the underlying principle imbedded in their current value system and the nature of their special education recommendations, which too often represent only one aspect of holistic human nature. Interpreting and analyzing other's attitudes based on each group's own values, especially when they are mainstream or traditional, can be detrimental and dangerous in that it damages others as human beings. Human perspectives need to be rejuvenated, broadened, and deepened in our pluralistic society by accepting that diversity is a valuable part of holistic human nature.

### Future Research

There are numerous areas that warrant future research. Further work is suggested on the outcomes of children with severe disabilities related to the level of parental participation, their quality of life, their transition plans, the benefit of using interpreters in facilitating parental participation in the IEP process, the effects of due process on the collaborative climate of the IEP team, and facilitating the CLD parents' role in the evaluation process.

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