

Collaborating With Families of Multi-Lingual Learners Who are Identified with a Disability

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The importance of collaboration between families of multilingual learners and education professionals should not be understated. Strong partnerships between educators and families are essential in special education, as they contribute to improved student outcomes (Aceves, 2014). In the U.S., students with disabilities are guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and related services under federal law (IDEA, 2022). These legal protections also safeguard the partnerships between families and schools (Hughes et al., 2008), which are central to the principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Trainor, 2010). As a result, schools are required to ensure that legal caregivers and guardians are fully included in special education meetings, such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings (Feeney et al., 2023). These partnerships aim to leverage the expertise of both families and educational professionals in making decisions that benefit students (Mortier & Arias, 2020), and legal mandates and acts serve to protect students and families (Mortier & Arias, 2020).

Though there are numerous advantages to partnerships between families and educators, some researchers highlight that access to special education for families is not always fully realized in practice (Aceves, 2014; Francis et al., 2022; Rosetti et al., 2020). Special education is nuanced and complex, which can pose challenges for families to understand and navigate special education processes effectively (Bravo-Ruiz & Flynn, 2022; Burke et al., 2020). For instance, many special education laws and procedures can be difficult to grasp (Bravo-Ruiz & Flynn, 2022). This situation underscores the existence of barriers that can hinder effective collaboration between families and educators during the special education process. Though it is possible that any family may encounter obstacles in accessing special education, immigrant families face additional challenges that can significantly affect their access to these processes and sometimes negatively influence partnerships with educators (Francis et al., 2017; Mortier & Arias, 2020), extending to families of multilingual learners who may also be identified with a disability.

Consider, for example, the varied cultural models and conceptualizations of the term “disability.” Though individuals may perceive disability through different lenses, there are three prominent “models” of disability through which may guide individual understanding about the term (Gerry et al., 2024). For example, individuals who perceive disability through the “medical model” may conceptualize a disability to be a condition in need of treatment or a cure (Gerry et al., 2024; Fallah et al., 2020; University of Oregon, n.d.). Other individuals may define disability through a “moral model,” which considers disability to be the result of an individual or family’s actions, character, karma, or thoughts and is often tied to religious or spiritual beliefs (Gerry et al., 2024; Olkin, 2022). Others may view disability through a “social model,” which posits that a disability is the consequence of the social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers within a society (University of Oregon, n.d.). Different models of disability may influence how individuals understand and perceive disability and may impact how families with whom best perceive ways to support

their child with a disability. As such, education professionals involved in special education would benefit by developing a baseline awareness of the models through which families they partner with may view disability.

Another important consideration in barriers to special education for families of multilingual learners is the role of language. Though translation services are often a focal point in discussions about these barriers, it is crucial to recognize that language can create challenges beyond just translation. Barriers in translation services are considerable and deeply influential. However, what is also important to consider is that language not only presents a barrier to families in terms of translation but is also a barrier in terms of the nuances, contexts, and meanings that are not easily translatable between languages. Consider, for example, special education procedural safeguards. Though the goal of these documents is to support parent access to special education, it is not uncommon for them to be written at university, graduate, or professional reading levels (Mandic-Gomez et al., 2012). As such, some of the terminology and jargon used in these documents may not be easily translatable or accessible to families.

Finally, when exploring the barriers faced by culturally and linguistically diverse families to special education, it is also of deep importance that educators understand the considerable variety of educational systems that exist across global settings. Families, especially those from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, have likely had direct experiences with different systems of education. Similarly to how cultural conceptualizations of the term disability may influence how families perceive disability and paths of support for their children (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997; Ravindran & Myers, 2012), cultural beliefs and practices can also influence how individuals perceive different roles and expectations within education settings (Francis et al., 2017). If these varied experiences or expectations regarding educational practices are misunderstood, it is possible that these misunderstandings can sometimes lead individuals to adopt deficit views of families (Francis et al., 2017), impacting positive family and educator partnerships as well as access to special education.

In conclusion, family and educator partnerships are vital for ensuring that students with disabilities receive the holistic support they need to succeed. However, despite legal protections and framework, barriers may exist that can hinder full and effective family participation. These barriers, including difficulties understanding complex special education systems, language challenges, and differing cultural perceptions of disability, can further complicate partnerships between families and educators. Further, these barriers present unique contexts for families who may have immigrated to the United States and have varied cultural beliefs and experiences with different global education systems. To overcome these challenges, it is essential for educators to recognize and respect the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the families they serve. By fostering inclusive, culturally responsive practices and providing clear, accessible information, educators will likely be equipped to build strong, equitable partnerships with families, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities.

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