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Barriers to Full Participation in the Individualized Education Program for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Parents

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) mandates that schools facilitate parent participation in planning the Individual Education Program (IEP). However, culturally and linguistically diverse parents are less likely to feel fully included in the IEP process. In this article we examine three sources of cross-cultural communication difficulties: verbal and non-verbal communication styles, bureaucratic procedures, and cultural assumptions about disability and intervention. We conclude by suggesting schools use an empathetic approach to improve communication in the IEP process.

Keywords: Individual Education Program, culturally and linguistically diverse, communication, disability, special education

There is a clear link between parental involvement in school and positive outcomes for students. Students with involved parents are more likely to do well academically than peers whose parents are not involved in their education (Keith et al., 1998). For children with disabilities, parental involvement is critical, particularly in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. Direct parental participation in the IEP leads to improved communication and increases the probability that professionals and parents will develop mutually agreed upon IEP goals (Smith, 2001).

Despite these benefits, parents of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are less involved in school affairs than parents of European American descent in both general and special education (Lynch & Stein, 1987; Denessen, Bakker, & Gierveld, 2007). CLD parents are also less likely to be familiar with special education procedures, available services, and their rights as parents (Harry, 1992a). This impedes full participation in the IEP process, and subsequently, a parent's ability to advocate for his or her child. It is a school site's responsibility to mitigate barriers that inhibit parents' active contribution to their children's education. Facilitating effective communication is an essential starting place for school personnel (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). This includes understanding the assumptions that underlie the school culture

as well as being informed and sensitive to the assumptions CLD parents and students bring to the table.

In school settings with less diversity, communication in the IEP decision-making process tends to be relatively predictable and clear because there is a shared understanding about how teachers, parents, students, administrators, and others will interact with one another. Communication within culturally diverse settings is prone to more complications, because parents and school personnel may interpret messages in unexpected and sometimes conflicting ways (Porter & Samovar, 1998). Various cultural groups also hold different expectations of their role in the educational process (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998: Nieto; 2000); however, not all participants will be aware of these differences that can lead to miscommunication.

Cross-cultural communication is also affected by participants' lack of awareness of their own cultural constructs, which limits appreciation of cultural differences and its effect on communication. Behavioral norms are so deeply internalized that they are believed to represent universal truths rather than cultural constructs. Consequently, individuals engaged in cross-cultural communication are quick to assume the other party is familiar with the workings of their system without even realizing that there is a system. This can create significant misunderstanding and conflict in the IEP process. Unfortunately, professionals and CLD parents are likely to blame communication difficulties on the other person, rather than attributing misunderstandings to cultural differences, thus contributing to a cycle of misunderstanding that limits meaningful communication and possibly alienating CLD parents from the IEP process.

Sources of Cross-Cultural Miscommunication

In this article we examine three sources of cross-cultural communication difficulties: verbal and non-verbal communication styles, bureaucratic procedures, and cultural assumptions about disability and intervention. Each of these areas is susceptible to misinterpretation when participants share the same cultural background and even more so when cultural assumptions are very different. We end by suggesting that an empathetic approach to interacting with parents can ameliorate miscommunication. Facilitating meaningful communication is a primary step in improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Barriers

Language competence, unfamiliar terminology, and nonverbal behaviors all affect the IEP process. As would be expected, language competency, or the lack of proficient English skills, is an immediate barrier for parents who are immigrants to the United States and is often the first communication hurdle for CLD parents and school professionals (Turney & Kao, 2009). While parents may wish to participate, limited language skills can cause them to feel nervous or inadequate. This in turn affects their involvement; the level of discomfort can be so great that parents may even avoid meeting with teachers or visiting the school. Ironically, school personnel may interpret this as a lack of interest rather than discomfort, and they may mistakenly believe the parent is not invested in his or her child's progress. Limited English language knowledge also restricts parents' access to information and their awareness of advocacy resources (Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001).

Even for parents who do speak English, the use of diagnostic and educational terminology creates linguistic obstacles (Harry, 1992a; Zhang & Bennett,

2003). Professionals routinely use educational jargon such as "stanine scores," "executive functioning," or "specific learning disability" to describe students' academic achievement or challenges. Making sense of special education terminology can be difficult for native English speakers, and is particularly challenging for CLD parents who face cultural and linguistic barriers that other parents do not (Lo, 2008; Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2010).

Nonverbal communication style also impacts understanding. Western cultures tend to use low context, or explicit communication norms, in which the choice of words, rather than context, determines the meaning of what is being communicated (Holmes, 2005). However, many non-Western cultures use high context, or implicit communication norms. A primary goal of an implicit communication style is to maintain outward harmony and, as a result, is indirect and relies heavily on nonverbal cues such as gestures, sighs, or eye contact to convey the intended meaning of a statement. For example, Holmes (2005) studied ethnic Chinese students' communication patterns in a New Zealand business school. She observed that in collaborative settings Chinese students smiled to convey a number of emotions - including pain, confusion, embarrassment, and displeasure - without disturbing group harmony. Their native-born New Zealand colleagues mistakenly interpreted the smile as a sign that they were all in agreement and moved on without further discussion. In the IEP meeting, professionals can easily mistake a parent's head nodding and smiles as indications of consent when this may not be the case. Harry (1992a) noted that many CLD parents are reluctant to openly disagree with professionals who they perceive as authority figures. Instead, they may outwardly agree with professionals, but

attempt to communicate their true feelings through more indirect means in order not to undermine a professional's authority. She suggests that when professionals do not recognize CLD parents' signals of discomfort and disagreement, such as prolonged silences, subdued tone, and downward gaze, parents may believe they are deliberately being ignored and pull back from the process. Meanwhile, professionals may wonder why, at the end of a seemingly smooth interaction, the parent suddenly refuses to sign consent forms.

Other researchers have documented the effects of implicit and explicit communication norms on cross-cultural communication. Cruz, Salzman, Brislin, and Losch (2006) studied native Hawaiian students' communication patterns to reduce culturally inappropriate counseling and teaching methods in universities where native Hawaiians are a cultural minority. They found that faculty's unfamiliarity with students' patterns of interacting with authority figures was often responsible for misunderstandings and conflict between native students and non-native faculty. Researchers observed that Hawaiian students frequently refrained from asking questions as a sign of respect for their professors. However, the Western professors perceived this as inappropriate and reprimanded students for not demonstrating more involvement. Furthermore, students often looked away and smiled during the reprimand to convey they recognized their fault and that they bore no grudge against their professors. Professors, however, viewed the smile as yet another sign of disrespect or disengagement.

Directly related to how parents engage in the IEP process is their understanding of parental and teacher roles. Some CLD parents come from traditional cultures where direct involvement in their child's education is a challenge to the

teacher's authority (Smith, 2001). This can be true for Asian and Hispanic cultures in which traditions of respect for scholarship and/or authority may act as a deterrent to direct, active, parental participation (Harry, 1992a; Zhang & Bennett, 2003).

Huang (1993) researched the communication patterns of Asian and Pacific Islander (API) families and Western educators. He found API families often expected their child's teacher to make all important educational decisions. In another study (Denessen, Bakker, & Gierveld, 2007), CLD parents supported their children at home by showing interest and giving encouragement, but did not consider it appropriate to become directly involved in school matters. They assumed that while they were entirely responsible for their children at home, teachers wanted to be entirely responsible for them at school. In fact, Huang notes that an unexpected effect of teachers seeking parental input was that some API families began to perceive them as incompetent.

Lack of knowledge about verbal and nonverbal communication patterns can significantly impact the IEP process. Parents' limited proficiency in the English language and their unfamiliarity with the terminology used in special education can inhibit full understanding and participation in IEP meetings. Similarly, indirect communication styles that rely on nonverbal cues to communicate can be overlooked by school professionals. Finally, teachers may lack adequate knowledge of how culture impacts parent participation and consequently misinterpret parent actions. Educators must recognize these potential verbal and nonverbal barriers in order to facilitate effective communication.

Bureaucratic Procedures

Creating an IEP is a highly bureaucratic process where each step is documented in writing, formal procedures are followed, and there are copious written materials for parents to review (e.g., assessment reports, the IEP). This approach can appear unfriendly and even be unhelpful to CLD parents. First, the content of the letters, forms, and reports can be difficult for parents to understand due to language barriers. Even communications in parents' native language may contain unfamiliar or awkwardly translated terminology. Second, CLD parents may feel intimidated by the formality of written communication, especially when it contains medical, legal, and technical terms such as the "Right to a Fair Hearing" statement found in most IEP forms. The number of written documents can seem overwhelming, written by a nameless "they," rather than by caring professionals who want to help their children.

The structure of the IEP process reflects an objectivity and formality that can intimidate and distance parents from more *personalistic* cultures (Bennett, Hojnar, & Zhang, 1998; Callicott, 2003; Lynch & Hanson, 2011). The structure is time-driven and linear with deadlines and other regulations. Professionals' willingness to adhere to this formal structure can be misperceived as impersonal and uncaring. Harry (1992a) notes that keeping IEP meetings brief and to the point may alienate CLD parents who expect more personal interactions. Also, allowing enough time for parent-professional exchange of ideas is crucial for parents who, due to cultural and linguistic barriers, may need more time to process the complex information.

The IEP process tends to rely on objective, decontextualized terms and procedures that CLD parents may not feel applies to their child. For example, assessment questionnaires that demand only yes or no, or true or false answers can be difficult to complete when parents'

childrearing views and practices differ significantly from those of school site personnel. They are also less likely to yield valid data as they are based on different cultural premises.

Finally, the bureaucratic nature of the IEP heightens the differences between the *professionalism* of Westerners and the *personalism* of many CLD parents. Teachers, support personnel, and administrators may use a more formal interaction style in their professional role compared to their private interactions with friends and family. When Western professionals interact with others at work, they often maintain a friendly yet somewhat detached and objective demeanor, which they associate with professionalism. Many CLD parents are from cultures in which this distinction is minimal (Harry, 1992a). They expect to develop a personalized, informal relationship with teachers and administrators and are disappointed when this does not occur. More importantly, parents may attribute this "cool" behavior to personal rather than cultural differences, and they may conclude the professionals dislike them or do not care about their children.

Thus, the highly bureaucratic nature of an IEP meeting presents several difficulties for parents from CLD backgrounds. It relies on terminology that is difficult to understand, and the decontextualized procedures can create discomfort. Given these potential sources of miscommunication, careful attention is required when conducting IEP meetings with CLD parents.

Diverging Cultural Assumptions within the IEP Collaborative Process

CLD parents and school professionals may hold different assumptions about what constitutes disability as well as what is an appropriate intervention. The way in which parents and

school site personnel negotiate these assumptions has significant implications for the IEP collaborative process.

Diverging definitions of disability. The concept of special needs is socially and culturally determined (Bevan-Brown, 2001; Lamorey, 2002). Cultures differ in what is considered an appropriate range of behavior and development. What one may perceive of as a disability can be within typical behavioral and developmental parameters for another. In some cultures a child is considered typical as long as he or she is able to contribute to the household in some way (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Thus, a child whose performance might indicate mild to moderate intellectual disability by Western standards may be considered within typical cognitive range in his or her community. And in cultures where most children have little access to schooling, parents may have lower expectations of academic attainment and may not share professionals' concern about a child's weak performance.

CLD parents may consider their child's condition or behavior to be problematic, yet they do not necessarily view it as an official disability. Harry (1992b) found that Puerto Rican parents she interviewed did not think of their children's reading or behavioral difficulties as disabilities. Instead, these parents cited such factors as extreme shyness, confusion resulting from transitioning from English to Spanish, and detrimental educational practices as the reasons for their children's lack of achievement in school. And given the challenges related to overrepresentation of CLD students in special education, accurately identifying low academic achievement as a result of disability, and not English learner status, is critically important (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Also, designations such as intellectual disability, specific learning

disability, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may be unfamiliar concepts for individuals whose culture characterizes children with academic challenges as lacking discipline or effort (Zhang & Bennet, 2003).

School professionals unfamiliar with parenting practices from another culture may incorrectly interpret different styles as inferior. For example, a Korean-American mother related the story of how she did not interact with her child when school personnel visited her home because it was not culturally appropriate to express parental affection in front of others. As a result, her interaction was later characterized as "problematic" (Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001, pg. 163).This complicated the school team's ability to provide productive input.

The American practice of providing a *free, appropriate, public education* (IDEA, 2004) to all students with disabilities is built on the assumption that they are entitled to the same education as their peers (to the maximum extent possible), and the history of disability rights over the last 40 years has emphasized the "normalization" of disability (Wolfensberger, 1972). Disability is not to be construed as a personal failing, but as a condition located along a continuum of human development. In contrast, some societies (Harry, 1992a) may be more likely to view disability as a circumstance that negatively reflects upon the entire family. In fact, the stigma of having a disability may have such serious social and economic repercussions for both the individual and the family that some families opt to hide a child born with a disability and deny his or her existence. For example, some in Nigerian society did not see the usefulness of formal education for a child with a disability, sometimes viewing them as retribution from God and destined to becoming beggars (Abang, 1988). Some Asian cultures believe that a person's illness or disability indicates disharmony within the family unit (Huang, 1993), which could lead parents to resist a disability label in order to avoid the shame it would bring to the family. However, we must note that stigma from special education status is still a concern for all parents and students regardless of ethnicity or culture (Norwich, 2009).

Clearly, parents from diverse cultures do not love their children any less than do those from the dominant American culture. However, it may be more difficult for CLD parents to advocate for their children in a manner familiar to school personnel. Understanding the cultural assumptions surrounding disability status, both mainstream and CLD, is imperative in facilitating productive IEP meetings.

Diverging attitudes toward intervention. CLD parents' perspectives on interventions may clash with the predominantly Western principles on which special education goals and interventions are based. Professionals must be aware that their own cultural assumptions may impact the services and interventions they recommend to parents (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Zhang & Bennett, 2003). For example, most Western societies have a deficit view of disabilities, acting on the assumption that it is best to identify the disability and whenever possible correct or remediate the associated deficits. However, CLD parents may have differing perceptions of how much and what type of intervention is necessary. For example, in a study of Mexican American mothers of children with communication disorders, Garcia and colleagues (2000) found that these mothers believed their children were simply developing at a slower rate and did not need to be proficient in communication skills until an older age. In other studies, Chinese-American families have reported using culturally specific cures, such as consulting mediums and seeking acupuncture

treatments, in addition to Western interventions (Ryan & Smith, 1989).

Some cultures may view aggressive interventions as meddling in what they consider to be an act of the Divine. Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) cite a case that reached the U.S. Supreme Court in which a Hmong family argued their child's clubfoot was in fact a reward from God for one of their ancestors' tribulations, and they should not be forced to correct it. Skinner, Correra, Skinner, and Bailey (2001) found that some parents saw their children's disability as a blessing. These mothers considered their children with disabilities special children that God had sent to them as a reward or a blessing for being exceptional mothers with their older child or children.

Professionals' and CLD parents' cultural norms regarding independence versus interdependence can also hinder the process of finding mutually acceptable interventions. IEP interventions reflect American society's strong preference for individual independence over interdependence. Interventions for individuals with moderate to severe disabilities often prepare the individual to transition to an independent or semi-independent setting away from home, while many non-Western cultures emphasize family-based solutions (Cruz et al., 2006). Unlike parents from Western cultures, parents from non-Western cultures may want to focus on coping and caring strategies rather than those that promote self-sufficiency (Rodriguez, 2011). Indeed, Zhang and Bennett (2003) found that some parents of children with severe disabilities believed that encouraging their child to become self-sufficient was a failure to meet their parental obligations. Without an understanding of the cultural context, professionals may perceive families who emphasize interdependence as too enmeshed with each other and therefore

psychologically unhealthy. Consequently, they may insist on implementing interventions that conflict with parents' values and thus alienate them from the collaborative process.

The role of cultural assumptions in both the definition of disability and what is an appropriate intervention can greatly influence the full participation of CLD parents in the IEP process. Conversely, cultural assumptions affect school professionals' perceptions of parents as well. Parents may wrongly be perceived as ignorant or uncaring. Special education services are most likely to be effective when both parents and school professionals believe they will meet a student's needs, so IEP meetings that honor the perspectives of all stakeholders are critical for success.

Developing Empathy

Using empathy as a starting point for improving cross-cultural understanding should be a fundamental strategy for school professionals. Empathy is the act of understanding and being sensitive to others' experiences, and an empathetic approach acknowledges differences without assuming one view is more legitimate than another. The goal of an IEP meeting is to determine the best delivery of services to meet a student's particular needs, so reaching consensus is important in crafting an IEP that is supported by all parties. When school professionals have the ability to facilitate communication across diverse perspectives, obtaining true consensus is more likely.

An empathetic approach first requires examination of one's own cultural biases and assumptions. Until school professionals take a close look at their own taken-for-granted modes of interaction, it is difficult to anticipate, or ameliorate, possible areas of miscommunication. For example, as this article details, the IEP process itself is replete with culturally prescribed ways of

operating. It is a highly bureaucratic proceeding that relies on specialized vocabulary and Western definitions of disability and intervention, and it is conducted in a formal manner with a low context communication style. Being cognizant of these facts can help professionals carefully look for areas that are likely to cause confusion or be points of conflict.

While knowledge about a school's population is necessary for developing sensitivity and awareness, a careful consideration of one's own cultural biases and assumptions can lead to further responsiveness in parent-school communications. In particular, such self-reflection provides a starting point to make use of all perspectives to create a fully participatory IEP process. Rather than viewing CLD parents as the "other" whose assumptions are automatically perceived as deficient, an empathetic approach asks that all perspectives be examined and then considered as useful information to inform the process.

A common critique of cultural competence training is its emphasis on defining culture through ethnic and racial categories (Jenks, 2011). This can lead professionals to think of CLD parents as a one-dimensional list of cultural traits to be addressed rather than as complex humans, and it may preclude understanding interactions with parents as a complex web of meaning influenced by a variety of factors. A similar critique has been leveled at the education community. Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) note that developing awareness of cultural differences is a necessary but insufficient step in establishing collaborative relationships with CLD parents. Too often, a cultural competence approach privileges the mainstream view and attempts to move parents to compliance rather than promoting active participation.

An empathetic stance, or what Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) refer to as a "posture of reciprocity," asks that school personnel acknowledge their own cultural assumptions (and those of the school context) as well as those of the parents. However, acknowledging parents' cultural assumptions includes attempting to *understand* their point of view, not simply to be aware of it. This avoids stereotyping, and it opens the door to an individualized awareness of each family's situation and how it intersects with the mainstream culture.

Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) provide four organizing principles that can be used when preparing for an IEP meeting. They caution these are not a checklist, but a flexible tool for promoting collaborative relationships. While we recommend considering these concepts prior to an IEP meeting, they can be used to even greater impact when developing a professional philosophy for working with CLD parents.

The principles include the following:

Step 1: Identify the cultural values imbedded in the professional interpretation of a student's difficulties or in the recommendation for service.

Step 2: Find out whether the family being served recognizes and values these assumptions and, if not, how their view differs from that of the professional.

Step 3: Acknowledge and give explicit respect to any cultural differences identified, and fully explain the cultural basis of the professional assumptions.

Step 4: Through discussion and collaboration set about determining the most effective way of adapting professional interpretations or recommendations to the value system of the family. (p. 17)

Consideration of these steps allows school personnel to invite parents to be full

participants in the IEP. They anticipate areas of miscommunication and provide an opportunity to explore participants' concerns while respecting the perspectives of all stakeholders. The focus is on an outcome that can be supported, and understood, by school personnel, parents, and students.

Effective communication is the cornerstone for productive, collaborative relationships with parents. For parents whose children have disabilities, the IEP meeting is an important forum for enhancing communication between school personnel and CLD parents. This requires an awareness of the culturally bound elements of the IEP meeting that may impede communication. In addition to an awareness of how verbal and non-verbal communication styles, bureaucratic procedures, and cultural assumptions about disability and intervention impact the IEP process, school personnel can implement an empathetic approach to cross-cultural understanding. These efforts will promote IEP meetings that support a student's success.

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