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Encouraging Active Parent Participation in IEP Team Meetings

Diane Marie Dabkowski

Now answer these questions honestly:

Are parents equal partners with you in the education of students with disabilities?

Do you actively invite parents, accommodate their schedules, and welcome their differing cultural contributions?

Are you aware of cultural and linguistic team processes or environments that might make parents uncomfortable?

Are you wondering how to improve parent participation in your decision-making processes?

How did you do? If you wavered a bit, you should know that many educators are also unsure. This article provides tools and processes that can help welcome parents into school as equal partners in their children's education.

Team Culture

Let's explore team attitudes and practices and the potential effect of the behavior of team members on active parent participation in decision making.

Though all IEP teams come together for the purpose of developing an IEP, team culture usually dictates the process by which the meeting takes place (by culture, we mean the attitudes and beliefs that are valued by a particular team). Among other attributes, teams demonstrate their culture in the following ways:

- The procedure by which people share information.
- Who speaks at meetings.
- How influential their perspective is in making decisions.
- The specific recommendations people make.
- The expressed beliefs about instructional strategies and their effectiveness.

For example, one professional may serve as meeting facilitator and dominate the discussion, whereas on other teams, all members may actively participate in discussions. Some teams may be quick to recommend a particular instructional strategy or placement, and others may be reluctant to do so.

Team culture dictates the ease or difficulty with which parents gain acceptance as team members (Briggs, 1997). Some teams, for example, may encourage parent participation throughout the meeting, whereas others may encourage such participation only at the end. Further, team culture may affect parent participation by the way the team struc-

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tures the meeting environment, the language team members use, or the respect team members give differing cultural values.

Meeting Environment

Conference space in school buildings can range from formal, well-appointed conference rooms to converted storage rooms with small tables and folding chairs. Though seemingly an issue of little importance, the physical environment in which the IEP meeting takes place and how teams use that space may affect the comfort levels of parents. Thus, the level of parent participation may be affected. (See the examples in the box, "Parental Reactions to IEP Meeting Environments.")

In Example 1, Mary Smith felt distanced from the team rather than a team member. She may, therefore, believe that her contributions to the meeting would seem of little value to the professionals. For some parents, this belief

Team culture means the attitudes and beliefs that are valued by a particular team, such as the procedure by which people share information and who usually speaks at meetings.

may result in a reduced willingness to actively participate. Barbour and Barbour (2001) suggested that teams can use seating arrangement to establish a sense of equity among meeting participants. Sitting *beside* the parent can remove both physical and psychological distance. Using a round conference table eliminates a sense of hierarchy among participants that may otherwise exist when particular team members are seated at the head of a rectangular table.

In Example 2, the physical environment in which the meeting took place reduced Catherine Brown's comfort level and participation. Professional team members need to recognize changes in parental comfort level

Parental Reactions to IEP Meeting Environments...

Example 1. On arrival at Pine Ridge Elementary School, Mary Smith was escorted to the room in which her son's IEP meeting would take place. Mary noticed that the professional team members had already arrived at the room. They seated themselves along one of the long sides as well as at both short ends of the rectangular table. Mary took the lone seat in the middle of the remaining side. This seating arrangement made Mary feel isolated from the rest of the team. ●●●

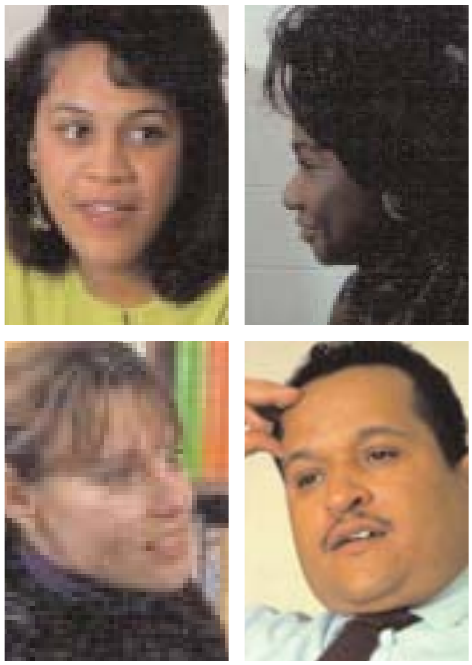
Example 2. The IEP meeting for Catherine Brown's daughter was held in a former storage room located between the boys' and girls' bathrooms in one wing of the school building. The meeting coincided with the morning bathroom break for some of the classes in that wing. Catherine did not have to strain to hear the conversations of the children in the bathrooms. "If I can hear them," Catherine wondered silently, "what can they hear about my child?" Catherine contributed little to the meeting until the bathroom noises subsided. ●●●

Example 3. Other than responding briefly to questions posed to her, Mrs. Jones sat quietly throughout her son's IEP meeting. This surprised Lisa Brown, Eric's special education teacher. Lisa's encounters with Mrs. Jones were quite different. When meeting with Lisa, Mrs. Jones contributed a great deal to the discussion. She frequently asked questions to gain a better understanding of her son's progress and educational program. Typically, she did not hesitate to offer suggestions or express her concerns. At one point during the IEP meeting, Lisa expected Mrs. Jones to express a difference of opinion with the other team members. This did not happen. At the conclusion of the IEP meeting, Lisa pulled Mrs. Jones aside; and the two sat down alone. When asked if she had any questions about the new IEP, Mrs. Jones reverted back to the woman Lisa knew. ●●●

brought about by uncontrollable events. They must be flexible in conducting meetings so that such changes can be accommodated.

Aside from the physical environment and use of space, parent participation may be influenced by the climate or tone set by the professional team members. Climate is evidenced in the way in which team interaction takes place (Briggs, 1997). Parents may perceive meeting climate along a continuum from inviting to intimidating. **In Example 3,** Mrs. Jones did not actively participate during the IEP meeting, yet she did so when meeting alone with the special education teacher. When the teacher provided Mrs. Jones with a debriefing period in an environment more suited to her needs, she was able to participate in the discussion about her son's new IEP.

Teams need to ensure a comfortable physical environment for IEP meetings.



Recognizing and addressing cultural differences are important ingredients in successful IEP team meetings.

Culture, Language, and Meaning

The cultural context through which both parents and professionals form their personal value systems contributes to their ability to make joint decisions. An understanding of the team process, including the role of participants' cultural background, can influence the effectiveness of IEP teams (see box, "What Does the Literature Say About Parent Participation.")

Cultural differences can result in disparate beliefs about disability and the nature of disabilities served through special education services. This disparity may result in differing goals for the child's educational program (Cloud, 1993; Lamorey, 2002). Perhaps more significantly, cultural beliefs influence the value placed on parent-professional partnerships in decision making, a concept not valued equally across cultures (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). In a professional team culture, participants should respect these differ-

What Does the Literature Say About Parent Participation?

IDEA. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA} Amendments of 1997 mandate that parents be included as members of the team that develops the evaluation plan, determines eligibility, and makes decisions about the individualized education program (IEP) and placement (Federal Register, 1999, p. 12472).

Despite the importance attributed to active parent participation on teams, parents are not necessarily partners in the decision-making process (Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Salembier & Furney, 1997). Some parents choose to limit their participation in making decisions about their child's program. Some other parents continue to find their efforts to participate blocked as a result of barriers they encounter in the decision-making process. The body of research conducted in this area has resulted in the identification of issues such as attitudes, cultural background, logistics, and parental responsibilities as some of these barriers (Rock, 2000).

IEP. The most significant venue for exercising the right to parent participation in decision making is the IEP meeting. The IEP meeting process must adhere to legal requirements relative to what should be included in the IEP. At the same time, it must meet legal requirements relative to who participates on the IEP team and how, including the parent (Council for Exceptional Children, 1999; Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; Huefner, 2000).

Get Real. In practice, however, opportunities for parent participation in making decisions can vary considerably. Such participation may vary not only from one school district to another, but also from school to school, depending in part on the people who serve on the team.

Though studies that have focused on team process and effects are limited, some evidence suggests that an understanding of the team process can influence team effectiveness (Fleming & Monda-Amaya, 2001).

ences. Teams should structure their decision-making processes to address these differences when they arise, rather than merely dismiss them.

For example, cultural beliefs might result in a parent indicating agreement with a team decision out of respect for professional educators rather than conviction. Professional team members need to be aware when such a possibility exists and provide another avenue for a parent's voice to be heard. Here, this might be accomplished through the availability of a parent liaison with a similar cultural background.

In a professional team culture, participants should respect cultural differences in how people view the concepts of *disability* and *parent-professional collaboration.*

Language barriers do not always refer to linguistic differences or the use of professional jargon (Berry & Hardman, 1998). Language barriers to active parent participation may exist among native English speakers and in the absence of professional jargon. Whether intended or not, language preferences and practices embedded in team culture can create a barrier to active parent participation. For example, a parent invited to *participate* in an IEP meeting may be more likely to do so than a parent who is invited to *observe* their child's IEP meeting. A professional who couples an indifferent attitude with a suggestion that a parent speak up "if they want" may send a message that the team is merely going through necessary motions rather than placing any value on what might be said.

Implications for Practice

As we have seen, IEP meetings can be a source of stress for parents. Professionals can take action to reduce potential stress by recognizing the effect of their team practices on parental comfort levels. Professional team members, therefore, need to engage in ongoing self-reflection and analysis to ensure a team structure that reduces stress and promotes active parent participation. Team members must be willing to focus on team *effectiveness,* as well as team *responsibilities* (Briggs, 1997).

The work of Briggs (1997), Cloud (1993), and Lamorey (2002) lays the foundation for reflection, analysis, and observation of the team meeting process (Figures 1 and 2). Team self-reflection should begin on an individual level by evaluating one's own attitudes and beliefs about the team meeting process. In turn, teams should recognize how individual beliefs contribute to team culture and influence parent participation. Figure 1 presents suggested questions to consider in the self-reflection process.

Further, team members should observe the meeting process and analyze it to determine how the meeting actualizes team culture and whether team practices provide opportunities for active parent participation. Figure 2 presents an observation form that includes important focal points.

Changing Team Practices Through Reflection and Analysis

After considerable self-reflection and analysis, a team may decide that opportunities for parent participation would be heightened by changes in the way its team meetings are conducted. The team might adapt the framework for change outlined by Hord (1992).

Shared Vision. Create a shared vision for new team-meeting practices by dis-

Figure 1. Professional Team Member Self-Reflection: Questions to Consider

Individual-Level Reflection

- As an individual, what are your beliefs about disability and special education services? What effect does this have on your contribution to individualized education program (IEP) development?
- In general, what role should the parent(s) play on the team? Observer? Provider of information? Decision maker?
- Who should be responsible for making decisions? The parent(s)? A specific team member? The team as a whole (including parents)?
- What value do you place on the collaborative process? How should your team implement this process to ensure equitable opportunity for participation among all team members?

Team-Level Reflection

- Has the team reached consensus on each of the preceding issues?
- How does the team respond to diversity of opinion on these issues? Are conflicts resolved? Does the team maintain its effectiveness when opinions differ?
- In general, how might lack of consensus on any of these issues affect parent participation in your IEP meetings?
- Do the attitudes and beliefs held jointly by the professional team members enhance opportunities for parent participation or diminish them?

Postmeeting Reflection

- Does the way in which your team conducts a meeting reflect team attitudes and beliefs?
- What changes should be considered to better reflect attitudes and beliefs that will enhance parent participation?

cussing the results of the analysis among team members. Recognize that parents and administrators also have a stake in this process. Teams should include these participants in the discussion. From the discussion, team members can generate—and prioritize—goals for transforming the new vision into practice. For example, a team may decide to request a change in facilities for team meetings.

Resources. Some goals may require resources in the form of time, money, clerical support, or supplies. Teams should identify such resources at the same time they generate goals.

Training. To assist with proposed changes, team members may benefit from professional development activities, including participation in inservice programs, attending conferences, observing other teams' practices, or using consultation resources. After the team has established its vision, it should consider and prioritize training needs, along with other goals.

Monitoring. Teams should recognize that effecting change in team practices is accomplished over time. It may help to identify a team member as "cheerleader" who will keep the team focused on its goals and monitor efforts toward implementing the new vision. This monitoring may include intermittent observation and analysis of team meetings.

School Culture. A school or district culture that supports change would assist the team in transforming their vision to practice. School principals and special education administrators can enhance the success of team efforts by advocating for change on the team's behalf.

Additional Considerations in Changing Team Practices

In an effort to reduce parental stress, Berry and Hardman (1998) suggested that teams provide parents with information regarding meeting logistics—location, time parameters, parking information, and so forth (p. 134). Such communication serves as a starting point for parents new to the IEP process. Team members need to give parents opportunities to become informed about how to participate in the decision-making process, as well as about their right to do so.

Parents who are supported in their initial attempts to participate in decision making will likely continue these efforts later in their child's school career.

Schools and districts have found many creative ways that parents may become knowledgeable about parental rights, their child's disability, and available services. (See Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, for a comprehensive discussion in this area.) At the meeting level, however, specific teams should supplement general knowledge about participation in IEP meetings with information about their team processes. Teams can set up parent workshops or individualized premeeting planning sessions to inform parents as to who will be in attendance, how people will share information, when and how the team will give parents opportunities for input, and what parents can do to prepare for the meeting (Turnbull & Turnbull). In addition, information conveyed to parents should include avenues for follow-up to the IEP meeting in case parents continue to have questions or concerns relative to their child's program.

Final Thoughts

Walker and Singer (1993) pointed out that the relationship between parent and professional is developmental in nature. As professional team members

Figure 2. Team Meeting Observation and Analysis of Practices

1. What professional disciplines are represented at the meeting? What role does each play?
   Discipline _____ Role _____
   Discipline _____ Role _____
   Discipline _____ Role _____
2. What roles do the parents play?
   ___ Observer ___ Provider of information
   ___ Decision maker
3. What team rituals are observed (e.g., who speaks when, how members are addressed, seating arrangement)? _____
   _____
4. What effect does the meeting environment have on parental comfort level and establishing equity among team members?
   _____
5. Does the manner in which professionals convey information reveal an awareness of the parent's cultural beliefs about disability?
   _____
6. What kind of information is shared and who presents it? _____
   _____
7. Is language used that will result in a mutual understanding of issues?
   _____
8. Is the meeting tone formal or more relaxed? How does this affect parent participation? _____
   _____

develop relationships with parents new to special education services, team members must consider the long-term effect of that relationship on active parent participation in decision making. Parents who are supported in their initial attempts to be equitable team members in decision making will likely continue to participate later in their child's school career. Professional team members should take these factors into consideration during the developmental process.

Team members should view team practices as a focal point for ongoing professional development. Recognize that as the knowledge base related to teaming and collaboration grows, new and better practices may continue to emerge. Along with professional team members, parents and administrators will require knowledge of new practices and opportunities to employ them in an environment supported by all team members.

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Diane Marie Dabkowski *(CEC Chapter #279), Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Special Education, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey.*

Address correspondence to the author at Department of Educational Leadership and Special Education, Monmouth University, Cedar Avenue, West Long Branch, NJ 07764 (e-mail: dmdab@aol.com).

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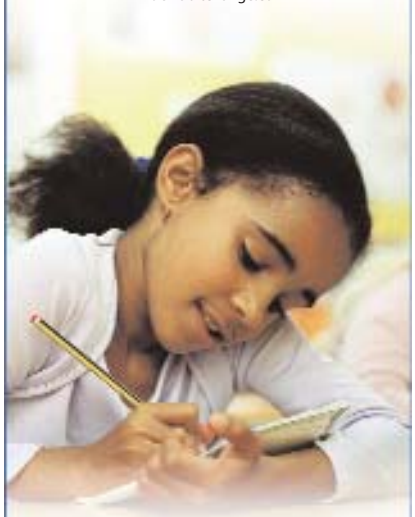

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