

Demystifying the IEP Process for Diverse Parents of Children With Disabilities

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Laws concerning special education, such as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2006) and its predecessors, were enacted to ensure that all children with disabilities ages 3 to 21 receive a free and appropriate public education as well as services that address their needs. Local education agencies are mandated to have a team of individuals hold an annual individualized education program (IEP) meeting for each child with a disability (34 C.F.R. §300.320). This team of individuals should include, but is not limited to, parents/guardians, special education teachers, general education teachers (if the child participates in the general education classroom), paraprofessionals, service providers (e.g., occupational therapists), and, as appropriate, the student with disabilities.

Active parental involvement in the IEP process is strongly emphasized in IDEA. The underlying assumption of this expectation is that when parents are actively involved in making decisions regarding special education services and placement, their children benefit. However, according to Kalyanpur and Harry (1999), this belief is reflective of a culture that values individualism, equality, and the need to exercise one's rights. These values are not always shared by families from other cultures, and the complicated IEP process is foreign to many immigrant families (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004). These barriers, together with linguistic challenges (Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001), can prevent culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families from fulfilling their expected roles in the IEP process. Educators and service providers should be prepared to demystify the process for this growing population. This article includes the very different experiences of two parents when they went through the IEP process (see boxes, "Mr. Sau's IEP Meeting Experience" and "Mrs. Garcia's IEP Meeting Experience") which help to identify best practices for professionals in working with CLD parents.

Mr. Sau's IEP Meeting Experience

One of Mr. Sau's children was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified. Mr. Sau received a meeting invitation 2 weeks before his son's initial IEP meeting. Although the meeting was scheduled during his work hours, Mr. Sau knew that it was important for him to meet with his son's teachers. After numerous requests, his boss permitted him to take time off from work without pay. Mr. Sau did not know how long the meeting would last, so he asked to take 3 hours off from work.

Mr. Sau arrived at his son's school 15 minutes prior to the meeting. He showed the school secretary the meeting invitation. The secretary said something to him, which he did not understand and then handed him a piece of paper with "312" written on it. He went up to the third floor and found Room 312, but someone was using the room. He stood in the hallway and waited patiently. A teacher walked by and asked if she could help him. Mr. Sau handed her the paper with "312" written on it. The teacher then used the hallway phone to call the office. After a while, she gestured to Mr. Sau to follow her. She led him to another building where the meeting was taking place. Mr. Sau noticed that he was 20 minutes late to the meeting. When he entered the room, he was shocked to see seven people already sitting around the table.

Immediately after Mr. Sau sat down, the meeting began. All the individuals in the room introduced themselves. The interpreter began interpreting, but because she spoke Mandarin and Mr. Sau spoke Cantonese he could not understand what she was saying. In order not to further delay the meeting, he simply nodded nervously. Fifteen minutes after the meeting began, two more people walked in the room and sat down. During the meeting, two of the participants left. At the meeting, each professional took turns saying something related to the papers they handed Mr. Sau. Although the other IEP team members sometimes spoke for a long time, the interpreter's interpretations were often very short. To show his respect, Mr. Sau simply nodded. The entire meeting took about an hour. Mr. Sau wished that he had known ahead of time that the meeting would only take an hour so that he could have planned more accurately how much time to take off from work.

Before the IEP Meeting

Background Preparation

Much of the existing literature provides professionals (including educators and service providers) with useful suggestions regarding how to increase parent participation in IEP meetings, such as using a round meeting table to show the equal status of all meeting participants (Dabkowski, 2004), providing parents with information prior to IEP meetings (Lytle & Bordin, 2001), and being attentive to parents' concerns during discussions (O'Donovan, 2007). However, parents' perceptions of IEP meetings begin as soon as they receive the IEP meeting invitation.

Parents who are new to the United States may find the special education process very different from the one in

their home country. It is common for CLD families to attend their child's first team meeting without knowing its purpose (Hughes et al., 2002). Similar to Mr. Sau, some parents might assume they are there simply to meet with the student's teacher and discuss their child's progress. However, as soon as they step into the meeting room, they are often shocked to see the large number of individuals present at the meetings (Simpson, 1995), at which point they realize that this meeting is much more than the usual parent-teacher conference. Parents new to the process can greatly benefit from receiving background information from the teacher, another parent, or even through a short video explaining the process.

Mrs. Garcia's IEP Meeting Experience

Mrs. Garcia was very concerned about her son Alfredo's academic performance. The school suspected that he might have a disability and wanted to evaluate him. Mr. Nelson, Alfredo's third-grade teacher, met with Mrs. Garcia, explained the evaluation process to her, and asked her to discuss it with her family and determine if they would consent to having Alfredo evaluated for special education services. At the meeting, Mrs. Garcia learned that if Alfredo was eligible for special education services, a team would be formed to discuss his services and placement; it was important for Alfredo's parents to be involved in this process because they were Alfredo's advocates and decision makers. Mrs. Garcia went home, discussed it with her husband, and agreed that the school should evaluate Alfredo so they could find out if he had a disability. Mr. Nelson and the special education teacher then scheduled another meeting with Mrs. Garcia and informed her of the process after the evaluation, her rights, and how she could be involved and prepared for the IEP meeting. They told Mrs. Garcia to review the information with her family and invited her to speak with the teachers whenever she had any questions. She also received a list of resources in her community. All the written information she received was in Spanish, her primary language. Because this process was new to her, Mrs. Garcia was pleased that the teachers took the time to meet with her and explain the process in detail. She was also glad that the school wanted her to be involved in the entire process.

Prior to the team meeting, the professionals met with the Spanish interpreter and explained how the meeting would be structured; they also provided her with a glossary of terms commonly used in IEP meetings. They asked how often they should pause for her to convert oral messages. At around the meeting time, the school secretary informed the team that the parent had arrived. Mr. Nelson greeted Mrs. Garcia at the school office and escorted her to the meeting room. The professionals and interpreter took turns introducing themselves and stating their roles in the meeting. Mrs. Garcia was not surprised to see the number of people at the meeting because their names had been in the invitation notice; it was nice to connect the names with faces. Although Mrs. Garcia was nervous, she felt prepared because the meeting agenda and all the evaluation reports had been sent to her prior to the meeting. Alfredo was found eligible for special education services. The team discussed his services and placement. Throughout the meeting, Mrs. Garcia was repeatedly invited to ask questions, and the other members verified that she understood the discussion. Toward the end of the meeting, Mrs. Garcia was informed what she would receive after the meeting and when she would receive it. If she had any questions, she was welcome to meet with the team chair.

*** Recommendations for Practice**

Prior to sending home IEP meeting invitations, teachers should provide parents with some basic information, such as the purpose of IEP meetings, what the IEP process entails, the preparations they might want to consider making before the meeting, their rights in the process, and the importance of their participation in the process. Although the notice regarding procedural safeguards is commonly distrib-

uted at IEP meetings, Mr. Nelson chose to inform Mrs. Garcia about her rights prior to the first IEP meeting. This preparation not only allowed Mrs. Garcia to be familiar with her rights, but also enabled her to see the importance of her involvement throughout the process.

Because paperwork is likely to overwhelm many CLD parents—especially when the documents may not be written in their primary language or to their level of education (Fitzgerald &

Watkins, 2006)—it may be helpful for the general or special education teacher to meet with the parents face-to-face before the IEP meeting, providing information in the parents' native language and answering general questions about the process. At the IEP meeting Mr. Sau attended, each professional took turns saying something related to various reports (written in English), as they handed these to him. It would be helpful to provide parents with important materials (e.g., evaluation reports) prior to the meeting and translated into the parents' native language. Because Mrs. Garcia was new to the special education process, instead of sending her a consent form to sign, Mr. Nelson took the time to meet with her, explain the process, and offer information such as the timeline and her rights as the parent. Mrs. Garcia was never pressured to make any decision at the meeting. Instead, she was encouraged to discuss it with her family. Mrs. Garcia shared that she felt she was part of the team and knew that the school cared and wanted her son to succeed.

Schools should also consider offering training sessions and workshops (with interpretation support) for parents who have attended IEP meetings previously and need more information. Professionals can invite parents who are familiar with the process to serve as speakers. Parents of children with disabilities are more likely to relate to others who can speak their own language (Lo, 2010) and have experienced similar challenges as theirs (Bull, 2003). Such a connection can allow parents who are new to the complicated IEP process to see that with sufficient knowledge and information, they can learn to be prepared and become better advocates for their children with disabilities. Parents can also offer each other additional emotional and psychological support.

The Day of the IEP Meeting

Welcoming Parents

Although it was not Mr. Sau's first time being at his son's school, he purposely arrived at the school early. Unfortun-

ately, due to the lack of assistance at the school site and the complexity of the school building, locating the meeting room was a challenge for him. He was eventually late to the meeting and apologized repeatedly to the professionals.

★ Recommendations for Practice

Welcoming parents to school is one of the crucial factors in developing effective home-school partnerships (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, Mapp, & Davies, 2006). Impressions of whether or not a school welcomes parents begin as soon as they step inside the school building. When parents arrive at school for a team meeting, the school secretary could inform one of the team members, preferably the classroom teacher or a staff member who is fluent in the parents' primary language, to greet the parents and lead them to the meeting location. This direct personal approach can avoid any confusion, especially when the meeting location might change at the last minute. Additionally, parents always appreciate the time professionals take to welcome them.

Meeting Participants

Depending on the child's needed services, it is common to have more professionals than parents present at team meetings. Sometimes a team meeting may have up to 10 professionals, including general and special educators, principal, educational team facilitator/team chair, and other service providers—whereas only one or two parents are in attendance. It is also common for many of these professionals to arrive late or leave before the meeting is completed.

★ Recommendations for Practice

Although the disproportionate number of school professionals to parent attendees in IEP meetings is very common, this intimidates many parents, especially those whose primary language is not English (Salas, 2004). Many parents who were born outside of the United States are accustomed to meeting with their child's teacher on an individual basis, so it might be new to

them to have many professionals gather and discuss their child's needs. Information such as the number of attendees was included in Mrs. Garcia's IEP meeting invitation, so she was not shocked to see numerous professionals at her meeting. Parents should also be notified that they have the right to invite others to accompany them to the meetings, as well.

It is important to note that both professionals and parents have busy schedules. In order to ensure that all professionals can be present for the entire meeting, information such as the estimated duration of the meeting should be included on the IEP meeting invitations. Longer meetings are needed when interpretation services are used. CLD parents, like Mr. Sau, may have blue-collar jobs, which most often pay by the hour. When parents like Mr. Sau take time off work, it means less income for the month. Letting parents know in advance how much time they

spoken in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), choosing the right interpreters is vital. For example, spoken Chinese can be categorized into seven major groups: Putonghua (Mandarin), Gan, Kejia (Hakka), Min, Wu, Xiang, and Yue (Cantonese). Each of these language groups includes a large number of dialects. The interpreter in Mr. Sau's meeting was unable to bridge the communication gap between Mr. Sau and the school because the interpreter did not speak the same language group. Further, although the professionals in Mr. Sau's IEP meeting often spoke for long periods of time, the interpreter only provided Mr. Sau with a summary of the discussion.

★ Recommendations for Practice

Ensuring that the family and the interpreter are speaking the same language is crucial, but the skills and experiences of the interpreters are equally

Letting parents know in advance how much time they need to commit to the meetings will allow them to make appropriate arrangements at work and home.

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Interpretation Services

As the demographics of the U.S. population continue to change rapidly, the number of students with disabilities from CLD backgrounds will also increase. Forty-two percent of the students receiving special education services in 2008 were from CLD backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a, 2010b). However, less than 20% of professionals in the schools were from diverse cultures (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Utilizing interpretation services has been considered the best solution to bridging the communication gap between professionals and parents who are limited- or non-English speakers. However, because there are at least 380 different languages currently

essential. In order to ensure the quality of the interpretation services, the team in Mrs. Garcia's situation met with the interpreter prior to the meeting and discussed how frequently they should pause so the interpreter could provide the parent with proper interpretations.

Specialized terminology is often used—and necessary—in IEP team meetings. However, many of these terms are unfamiliar to individuals who are not in the field of special education. Words like *manipulatives* and *timeline* may not even exist in the vocabulary of some cultures. Due to the shortage of bilingual special educators, school districts often hire interpreters who are fluent in the language but may not have knowledge of the vocabulary related to the field of special education (P. Riley, personal communication, June 3, 2008). When these terms are used in IEP meetings, interpreters may skip over the



information and not interpret it to the parents, or provide parents with inaccurate interpretations (Lo, 2008). This can create unnecessary misunderstandings between schools and families. The interpreter in the IEP meeting Mrs. Garcia attended was given a glossary of words commonly used in the field and their definitions. This list enabled the interpreter to provide high-quality interpretations at the meeting.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Communication among people from high-context versus low-context cultures can be a complicated process. Individuals who are from low-context cultures, such as Anglo-European Americans, focus more on verbal communication; those from high-context cultures, such as Asian and Hispanic cultures, emphasize verbal interactions less (Hall, 1976; Jandt, 2007). Individuals from high-context cultures perceive nonverbal communication (e.g., facial expressions, body language, gestures, speed of interactions) to have more meaning than verbal communication (Jandt, 2007). However, much

nonverbal communication is frequently misinterpreted by others who are unfamiliar with the culture. For example, nodding represents agreeing and understanding in the dominant culture in the United States, but the same gesture in the Asian culture means, “I hear what you are saying;” because disagreeing and saying “No” are considered impolite, nodding is sometimes used to replace these responses (Su, 1993). In Mr. Sau’s case, in order not to disrupt the meeting, he nodded once in a while to show respect, even though he did not understand what was said at the meeting. The professionals perceived his nodding as understanding what was being discussed and were not aware that Mr. Sau was simply being polite.

*** Recommendations for Practice**

Professionals should no longer interpret their communications with CLD families by relying solely on their own cultural perspectives. Kalyanpur and Harry’s (1997, 1999) concept of cultural reciprocity suggests professionals compare their own beliefs and the stu-

dent’s family’s beliefs, identify the differences, and work towards collaboration that builds on the family’s beliefs, perceptions, and strengths. Instead of simply accepting Mr. Sau’s nodding as understanding what was discussed at the meetings, the other team members should have asked him for his opinions regarding some of the suggestions that were proposed at the meetings. Professionals must take the extra step to ensure that CLD parents understand the discussions and decisions made at IEP meetings and invite feedback from them.

After the IEP Meeting

Meeting Summary

Often, CLD parents find IEP team meetings stressful because they cannot communicate well with professionals and feel that professionals tell them what their children did wrong or did not do (Salas, 2004). With such a high level of stress, parents may not be able to process the large amount of information that is shared in the meetings. At the IEP meeting Mr. Sau attended, due to the linguistic barriers he did not

Figure 1. Checklist to Demystify the IEP Process for CLD Parents of Children With Disabilities

Before the IEP Meeting

- Meet and explain to parents the timeline, their rights, what is involved in the IEP process, and how they can participate.
- Provide parents with information on relevant community resources.
- Offer parents opportunities to connect with other parents of children with disabilities.
- Include, in the meeting notice, options for meeting dates and times, who will be attending, how long the meeting will last, and available interpretation services.
- Send parents a draft meeting agenda and invite them to add items to the agenda.
- Provide documents in parents' primary language and that match their educational level.
- Provide parents with directions to school.
- Meet with interpreter at least 30 minutes prior to the meeting to provide a glossary of relevant terms and acronyms and to discuss how often the professionals should pause for converting oral messages. Generally, professionals should pause every 2 or 3 sentences. Relay this information to the other team members.

The Day of the IEP Meeting

- Have one of the IEP team members escort parents to meeting room. It is best that this professional is someone the parents feel comfortable with and have met before. If the welcoming professional does not speak the parents' native language, have the interpreter also greet and escort the parents.
- Have team members introduce themselves and state their roles in the meeting.
- Ask parents open-ended questions to ensure that they understand the meeting discussions.
- Pay attention to parents' verbal and nonverbal cues.
- Invite parents to ask questions and offer feedback.

After the IEP Meeting

- Provide a written meeting summary and invite parents to call, e-mail, or meet if they have questions.
- Inform parents what will happen after the IEP meeting, such as when they will receive a copy of the proposed IEP and what their rights are if they disagree with the IEP.
- Have the translated IEP available to parents in a timely manner.

have the opportunity to understand the information being presented.

* Recommendations for Practice

In order to ensure that parents are informed, some states, such as Massachusetts, require the team to provide

parents with a meeting summary as they leave the meeting (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). Such summary should include a completed IEP service delivery grid and a statement of major goal areas associated with these services; this helps ensure

that both parents and schools are aware of the key decisions and agreements made at the meeting. It is also helpful to have the summary translated and provided to CLD parents in their native languages.

Translated IEPs

Providing CLD parents with translated IEPs in a timely manner is another key factor to successful home-school partnerships. Many parents who are limited- or non-English speakers rely on the information on the translated IEPs. In order to best serve the child and follow the true spirit of the process, professionals should make every possible attempt at clear verbal and written communication to ensure that the IEP is understood by the parent.

Final Thoughts

Home-school partnerships begin as soon as children are enrolled in school. For families of children with disabilities, partnerships with schools are even more crucial because parents are the advocates for their children and are the ones who can speak for their children regarding what services and supports are suitable to address their needs. IEP meetings become the forum for parents and professionals to meet, discuss, and formulate how schools can better serve these children. The tone and outcome of these meetings and how familiar the families are with the IEP process can have a tremendous impact on relationships between schools and their students' homes. Parents who feel respected and are considered as equal partners are more likely to continue to participate throughout their child's academic career. Because CLD parents may not have the skills or the knowledge to take on the roles that are expected by federal regulations and schools, professionals become the ones who can provide this population with guidance throughout the entire process. There are specific ways that teachers and school administrators can facilitate the participation of CLD parents. See Figure 1 for a checklist of strategies that are mentioned in this article.

As the U.S. population continues to diversify, professionals need to acquire the knowledge to work collaboratively with families who are from cultures that are different from theirs. Cultural competence is no longer sufficient;

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professionals must be self-aware of their own culture, values, and beliefs. Additionally, viewing each family as a unique entity is a must (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). As new and effective practices related to teaming and collaboration emerge, continuous professional development is needed for all professionals, with the needs of parents and the students schools serve being at the center of all the activities.

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