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Breaking Down Barriers: Successful Transition Planning for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional Students

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Cézar's Story

Karina is a gentle, soft-spoken Peruvian woman, dedicated to fostering a loving and enjoyable life for her family. Although she works full time outside of the family home, her husband and children are her most cherished responsibility. Karina's current life is not what she anticipated for herself when she was growing up. However, she has come to accept and treasure the experiences and opportunities she has been given. Education was highly valued in Karina's family. Her parents believed that in order to be successful in life, a good education was required. In Peru, a good education was not something that every child had the privilege to receive. Families who could afford it enrolled their children in private Catholic schools. Karina did very well in school, which was something that made her parents very proud. She was even able to attend college after she graduated, something that was highly respected within the structure of Peruvian society. Cézar's father also grew up in Peru. He and Karina met while they both attended college. They had not been married long when they found out that Karina was pregnant with their first

child. Of course, they were very excited to find out that their baby was going to be a boy; who would carry on the family name.

In the Beginning

Since Cézar was Karina's first baby she did not realize that he was not developing normally. During a routine check-up, the doctor told her that something was wrong with her son. Karina recalls how difficult this news was for them to accept. After they had time to process this information, and after talking with their priest, who provided a great deal of comfort when he told them that they had been selected to raise this special child, they were able to accept that their son was not typical.

At that time, there were not many services in Peru for children like Cézar. Karina and her husband realized that their child was not going to be included in Peruvian society, so they decided to move to the United States. They believed that in the U.S., their son could receive better medical and educational services. Life in the states brought many opportunities as well as challenges. Cézar received many services that increased his quality of life as well as the quality of life of the family. Although

relocating to the United States was a huge cultural adjustment for them, they were so happy that they had the opportunity to provide their son with a better life than what was available to him in Peru.

The School Years

Cézar attended elementary school near his home. For the first several years of his schooling, things were good. He was instructed primarily in English when he was at school, but continued to hear and speak Spanish with his family at home. He was able to participate in his special education class as well as some non-academic general education classes such as P.E., Art, and Music. He learned how to be more independent in spite of requiring full-time support, and he learned to perform small tasks with direction from a paraprofessional. Unfortunately, Cézar exhibited some problematic behaviors. Aggression was the most challenging behavior for him both at school and at home. When frustrated, Cézar would become very irritable and would grab, hit, or pinch whoever was close to him. Fortunately, these behaviors did not seem to be a big deal from kindergarten through his fourth grade.

The summer after Cézar finished fourth grade his family decided to move to a bigger house. This move meant Cézar would be attending school in a different district. When he went to his new school, they were not prepared to educate him even though Karina called them long before the start of the school year. Karina recalls that the school personnel told her that they could not work with her son. The new school district wanted to place Cézar in a special school or provide homebound services to him, but Karina said that she did not like the special school and the way they treated the children. Karina and her husband would have sued the school district, but they did not have the money to hire a private lawyer. Thus, it was easy for the school district to dismiss them.

Cézar missed the next two years of school while his family fought with the district to get him back into school. Finally his parents decided to move again so that he could go to school in the first school district that he attended. By this time, Cézar should have been entering the seventh grade; however, his behaviors had gotten much worse since he had not been in school for so long, and it was much harder to have him at school. Now, the educational team decided that it would be best for Cézar to be moved up to the transition program early. They felt this placement would be much better for him since there were less academic constraints placed on him there.

Cézar was already in a transition program for students age 18-21 at the age of 12 years old. His parents agreed to this arrangement because they wanted their son to receive an education and because having him at home placed a huge financial burden on their family. Even though the school was not really accomplishing much with Cézar through the transition program, it was enough for Katrina to see that the school staff was happy to work with her son. In light of their previous problems with the school system, Katrina and her husband were content with what they were getting from the transition program.

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Cézar's Transition Program

Cézar is a very happy young man, dearly loved by his family. He loves going for walks, especially outdoors, and watching movies. Cézar's parents describe him as their "*big boy*" and "*their little angel.*" They see him as "*special*" and believe that he is going to live with them for the rest of his life. His parents do not see his disability as something that needs to be fixed. They accept him the way he is and enjoy the opportunities they have to spend time with him. Cézar just turned 21 years old, and he is preparing to transition out of the school system very soon. His transition goals on his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) included: (a) improving his ability to work and learn in the community and other natural environments, (b) improving his safety out in the community, and (c) engaging in social and recreational activities with others in order to establish relationships. In order to reach these goals, Cézar has participated in a number of different activities through his transition program. He has been working on completing small work tasks at his desk with increased independence. He also is an active participant in a cooking class, hobby club, and swimming. Cézar attends a daily living class, work skills class, and participates in volunteer opportunities in the community.

For the last few months Cézar has been sharing time between the school's transition program and a privately run community-based program. The school's transition program meets at the district building and the students go to different places in the community. Students in this program learn functional skills such as crossing the street, taking the bus, and going to a baseball game and paying for their tickets. They learn vocational skills and Cézar has participated in some work experiences at a restaurant and a grocery store with support. They also learn recreational skills, and he participates in a craft class every day.

Karina, Cézar's mom, is happy that the school is working with her son to be more independent but she has limited expectations for him to live on his own or hold a job, and there are many skills the school is working on that she and her husband do not value or see as important. Cézar's IEP team wants him to improve his community access skills, such as learning how to cross the street at an intersection with a traffic light by pushing the signal button and waiting to walk until the appropriate time as well as learning to ride the public transportation system. However, his family does not use public transportation and they do not feel like this is something he will use once he leaves the school system.

At school, Cézar practices using a fork and spoon when eating lunch and snacks, and he is somewhat successful with this. Yet according to the IEP, his teacher has expressed that being fed at home appears to be inhibiting his overall independence in this area. Karina says that she likes to feed Cézar because this is really the only time she has interactions with him during the days he is at school.

Cézar's IEP team feels that communication is also an area in which he needs to continue to improve. His primary language and the primary language spoken in his home is Spanish;

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however, he is spoken to in English at school. Despite this, Cézar is successfully able to communicate at school using a communication device, hand over hand requests, vocalizations, and gestures. At home, he also uses gestures and vocalizations, but his family does not want him to use any formal communication system, such as a voice output communication aid. Although Cézar's family does not always see the importance of the activities he participates in at school, they are very happy that he is able to receive services from the school.

Cézar recently began participating in a privately run community-based program two days a week. The activities provided through this program include swimming, bowling, watching movies, going to the mall, going out to eat, and shopping at the grocery store followed by a cooking class. He does really well with this group and his family would like for him to be able to go more than two days a week, but unfortunately they don't have the money to pay for any more days. Because Karina and her husband have to work full time they do not feel like they have enough time to help Cézar participate in some of the available post-school options. For now, Cézar will continue to participate in the community-based program two days a week, and he will have to go to work with his dad on the other days. This is not an appropriate setting and could possibly jeopardize his job, but the family has no other option.

Cézar's Future

Cézar's parents' dream is for him to be happy and to enjoy life with his family. However, Karina has expressed her fears for the future and feels like there are limited post-school options out there for children like her son because of his need for constant support and supervision. They have looked at several different adult day programs suggested by the school staff but feel like these have not met their expectations. As the time for Cézar to leave the school system grows closer, things have become more stressful for his family. At the recommendation of his IEP team, Cézar is now on a waiting list for residential services, but Karina has stated that she does not want her son to leave home and that she worries about the time when she will no long be able to care for him since the rest of their immediate family members still live in Peru.

Introduction to the Problem

While transition services being provided to Cézar may be seen as beneficial and as having the potential to lead to positive post-school outcomes, involvement and expectations of Cézar's family are taking a backseat to the involvement and expectations of professionals in this process. Discrepancies between family and school expectations and desires can lead to the failure of this plan (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995; Trainor, Lindstrom, Simon-Burroughs, Martin, & McCray Sorrells, 2008).

Transition to adulthood is a process not only affecting the student, but one that affects the family as a whole. Research on the factors influencing positive transition outcomes has supported the critical need for family involvement (Harry, 2008; Kim & Turnbull, 2004; Kohler, 1998). However,

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researchers indicate that actual parental participation in school-based transition planning diminishes during the transition period despite broad agreement regarding the importance of parent involvement (Landmark, Zhang, & Montoya 2007). Although federal mandates have pushed for increased parental involvement in the transition planning process, it is evident from the research that families are not valued members of the decision making team (Gallivan-Felon, 1994; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Salembier & Furney, 1997).

Changing Demographics

Based on the increase of culturally diverse populations in the United States, it is more likely than ever before that one will work and live near people who are diverse. The U.S. census data shows that between 1980 and 2000, minority populations grew 11 times faster than the majority population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, November). As demographics have changed, students from diverse cultural backgrounds have come to make up a large proportion of students in our school systems (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Likewise, in the 2007-2008 school year 43% of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act were from a diverse population (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Consequently, it is increasingly more likely that service providers who develop individual education plans (IEPs) and collaborate on transition planning teams will work with minority students and families.

Despite this growing diversity in cultural backgrounds, many legal mandates and transition components are based on European-American

cultural beliefs regarding disability, optimal post-school outcomes, and how best to achieve these outcomes. These beliefs about disability and post-school outcomes are not necessarily shared by all cultures, and thus, cultural conflicts are quite probable when service providers simply comply with transition mandates.

Transition Planning and Cultural Conflicts

By their very nature, societies use cultural values to determine interactions and perceptions of how specific processes should be organized (Brislin, 1993; Lewis, 1997). Cultural values and beliefs of the majority population are formalized by the development and passage of legislation and policies (Cordeiro, Reagan, & Martinez, 1994; Nieto, 2000). The IDEA mandates have created four essential elements of transition, which represent a number of formalized sets of values that can clash with the values of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Luft, 2005).

"The first essential element, *consideration of the student's needs, interests, and preferences*, mandates that transition teams individually assess students' preferences for their future career and lifestyle" (Luft, 2005, p. 278). Being able to eloquently express oneself is a skill some families highly value (deFur & Williams, 2002). The cultural values that support such planning emphasize independence and self-sufficiency as a way of achieving personal success (Green, 1999). However, many other cultures value and prefer belonging to a group over becoming independent or self-sufficient

(Harry, 1992). Their cultural beliefs emphasize the importance of the needs and interests of the group as a whole over individual preference. They may reject the notion that their children have a right to make choices for themselves in favor of the idea that the family's needs take priority over the needs of the individual (Luft, 2005). In these families, interdependence is the primary value, and contributing to the family as a whole, is more important than expressing independence or working toward personal achievements (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, & Powers, 2007).

"The second essential element of transition planning is to use an *outcome-oriented* [or *results-oriented*] process" (Luft, 2005, p. 278). Positive post-school outcomes are highly defined by one's cultural background (Nieto, 2000). For example, some people view post-school outcomes, such as financial success, material possessions, and higher social status, as positive. Achieving these things, for many people, results in feelings of success and contentment. By extension, educators who subscribe to this philosophy may want these same outcomes for their students. The family, however, might want their child to continue living at home where he/she can be cared for and to work with a neighbor or family friend in a part-time job (Harry, 1992).

Kraemer and Blacher (2001) found that while post-school expectations for their children varied, many parents envisioned a future in which their child with significant disabilities is living in the family home. Some have expressed concern in regard to who would take care of the individual when the parents are gone. This issue is compounded if the extended family still lives in their country of origin. These researchers also found that for those parents who envisioned their child living outside the family home, they envisioned their son or daughter also being gainfully employed. However, only one parent felt like a sheltered workshop was the appropriate place for their child to find employment. Because some cultures do not use economic productivity as an indicator of a person's worth (Harry, 1992), families from different cultures, may not expect or encourage all of their children to be employed, especially any individual with severe disabilities (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Jones, 1988; Kraemer & Blacher, 2001).

"The third essential element of transition planning is *coordinated interagency responsibilities or linkages*" (Luft, 2005, p. 279). Representatives from adult service agencies, who may potentially be providing support to students once they exit the school system, must be invited to participate in the transition planning process. However, some families may prefer to seek support and resources within their own extended network of family and friends or through more familiar community organizations, such as their church. "Some cultures have great difficulty in seeking help or in disclosing a need for help, and may not feel comfortable with a large group of [unfamiliar] individuals . . . discussing their or their child's needs" (Luft, 2005, p. 279). Since adult service providers typically meet with parents only once or twice throughout a child's transition program, parents may be resistive to

the suggestions and supports offered by these unfamiliar individuals.

"The fourth [and final] essential element of transition is *movement from school to postschool activities*" (Luft, 2005, p. 279). Post-school activities set forth by IDEA include post-secondary education, living independently, being employed, community participation, and appropriate utilization of adult services. Cultural conflicts may arise when these expectations differ from those held by families, for example, viewing unmarried children who live outside the family home as an indication of dysfunction within the family (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). In terms of post-school activities, some families might prefer that their children with significant disabilities remain living at home where they can be cared for and protected by people who love them. "Beliefs and values associated with education and development of job skills also vary" (deFur & Williams, 2002, p. 111). Some people view education as an honorable pursuit while others may view it as necessary in order to improve their family status (deFur & Williams, 2002). Some families may be reluctant to pursue plans that appear unrealistic to them or post-school goals that have no value in their cultural framework. Transition teams who develop plans that conflict with the family's cultural values, beliefs, and expectations may be surprised later to find that their careful planning has not resulted in "success".

The potential for clashing values between the majority culture and a given minority culture does not end with these four essential transition elements. There are in fact other value sets that can create points of conflict

(Lynch & Hanson, 2004). These value sets include contrasting views of disability, contrasting views of technology, and contrasting views of time. Although not directly in conflict with transition mandates, these value sets can lead to misunderstandings between families and school personnel, which in turn, break down the partnerships that are so desperately needed.

Contrasting Views of Disability

Some cultures view mild learning and emotional disabilities as part of a typical range of behaviors; only recognizing disabilities that are more obvious such as physical disabilities (Zuniga, 1998). These parents may lack the sense of urgency when it comes to intervention since they do not understand why their children are struggling in the school environment. For children who have mild disabilities, their families may view the school's complex transition planning process as unnecessary. Furthermore, those who believe that a disability reflects negatively upon their family may not be comfortable discussing disability related issues in the amount of detail that schools prefer.

Contrasting Views of Technology

Although the dominant culture in America is known for pursuing the latest innovations and preparing for the future (Bryan, 1999), many people from other cultures place great importance on ancestral rituals and traditions (Rogers-Dulan & Blacher, 1995). According to deFur and Williams (2002), "the latest technology or the newest approach to teaching may be regarded with disinterest or suspicion" by such families (p. 111). For example, some

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parents from different cultures with children who have significant disabilities refuse to use alternative communication devices due to their perception of them as unnatural and stigmatizing (Kemp & Parette, 2000).

Contrasting Views of Time

Some families from diverse cultural backgrounds do not believe that interactions should be limited by time constraints. Valuing directness and efficiency through the use of timelines and agendas can very negatively affect trust, communication, and participation in the decision making process, especially when those decisions have the potential to impact the future (Dunn & Griggs, 1995). Other families may perceive punctuality to be an indication of the importance someone places on a meeting, and may believe that their child's needs are not important when professionals arrive late or leave early (Bryan, 1999). Families who put emphasis on the present may struggle to think about and plan several years into their children's futures (deFur & Williams, 2002; Marin & VanOss Marin, 1991).

It is important to keep in mind that cultural tendencies are given only as a guide and do not exist at the same level and intensity in every individual who is culturally and linguistically diverse. Making generalizations must be avoided due to the fact that they only breed stereotypical thinking (Milian & Correa, 2001). Regardless of where a student and family falls with regard to issues, such as these, it is imperative to use caution when planning the future lives of these students (deFur & Williams, 2002).

Cultural Considerations and Transition Planning

Cultural beliefs and values greatly influence how successful transition to adulthood is defined; however, little attention has been given to this matter in the transition literature (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Trainor et al., 2008). Such lack of concentration in this area may signify the application of a "one size fits all" set of transition services being provided to students, without taking into account the effects on families who come from culturally diverse backgrounds (Kim, 2006).

Few studies have focused on the involvement of families that are culturally diverse in the transition planning process (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Trainor et al., 2008). Lynch and Stein (1987) found Hispanic parents reported being satisfied with their children's educational services; however, only 55% reported knowing what services were included in their IEP. Furthermore, 50% of these parents indicated feeling like they had limited participation in their children's IEP meetings. Geenen, Powers, Lopez-Vasquez, and Bersani (2003) identified barriers to participation of parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse, such as discrimination, inflexibility, uncaring service providers, contextual barriers, and the lack of emphasis on cultural and family values. Similarly, deFur and her colleagues (2001) found that parent-professional relationships were a key factor influencing parental involvement during transition planning. The major findings of their study described barriers to family involvement such as professionals' attitudes, discrimination based on race or

ethnicity, and an emphasis on their children's weaknesses. Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001) found that while culturally and linguistically diverse parents reported being more highly involved in planning that focused on nonschool-based activities, such as teaching their children about their cultural background and expectations for their adult life, than did European-American parents, professionals saw involvement of culturally diverse families in nonschool-based transition activities as reasonably lower than European-American parents. Results such as these indicate that professionals have limited understandings of culturally diverse parent involvement in transition planning activities, which consequently may often lead to cultural conflicts.

From the results of these studies "it is clear that [culturally and linguistically diverse] families perceive their experiences during transition planning in a significantly different light than their European American counterparts" (Kim & Morningstar, 2005, p. 98). More recently, additional studies have emerged that also support these results (Landmark et al., 2007; Povenmire-Kirk, Lindstrom, & Bullis; 2010). Unfortunately, parents who are culturally diverse more often deal with challenges when it comes to their participation in transition planning. These barriers include negative attitudes of school personnel, cultural insensitivity and discrimination, poverty, limited knowledge, and educational system procedures and policies. "It may be that the field does not have a foundational understanding of the crucial issues facing [culturally and

linguistically diverse] families during transition, and perhaps a direction for further research has emerged" (Kim & Morningstar, 2005, p. 98). Based on the aforementioned studies, several practices that can be used to enhance the transition planning process with parents who are culturally diverse have been identified.

Practices that Enhance Transition Planning

Practices that can be used to work more successfully with parents who are culturally diverse have been identified in the literature. These practices can be categorized into three main groups: (a) increasing the cultural competence of service providers; (b) increasing family empowerment; and (c) increasing the use of informal supports (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Lynch and Hanson (2004) have stated that everyone has a cultural background that influences our belief systems and behaviors. Many agree on the obvious need for cultural competence training of professionals who provide transition services to students with disabilities (Kim & Morningstar, 2007; Luft, 2008; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2010). Lynch and Hanson (1993) have defined cultural competence as "the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build upon ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity" (p. 50). This requires four main actions on the part of the professional.

First, service providers must know their own views of the world. This is done by becoming "aware of the cultural values and expectations embedded in their own perspectives of transition regarding work, community

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integration, role expectations, and social functioning" (Kim & Morningstar, 2005, p. 99). This is also an essential belief of Trainor and Patton (2008) who state that cultural responsiveness is achieved by teachers knowing how their own personal values and perceptions are influenced by their culture.

Second, service providers must get to know the families in the community in which they work. This can include gathering information about family member's roles, communication styles, perspectives on disability, family structure, and successful adulthood, family customs and traditions, and socio-economic factors of the family (deFur & Williams, 2002). Trainor and Patton (2008) state that "cultural responsiveness entails knowledge and awareness of the values and beliefs held by families and students in transition planning" (p. 362).

Third, service providers must acknowledge and respect cultural differences. This requires openness to learning and willingness to use alternative strategies when faced with conflicts reflecting differences in culture (Lynch & Hanson, 2004). Trainor and Patton (2008) also express that "cultural responsiveness entails negotiation and collaboration with family so that perspectives of the school and teachers can be adapted by the family without violating their cultural beliefs (p. 362).

Last, mutual goals between families and service providers must be developed. This can be accomplished through identifying conflicts, having open communication with families during problem solving, and identifying sources to help resolve disagreements and promote mutual agreement on

goals (Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2010; Wolfe, Boone, & Barrera, 1997). Trainor and Patton (2008) concur that there is a need for "[e]xplicit articulation of goals, values, and beliefs of the school that may differ from those of the family while respecting the cultural values of the family" (p. 362). From this, shared goals can be identified and developed leading to transition plans that all members of a student's team can agree will lead to desired outcomes.

There is a need to empower families by providing knowledge and understanding related to transition issues and encouraging participation of extended family members as well as providing parent support programs (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Trainor & Patton, 2008). In order to increase the involvement of extended family members, service providers can gather information on supports these special family members can provide, identify the roles they can play, and specifically include them in the planning process (Greene & Kochhar-Bryant, 2003). Providing parents with support systems can be helpful throughout their child's time in the public school system; however, during the period of time when their child is transitioning to adulthood, supports are even more vital. Service providers can create opportunities for parents to network through the use of parent-focused trainings, social events, and parent phone-trees. Finally, increasing the use of informal community resources—such as extended family members, members of their church congregation, and social groups—instead of focusing on seeking help from professional settings, will be beneficial to help service providers

avoid conflicts that may arise when working with these diverse families.

Conclusion

Although culturally sensitive strategies are available in the literature that indicate how service providers can better support diverse families, research on parent involvement/satisfaction and large-scale outcomes-based data do not show positive findings for this group of individuals. In actuality, conflicts between families who are culturally and linguistically diverse and the school service providers cannot be avoided. Despite the overwhelming importance of these issues, cultural differences have not yet been recognized as a valid area of content in the knowledge base of special education. More research is needed in order to provide contextual information that will add a significant contribution to the literature in this area and will aid future research in the pursuit to identify best practices in transition services for students with disabilities who are culturally diverse.

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