

Barriers Against and Strategies for Promoting the Involvement of Culturally Diverse Parents in School-Based Transition Planning

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the barriers against and strategies for promoting the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents in school-based transition planning. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with 31 parents from Native American, African American and Hispanic communities, and 10 professionals who had involvement in transition planning. Coding of the transcripts using established ethnographic and content analysis techniques revealed seven main categories or types of barriers which appear to inhibit or prevent parental involvement in school-based transition planning: (a) power imbalance; (b) psychological or attitudinal; (c) logistic; (d) information; (e) communication; (f) SES and contextual factors; and (g) cultural influences. In the qualitative study, parents and professionals also identified a number of potential strategies for increasing or better supporting parental involvement in transition planning. These strategies included: (a) positive communication between parent and professionals; (b) preparing for transition at an earlier age; (c) information on school-based transition planning; (d) use of a parent advocate; (e) emotional support for parents; and (f) flexibility in meeting formats. The implications of these findings for educational and transition services are discussed.

Introduction

It is well established that young adults with disabilities face significant economic, educational and community-based barriers in their transition to adulthood. Outcomes studies over the past twenty years have demonstrated that youth with disabilities who are moving into adulthood lag behind peers without disabilities in their rates of high school graduation, employment and postsecondary participation (Henderson, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003; Wagner, Blackorby & Hebbeler, 1993). Most recently, the 2004 National Organization on Disability/Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities found that people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be unemployed, twice as likely to drop out of high school, and three times more likely to live in poverty, as compared to people without disabilities (N.O.D./Harris Survey, 2004). Adding to the numerous challenges faced by adolescents with disabilities is the uncoordinated and uncertain adult service system which students confront as they exit high school. Many parents and students experience difficulties shifting from the stability and security of school programs to an adult service system that is unfamiliar, variable, and often challenging to access and navigate.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) adolescents and young adults with disabilities appear to be at even greater risk for poor transition than their non-minority peers with disabilities. While the recent

NLTS2 reveals that important progress has been made regarding the outcomes of students with disabilities since the NLTS was first conducted in 1987, the data indicates that important differences endure for CLD students (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). For example, the NLTS2 found that African American young adults with disabilities were significantly less likely than Euro-American youth with disabilities to be living independently (4% vs. 19%), to earn above minimum wage (77.4% vs. 90.2%), and to participate in postsecondary education (28% vs. 36%).

People with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be unemployed, twice as likely to drop out of high school, and three times more likely to live in poverty, as compared to people without disabilities

Hispanic young adults with disabilities sometimes fared even worse, with only 68.6% earning more than minimum wage and 21% attending a postsecondary program. Similarly, Yelin and Trupin (1997), using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), found that unemployed Euro-American adults were 40% more likely to find employment than adults with disabilities from ethnically diverse backgrounds. CLD individuals may experience greater challenges to accessing employment related services as well. For example, studies have shown that CLD individuals are less likely than their Euro-American counterparts to use Vocational

Rehabilitation (VR) services and when they do, experience lower placement rates (Atkins & Wright, 1980; National Council on Disability, 1993.)

The transition of students with disabilities has been an area of focus for well over two decades, and important laws have been established to address the needs of these young people. Since the 1990 passage of Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has required that supports or services needed to promote transition must be included within the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Most recently, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA moved the age at which this transition statement is to be included in the IEP from 14 to 16 years of age. The importance of parental involvement has also been recognized in legislation and school policy. For example, IDEA 2004 maintains the stipulation that parents be invited to participate in school-based transition planning, and educators are required to have parental consent for the initial evaluation and content of the IEP.

The importance of parental involvement in transition planning has also been empirically documented through local, regional and state studies. For example, Schalock, Wolzen, Ross, Elliott, Werbel and Peterson (1986), in studying youth with learning or developmental disabilities, found that students whose parents were actively involved in transition programming were more successful on employment outcome measures than students whose parents had little involvement. Young people who had high family involvement worked more hours and received higher wages than students who had low family involvement. Halpern, Yovanoff, Doren, and

Ben (1995) also found that family involvement during transition was a significant predictor of post-secondary success. Schalock and Lilley (1986) further documented the association between parental participation and successful living among people with disabilities, while Hasazi, Gordon and Roe (1985) revealed that most students find employment through parental or community-based networks. Finally, Powers, Turner, Matuszewski, Wilson and Loesch (1999) found that students considered the support they received from their parents to be critical for their transition preparation.

While there is strong evidence regarding the importance of parent participation, actual parent involvement in school-based transition planning typically diminishes during the transition period. For example, McNair and Rusch (1991) found that only slightly more than 30% of parents surveyed had involvement in transition programs, although nearly 70% reported they desired involvement. Additionally, Lynch and Stein (1982) reported significantly less participation in IEP conferences by parents of older students than by parents of younger children. Teachers also appear aware of and dissatisfied with the low parental involvement in transition planning. Benz and Halpern (1987) conducted a survey of parents, teachers and administrators in Oregon, and found that only 13% of the educators were very satisfied with the parental support they were receiving. When parents were surveyed, over half indicated contact with their child's teacher once per term or less.

Parent participation in school-based transition planning seems to be especially low among CLD parents. Several studies have indicated that CLD parents are typically less

involved in the overall educational planning process as compared to non-minority parents (Lynch and Stein, 1982, 1987). A study by Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001), specifically investigating the involvement of minority parents in transition planning, found that CLD parent participation in school-based transition planning was significantly lower than that of non-minority parents. It should be noted however, that minority parents reported significantly greater involvement than non-minority parents in several transition planning activities that occurred outside the realm of school.

While parental participation in school based transition planning may be particularly low among CLD parents, it also appears to be of particular importance, as a strong relationship between families and the school can promote cultural understanding and responsiveness in transition planning.

Research confirms that when educators engage in a truly collaborative partnership with parents, schools can more effectively meet the needs of their CLD students.

Ethnic groups often embrace different norm-related behaviors and define adult roles differently, and parents can be a valuable resource in helping educators understand, identify and support transition outcomes that are valued within a family's culture (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). Research confirms that when educators engage in a truly collaborative partnership with parents, schools can more effectively meet the needs of their CLD students. For example, Harry's study (1992a) of 12 low-income Puerto Rican parents revealed that while they had a limited understanding of the

educational system, the parents had important information and insight into the difficulties of their children. Additionally, when professionals were receptive to parental feedback, the views of parents had an important impact upon educational decisions made by the school. At the high school level, research has demonstrated that parent involvement has an impact on the academic performance of CLD students, particularly for Native American students (Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, Killings, 1998).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to further explore the transition planning experiences of CLD parents, particularly the barriers that impede their participation in school-based transition planning and strategies for promoting their involvement. These issues were examined from the perspectives of CLD parents and school staff that provide transition support.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 31 CLD parents or primary care givers of students participating in special education transition planning. Parents were recruited through the Special Education Program of an urban school district in the Northwest, and through specific district programs for CLD youth, such as Indian Education and the English as a Second Language Programs (ESL). Additional participants were recruited through the County Developmental Disabilities Program and local community based organizations. All participants were from CLD groups: 7 were Native American, 10 were Hispanic and 14 were African American. Twenty-four of the participants were mothers, 5 were fathers, and 2 were grand-

parents. Disabilities of the parents' children ranged from mild to severe, and their diagnoses included epilepsy, developmental delay, mental retardation, learning disabilities, paralysis, hearing and/or vision deficits, and several chronic illnesses.

The qualitative study utilized both focus groups and in-depth interviews to explore parents' general experiences around transition, and to identify both challenges and strategies related to their participation in school-based transition planning. Specifically, 22 participants took part in focus groups and 9 participants were interviewed individually. Focus groups were conducted first, and were designed to be an open-ended forum where participants could share their experiences around transition in general, without being influenced by targeted questions from the investigators. Thus, the goal of the focus groups was to identify what topics around transition naturally emerged in dialogue between parents. Individual interviews were conducted after focus groups had been completed, were significantly more structured and focused, and were intended to gather specific information about parent involvement in transition planning. Parents or family members joining the project early-on participated in a focus group, while participants who contacted the project after the focus group phase of the study had been completed were invited to participate in an individual interview. Additionally, participants who were selected for a focus group but could not attend were offered an individual interview instead.

Individual interviews were also conducted with school staff to capture their perceptions of minority parent involvement in school-based transition plan-

ning, and provide a comparison to the reports of parents themselves. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 10 school Transition Specialists whose primary responsibilities were to design, coordinate and implement transition planning within the same school district parents were recruited from. All transition specialists were Caucasian, and three were male. The length of time the professionals had held a position as Transition Specialist ranged from 1 to 12 years, with their median tenure being 3 years.

Focus Group Procedures

One or two focus group was conducted with parents from each cultural group (Native American, African American, and Hispanic) for a total of five focus groups. In each group, there were three to five parents or grandparents, for a total of 22 focus group participants. Each focus group was co-facilitated by one of the investigators and a representative from the same ethno-cultural background as the parents. For the Hispanic focus groups, the co-facilitator was also fluent in Spanish. Focus groups lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. Written consent for participation in the study was obtained from parents and relatives prior to the beginning of a focus group.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The protocol for each focus group centered broadly on the activities parents engage in to prepare for their children's transitions into adulthood. The goal of the focus groups was to be parent-directed, i.e. parents determined, to a large extent, what issues around transition were important to discuss. The broad and open-ended structure of the groups permitted each family member to share his or her own perspective or story, without being immediately affected by possible biases from more fo-

Figure 1.

Parent Focus Group Questions

1. What would you consider to be a successful future for your child?
2. What are barriers to that future?
3. What has happened so far to help your son/daughter get ready for the future? Who has helped? What have they done? What have you done?

Figure 2.

Parent Interview Questions

- 1) What would you like to see your son/daughter doing once he/she has finished high school?
- 2) What needs to happen to help your child get ready for successful adulthood?
- 3) What has happened so far?
- 4) What activities have you participated in to help your son/daughter get ready for the future? Why?
- 5) What activities do you think are most important for parents to do to help their children prepare for the future?
- 6) What things have kept you from participating?
- 7) What things would make it easier for you to participate?

Figure 3.

Professional Interview Questions

- 1) Do you think parental involvement is important in transition planning? Why or why not?
- 2) What opportunities are there for parental involvement in transition planning within the schools?
- 3) In your opinion, what is the reality of parental involvement? In other words, what is the real nature of participation among parents? At what level are they getting involved and who is involved?
- 4) What do you think are the barriers to parent participation? Why do some parents not get involved?
- 5) Are there things you do or have tried to get parents more involved?
- 6) What other ideas do you have for how to get parents more actively involved?

cused, specific questions from the investigators (see figure 1).

Interview Procedures

After the focus groups were completed, interviews were conducted with 9 parents; 3 from each target community (African American, Hispanic and Native American). In addition, individual interviews were conducted with 10 Transition Specialists. In the majority of cases, the interview occurred between the parent or professional and the investigator. On 3 occasions however, the parents spoke only limited English, and a Spanish translator also was present.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

While the focus groups were de-

signed to be parent-directed, covering a broad range of topics, the interview protocol was more focused, with an emphasis placed on exploring parent participation in various transition activities, particularly their involvement in school-based transition planning (see figure 2). The interview protocol was designed to highlight four areas: (a) current participation activities of parents during transition planning, (b) which transition planning activities are valued by parents and professionals, (c) barriers which inhibit parent involvement, and (d) strategies which promote parental participation. Within each area, respondents were

asked to share their experiences.

The interview questions were not asked in a fixed, sequential order. Rather, the protocol served as a map of the territory to be covered during the course of the interview. As an interview proceeded, the researcher asked specific follow-up questions about the parent's involvement in school-based transition planning if such information did not emerge naturally (e.g. Have you worked with your child's school in planning for his or her future? If no, why not? If yes, what have been your experiences? What has been helpful? What has been a challenge?).

Similar questions were asked of the Transition Special-

ists, however they were phrased differently in order to solicit their perceptions of parent involvement (see figure 3).

The researcher asked specific follow-up questions about the involvement of CLD parents in school-based transition planning if such information did not emerge naturally (e.g. what is the nature of participation among CLD parents? Are there unique challenges or barriers to their involvement?)

Data Analysis

All focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded according to constant-comparative procedures described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Utilizing this approach, field notes and verbatim transcripts were reviewed, and emerging themes were identified. Initial categories were developed based upon identified themes, and after coding each line of the transcripts, topics were collated for each category. Each transcript was coded by the researcher who conducted the original interview as well as a secondary coder from the research team. Any coding disagreement was discussed until agreement was reached.

Literature suggests that while many communities were initially supportive of schools, over time they have become alienated as their children's behavior have been misinterpreted due to cultural biases

While initially there were a larger number of categories, minor codes were collapsed under major categories. In addition, new categories were sometimes created to accommodate additional themes that emerged. After refinement of the coding structure, formal reliability between a primary and secondary coder was assessed

with six randomly selected, uncoded transcripts. Using the formula of number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements x 100 = % of agreement, the percentage of interrater reliability was calculated at .81. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommended data trail procedures were used to allow anyone outside of the study to verify the findings.

Findings

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Coding of the interviews and focus groups revealed a number of barriers which appear to inhibit or prevent parental involvement in school-based transition planning. While all respondents expressed a basic caring and concern for their children's future, a number of factors made it difficult for some parents to participate in the school-based transition processes at the level they desired. Qualitative analysis revealed seven main categories or types of barriers: (a) power imbalance; (b) psychological/attitudinal; (c) logistic; (d) information; (e) communication; (f) SES/contextual barriers; and (g) cultural factors or influences. Each type of barrier is described below, and quotes from parents and professionals are presented to illustrate key themes.

Power Imbalance

The issue of power appears to be one of the most frequent and important barriers impacting parent involvement in school-based transition planning, and was often described as inherent in the everyday interactions of parents and school staff. For example, parents often perceived that school related information and decision-making was in the hands of the professionals, who ultimately decided what services a student would or would not receive:

They (the school) know...it's very obvious that it is needed, you know...and they're supposed to provide it...but they're getting around it because, you know...a loophole. I just wish that there was a plan of action that took place...and you wouldn't have to fight to keep on getting it...it kind of makes them the enemy. And I feel we should be working together as a team, and not having to rub against each other.

Similarly, while school meetings are supposed to provide an opportunity for teamwork and sharing of ideas between parents and professionals, the goals of transition plans are often prepared beforehand, and staff predetermine the content of paperwork. As one professional admitted:

I think a lota times...we were just talking about this last week (with other professionals), some teachers write up the whole thing and then just read it off you know...which is not the best way.

The importance of power is also reflected, on a larger scale, in the relationship between the general education system and the disability or CLD communities, especially around issues of funding and resource allocation.

You know the problem with uh...disabled parents is that we are such a minority. And when it comes to schools, and things like that, the majority always gets its...you know...these classes, they've got 500 students and they need this, and (ours) is only one class, so I'll mention it, it would be nice, but you know...I've learned not to...uh...build my hopes up.

Whenever there is an imbalance of power, the danger exists that it will be misused. Literature suggests that while many communities were initially supportive of schools, over time they have become alienated as their children's behavior have been misinterpreted due to cul-

tural biases (Harry, 1992b). Similarly, parents expressed mistrust of the school's ability to accurately understand and educate their children, or to follow through on promises made for services:

I've had teachers tell me about Paul that 'Oh I knew someone in the army who had epilepsy (and) he did fine, so no problem...why is Paul not doing the work?' Right! You know I hate those stories, we're talking about this individual child that has this problem. What are you going to do? You know what I am saying? I don't let them get off. I refuse to let them get off!

Cuando uno piense mas que a uno lo estan ayudano, le van a clavar la espada (When one is thinking that they are helping you, that is when they stick it to you).

When parents do become empowered through access to information and more experience with school procedures, they report they are better able to advocate for their child:

I have learned a lot, and I've learned that it's all there...you just need to let them (school staff) know, 'I know about it!' You know, if you don't, then it's just like every other job...it's just more work for them to do.

Professionals, however, may not always feel comfortable with a shift in power. Interviews with school staff suggest that they find it difficult to work with parents in a truly collaborative manner where decision making is shared equally:

Sometimes, um, a knowledge of the system, or sort of a readiness to go to advocacy, it's kind of like a little knowledge is a dangerous thing...there is not over-involvement (by the parents) in terms of time and cooperation, but over-direction.

Psychological or Attitudinal

Parents may be coping with a variety of psychological issues or demands that make planning for their child's transition into

adulthood difficult. For example, while a child with special needs may actually require greater parental advocacy and planning during adolescence, this is a time when most parents typically cut-back on their level of involvement.

Furthermore, professionals reported that during transition, parents may experience feelings of fatigue and "burnout" after years of care giving:

I come into contact with a lot of parents who are just tired...they're done. Its sad though cause that's (transition) when they need to step on the gas...this is really gonna make a difference about what they are going to do.

Sometimes its just attitudinal. The parents are just tired of the process...they've been doing this (meetings) for years and years.

As one parent illustrated, the immediate, day-to-day emotional demands of having a child with a disability can sometimes be so overwhelming, that it can be difficult to find the time or energy to plan for a child's future:

Well you know, speaking of Raphael's future, we've always taken it day-by-day. So there really hasn't been, um, thinking 'oh you know, what's gonna happen after high school?'...it's just the grief (long pause)...so we really haven't put much thinking to that (the future).

Similarly, several professionals noted that parents often are so intently focused on making sure their children graduate from school, they overlook the need to plan for life after graduation. For example, one transition specialist reported that:

I think there are those folks who tend to be more concerned with their student graduating...that's the whole goal. They're not thinking about life after high school yet, they're pretty focused on getting through high school.

Logistics

Scheduling conflicts and work obligations often make it difficult for parents to attend school meetings or conferences. Occasionally, parents indicated that could not attend a meeting because it was held during the day while they were working, or they did not receive advance notice of a conference time. More often however, parents mentioned they were too tired from the demands of their everyday schedules and they had little energy left to stay actively involved with the school.

Si me gustaria, este...estar en contacto saber que me dejen saber por ejemplo usted sabe que a veces se pueden salir de clases o no ir uno le dicen si fue, pues yo me la paso trabajando (Well, I would like to have more contact with his school so that they could tell me if he is assisting in his classes or not, [but I can't] because I am always working).

I really didn't go much (to the school) because I had other children in the house, and they were very troublesome children...and I was running to counseling, running to doctors, or whatever, so that's taken up a lot of my time.

When parents do become empowered through access to information and more experience with school procedures, they report they are better able to advocate for their child

Information

Results from the qualitative study indicate that while parents feel their child's education is important, they may lack awareness regarding their parental rights and educational procedures. For example, several parents reported that they did not understand the content or meaning of educational documents they had signed, or why

they had met with the school. Transition staff also confirmed that parents often do not understand the educational process they are involved in:

I got parents that are really concerned about their kids, but quite honestly, I don't really think they understand a lot of what we're doing...I mean we try to make it as clear as possible, and as simple as possible, they get copies of all the papers...but they don't get it.

Parents also appear to lack information about services for their children once they exit high school. The adult delivery system is typically disconnected from the school system with which families are familiar, and thus, parents appear to have difficulty planning for and securing these services ahead of time.

I just don't know what kind of services or programs are out there for kids after 21...I mean one time, someone told me there's always nursing homes. Nursing homes! Can you imagine...there has got to be more out there than that, but I don't know what.

Finally, professionals reported that many parents may lack information about the transition processes itself and fail to recognize it as a new step in the educational processes:

For some parents, um, they get so tired of going to meetings and hearing about how badly their child is doing academically. I think a lot more parents would come to transition meetings if they knew we were talking about something new, not school work, but about what their kids will be doing with their life after school.

Communication

Communication can impact parent participation on several levels, including the use of professional jargon, nonverbal communication, and communication styles. A frequent communication barrier cited by both

parents and school staff was the lack of professionals who are bilingual and communicate with parents in their native language. For example, a parent reported that she is reluctant to ask professionals questions because she does not speak English:

Aca no lo puedo preguntar porque yo no puede hablar Inglés, me da much pena explicarles, no me entienden (Here [school] I can't ask because I can't speak English. I am very ashamed to ask).

The technical language often used by professionals within the educational system can also confuse parents and inhibit their participation, as illustrated by this parent's comment:

A lot of Hispanic families, it's like your talking to them and they're like 'Yeah, Yeah, Yeah' and they're not understanding any of the information you just told them. You need to throw in something like 'Oh my cat's blue' to see if they are understanding.

The direct, formal style of communication many professionals may exhibit may be distancing to people who are more accustomed to slower, more relaxed style of interaction.

The majority of parents interviewed reported only intermittent contact with school staff, and when they did, the communication they received from the school was usually around a problem or their child's misbehavior.

Parent's responses during these qualitative interviews highlighted the importance of using a more indirect communication style when working with Hispanic and Native American families, including the need for professionals to take time to "get to know the family." As a parent who also serves as an educational advocate for other families points out:

I see myself as a Hispanic, so

I know when I go into a home, you don't just march in and say 'Okay, you know I have 15 minutes, can we just do this.' No, you don't do that with a Hispanic family...the first visit is just to chitchat, really get to know them.

The majority of parents interviewed reported only intermittent contact with school staff, and when they did, the communication they received from the school was usually around a problem or their child's misbehavior. Thus, over time parents may come to expect interactions with the school to be unpleasant or negative.

Socio-Economic Status and Other Contextual Barriers

A variety of environmental barriers, such as poverty, violence in the home or parental drug abuse may make it difficult, if not impossible, for some parents to participate in transition planning for their child. As illustrated below, when a family is striving simply to meet their basic needs for survival, activities that are not immediately pressing, such as participating in school meetings, tend to be overlooked or neglected:

My husband can't take time from work until May...and they're like (school staff) 'You don't understand, your son needs you right now'...and I'm like, 'I'm sorry, you don't understand, I'll loose my kid, I'll loose my house, I'll loose everything...I can't right now.'

Culture

Cultural issues permeated almost every type of barrier, particularly within areas of communication, and information. For example, differences in linguistic patterns were reported to create misunderstandings between school staff and families, while professionals described recent immigrants as facing additional barriers to information as parents are unfamiliar with the school setting

and have no parallel system in their country of origin. The issue of power also tended to be culturally embedded. While many parents encountered reluctance by professionals to truly engage in collaboration, the issue of power imbalance appears to be a particularly complex one for CLD persons. For example, several parents expressed discomfort or frustration with the fact school professionals are rarely from the same cultural background and, as a result, the educational and transition needs of their children are misunderstood. In contrast, some parents viewed professionals as a source of authority and reported that they tended to leave the educational decision making in the hands of school staff as they were the “experts”. However, it should be noted that while these parents were not comfortable questioning authority figures, they did not always agree with decisions made by the school.

I guess you just have to trust...right, cause' they're (school staff) the experts, that's their job, you just have to trust that they know what's best...but there sure are times when I'm not so sure... I just don't feel comfortable saying anything.

In addition to appearing as a framework from which to understand other barriers, parents also described instances in which culture in and of itself was a barrier. More specifically, several parents described instances when they felt they were treated poorly by professionals or the educational system because of their culture. While not all parents labeled these occurrences as acts of racism, they did express frustration with feeling misunderstood and unsupported because of their culture. Several parents actually men-

tioned that they “gave-up” on seeking help from formal, public institutions (e.g. school) after they experienced continued disregard and disrespect for their culture.

I think racism in middle and high school is really the biggest thing...and it's too bad, because as long as we've argued with these people and talked about curriculum, and talked about being available to the whole population they serve, they continue to teach really ignorant things, and you can only take so much of that garbage before you end up being enraged or just give up and walk away.

Strategies to Increase Parental Involvement

Parents and professionals also identified a number of potential strategies for increasing or better supporting parental involvement in school-based transition planning. These strategies are reviewed below and include: (a) increased positive communication between parent and professional; (b) preparing for transition at an earlier age; (c) information on school-based transition planning; (d) use of parental advocates; (e) increased emotional support for parents; (f) increased flexibility in meeting formats.

Increase Positive Communication

The majority of parents interviewed reported only occasional communication with school staff, which was usually around something negative. Both parents and professionals reported that an increase in ongoing, positive communication between home and school would lead to greater parent involvement.

How about calling us when our kid does something good? I think I would fall right out of my chair...it sure would be nice to hear some good news for a change.

Prepare for Transition at an Earlier Age

Both parents and professionals reported that planning for a student's transition often seems to occur too late in a child's education and they believe it would be helpful if transition planning began at an earlier age. Respondents indicated that earlier planning would provide students with more time and opportunities to develop independent living skills and career interests, permit parents to identify and access adult services ahead of time, and allow families to more gently move into the transition process.

For example, as one parent unhappily noted:

It was like we woke up and boom, the future was here. It totally snuck up on us, and we were totally overwhelmed and unprepared. My advice to all parents is start thinking about this stuff early.

Information on School-Based Transition Planning

Both parents and professionals indicated that families frequently have little specific information regarding the meaning or importance of school-based transition planning. Often parents reported that they were unclear about their role during transition planning meetings, were unaware of service options during and after transition, and did not see school-based transition planning as a new step in their child's educational preparation. While parents and professionals did not specifically recommend a training program for families around transition, respondents strongly indicated that there was a great need for parents to have more information about school-based transition planning, as well as a means for learning that information.

Somehow we have got to get parents information on what

these transition meetings are all about...that we'll be doing a transition plan and talking about their kid's future. So they understand that this is something new, something they haven't done before...something important that they should care about.

Use of a Parental Advocate

The strategy that many parents felt would be most helpful to them in transition planning was the use of an advocate. Several of the parents interviewed reported that they had used an advocate on at least one occasion, and a few parents indicated that they had worked with an advocate for an extended period of time. In general, parents described the advocate as a person located outside of the school system who attends school meetings with them, gives them information about school procedures, provides emotional support, and clarifies their educational rights. All parents who had used an advocate unanimously reported that the advocate was very helpful, and made them feel more comfortable about participating.

I didn't know anything about the school has to do this...I didn't know any of that, so I had an advocate for two years...and after that, I was doing great! You know, you can be an advocate for your own kid, and since then, I've done it myself and I have learned all that's there.

While parents indicated that the support of an advocate was useful, professionals expressed uncertainty about the helpfulness of such support. Specifically, several professionals pointed out that advocates tend to be introduced after the relationship between parents and professionals has begun to break down, which serves to only further increase the animosity between the school and family. Therefore, the use of an advocate per se may not be prob-

lematic, but the timing and conditions under which an advocate is introduced appear important. For example, professionals reported:

Advocacy doesn't often help...because, and it's probably not directly related to advocacy, but usually the point at which parents bring an advocate to a meeting is probably because there's some sort of communication gap...and instead of a team approach... it will take on an adversarial kind of 'this is what we want you to do.'

Increase Emotional Support

Another important strategy for some parents in increasing their involvement is the provision of ongoing emotional support. As mentioned earlier, parents of special need children may be susceptible to feelings of fatigue and "burnout". The day-to-day demands of having a child with a disability may become so challenging, that parents have little energy left over to plan for their child's future. This may be particularly true for parents who face additional barriers such as being a single parent or having multiple children with disabilities. During the interviews, a handful of parents indicated a strong need for emotional support around the care giving of their children, either through informal community networks, parent support groups, or professional counseling. In particular, parents seemed to want someone who could give them guidance around parenting, acknowledge their stresses and accomplishments, and simply listen. At times, parents expressed anger at having to care for their child on their own and wished for the support of another adult.

I am so tired of having to do it on my own. I just, I wish there was someone else I could talk to who would help me through some of this stuff and understand.

Parent support groups...I think are a great thing be-

cause we need that so badly, we need that support.

Flexible Meeting Formats

Parents made a number of suggestions that centered on making school meetings more "family friendly." Parents noted that school meetings are typically held during the day making it difficult for them to attend. According to parents, greater advance notice and more options for scheduling meeting times would be helpful. In addition, several parents described instances where school meetings were held in their home, which removed barriers for parents (e.g. child care, transportation) and created an atmosphere that was more comfortable for the family. Professionals also acknowledged that meeting times are often inconvenient for families, but stressed that it is difficult to schedule meeting after school when more than one staff person is expected to attend.

Respondents expressed that simply informing parents that they are invited to participate is typically insufficient. Rather, parents must be told that their involvement is desired and important. Most professionals acknowledged that when the relationship with a parent is lacking or non-existent, even the best-planned strategies for enlisting parent involvement fail. As one professional emphasized:

You have to make efforts, it's your job and responsibility to make these parents get involved. There are a lot of parents who may or may not participate a lot...I don't think that's where our responsibility ends...I think it's just making that extra call, make that last stop...you'd be amazed at the doors that begin to open up.

Discussion

In considering the implications of these findings, it is important to clarify that the purpose of this qualitative analysis was to derive an understanding of the

participants' perceptions about parent involvement in transition planning, not to confirm or test any hypotheses or theory. Additionally, the study's in-depth qualitative examination of the experiences of a small number of parents and school staff limits its generalizability. It is also important to note that the responses of parents were largely in reference to their personal experience with their children's transition planning, whereas the comments of Transition Specialists referenced their general perceptions of transition planning with CLD parents with whom they have worked.

Previous research indicates that CLD parents often demonstrate low levels of involvement in school based transition planning as compared to higher levels of involvement within systems more familiar to culturally diverse minority families (e.g. neighborhood or community connections, extended family or informal helpers; Geenen, Powers, Lopez-Vasquez, 2001). Results from this qualitative investigation appear helpful in explaining this pattern of involvement, revealing in particular, why CLD parents are reluctant to access and place trust in the educational system.

Among the challenges described by the study's participants, the issue of power imbalance appears to be one of the most important barriers to parental involvement in school-based transition planning, and may be most apparent in the way families are excluded rather than included in educational planning. The "us-them" attitude of many professionals, where parents are seen as potential opponents rather than members of the same team, may be driven both by the organizational features of the special education system (e.g. bureaucracy, professional "jargon") and a failure by professionals to see parents as qualified decision makers. In addition, a lack of information (e.g. about

one's parental rights, the educational process and transition in general), parental fatigue, logistical constraints, communication and contextual or environmental barriers may further inhibit or prevent parent participation in school-based transition planning.

The barriers described above may pose considerable obstacles for CLD parents. For example, while all parents may encounter reluctance by professionals to see parents as true equals in the decision making process, professionals may have even greater difficulty acknowledging and appreciating the contributions of parents who are significantly different from them in culture, and even more so when a second language enters the equation.

Educational laws and policies have been culturally biased or discriminatory, and youth from diverse backgrounds continue to receive special education services at disproportionately higher rates than Euro-American students.

The issue of power imbalance becomes even more complex for CLD parents when the historical relationship between the educational system and minority communities is considered. Educational laws and policies have been culturally biased or discriminatory, and youth from diverse backgrounds continue to receive special education services at disproportionately higher rates than Euro-American students (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar & Higuera, 2005; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Calabrese, 1990; Patton, 1998). Thus, while parents of all ethnic groups may encounter a variety of barriers to participation in school-based transition planning, for CLD parents these same barriers are made more formidable by racism, discrimination and cultural unresponsiveness.

A number of strategies for promoting parental participation in

school-based transition planning were identified through the qualitative interviews and focus groups. These included increased communication, earlier preparation for transition, parent training, parental advocacy, emotional support for parents and flexible meeting times. While all of these strategies could prove useful to varying degrees, none of them will be effective unless professionals are truly prepared to encourage and value parental empowerment. Furthermore, since the power of decision-making currently lies within the hands of professionals, they, and not parents, are in the best position to strengthen family-school partnership. The strategies identified in the study tend to focus on parent supports (e.g. parental advocacy, parent training and emotional support), however, their implementation requires the field of transition to adopt new models of professional behavior and collaboration.

Implementing these models will require our education systems to adopt policies and practices that enable and encourage professionals to engage in behaviors and establish conditions that facilitate parent involvement. Findings from this study are consistent with other research and generally held beliefs among many parents and professionals regarding how best to address current barriers to parent involvement in transition planning. It seems that the future challenge before us is less related to understanding the problem than to implementing systemic approaches that provide the solution.

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