

Immigrant, Bilingual Parents of Students With Disabilities: Positive Perceptions and Supportive Dialogue

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Abstract

Parent-professional partnerships are essential for meaningful and effective inclusion of students with disabilities. Research indicates that partnerships with immigrant, bilingual parents can be challenging due in part to unrecognized parent skills and educators' own everyday uses of English that can marginalize parents during individualized education program (IEP) meetings. However, teachers can reflect on and improve their assumptions about parents' as well as use supportive dialogue during IEP meetings to support inclusion for students with disabilities who are learning English.

Keywords

linguistic, diversity, cultural, diversities, family, IEP process, parents

Within the United States, students with disabilities who are English learners are increasingly participating in special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b) and are more likely than students who are not learning English to receive special education services outside the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Participation of these students' parents follows the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) and can result in increased student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Leithwood, 2010). *Parent* denotes a student's caregiver who has responsibility for a student; this term is not restricted to the traditional role of parent nor to a blood relationship with the child. Contemporary scholarship recognizes parent participation framed as family-professional partnerships such that mutual trust and respect are tied to shared decision making in which parents' expertise, priorities, and concerns are recognized and acted on to support special education services (Dunst, Trivette, & Snyder, 2000; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015).

Nonetheless, research suggests that fostering partnerships challenges special educators, particularly with families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Indeed, participation for parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds typically does not meet expectations outlined within IDEA

(2004), nor meet characteristics of partnerships (Harry, 2008; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Jegatheesan, 2009; Rueda, Monzo, Shapiro, Gomez, & Blacher, 2005). Difficulties in family-educator partnerships can lead to parent frustration, decreased participation, and refusal to collaborate and to parents relegated to the role of recipients of educators' decisions (Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2015). Moreover, these partnership difficulties can result in inequitable special education services for students with disabilities.

One area of particular challenge can be partnering with immigrant, bilingual parents who speak English during individualized education program (IEP) meetings. Following Cook (2002) and Grosjean (2008), rather than restricting the definition of bilingual to speakers possessing "native-like" language skills in both languages, here *bilingual* denotes a person who has linguistic skills in two languages regardless of contextual proficiency. This may also

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include multilingual individuals. This article focuses on bilingual parents who have lower proficiency in English during IEP meeting contexts. These parents may elect to have their child's IEP meeting held in English for many reasons, such as parents' daily success in using English in many contexts, their distrust of language interpreters based on prior difficulties, or their embarrassment at requesting a language interpreter. Schools also may not provide language interpreters for these parents when required by IDEA (2004). For these parents and their children's teachers, partnership and communication difficulties can be, in part, due to unrecognized parent bilingual language skills and educators' everyday uses of English that can marginalize parents.

This article asserts that teachers can (a) reconceptualize bilingual parents' language skills and (b) use supportive dialogue to partner in the interest of supporting inclusion for students with disabilities who are learning English. This article centers on IEP meetings as IDEA's (2004) institutionalized venue for collaboration with parents; however, much of this discussion also applies to parent-teacher conferences and informal parent-teacher discussions.

Challenging Perspectives

Educator beliefs and presumptions about immigrant, bilingual parents can encourage or discourage equitable partnerships. In spite of educators' best intentions, partnerships with parents can be challenged when parents receive subtle messages that their skills, ideas, and perspectives are not valued and/or acted on (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Added to this, schools may perceive immigrant, bilingual parents negatively when they speak less than native-like English. Because communicative needs in the United States are predominantly carried out in English and English is spoken by the majority, the power of "native English speaker" norms can be overwhelming. A language hierarchy can exist in which individuals perceived as having "limited English proficiency" may be negatively viewed compared to "monolingual, native English speakers" (Ortega, 2014) because monolingualism is the norm such that characteristics of bilingualism can be viewed as odd, exceptional, or even inferior (Edwards, 1994; E. Ellis, 2006; Hamers & Blanc, 2000). As a consequence, bilingual parents' language skills in English (or their English proficiency) may be viewed through a deficit lens, which complicates teachers' efforts to pursue partnerships.

Immigrant, bilingual parents who may not speak like native English speakers during IEP meetings may be primarily viewed with reference to their imperfect English (Cook, 2012; Ortega, 2014). Their language skills, expertise, and strengths for their children can be viewed as less valuable due to teachers' primary focus on and linguistic judgments about the grammaticality of parents' English.

Consequently, parents may be relegated to complying with teachers' requests and adopting educators' viewpoints rather than acting as equal partners during IEP decision making. Importantly, as immigrant, bilingual parents may not recognize the importance of their cultural strengths and child expertise for partnerships, they may also adopt this deficit ideology by faulting themselves for impeding IEP communication rather than looking to teachers for appropriate communication adaptations to support effective dialogue (Correa-Torres & Zebehazy, 2014). Consequently, parents' voices may be unheard, rendering them and their children vulnerable to receiving inequitable special education services.

Marginalizing Talk

Misperceptions about immigrant, bilingual parents may lay a foundation for marginalizing talk during IEP meetings such that immigrant, bilingual parents' voices and expertise are unheard, rejected, and replaced with those of teachers. A focus on spoken words and phrases is important because language is not a neutral, power-free exchange of words and meanings (Beneke & Cheatham, 2016). Through talk, teachers may assert their expertise over parents (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). As a result, language can (re)construct negative perspectives, resulting in marginalizing parents and inequitable special education services.

While special education jargon, acronyms, and technical language (e.g., inclusion, free appropriate public education, learning disability) can silence parents (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012), teachers' everyday uses of English can also silence immigrant, bilingual parents if teachers do not adapt their talk to meet parents' communicative needs (Lee & Park, 2016). Indicators of negative perspectives about immigrant, bilingual parents can be teachers not listening to parents, being directive, and offering few opportunities for shared decision making during IEP meetings. Teachers also may speak in ways that parents cannot understand (Cummings & Hardin, 2017). Moreover, educators may not provide immigrant, bilingual parents with cultural and institutional background information necessary to meaningfully dialogue (Lee & Park, 2016; Salas, 2004).

Teachers' uses of everyday English can marginalize immigrant, bilingual parents, leading to prioritizing teacher expertise (Cheatham & Ro, 2011). Examining teacher words and phrases is critical to moving forward to support partnerships and communication. As a simple example, some parents may need support to understand everyday English homophones (i.e., two or more words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings) used during IEP meetings, such as *very-vary*, *hears-here's*, *ways-weighs*, and *witch-which*. Without their understanding of these seemingly unimportant words, within a fast, continuous stream of teachers' talk, bilingual parents can be left trying to

determine why the teacher used one word rather than its homophone and how this impacts the teachers' intended meaning, for example, regarding their child's school performance. More challenges ensue when teachers speak without clear boundaries between words (Cheatham & Ro, 2011). As such, these parents may be rendered confused and unable to meaningfully dialogue with teachers.

Similarly, teachers' uses of words that have specific meanings within the context of U.S. schools can marginalize immigrant, bilingual parents. To illustrate, everyday adjectives used to describe students during IEP meetings (e.g., *helpful*, *shy*, *respectful*, *intelligent*) can confound teachers' desires for partnerships because immigrant, bilingual parents may bring considerably different backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences to IEP meeting discussions, resulting in misunderstanding of intended meanings (Cheatham & Nyegenye, 2017). Teachers may use adjectives expecting parents to readily infer their meanings. When a teacher says, "Abshir is disrespectful during class," the teacher assumes that the parent understands ways in which classrooms are structured, expected student interactions, and the behaviors that teachers consider respectful and disrespectful. Teachers may also assume that parents agree with teachers' viewpoints. These culture-laden contexts are largely unaddressed during IEP meeting conversation, placing the burden on parents to understand teachers' intended meanings as a precondition for partnering during decision making.

Furthermore, teachers' adherence to typical conversational routines during school meetings may marginalize immigrant, bilingual parents (Salas, 2004). Talk routines are conversational structures specific to IEP meetings, such as teachers sharing students' school performance, teachers setting academic goals, and parents recounting students' home behaviors. Other conversation patterns include explaining, disagreeing, summarizing, questioning, and answering. When parents do not participate in conversational routines as educators expect (e.g., follow English-language pragmatic norms), teachers may not hear parents' viewpoints and prevent parents from participating in decision making. Teachers also may misinterpret parents' subtle language cues. For example, teachers may ask a question and provide wait time for parents to respond; without parents' immediate response, teachers may assume that parents have nothing to say (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2013). However, bilingual parents may not know exactly what to say or how to say it, or may still be processing the teachers' question. Teachers' rapid pace of talk can be overwhelming (Cummings & Hardin, 2017), resulting in some bilingual parents expressing themselves with more frequent English-language difficulties.

Another common conversational routine during IEP meetings is advocating for students, for example when parents use language to pursue a particular set

of educational services for their child. Teachers may not recognize some immigrant, bilingual parents' subtle advocacy efforts such that teachers' expertise is prioritized in decision making (Cheatham & Jimenez-Silva, 2012). In the context of perspectives in which immigrant, bilingual parents' expertise may be negatively viewed and spoken by parents in "imperfect" English, educators' talk may marginalize parents, leading to inequitable special education service provision.

Positive Perceptions and Supportive Dialogue

Despite these challenges, teachers can increase positive perceptions of immigrant, bilingual parents and provide them with supportive dialogue during IEP meetings. To foster and maintain partnerships, researchers suggest many important viewpoints and strategies, such as having high expectations about parents and their participation, developing trust with families, respecting family culture, avoiding jargon, equalizing relationships, and recognizing family strengths and expertise (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Keilty, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2015). Moreover, to take professional responsibility for tapping parents' skills and expertise, engaging them in meaningful, equitable dialogue about students, and facilitating true partnerships, educators can first focus on adding positive perceptions about immigrant, bilingual parents.

Developing More Positive Perceptions

Replacing misunderstandings and potential biases with positive perspectives regarding immigrant, bilingual parents requires teachers to realize that U.S. society and its school professional community may have (perhaps subtle) negative perceptions of immigrant, bilingual parents who do not speak English with high proficiency. Educators can respond to reflective questions designed to promote positive perspectives and equitable and effective dialogue with immigrant, bilingual parents. These questions are designed for educators to challenge potential misunderstandings and biases regarding immigrant, bilingual parents' multilingualism, cultural differences in communication, and the conflicting expectations about parents' roles (i.e., parents as equal partners versus parents as service recipients). These reflection questions can be used by individual teachers, professional development groups, or during consultations with experts in culture, language, and power and the interrelations among them. As such, educators can move toward more effectively acting as expert facilitators during IEP meetings (Beneke & Cheatham, 2016) and families' expertise and advocacy concerning their children's education can be better recognized and acted on within an equitable relationship.

Shifting from linguistic barriers to linguistic potentials. Educators can recognize that negative assumptions about bilingual parents may exist. Research indicates that expecting bilingual individuals to speak like native English speakers is inappropriate and may actually maintain negative perceptions and unhelpful communication with bilingual parents (Canagarajah, 1999; Ortega, 2014). To promote positive understandings and practices regarding immigrant, bilingual parents, educators can ask the following self-assessment questions:

1. How much responsibility for miscommunication do I place on immigrant, bilingual parents? What actions can I take to shift responsibility for partnerships and communication from immigrant, bilingual parents to me?
2. How can I learn about the extent to which my talk prioritizes my expertise over the expertise of immigrant, bilingual parents? How can I learn if my language use during IEP meetings prevents parents from meaningfully and equitably participating?
3. What questions can I ask immigrant, bilingual parents to learn more about their linguistic strengths and needs during English-language IEP meetings? How can I discover these and then act on them during planning for their children during IEP meetings?
4. What specific actions can I take to learn about individual parents, their culture, and their language? Who should I consult to ensure that I take these actions in a culturally acceptable and a linguistically understandable way for parents?
5. What outside resources (e.g., cultural informants, language experts) can I consult to more effectively and inclusively communicate and partner with immigrant, bilingual parents?

Shifting from grammaticality to acceptability. In addition, grammaticality judgments may also hinder educators' efforts at effective communication and partnerships with immigrant, bilingual parents. To shift educators' focus from grammaticality to more inclusive acceptability, teachers can reflect on the following questions:

1. How do I perceive bilingual parents' English when it is spoken with mistakes? How can I move beyond parents' errors, accept the ways parents speak, help them understand my talk, and seek greater understanding of parents' talk?
2. To what extent do I believe that English should be spoken perfectly or native-like to participate in school meetings? What experiences and other learning have I had that led to this viewpoint? What

information or experiences do I need to overcome this viewpoint?

3. What conversational adaptations can I employ during communicative interactions with immigrant, bilingual parents to ensure equitable dialogue and decision making during IEP meetings?
4. What questions can I ask parents to understand their language preferences during IEP meetings? When parents refuse language interpretation services, how can I reframe this in light of communication difficulties?
5. Who can I ask to observe and provide a constructive critique regarding my language use during IEP meetings with immigrant, bilingual parents? How can I help the observer focus on whose expertise is prioritized, and what adaptations are needed to support parents?

Moving to Supportive Dialogue

In addition to addressing potentially negative perceptions, teachers can also benefit from immediately implementable strategies to foster dialogue and understanding during IEP meetings with immigrant, bilingual parents. Teachers have the professional responsibility for cultivating mutual partnerships with families such that parent priorities and perspectives are foregrounded and acted on. Therefore, establishing an environment of trust in a context of ongoing relationships with parents is important. To achieve positive relationships, teachers' communication strategies, such as asking open-ended questioning and actively listening to parents, can be helpful (Friend & Cook, 2016; Turnbull et al., 2015). To these strategies can be added teachers' specific communication adaptations, which are based on second language acquisition research with bilingual adults who were developing English skills. These adaptations are presented to help teachers speak in understandable ways and thereby promote meaningfully dialogue with bilingual parents; as such, the adaptations can move teachers' positive perceptions of parents to practice.

Engaging. First, educators can implement the following strategies to begin engaging immigrant, bilingual parents in dialogue:

1. Lower anxiety and equalize power relationships (Vandergrift, 2011). For example, educators can discuss with parents their philosophy of partnerships and collaboration including the importance of meaningful parent participation during IEP meetings.
2. Engage in small talk prior to meetings to accommodate to each other's language uses (e.g., rate of speech, pronunciation, intonation; Field, 2008).

3. Activate prior knowledge (Goh, 2017; Vandergrift, 2011), for example, by exchanging with parents information about relevant experiences and knowledge (e.g., home life, beliefs, the student's education) as well as asking parents to share about topics to be discussed during meetings, such as the student's academic performance and interventions.
4. Learn about each other to increase pragmatic understandings (e.g., understanding of meanings that are unsaid but implied; Field, 2008), for instance, by sharing about each other's lives.
5. Explain the purpose of meetings (Richards, 2005). To illustrate, teachers can discuss the goals of an IEP meeting in relation to a student's learning and school performance. Ask parents to suggest other purposes and/or discussion topics.

Defining. During IEP meetings, as teachers define key ideas, phrases, and words, parents can better contribute to discussions.

1. Preview important words/phrases and their meanings (Chang & Read, 2006; Richards, 2005), which will be used during the subsequent discussion by presenting words and their contextual definitions. This can also help individuals who know words in print but have difficulty identifying them in spoken language (Goh, 2017).
2. Define key words/phrases while speaking, for example, using embedded definitions of key terms and phrases (e.g., "We asked the TA, that is the teaching assistant, to help with math calculation"; Long, 1983).
3. State the same information in a different way for clarification (Vandergrift, 2011). Likewise, teachers ask parents to explain their ideas in different ways to clarify ideas for teachers.
4. Use examples to illustrate ideas (Vandergrift, 2011). For instance, teachers can provide parents with details about a child's behavior during class. Ask parents to provide relevant examples as well.

Signaling. Third, teachers can promote dialogue with immigrant, bilingual parents with different types of signaling strategies:

1. Use cohesion and coherence discourse markers (e.g., *first*, *second*, *however*, *so*; Field, 2008; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Vandergrift, 2011) to support parents' understanding of relationships between words, sentences, and the overall discourse. Teachers signal for parents when topics change during the meeting (e.g., "OK, we just finished talking about his math class. Would you like to talk about social studies?").

2. Emphasize syllables of key terms/phrases (Field, 2008) for words/phrases that parents may not know/understand.
3. Repeat and emphasize key words/phrases (Webb, 2007). Encourage parents to do the same.
4. Use discourse markers to contextualize talk by signaling that some key ideas are important (e.g., "Let me say again . . .," "Just to emphasize . . ."; Vandergrift, 2011). Listen for parents as they signal their priorities.

Prompting. Fourth, educators can prompt immigrant, bilingual parents to facilitate information exchange and dialogue:

1. Engage parents in discussion and dialogue (Richards, 2005) by asking for their ideas, suggestions, disagreement, and information (e.g., "I will share about your child's math skills at school. Please discuss what you think is important and what I may not have gotten correct"). Prompt parents for their suggestions during problem solving and decision making such that decisions emanate from the dialogue rather than being predetermined.
2. Provide verbal advance organizers of meeting discussion topics (Field, 2008) and invite parents to add topics (e.g., "Today, we'd like to talk about your child's literacy strengths and his needs, and we'll make a plan for how to help him. What would you like to discuss?").

Scaffolding. Next, as teachers scaffold parents' understanding, they provide support for parents to meaningfully dialogue with other participants during IEP meetings:

1. Refer to physically present objects as a part of ongoing talk (R. Ellis, 1986; e.g., graphs of student test scores, student drawings and projects). Ask parents for their perspectives.
2. Use cognates and borrowed words (i.e., words that are substantially similar across English and another language; Field, 2008; Rost, 2011) to draw on parents' home language skills, for instance, English-Spanish (*independent-independiente*) and English-Korean (*support-서포트*, pronounced "suh-po-tuh"). Discuss possible meaning differences for cognates and borrowed words across languages.

Checking. In addition, by checking on each other's understanding, teachers and immigrant, bilingual parents can effectively dialogue and plan students' education programs.

1. Provide meaningful feedback to signal misunderstanding (Goh, 2017; Vandergrift, 2011), such as “I’m not sure I understand.” Encourage parents to do the same.
2. Provide frequent comprehension checks (Richards, 2005), such as “Yes, I see what you mean,” followed by a brief summary of what the parent said. Encourage parents to do the same.
3. Hold postmeeting discussions (Richards, 2005) (e.g., by telephone or in person a few days after the IEP meeting) in which discussions and decisions are summarized by both parents and teachers; solicit misunderstandings and disagreements; dialogue as needed.

Using these strategies to more effectively communicate with immigrant, bilingual parents is a reflection of teachers’ positive perspectives of immigrant, bilingual parents. These adaptations can support development and maintenance of partnerships.

Conclusion

Special educators have a responsibility to support bilingual, immigrant parents’ meaningful participation in decision making. With attention to positive perspectives about these parents and to provide supportive dialogue for parents during IEP meetings, teachers can ensure greater recognition of immigrant, bilingual parents’ expertise regarding their child’s strengths and needs. Moreover, by implementing communication strategies, educators can better meet parents’ communication needs. In this way, teachers can foster partnerships leading to equitable, inclusive services for students with disabilities who are learning English.

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