

*Parents' Experiences
with the IEP Process
Considerations for
Improving Practice*

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*Helping Parents and Educators
Create Solutions That Improve Results
for Students with Disabilities*

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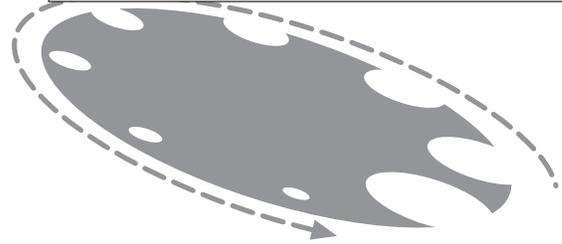
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Since 1975 active parent participation in all aspects of educational programming for students receiving special education services has been legally mandated, initially with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), then in 1990 with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 102-119), and most recently with the 1997 and 2004 versions of IDEA (PL 105-17, PL 108-446). Through each reauthorization of IDEA, the individualized education program (IEP) component has continued to direct student educational goals and objectives, placement, and evaluation criteria, as well as standards for educational performance and duration of programming modifications for special education services (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). The IEP meeting between educators and parents is the focal point for collaboration in the development of an educational plan. The quality of this collaboration is a significant determinant of the effectiveness of special education programs. Successful implementation of the IEP depends on all stakeholders' viewing themselves as valued contributors.

Given the central and determinative role of the parent-school relationship, it is imperative that professionals in the field of special education reflect upon and learn from the experiences of all IEP meeting participants. By shedding light on the perspectives of parents and schools, we further an understanding of how each views the special education process and from this we gain insight that is vital to developing best-practice guidelines for conducting IEP meetings.

We review literature here to explore findings from 10 studies published after 2004 that focus on the experiences and perceptions of parents or other caregivers related to the IEP process. Our objective is to highlight recommendations from this body of literature for improving the experiences of parents and encouraging their participation in IEP meetings.

Parent Experiences

Fish (2008) conducted a survey of 51 parents of students receiving special education services. Most of the participants were middle- to upper-middle class, and 80% were white. Results showed that the majority of participants reported their overall IEP experiences as positive. They believed educators valued their input, treated them with respect and considered them to be equal decision makers.

However, the favorable findings from this study are the exception, not the norm. Stoner et al. (2005) interviewed four married couples of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), all of whom described the initial IEP meeting—their first formal contact with the special education system—as confusing. One parent reported feeling “totally lost” and remarked that he couldn’t “process” the meeting. The authors stated that this confusion heightened parental concern and fostered attitudes of dissatisfaction with the special education process.

Fish's earlier study (2006) investigated the perceptions of seven parents of children with autism about the IEP process. All participants stated that their initial IEP experiences had been negative. Most indicated that they had been treated badly at one time or another by educators during IEP meetings. For example, some had been accused of being unreasonable and blamed for their children's academic and behavioral problems. One parent reported that educators “intimidated” her and asked her if she had done drugs when she was pregnant. Most of the parents described being treated more respectfully and professionally by educators when an advocate attended the IEP meeting. They reported that educators were more likely to carefully observe IEP protocol when an advocate was present.

Fish concluded that although relations between parents and schools had been difficult, they had strengthened over time through increased awareness of student disabilities among educators and through parents' becoming more knowledgeable about the IEP process.

Childre and Chambers (2005) investigated the perceptions of six families about their experiences with both traditional IEP meetings and a Student Centered Individualized Education Planning (SCIEP) approach. All of the families stated that their primary role in traditional IEP meetings was limited to listening to information about their child's education and answering questions. One family described how professionals began the meeting with preset student goals and how this hindered their participation. The authors pointed out that the presentation of prepared forms tends to convey the message that parent participation is merely a legal obligation of schools. Data collected after the families participated in the SCIEP meeting described their perceptions of that process. Families identified the main characteristic of the SCIEP approach as a level of communication that supported family participation. They reported that meeting dynamics shifted from general conversation to in-depth communication about specific issues. All families stated that they preferred SCIEP to the traditional IEP process.

According to Lo (2009), 41% of students receiving special education services are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), yet only 14% of special education teachers are from diverse cultures. This imbalance often leads to a language and cultural barrier between CLD parents and school personnel. Salas (2004) interviewed 10 Mexican-American women about their experiences during IEP meetings for their children. Spanish was the primary language for all the women and they indicated that the language difference was a barrier. They reported feeling that they were not heard by school personnel and were marginalized and isolated during the IEP meetings. They also reported that school personnel engaged in disrespectful behavior, such as not showing up for a scheduled meeting or repeatedly looking at the clock during the meeting. This caused the women to believe that their participation was not valued.

Chinese parents of children with disabilities also cite numerous challenges during IEP meetings, including cultural and language barriers, poor translation and interpretation services, and disrespect from professionals (Lo, 2008). These parents expressed frustration that professionals arrived late for the meetings or left early. All of the parents Lo interviewed had taken time off work to attend the meetings and several worked hourly jobs that did not pay when they missed work. Parents also reported that interpreters often did not know how to translate common special education terms. At times meetings continued even though the interpreter had left. Overall, the participants indicated that their input was not valued or welcomed, preventing them from anything more than minimal participation in IEP meetings.

Cho and Gannotti (2005) interviewed 20 Korean-American mothers of children with disabilities about professional support related to special education programs. Participants in this study indicated a need for qualified translators and interpreters, and they identified skills and habits that translators should possess: fluency in both English and Korean; knowledge of childhood disability, medical, and rehabilitation terms; knowledge of available services; behaving professionally; allowing sufficient time for meetings; remaining objective; and, refraining from interjecting while translating. A majority of the mothers reported that some educators made them feel disenfranchised and marginalized. The mothers perceived that educators discounted their concerns and comments about their children's

social and academic progress. However, parents also reported being grateful that special education and related services were available at no cost and that they believed that special education professionals were adequately trained and provided quality education to their children. All participants were able to name at least one professional for whom they had a great deal of respect.

Considerations for Improving Practice

Below are recommendations from the reviewed literature for strengthening the IEP process and promoting a positive experience for all stakeholders. These recommendations suggest a framework for developing best-practice guidelines for ensuring active parent participation in IEP meetings. By encouraging greater parent-educator collaboration, these recommendations are intended to create strong partnerships for the ultimate benefit of the students. They are broken into three categories: considerations for schools and educators, considerations for parents and considerations for CLD families.

For Schools and Educators

Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) recommend that professionals improve parents' experiences in school-based team meetings by sharing their knowledge of the child as an individual with unique interests, strengths, and weaknesses and avoid discussing the child in ways that suggest he/she is defined by his/her disabilities. The authors further suggest that schools apply creative solutions to problems and remain open to alternatives when current solutions aren't sufficient.

Fish (2006) asked parents what school districts could do to improve IEP meetings. Answers included: making the meetings more democratic so that parents feel they are equal contributors; being open to parental input regarding placement, discipline, and instruction; being friendly; valuing and listening to parental input; being flexible and more willing to adjust to student needs; and, educating parents about the IEP process.

Most of the participants in Fish's 2008 study were generally satisfied with their child's IEP meetings, but they still believed that educators could improve the process. Their suggestions included: allowing sufficient time for the meetings; creating a welcoming atmosphere; encouraging parents to bring an advocate familiar with the IEP process; using common terms instead of jargon to lessen confusion; refraining from completing IEP forms in advance of parental input; involving parents in the writing of goals and objectives; and, providing parents with a copy of the IEP objectives a few weeks before the meeting to allow time for review and preparation of questions.

Simon (2006) suggests that educators provide parents with IEP forms in advance and ask them to think about issues to be discussed at the meeting. This can enhance parents' sense of ownership of the process as team members and foster good communication with them during and after the IEP meeting. Soliciting parents' feedback on their child's progress toward reaching his/her goals and welcoming their post-meeting feedback can help to identify points of weakness in the implementation of the IEP, which can then be addressed through professional development or in-service opportunities as needed.

Stoner et al. (2005) developed recommendations for professionals based on the findings of their study that include:

providing parents with credible, research-based information on ASD; preparing parents for the IEP meeting by informing them about procedures, their legal rights and related services; being flexible in discussions about location and duration of IEP meetings (to equalize the roles of team members and reduce the power of educators and other professionals); and, strengthening trust by listening to parents, welcoming their input and, following through on promises.

For Parents

Fish (2006) asked participants what parents can do to improve the IEP process. Responses included becoming knowledgeable about special education law and the parameters of the IEP process, taking the initiative to educate themselves about special education issues, and being persistent in requesting needed services for their children. Respondents in Fish's 2008 study also stated that parents should prepare before IEP meetings by educating themselves about special education law and the IEP process. They also encouraged parents to speak up during meetings and to be unafraid to ask questions and make suggestions.

For Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Cho and Gannotti (2005) reported that all of the mothers interviewed for their study agreed that their limited English ability was not a barrier as long as professionals were willing to take the time to communicate with them by listening carefully and rephrasing the parent's words in correct English to clarify and avoid misunderstandings. They also expressed the need for better translation and interpretation services and for more support and information from professionals. The authors stated that disagreements with education professionals can be a major source of stress for Korean parents because respect for authority is highly valued in their culture and conflict with authorities is viewed negatively. Consequently, having to make requests repeatedly is very discouraging and stressful for these mothers. The authors also recommended connecting parents with community, service, or parent-to-parent groups that target the needs of Asian/Korean families for support and information immediately after diagnosis.

Lo (2008) identified several ways that professionals can improve the IEP process for CLD parents, including meeting with interpreters before each IEP meeting to provide them with the terminology that will be used in the meeting, speaking to parents in short sentences and pausing regularly to provide the time needed for note taking and interpretation, and working with local community organizations to develop training programs in the parents' native language to educate families on how best to prepare for and be involved in the IEP process.

Lo (2009) made additional recommendations for improving the IEP process for CLD parents, including: providing parents with information about their child's disability in their primary language; having a second reader proofread translated documents before sending them to families; taking time to determine the dialects that the families speak; and, locating qualified interpreters who speak the same dialects. It is important to find out if translators and interpreters have expertise in special education and, if not, to provide the common terms that will be used during the meeting and instruction on how to provide interpretation during the meeting. The authors also suggested that educators supplement written progress reports by dedicating a portion of the IEP meeting to teaching strategies that families can use to instruct their children at home. Children's skills can be reinforced when the same methods are used by both teachers and parents. As in her 2008 study, Lo emphasized the need for schools to identify and collaborate with community organizations to provide parent education related to the special education process.

Conclusions

Parent-school communication, relationships, and collaborative planning form the foundation upon which student-centered educational plans are built. The recommendations provided in this review offer a menu of possibilities for enfranchising and actively enlisting the voices of parents as team members. To the extent that a mutually respectful and inclusive tone is achieved throughout the IEP process, the perceptions and experiences of families will become increasingly positive. Students will find that their best interests are being identified and championed by strong family-educator partnerships, and limited economic and personnel resources will be more effectively employed in productive planning and implementation.

Author Note

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