

Involving Immigrant Parents of Students with Disabilities in the Educational Process

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“Parents are their child’s first teacher.”

How many times have you heard this platitude, usually at workshops about how to involve parents in their children’s education? The challenge for educators of children from immigrant families is to figure out how to engage parents from ethnic and linguistic backgrounds different from their own (see box, “Overview of Current U.S. Immigration”). What if the parents speak Urdu or Hmong, Somali or Chinese, and the only foreign-language teacher or resource person at the school is the Spanish teacher? This article provides many practical suggestions, tactics, and resources for questing educators who are sincere in their desire to involve *all* parents.

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Parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities in the United States is a legal right mandated with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 94-142, 1975), further strengthened in P.L. 101-476 (1990), and in the most recent reauthorization of P.L. 105-17 (1997). Unfortunately, despite the 25 years of such mandates, U.S. special education programs still lack active involvement and participation from parents of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Thorpe, 1997).

Barriers to Participation by Immigrant Parents of Students with Disabilities

Several potential barriers limit parents’ participation in their children’s education in the school setting. Knowledge and understanding of these barriers is the first step toward bridging them. (See “Resources” boxes for helpful instructional tools and other useful resources.)

Language

Limited English-language proficiency is a major factor that affects parent participation in the school system (Holman, 1997; Sileo, Prater, & Sileo, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull,

2001). Parents with limited English proficiency may not feel confident communicating with school personnel and, in fact, might feel intimidated by highly educated school personnel (Holman, 1997). New or unskilled English-language speakers should be encouraged to use their native language (with appropriate supports) to gain and give information about their child’s education.

Further, these parents might not understand the special educational needs and the nature of their child’s disability (Thomas, Correa, & Morsink, 2000). For example, they may not be able to read the reports that teachers are sending home—in some cases, even when the report is in their native language. Some parents may be illiterate in their native language.

On the other hand, some parents may have strong English skills and want to communicate in English. These parents will be able to gain a full understanding of their child’s educational process through traditional home-school communication.

Tactics

- First, try to assess and understand the language needs of each immigrant family. Your first task is to ask parents if they are comfortably



Overview of Current U.S. Immigration

U.S. Census Information. The population of U.S. schools is becoming increasingly diverse. According to the population survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000 (Camarota, 2001); there are 28.4 million immigrants living in the United States, they account for about 1 in 10 residents (10.4%), the highest percentage in 70 years. The census also revealed that school-age immigrant children in the United States number 8.6 million; and researchers have projected that this number will be even larger in the coming years, because 17.6% of the children approaching school age have immigrant mothers (Camarota, 2001).

New Immigrants. Families immigrate to the United States for many different reasons: political conflicts, economic opportunities, education, to reunite with family, and a combination of these and other concerns. Whatever their reasons, the immigrants seek a better life and opportunities for their families, including access to a system of free public education for their children (Holman, 1997). Immigrant families come with educational expectations for their children, but a lack of familiarity with the U.S. education structure. The U.S. schools are required to meet the needs of the diverse students and inform parents of their rights and responsibilities. In 1974 the Supreme Court's decision in the *Lau v. Nicholas* case (Ohio Department of Education, 2001) stated that equal access to education involves having instruction in a language that the student can communicate in and understand. This decision has resulted in an increased availability of translated materials and translators to meet the educational needs of children with limited English proficiency. Effectively teaching immigrant children demands additional resources from a school system that is already struggling to meet the educational needs of its domestic students.

Socioeconomic Profile of Immigrants. The survey conducted by the Census Bureau shows that 53% of immigrant

children live in or near poverty, compared to 35% of children of natives (Camarota, 2001). Some immigrant students might be suffering from the harmful effects of living in refugee camps. These immigrant students may not have had formal education opportunities in their native countries. Immigrant parents may work in jobs that do not provide family health insurance. Poverty, emotional and physical trauma, or poor medical care that some immigrant children experience may create circumstances that increase the likelihood of the children having special educational needs. A consequence may be that many immigrant students are at increased risk for school difficulties. In particular, special educators are challenged to not only address cultural and linguistics differences but also meet the needs of children with disabilities (Artiles, Trent, Hoffman-Kipp, & Lopez-Torres, 2000). Educators are faced with immigrant students who struggle with language (Roseberry-McKibbin, 1995). Teachers need parents' assistance in distinguishing language differences from language disabilities.

Barriers to Instruction. Teachers of immigrant children have to overcome barriers to instruction, such as language and cultural differences, parental lack of information about U.S. schools, and differences with previous educational system or the lack of previous formal schooling. Despite these barriers, teachers are working hard to meet the individual needs of students in their classrooms. Teachers alone cannot achieve the goal of an appropriate education for all children; parents and families must be fully and meaningfully engaged in this process. In addition, educators must take into consideration that the family is the most important element in a child's life (Heward, 2000). Parents are their child's first teacher and often are the first to recognize the special needs of their children. Yet, involving parents and families becomes a difficult issue in improving the academic and social devel-

in receiving communication in English. You can informally assess whether English is an appropriate language for communication with a family by talking with family members and evaluating if the parents or other significant adults in the family can effectively receive and give clear information. Be careful to emphasize with parents that at any point, if the parents' language skills change (e.g., parents become more proficient in English or you realize that there are frequent miscommunication in English), then you can change the language of communication.

- Include translators in meetings with parents. Translators must have the family's confidence and be held to a high ethical code, including confidentiality. School districts usually maintain bilingual translators in languages that have a significant population in their area. Most states or districts have community-based translators who are available to schools. For example, in central Ohio, the Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS) is a community-based program developed in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Education that provides translators to school districts. CRIS has a pool of translators for 22 languages. The translators usually have other jobs but assist schools on request. Schools use services like CRIS for languages less frequently found in the school districts. The Ohio Department of Education also partnered with the Ohio Dominican College to set up summer training for bilingual translators to increase the pool of available translators (D. Fleak, personal communication, September 1, 2001). Individuals who successful-

ly completed the program were listed by language as persons available to schools as translators. Schools typically pay a nominal fee to the interpreters.

- Give the parents the opportunity to choose a translator with whom they feel comfortable and may have worked with in the past (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).
- Ask other parents who speak the same language to assist in the communication with the family.
- Provide classes to teach parents English as a second language, if possible, or direct the interested parents to certain programs, such as Center for Applied Linguistics, which offers online language and academic programs for recent immigrants (www.cal.org/crede/newcomers).
- Large urban school districts or a coalition of smaller school districts may develop transition or welcome educational centers that provide assistance to immigrant children and families in adjusting to U.S. schools. The centers allow educators to assess the skills of the students and the development of student skills needed for school success. For example, the Columbus, Ohio, Public Schools has developed a Welcome Center that provides services to immigrant children and their families. Such centers enable schools to use resources more efficiently.

Lack of Information

Parents of children with disabilities often report that their greatest need is information (Thorp, 1997). Parents need frequent and precise information about their child's progress; it is not enough to receive progress reports a few times per year. Moreover, as stated by Thorp, "The information received by the parents may or may not be in their home language, and it may or may not be provided in a way that is understandable" (p. 267).

Tactics

- Provide information, both written and oral, in ways that enable the

Assess and understand the language needs of each immigrant family.

parents to understand. The Regional Resource and Federal Centers (RRFC) Network is composed of the Federal Resource Center and the six regional resource centers for special education (<http://www.dssc.org/frc/index.htm>). Immigrants from a particular culture/country often settled in the same region of the United States. For example, Minnesota has a large Hmong community; central Ohio, a significant Somali population; south Florida, a large population of Cubans. Schools in these areas may have parental information and teaching aids already translated into the native languages of particular groups resident in their community. By contacting the appropriate federal regional office, you may obtain the needed translated materials. General information about working with immigrant children and their families is also available from the regional centers. For example, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory provides online self-report checklists (www.nwrel.org/cnorse/book-lets/immigration/5.html) for teachers and administrators to assess the school environment's friendliness toward immigrants.

- Make school reports simple. Use icons (e.g., happy or sad faces) to convey information. If you are sending written reports, have it translated into the family's native language. Translators can help with the development of school forms in the parents' native language.
- Use positive, direct, and simple language. Avoid using medical or psychological terms or language.

Provide information, written and oral, in ways that enable the parents to understand.

Provide examples of student behavior, preferably on graphs or charts that are more easily understood.

- Use translators if you need to communicate orally with the parents.
- Deliver positive messages through nonverbal communication; sometimes it is the only direct communication between you and the parent.
- Do not assume that you have communicated effectively; verify it by having the parents communicate to you what they heard.
- Develop a survival vocabulary list in the native language(s) of your families for use with parents and school personnel (Thomas et al., 2000). Include basic special education terminology, greetings, action words, and calendar words in the list. The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE, 2001) (<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/classroom/fun.htm>) provides much of this information. After choosing the list of vocabulary you feel is important to facilitate the communication between you and the families, you may find on-line resources to translate the list to other languages (e.g., www.world.altavista.com). This Web site allows you to translate any text, or even Web sites, to eight different languages.

Teacher's Unfamiliarity with Immigrant Parents' Culture

As the school population has become increasingly diverse, the teacher population in the school environment has remained unchanged with the vast majority of teachers coming from middle class Euro-American backgrounds. This creates unequal representation of students with a disproportionate number of teachers coming from the majority culture and the majority of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Sileo, et al., 1996; Thorp, 1997). Unless teachers actively seek opportunities to learn about other cultures, they will be unfamiliar with the immi-

grant family's cultural traditions and practices.

Tactics

- Read about other cultures. For example, *The Culturalgram: The Nations Around Us* (Brigham Young University, 1996) provides a synopsis of countries and cultures from around the world.
- Ask bilingual parents, especially those who have children with disabilities, about their experiences with the education system in their native country.
- Understand the different needs of the families and appreciate their culture and language (Fradd & Tikunoff, 1987).
- Welcome the parents to your classroom and encourage them to share their culture and experiences with your whole class.
- Be sensitive to matters pertaining to nonverbal communication (e.g., eye contact, facial expression, gestures, proximity, touching, clothing) among diverse cultural groups (Thomas et al., 2000). In some cultures looking directly and making eye contact could mean respect, but in other cultures it could be interpreted as disrespectful.
- Be careful with physical proximity and touching. Cultural norms vary widely on the type and frequency of touching that occurs during friendly professional interactions.

Negative Educational Experiences

Parents' negative experiences may affect their participation in the educational process of their children. Some parents may have had prior negative experiences with educators. For example, parents who never have been invited to their child's classroom, or the parents who don't speak English yet have been told that they should only speak English to their child with a disability (Thorp, 1997). These messages may have created negative attitudes toward school personnel. The teacher must gain the trust of the families and engage them in the education process of their child.

Tactics

- Send welcome notes to the new-arrival families in their language and invite them to visit the school.
- Communicate personally with the family, through e-mail, a phone call, or quick "home note" (Thomas et al., 2000) regarding the progress of their child, notifying parents about upcoming activities, and any other concerns.
- Include special cultural and religious holidays on the school calendar. Ask parents to help plan cultural events and celebrations at the classroom. Use the international calendar on the NCBE Web site (<http://www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ/MCC/calendar-index.html>).
- Make home visits by appointment with the family member. Dress appropriately and comfortably. Respond with sensitivity to offers of food and beverages (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).
- Home visits provide an opportunity to instruct parents in specialized strategies designed to meet their child's educational needs. Make sure your suggestions coincide with the parents' behavioral goals for their child.

Unfamiliarity with the U.S. Educational Practices

Learning about and gaining access to community services can be challenging to parents, especially immigrant parents (Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999). Immigrant parents may not understand their legal rights and the rights of their children, and they may not be familiar with the educational practices in the United States. Many developing countries do not have mandates and laws for educating children with dis-

Send welcome notes to new immigrant families in their language and invite them to visit the school.

Helpful Resources on the World Wide Web

Beach Center on Families and Disability

(<http://www.beachcenter.org/>). Conducts research and training to enhance families' empowerment and disseminates information to families, people with disabilities, educators, and the general public. Provides technical assistance to national network of parent-to-parent support programs.

The Center for Applied Linguistics offers on-line language and academic programs for recent immigrants (www.cal.org/crede/newcomer.htm).

Clearinghouse for Immigrants Education (CHIME) (http://www.igc.apc.org/ncas/sr_essi.htm): Selected readings. This is an interactive database and networking services that facilitates public access to literature, research, Internet resources, and reform strategies to promote the effective education of immigrant students.

Family Network on Disabilities of Florida, Inc. (<http://fndfl.org>). A statewide alliance of people with disabilities, special needs, or at-risk children and their families. Its mission is to provide family-driven support, education, information, and advocacy.

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) (<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/index.htm>). Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs to collect, analyze, and disseminate information relating to the effective education of linguistically and culturally diverse learners in the United States. Through this Web page you will have access to a variety of internet resources relating to aspects of language, culture, and education. Through language and education links, you can also learn words, phrases, and holidays from around the world.

National Council on Disability (<http://www.ncd.gov/>). Its purpose is to promote policies, programs, practices, and procedures that guarantee equal opportunity for all individuals with disabilities and those from diverse cultural backgrounds. Parents and teachers can have access

to the disabilities Act and other civil rights laws. NCD brochures offered online in several languages.

Northwest Regional Resource Center provides on-line self-report checklists (www.nwrel.org/) for teachers and administrators to assess the school environment's friendliness toward immigrants.

Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OBEMLA>). OBEMLA's mission is to include various elements of school reform in programs designed to assist the language minority agenda. These include an emphasis on high academic standards, an improvement of school accountability, an emphasis on professional development, the promotion of family literacy, the encouragement of early reading, and the establishment of partnerships between parents and the community.

The Parent Advocacy Coalition of Educational Rights (PACER) serves families of children and adults with disabilities (<http://www.pacer.org>).

The Regional Resource and Federal Centers (RRFC) Network (<http://www.dssc.org/frc/rrfc.htm>). These centers are specially funded to assist state education agencies in the systemic improvement of education programs, practices, and policies that affect children and youth with disabilities. The RRCs help states and U.S. jurisdictions find integrated solutions for systemic reform, offering consultation, information services, technical assistance, training, and product development.

The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (the Alliance) (<http://www.taalliance.org>), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Focuses on providing technical assistance for establishing, developing, and coordinating parent training and information projects under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The Alliance is prepared to offer a variety of resources that will launch parent training and information centers into the 21st century.

abilities. Parents may or may not have had formal schooling opportunities themselves. The result is that some may not be aware of their right to ask for special education services for their children.

Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson (1996) studied culturally diverse parents of children with developmental disabilities regarding their attitudes and experiences with the special education system. The researchers found that all the families indicated high

degrees of commitment and involvement, but responses varied in terms of their understanding of the individualized education program (IEP) process, awareness of rights and options, and willingness to challenge school district's decisions concerning their child.

Tactics

- Fully inform immigrant parents about their rights and their role in their child's education. Educators can find parental information in

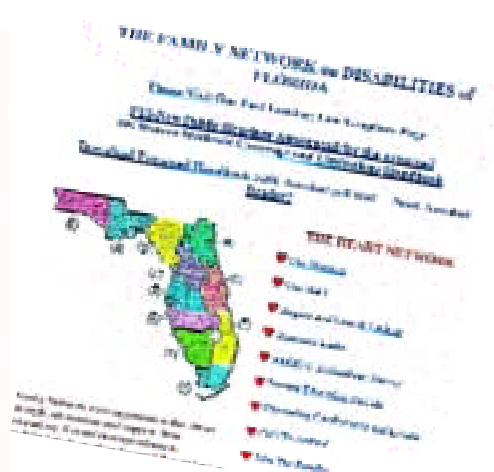
various languages through the Federal Regional Resource Center.

- Provide information about the identification, referral, and intervention process; legal, ethical, financial matters; and other resources (e.g., transportation and child-care services) (Sileo, Prater, & Sileo, 1996). Provide written handouts in the family's language. See the Web site of PACER center, the Parent Advocacy Coalition of Educational Rights, which serves



Other Helpful Resources

- Baca, L., & Evarts, H. (1998). *The bilingual special education interface* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.*
- Bilingual Dictionaries, Inc., 5107 Via Miudanao, P.O. Box 529, San Luis Rey, CA 92068 (<http://www.bilingual-dictionaries.com>).
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families of children and adults with disabilities (<http://www.pacer.org>). The center was created by parents of children and youth with disabilities to help other parents facing similar challenges. PACER can also identify the resources and services available to assist teachers in working with parents. For example, this Web site can provide information about translated materials in Hmong and Spanish.

- Develop audiotapes and videotapes in the parents' language explaining their rights and responsibilities under the law.
- Develop school manuals on school policies and procedures, curriculum, and transition. Manuals for parents are available from many parent organizations, such as PACER centers (www.pacer.org; Thomas et al., 2000).

Differing Views Regarding Involvement in Schools

Families from diverse cultural and linguistic communities may have historically different relationships with schools and attitudes about family involvement in schools (Thorp, 1997). In some cultures, parents may see involvement as interfering with the school—that they are merely consumers of services. Moreover, they may typically have been passive participants in the educational process in their native country. Educators must work to inform parents of the participatory role that

parents are encouraged to play in the U.S. school system.

Tactics

- Assess and evaluate the family's beliefs and needs as they relate to their children's education.
- Educate parents through school meetings and home visits about the importance of family involvement and participation and the effect of their involvement on their child's education.
- Set up the school's phone system with a voicemail answering the most common questions immigrant parents in general have about their children's education. You could obtain technical assistance to develop a phone system to provide information in multiple languages.
- School districts can set up Web pages in multiple languages that immigrant parents can access.
- Assist families in making contact with other immigrant parents (from their native country) whose children have been successful in school.

Fully inform immigrant parents about their rights and their role in their child's education.

A Teacher's Thoughts on Working with Immigrant Families

Julie is a teacher in a middle school where there are many students who have recently moved to the United States from a variety of countries. On the first school open house, about a third of the parents attended. Some brought family members or friends who could help interpret. The school has Somali assistants and one teacher fluent in Spanish to help with communication. Julie found the parents to be keenly interested in their child's education. She found that the language barrier is not difficult to overcome when both parent and teacher have a genuine desire to help the child. She also noticed that the children of parents who have attended the open houses and parent-teacher conferences, and who have attempted to respond to written and phone messages, have generally made the most progress in acquiring language skills. Julie works to make parents feel comfortable and respected. She communicates to them how much courage it must have taken for them to leave everything that was familiar and start a new life in a different country.

Julie says that teachers in her school are happy and impressed with the fact that the parents value education and are willing to team with teachers to help and encourage the children. Teachers find it an interesting and rewarding experience to work with students and parents from other countries and other cultures. Further, Julie emphasized that teachers should discuss parent expectations regarding academics and behavior. She encourages parents to set high but obtainable educational goals for their children.

Final Thoughts

Bridging the gap between home and school is the responsibility of both educators and parents. Professionals should take the first step toward encouraging immigrant parents to become more actively involved in the educational process.

Understanding the needs and the culture of immigrant parents helps in building a positive relationship between school and home. The outcomes include improved student achievement, increased teacher familiarity with other cultures, and a better understanding by parents of their rights and responsibilities. The future success of our society is just as closely tied to the education of today's immigrant children as our past success was to the education of the previous generations of immigrants.

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