# Involvement of Language Minority Parents
## of Children with Disabilities
## in Their Child's School Achievement

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Everyone agrees that family participation is paramount to student achievement. Much has been written about the importance of parent collaboration in the schools. Some of these studies discuss the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse families. Others examine the difficulty of working with parents who do not speak English. Less has been written about the family who does not speak English and also has a child with disability.

This article reviews the research on involvement of parents in the schools, the research on involvement of language minority parents in the schools, the research on involvement of parents of children with disabilities, the requirements under *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) for parent participation, and the research on involvement of language minority parents of children with disabilities, in order to provide suggestions for strategies for increasing the involvement of language minority parents of children with disabilities in their child's school achievement.

### Research on Involvement
### of Parents in the Schools

Henderson, Marburger, and Ooms (1986) suggest families participate in schools in a variety of roles, including parents as partners, collaborators, prob-

lem solvers, supporters, advisers, and co-decision makers. This involvement in their children's education programs can range from either very active to passive reception depending on the school climate. If the school environment is open, helpful, and friendly, and frequent, clear, two-way communication is present, then parents are more likely to participate. Epstein (1995) has been one of the leading researchers focusing on parental involvement and its effects on student achievement. Epstein identified five categories of parent involvement, ranging from parent fulfillment of basic obligations all the way to active participation in school governance. These include: (1) Providing for children's basic needs; (2) Communicating with school staff; (3) Volunteering or providing assistance at their child's school; (4) Supporting and participating in learning activities with children at home; and (5) Participating in school governance and advocacy activities.

Williams and Chavkin (1989) suggest that the essentials for strong parent involvement include but are not limited to the presence of written policies, administrative support, parent training, two-way communication, and frequent family-teacher networking. However, it is Alma Flor Ada's work that provides specific suggestions for how to cultivate the importance of the home-school interaction. She strongly emphasizes that in order for any of the above ideas to move beyond a concept, the educator and the family must spend time together (1988).

Researchers have described parent involvement as including a number of activities performed at home that are meant to support classroom instruction, such as school readiness activities and ensuring the completion of homework (Epstein, 1987; Goldenberg, 2004). Parent

involvement can include many forms of collaboration between schools and parents (Murawski, 2009). This type of involvement reflects shared values between school personnel and parents. Researchers have noted that when this sharing exists, parents participate in schools in ways that makes effective use of their own knowledge, experiences, and skills (Gonzalez, Moll, Floyd-Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti, 1993; Noguera, 2001).

In addition, collaborative involvement refers to parents being informed, knowledgeable, and capable of choosing ways to be involved in their children's schools and education that are congruent with their culture and values (Valdes, 1996). Finally a collaborative type of parent involvement allows the parents to advocate for their children (Diaz-Soto, 1997).

### Research on Involvement
### of Language Minority Parents
### in the Schools

Research repeatedly suggests that parent involvement is important to the academic achievement of English Language Learners (ELLs). Schools and teachers that provide meaningful parental involvement have improved attendance, higher levels of student achievement, higher graduation rates, and students that are more positive about education (August & Hakuta, 1997; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Many reasons are given for lack of parental involvement by language minority parents. One factor that has often been cited as hindering effective parent-school collaboration is a *deficit view* of the language minority parents. This view is represented by the belief

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that students fail in schools because their families are characteristically flawed (Valencia & Black, 2002). For example, the deficit view may be directed at language minority parents by assuming that Mexican immigrant families do not value education. This assumption then leads school personnel to think that parents are unwilling to support their children's education, which is then used as a reason for high Latino dropout rates and school failure (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Another example of how the deficit view may lead to beliefs about parents is a judgment coming because of the parent's lack of English fluency (Crawford, 1991; Diaz-Soto, 1997; Villenas, 2001). Immigrant parents are often judged as failing their children because they do not establish the kinds of language skills and values that are found in mainstream families and schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Finally, deficit views are also reflected in programs aimed at teaching and changing parents, such as programs that teach parents as though they have few skills necessary to support academic achievement (Rioux & Berla, 1993).

In contrast to the assumptions about deficit views, research on language minority parents demonstrates that the attitudes and values that many immigrant parents bring can be a primary source of support for parent involvement. Many immigrant parents place a high value on schools, teachers, and education and are very interested in being involved in their children's schools (Goldenberg, 2004; Lopez, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Valdes, 1996). Many parents often immigrate to the United States to give their children a better life and education becomes the most important way for their children to get ahead in the U.S. (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Despite the high value on education held by many language minority parents, low levels of parent involvement in schools indicate that these values may not be enough to generate meaningful parent involvement. It is necessary to give consideration to some of the barriers often cited for lack of parent involvement. Language barriers and access to effective opportunities to learn English form one of the most significant obstacles to immigrant parent involvement. This includes parents' lack of English skills and small numbers of school staff who are able to speak the language of the parents (Crawford, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Trueba, 2002).

This language barrier prevents immigrant parents and teachers from being able to communicate with one another, both orally and in written form (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). The result is a lack of significant understanding and relationship-building between parents and school personnel. In developing and offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for parents, it is important to take into consideration the quality and effectiveness of these classes. Many of these classes are not adequately funded or assisted. Sometimes these courses are offered in schools and the instructors receive little training or guidance.

English language abilities are not the only type of language barriers. A language barrier can be created by the vocabulary and grammatical structure used in many forms of written correspondence to parents. Many school district translations are written at a "high level" in order to follow legal requirements. However this often results in written language that is more formal and less clear to parents. Specifically, when documents regarding parental rights and information about Individual Education Plans (IEPs) go home to parents, although the individual words may be familiar to the parents, the content is not readily understandable.

Understandably, many immigrant parents have had little or no exposure to U.S. schools. This becomes a significant issue when considering parental involvement in the schools (Valdes, 1996). Parents are usually unaware of what types of educational programs are available for their children, particularly the various kinds of instruction offered to students with disabilities, or those who are learning English as a second language. Many parents are also not familiar with U.S. report cards, IEPs, and other information provided about their child's academic progress (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001).

As indicated above, the language of these documents must be conveyed to parents in a way that is comprehensible. It should reflect the manner of speaking and an academic level that is familiar to parents who may not have experience with formal education (Waterman, 2003). In addition, because of differences in cultural practices, many immigrant parents are also unfamiliar with the ways schools "expect" them to be involved in their child's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Lopez, 2001; Valdes, 1996). For parents to be involved they need to have prior knowledge and understanding of the expectations of schools.

Another issue which hinders parental involvement is the isolation from other parents in their community that many immigrant parents experience. This isolation tends to reinforce the barriers caused by a lack of access to comprehensible information about schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Schools which provide parent-to-parent contact can be an effective way to help immigrant parents build networks to assist them in understanding the many aspects of U.S. schools. These networks can involve exchanging of information and resources, building trust, and a safe place for parents to share knowledge and prior experiences.

### Research on Involvement of Parents of Children with Disabilities

Bronfenbrenner (1979) visualized human development as a series of nested contexts. Shea and Bauer (1991) have adapted this vision to families of children with disabilities. Bronferbrenner's ecological contexts provide a framework of hypothesis for what takes place within an average household (microsystem), the forces in the larger social system in which the family functions (exosystem), and the interaction of these settings with one another (mesosystem), resulting in the overriding cultural beliefs and values that influence the three systems (macrosystem) and ultimately impact the involvement or noninvolvement of parents of children with disabilities in their child's education journey.

Parents of children with disabilities go through a predictable set of stages in reacting to the diagnosis of disability. These stages are similar to what people go through when they learn a loved one is terminally ill: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance, and stigma. The extent of family resources affects the ecological contexts described above and the coping mechanisms needed to advance to acceptance when dealing with the child's disability. Karnes and Zehrbach (1972) maintain that coordinated school-family endeavors and enhanced parent-school collaboration have long been researched as the best way to ensure student progress and success in school.

Throughout the literature in special

education is the vision of collaboration between schools and families of children with disabilities. Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004) identified the six key characteristics of collaboration to be positive communications, commitment to children and families, equity, competence, trust, and respect. However, as has been discussed above, when dealing with immigrant families cross-cultural misunderstanding, assumptions of family deficit, and professionals' unawareness can serve as obstacles to implementing collaboration.

It is critical that school personnel involve families in all aspects of the decision-making process (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994). Eleanor Lynch (1981) interviewed 100 families and identified nine barriers that parents confront when they try to participate in their child's education. These include communication challenges, transportation problems, babysitting issues, lack of time, lack of understanding of the education system, feelings of inferiority, feeling that problems won't be resolved, language and/or cultural differences, and realistically accepting their child. Families must have access to all information and support needed to enable them to address the educational needs of their child (Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, & LaPointe, 1996). This means all involved need to work together to insure collaboration. For example, when a family member does not speak English, special accommodations must be made to include them. Federal legislation provides requirements for parent involvement.

## Requirements under NCLB and IDEA for Parent Participation

The NCLB law defines parental involvement as

> the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including: assisting their child's learning; being actively involved in their child's education at school; serving as full partners in their child's education and being included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and the carrying out of other activities such as those described in section 118 of the ESEA. (NCLB, Section 9101(32)

IDEA (2004) requires professionals to involve parents of students with dis-

abilities in the educational decision-making process. IDEA recommends that professionals incorporate parents' knowledge of their child when deciding on the most appropriate education, and inform parents of their rights and of any changes in placement. In addition the law includes mandates for informing consent of "caregivers."

School districts must take the necessary steps to ensure that caregivers understand what is occurring during an IEP meeting. This would include the use of interpreters for the deaf and caregivers whose language is other than English. IDEA also has regulations for schools to provide adequate notice of meetings, holding these meetings at mutually convenient times and places, and providing caregivers with copies of all IEPs. Parts B and C of the law specifically address family-centered services for early intervention and pre-referral practices.

## Research on Involvement of Language Minority Parents of Children with Disabilities

Many researchers have documented possible reasons for a lack of involvement by immigrant families of children with disabilities. These reasons have included lack of effort to by professionals to seek family input (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995); scheduling meetings at times inconvenient for parents (Linan-Thompson & Jean, 1997); distributing information about services and parent rights at level which in not comprehensible to non-literate families (Harry, 1992b; Leung, 1996; Linan-Thompson & Jean, 1997; Weiss & Coyne, 1997); lack of transportation and/or child care (Kalyanpur & Rao, 1991); communication and language barriers (Leung, 1996); a history of poor relations with schools (Salend & Taylor, 1993; Thorp, 1997); and cultural differences in help-seeking behaviors and in beliefs about disability (Danesco, 1997; Huang, 1993).

Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) make the point that parent participation is based on ideals that are highly valued in the dominant culture and may not meet the ideals found in various cultural groups. Their discussion of professional knowledge versus parent knowledge highlights a problem often seen in schools where immigrant parent's view are discounted. Their statement "what is often overlooked is that parents with very little education can be very insightful concerning their child's difficulties" (p. 124) is signficant.

In addition, the authors identify three areas where cultural values and traditions may impede parent involvement: equity versus value-inequality, individual rights versus social obligations, and choice versus ascribed roles. In essence, Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic report that despite legal requirements for obtaining parental input in the decision making process, many parents have neither the skills nor the time to engage in initiating advocacy.

Harry (2008) reviewed many research-based definitions of collaboration between professionals in special education and immigrant families of children with disabilities and found barriers tend to form around deficit views of families, cross-cultural misunderstandings related to the meaning of disability, and differential values in goal setting for students with disabilities. As discussed above, the deficit view of families can lead to inappropriate generalizations based on stereotypes made by professionals. Often these beliefs lead to decisions about children's ability, placement, and services. Influential negative perceptions are often based on the family's economic level, marital status, educational level, and assumptions about family dysfunction (Knotek, 2003; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

These deficit views of families are often at the core of many immigrant families' feelings of disrespect. Immigrant parents of children with disabilities have reported they did not feel respected by service providers, felt discrimination based on culture, received less provision of and access to services, and suffered lower expectations because of their language and culture (Darling & Gallagher, 2004; McHatton & Correa, 2005; Sontag & Schact, 1994; Zionts, Zionts, Harrison, & Bellinger, 2003).

Confusion related to the meaning of disability is another reason that can lead to barriers in parent involvement. What may be a disability in the schools here in the U.S. may not be seen as a disability by some immigrant parents. For example, parents may have broader views of normalcy and misunderstandings about labels and causes of disability (Fadiman, 1997; Harry, 1992a; Harry, Allen, &McLaughlin, 1995). In addition, they may not have a clear understanding of how their child's disability affects his or her learning (Bailey, Skinner, & Correa, et al. 1999; Wathum-Ocama & Rose, 2002; Zeitlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). Any of

these reasons can lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding and lack of services for parents and or their children.

The IEP or IFSP is central to IDEA's provision for individualization. Unfortunately, these too can lead to barriers for immigrant families of students with disabilities. Many immigrant families may be unfamiliar with the notion of setting goals for their child's education. There may be differences in what professionals think is important for a student and what the parents want for their child. Lynch and Hanson, (2004) reported that the most common causes of differences in goal setting for young children tend to be around independence in feeding, exploration, and toileting. For older students issues tend to center around views of transition.

Our American values of independence, autonomy, and economic productivity have been found to be in conflict with some families from culturally diverse backgrounds. Rueda, Monzo, Shapiro, Gomez, and Blacher, (2005) found that differences in expectations were related to parents beliefs about independence and the parents' right to make decisions for a child with a disability. In addition, Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001) suggested that professionals may report a lack of involvement in transition planning by families when, in fact, they may be doing more than just attending meetings. As Harry (2008) pointed out, "If professionals' interactions with parents are limited only to school-based activities, their lack of awareness of community and other cultural contexts will limit their understanding of families cultural models and practices" (p. 382).

Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) suggest that collaboration between parents and professionals requires that the professionals develop an awareness of their own cultural and ethical values and recognize the assumptions and beliefs espoused by their own schools and districts.

### Suggested Strategies for Increasing the Involvement of Language Minority Parents of Children with Disabilities

#### 1. Parent Liaisons/Advisors

Levine, Irizarry, and Bunch (2008) report one school that made the teacher's role as a liaison the emphasis for profes-

sional development (PD) and implemented several strategies for communicating with diverse families. One strategy was to spend time at PD meetings writing scripts to guide teachers' meetings with a family.

For example, the first time teachers and parents meet the script might include the teacher and the family saying something personal about themselves, the teacher explaining their role as liaison, and discussing with parents their likes and dislikes about their school experience. Another strategy was to role-play during PD meetings the kind of discussions teachers need to have with parents.

#### 2. Home Visits

Another strategy implemented at this school was for each liaison to make a home visit before the school year began. This allowed the liaison to get to know the family, and introduce his or herself in the comfort of the child's home. In many cases an interpreter accompanied the liaison. This idea of one family-one liaison would be easy to implement in classrooms for students with disabilities.

#### 3. Exhibitions

Levine et al (2008) also report that "the most powerful mechanism for drawing families into the school and into a meaningful collaboration was the use of twice-a-year exhibitions" (p. 32). Although this was used as a student requirement for advancing to the next grade, it could be easily adapted.

In the first exhibition, the students presented their goals for the year to their liaison and families. At the second exhibition, later in the school year, the students and their families listened or watched as students presented projects and assessments of their own progress.

#### 4. Parent Coordinator

Another idea is hiring as a parent coordinator a paraprofessional who is bilingual and can write scripts for teachers who may not speak the language of the parents. These scripts can be for phone calls to give feedback to parents with simple immediate feedback, prefaced with apologies about their lack of home language skills.

#### 5. Building Human Resources

A further suggestion is using other family members or community volunteers to translate or interpret for meetings and notes home.

#### 6. Looking at the Big Picture

Broadening the focus "to schools as communities and communities of schools" (Harry, 2008 p. 384) is also recommended. This can include building on community based organizations and community funds of knowledge and arranging trips for school staff to explore areas in the community and share their findings at professional development meetings.

#### 7. Incorporate Funds of Knowledge

Knowledge that is learned at home through interactions with other individuals is known as "Funds of Knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). These valuable resources learned by students, such as resiliency, a strong work ethic, and mediating communication with outside institutions, can be used effectively when working with immigrant parents and their children (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Incorporating these funds of knowledge, after a home visit, led one teacher to better understand her student and the student's linguistic and cultural environment. The teacher shifted her deficit views about the household and was able to incorporate much of what she learned to create a culturally and linguistically rich opportunities for the student (Araujo, 2009).

#### 8. Bridging Cultures

This idea introduces teachers to the individualism-collectivism framework as a way to understand parents and their thinking. By using the framework of "Bridging Cultures" teachers have been able to translate parent motivation into parent involvement (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

#### 9. ESL Classes

Many schools offer English classes for parents. However, immigrant parents of children with disabilities need English classes which are geared around their child's situation. Teaching the language of special education and the parents' role in IEP meetings and transitional planning can include role-playing and question asking practice.

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