

Think Outside the Box: Engaging and Empowering Immigrant Families of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Family engagement has been proven to be key to student success for decades. With the expectations of the U.S. special education regulations, family engagement is even more important. Families are expected to be their children's advocates and decision makers and collaborate with schools to develop their children's individualized education programs. However, research consistently reports that families who are from low socioeconomic background and who are culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) encounter difficulties engaging in the process due to reasons such as a lack of knowledge about the special education system and cultural and linguistic differences. Many schools also struggle partnering with these populations due to budget constraints and shortage of bilingual teachers, staffs, and service providers. While home-school partnership is important, community support is frequently needed to help fill the gaps of support. The purpose of this article is to share how one community-based parent support group was able to empower immigrant families to become schools' equal partners. The support offered by the parent support group not only increased the parent members' knowledge of the special education regulations and their parental rights but also their advocacy skills, so they could know how to partner with schools and discuss their child's needs, special education services, and placement. Furthermore, when schools were unable to prepare families for supporting their children's remote learning during COVID-19 pandemic, this group was able to offer technological support and resources to enhance their skills.

1. Introduction

Research on the importance of parent engagement began decades ago, and their results consistently suggest that when families are engaged in their child's lives and academic careers, their children are more likely to be successful in schools [2], [6]. For children with disabilities, engagement from their parents is especially crucial, since they not only can inform schools about their child's academic and medical history, but also are expected to collaborate with schools and determine if appropriate services and placement are provided to them [18]. In the U.S., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates

parents of students with disabilities to be actively engaged in the special education process and their child's individualized education program (IEP) team [18]. Starting from the initial stage of the process till students exiting schools, parents must decide which steps to take, so they could ensure that the services their children with disabilities receive address their individualized needs. For instance, schools won't be able to formally evaluate students for special education services without parental consents [18]. Special education services and placement cannot be provided or modified until parents approve their children's IEP [18]. In order to fulfill these expected responsibilities, parents must have a clear understanding of the special education regulation, know what parent engagement is, be knowledgeable about their child's disability, needs, and services, and be able to communicate with schools fluently. However, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents, especially those who are immigrants and speak limited to no English, struggle to fulfill these roles and responsibilities and were unable to be actively engaged at the expected levels [5], [11].

Often, when parents are not engaged at the levels as expected by schools, they may be misunderstood as not being cared. Such assumption has been proven to be untrue. Previous studies suggest that CLD parents want to be engaged, but many barriers prevent them from doing so [5], [12]. These barriers include but are not limited to cultural differences of the expectations of family engagement, language barriers, and lack of knowledge and skills to be engaged in the special education process [7], [8], [9].

While U.S. schools are encouraged to think creatively and engage parents whose cultures and languages are different from theirs [19], schools continue to struggle doing so. One of the few reasons is that the demographics of the teacher population continue to not reflect the student population. Over half of the U.S. student population is CLD [13], but only a small number of teachers, 21%, are [14]. Some of them may lack cultural competency to know how to best engage families whose culture and languages that are different from theirs. Support from the community is needed. Many local non-profit organizations are aimed to serve and support CLD families. Many of their staff members are not only bilingual but also bicultural, so they can serve as cultural brokers and help bridge the cultural and

communication gaps between schools and families [17]. Additionally, these organizations, no matter large or small, may offer support that schools are unable to provide.

2. Benefits of Parent Support Groups

The purpose of this article is to share how one community-based parent support group was able to empower Chinese immigrant families of students with disabilities to become schools' equal partners by providing updated information and resources, training, and emotional and psychological support. Furthermore, the group was able to provide opportunities for experienced parents of students with disabilities to support parents who were new to the process. Such parent-to-parent support was essential to the population.

Learning that your child is diagnosed with a disability can be overwhelming and devastating for many families [15]. For some CLD families, their perceptions of what their child's disability is, causes of the disability, and which available treatment/interventions should be used may be different from the mainstream culture [3], [7]. These differences may prevent them from partnering with schools and being engaged in the special education process.

Previous studies have concluded that it is essential for families of students with disabilities to connect with other families who has children with similar disabilities, who are from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and/or who have gone through the process [10], [16]. This connection not only allows them to receive emotional and psychological support, but also information and resources that are helpful to them. Furthermore, experienced families of students with disabilities often can share strategies with families who are new to the process, so the new families don't need to experience the same challenges they have gone through. There are various types of parent support groups in the community. Most groups are founded by families of students with disabilities, while others are founded by professionals or schools [4]. Some groups specify that they support only families with a particular characteristic, such as families of children with Tourette Syndrome, fathers of children with disabilities, or Latino families of students with disabilities. Regardless of the type of the support groups, their ultimate goal is to offer support to families.

3. Formation of the Parent Support Group

With the support of five Chinese immigrant parents of students with disabilities, a professional who was an expert in special education and family,

school, and community partnerships founded the support group 10 years ago. At the time of its formation, there was a growth of Chinese speaking students with disabilities. Schools struggled to have their families engaged in the special education process. Additionally, there was a concern in the Chinese speaking community that the parents were unfamiliar with the special education school system in the U.S. and did not know how to advocate for their children with disabilities for services. With these reasons, this group was founded specifically for the Chinese immigrant families of students with disabilities.

The group met once a month in the evening from September to June each year at a community organization that was accessible and convenient to the parents. Each group meeting lasted about two to two and a half hours. To accommodate the families, childcare service and light dinner were provided. Each year, special events and/or activities were also planned, such as Lunar New Year celebration and arts and crafts competitions. Recreational activities were also offered to the families during the summer break, such as picnics and one-day trips.

Since the challenges parents face can occur on a daily basis and they often need immediate support or guidance, waiting till the monthly meetings to seek help can be too late. Additionally, due to work schedule, not all parent members are available to attend group meetings on a monthly basis. To help facilitate and enhance the communication among parent members, a private online chat group was created using one of the instant messaging systems. Parents can then easily seek and offer assistance and share resources in the private group.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the monthly group meetings were moved online. Because of the convenience of joining the monthly meetings without traveling, the parent members voted to move the group meetings virtually even after the pandemic.

The positive impact of the parent support group was quickly shared in the community which leads to more and more Chinese immigrant families of children with disabilities requested to join. The membership has grown from 5 to 83 families. Disability of the parent members' children range from mild to severe. Grade levels of the children range from preschool to high school. Because of the group founder's close partnerships with other non-profit organizations and state agencies, two of them agreed to sponsor the group. Each organization assigns a staff member to participate in the group who offers direct support to the parent members, such as attending IEP meetings with parents and offering advocacy, reviewing and explaining evaluation reports to families, and sharing new and updated initiatives that can be beneficial to them.

3.1. Types of Support Offered

When the parent support group was founded, all the participated parent members had limited to no knowledge about the U.S. school system, the special education process, parent responsibilities during the process, and expectations of parent engagement. They also did not have sufficient knowledge about their parental rights in the process. Because they spoke limited to no English, it became very difficult for them to access any available resources. Therefore, training opportunities on these areas were emphasized. As their knowledge continued to advance, additional training topics were offered.

To determine the needs of the parent members in the group and ensure that the offered support is relevant to them, they are surveyed each year. In addition to a rating scale for them to share their perceptions of the effectiveness of the group, they are asked to respond to the following open-ended questions.

- What information provided this year was especially helpful to you?
- What new information would you be interested in learning in the upcoming school year?
- In what areas can this parent support group further support you?

Results of the annual survey inform the group founder what improvements need to be made and which topic(s) should be focused for the upcoming year. Depending on the topic(s), experts in the field are invited to speak with the group. For instance, parent members were interested in learning about guardianship and life after high school. An attorney and the regional director of one state agency were invited to share information with the group.

During the pandemic, the parent members faced many challenges, such as difficulty engaging their children in academics, providing technological support during remote learning, monitoring children's screentime, and managing their children's behaviors. Digital digit hits U.S. immigrants the hardest during this period but limited to no support was offered by the schools. This parent group decided to provide various types of technological support and academic resources to the parent members.

4. Impact of the Parent Support Group

Throughout the last 10 years, parent members consistently reported that they were highly satisfied with the support offered by the parent support group. Below is the summary of survey results obtained using Likert scale questions (scale of 1 through 4, where 4 is the highest):

- Special education knowledge (M = 3.89; SD = 0.32).
- Advocacy skills (M = 3.91; SD = 0.30).
- Preparedness to work with schools (M = 3.65; SD = 0.82).
- Technological skills (M = 3.92; SD = 0.27).
- Emotional and psychological support (M = 3.79; SD = 0.41).
- Guest speakers based on parents' interested topics (M = 3.51; SD = 0.50).

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

While this community-based parent support group is proven to be highly effective in advancing parents' knowledge and skills in special education and preparing them to become schools' equal partners and their children's advocate and decision makers, the parent members continue facing some challenges when working with schools which the group is unable to address. One is about the communication between schools and families. While informing parents with updated information is helpful, it is far from sufficient. Two-way communication must be used, so parents have a voice on decisions that are made about their child's academic programs [1]. Next is the quality of interpreters and translators used in school meetings must be improved. As of now, language interpreters and translators are not required to be certified or licensed. Besides having the ability to speak English and the target language fluently, professional interpreters and translators must receive training on how to provide quality services in specialized meetings, such as IEP and school disciplinary meetings. Knowing the terminology that is used in these meetings is needed. Finally, many immigrant parents who are new to the country may not be familiar with the support available in the community. Schools can consider creating and sharing a community resource directory with families.

Schools, community, and families must use creative ways to collaborate. The ones who benefit from this three-way partnership are our students with disabilities.

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