

Communicating With Parents of Children With Special Needs: Strategies for Teachers

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Abstract

Communicating with parents is a key role for teachers to foster relationships that will support student learning. This essay and discussion article focuses on a range of strategies teachers can use to promote effective communication with parents of children with special needs. The increasing prevalence of students with disabilities in our schools is highlighted as well as training needs relevant to both regular and special education teachers. The importance of understanding the parent experience is discussed, as well as viewing parents of children with disabilities as experts on their child, which complements the professional knowledge and practice of teachers. Specific strategies discussed include building trust with parents and the use of effective communication skills, including a thoughtful approach to the content, mode, and frequency of communication. Strategies to support key interactions with parents during IEP meetings are outlined based on the literature. Finally, opportunities to support communication with parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse and who also have a child with a disability are highlighted, with the goal to reduce barriers and promote parent engagement.

Key Words: communication, communicate, communicating, exceptionalities, parents, teachers, children, students, special needs, special education, disability, disabilities, strategies, parent engagement, parent involvement, school-home partnership, culturally and linguistically diverse, CLD

Introduction

Effective communication between teachers and parents is critical to build strong relationships that support student learning. Communicating is one of six key parent involvement strategies outlined by Epstein over time (Epstein, 1995, 2010; Epstein et al., 2018) and has been described as the strongest predictor of parent involvement (Gisewhite et al., 2021; Park & Holloway, 2018). Teacher–parent communication is important for all students but becomes even more critical for the parents of children with disabilities, whose special education goals and programs may vary widely from the regular curriculum. Communication and collaboration between teachers and parents of children with disabilities occur at multiple levels, including discussing the child’s educational needs, participating in the evaluation process, identifying goals, reviewing progress, and planning for successful transitions (Mereoiu et al., 2016). Indeed, there are legal mandates in the United States and in many other countries to ensure parent participation in both evaluation and placement decisions and in the development of an individualized learning plan for the child.

It is important that teachers understand the unique needs and experiences of parents who have children with special needs to support effective communication. Beyond their control and because of their experiences, many parents have faced significant personal and family stress, wait lists, health concerns, and financial hardships. Parents often become experts on their child in ways that go well beyond expectations for a typical parent, such as in-depth knowledge of medical conditions, developmental milestones, and treatment history. Parents are often asked to repeat their child’s story to multiple professionals. Many parents are forced to take on unexpected roles to address their child’s educational needs, requiring considerable personal time and energy (such as advocacy). Parents have also reported stress due to feeling criticized and blamed for their child’s challenges (Broomhead, 2013; Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015), as well as stress navigating the special education system (Dattoo, 2021; Heiman, 2021).

This essay and discussion article is the third in a series for teachers on communicating with parents. The first article outlined the wide range of one-way and two-way communication strategies available to teachers such as websites, email, various apps, report cards, phone calls, as well as in-person and virtual meetings (Graham-Clay, 2024a). The second article outlined specific communication skills that teachers can use to support difficult conversations with parents (Graham-Clay, 2024b). These skills are particularly important when communicating with parents of children with

special needs, given the increased potential for heightened emotions (Solvason & Proctor, 2021), disagreements regarding educational decisions (Lasater, 2016), and lack of trust (Madsen & Madsen, 2022).

Educators carry the primary responsibility to develop and maintain relationships with the parents of children with special needs (Broomhead, 2019). This current article focuses specifically on strategies teachers can use to support effective communication with this unique parent group. The increasing prevalence of children with disabilities in the education system is described amid the lack of focused training available to both general and special education teachers to communicate with parents. Specific considerations and strategies to support effective communication with parents of children with special needs are then discussed. First, it is important that teachers understand the parenting experience and recognize the expertise that these parents bring regarding their child. Teachers are then encouraged to build trust with parents and to use effective communication skills to ensure that parent voices are both heard and understood. This requires a thoughtful approach related to the content, mode, and frequency of communication. Based on the literature, strategies to maximize effective communication during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings are outlined to support collaborative planning. Finally, culturally responsive practices are discussed that will support communication with parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse and who also have a child with a disability.

The term “parent” in this article refers to those adults in a child’s life who may communicate with the child’s teacher regarding the child’s special education needs, program, and services (including parents, guardians, grandparents, foster parents, etc.). The terms special needs and disability are used interchangeably within the text. That said, it is recognized that while these descriptive terms are widely used in the educational literature, sensitivity is needed as language terms and labels have the potential to negatively impact perceptions about a child (Clark, 2023). It is imperative that each child’s unique gifts, talents, and abilities are recognized and supported.

Prevalence of Disabilities

The number of children with disabilities in our schools is increasing. National Health Information Survey (NHIS) data reported a 9.5% increased prevalence of developmental disabilities among children between 2009 and 2017 (Durkin, 2019). Similar trends were also reported in other countries. Based on this data, particular increases were noted in the prevalence of

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and intellectual disabilities (Zablotsky et al., 2019). U.S. Census data in 2019 indicated an estimated 2.6 million households had at least one child at home with a disability, representing 7.2% of the households in the U.S. with children under the age of 18 (Young, 2021).

The reasons for this increasing prevalence over time are multifaceted. These include improved child survival (Durkin, 2019; Olusanya et al., 2022) as well as improved knowledge of neurodevelopment by health providers, educators, and parents; enhanced developmental screening; broadened diagnostic criteria; and increased inclusion of children with disabilities (Durkin, 2019). Diagnostic capacity has also improved resulting in more “timely and accurate diagnoses for children” (Dan et al., 2024, p. 2).

From a special education perspective, the Report on the Condition of Education 2023 indicated the number of American students (aged 3–21) receiving special education or related services increased from 6.4 million in 2010–11 to 7.3 million in the 2021–22 school year (Irwin et al., 2023). This translated to 15% of the total public-school enrollment of students in the U.S. The disability types listed in order of prevalence included: specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, health impairments (e.g., heart condition, epilepsy), autism, developmental delay, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, and hearing impairment. Although countries differ in their definition, Brussino (2020) reported that all education systems have faced an increasing population of students with special education needs.

Depending on the school district, students with special needs may attend a regular class, a combination of regular and special education classroom placements, or a self-contained special education class. Thus, both general education and special education teachers often engage with the parents of children who present a range of special education needs. Given a growing focus on inclusive education in past years, the increasing numbers of students receiving special education services, and the limited number of special education teachers in some locales (Koch, 2020), it is important that all teachers are trained and prepared to interact effectively with the parents of children with special needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Koch, 2020; Solvason & Proctor, 2021).

Teacher Training

The importance of effective communication skills with parents has long been highlighted as a key competency for teachers. Unfortunately, teachers

are often not adequately trained to work with parents generally, nor with the parents of children with special education needs specifically (Accardo et al., 2020; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Collier et al., 2015; Gisewhite et al., 2021). The high rate of teacher attrition in the U.S. further underlines the need for focused training of both regular and special education teachers to work with parents of children with special needs (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Indeed, few training programs have required courses on collaboration and the “interpersonal aspects” of teaching (Luke & Vaughn, 2022).

The need for focused training for teachers was highlighted by Kyzar et al. (2019) who conducted a national survey of special education faculty members across 52 institutions in the U.S. Just over 95% of faculty agreed that family–professional partnerships were a key responsibility for preservice teachers after graduation; however, only half (49.6%) were satisfied with the depth of the content covered in their program. The lack of formal training for teachers on family–school partnerships was also highlighted in two cross-cultural reviews, noting that the level of training was dependent on individual instructors (Epstein, 2018; Thompson et al., 2018). A survey of Canadian teacher educators showed consistent results. Parent engagement was a valued skill; however, the presence of relevant content in university courses depended on the specific instructor (Antony-Newman, 2024). It was proposed that long-term sustainability of parent engagement content will require policy changes at the teacher certification and program accreditation levels.

Several studies have focused specifically on training preservice teachers to work with parents of children with special education needs. Preservice training has sometimes incorporated opportunities for student teachers to interact with and to learn from parents, such as designing and implementing an intervention in collaboration with a parent (Accardo et al., 2020), making a home visit and then writing a reflection paper about the experience (Collier et al., 2015), meeting with parents several times through a course (Greenbank, 2023), having a course for teacher candidates co-taught by a professor and parent (Murray et al., 2018), as well as field experiences that provided structured interactions with a child and family (Sutton et al., 2020). Strassfeld (2019) strongly advocated for preservice teachers to have fieldwork opportunities to engage with parents, to learn about disabilities, and to engage in “service-learning” activities within a specific cultural community. Participation in IEP meetings has been highlighted as a particular need for preservice teachers, as many have never actually attended an IEP meeting prior to entering the profession (Toledo, 2023). A gap in the knowledge of teachers with respect to neurodiversity was also

identified (Dan et al., 2024) to better prepare educators to understand the complex range of disabilities they may encounter in their teaching practice. Additional training for special education teachers was also recommended regarding supervision of and collaboration with paraprofessionals who work directly with students (Dudek et al., 2024).

Training for teachers has been shown to be effective to promote partnerships with parents. A meta-analysis of 39 studies on a range of training programs for preservice and practicing teachers reported a significant positive effect on all teacher–family engagement outcomes, including communication strategies, collaborative planning, and problem solving (Smith & Sheridan, 2019). However, Mancenido and Pello (2020) cautioned that the reliance on self-report surveys in the field makes it difficult to determine if teacher training interventions of self-reported beliefs and knowledge translate into actual skills and practices for teachers.

The Parent Experience

Parenthood is a demanding and major milestone in life for all parents (Jambekar et al., 2018). That said, parenting a child with special needs can be a “complicated and demanding task” (Cheng & Lai, 2023, p. 9) and often brings a “number of well-documented, out-of-the-ordinary challenges and hardships” (McConnell et al., 2015, p. 30). It is important that teachers understand and appreciate the lived experiences of parents of children with special needs, including both the challenges as well as the joys.

The use of “narrative inquiry” as a form of qualitative research has frequently been used in the form of interviews with parents to understand their parenting experience (Lalvani & Polvere, 2013). Studies have focused on the range of parental reactions that may occur over time as well as the impacts on many facets of family life. Some studies have focused on the perspectives of parents of children with specific diagnoses (such as ADHD and ASD), whereas other research has included parents of children with a broad range of disabilities.

Following their child’s diagnosis, the initial emotional reactions of parents often include feelings of shock and denial (Rositas et al., 2023) as well as a “dark period” characterized by depressive features (Wai Chau & Furness, 2023). Sheehan and Guerin (2018) reported that the early years were often marked by parental feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, and stress. During the child’s later years, parents reported a shift towards feelings of joy and pride in their child. Many challenges have been reported by parents that impact their parenting experience, including the demands of physical

care of their child, fatigue, as well as higher rates of family breakdown and parent burnout (Ott, 2015; Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2023). This is especially true for parents with combined vulnerabilities (e.g., single parent of a child with a disability; Tekola et al., 2023). Higher rates of depression and other mental health challenges were reported in parents of children with developmental disabilities (Marquis et al., 2020). Parents of children with ADHD described stress associated with responding to their child's challenging behaviors (Leitch et al., 2019) resulting in a "near constant state of hypervigilance" (p. 4). Indeed, many parents described their experience as a "constant fight" for support and respect (McConnell et al., 2015, p. 14) that required "continuous coping" (Shenaar-Golan, 2017, p. 306).

Research has shown that the experience of having a child with a disability may also result in social costs for many parents in the form of lost relationships (Shenaar-Golan, 2017), social isolation (Andreyko, 2016), increased dependency on family members (Jambekar et al., 2018), and feelings of stigma (Cheng & Lai, 2023; Tekola et al., 2023). Difficulties finding reliable, quality childcare impact many families (Brown & Clark, 2017). In addition, ongoing care may be required throughout the child's adolescent years (and even adult life) if the child cannot be safely left alone. The need for ongoing childcare may also impact a parent's career options due to restrictions on travel and working hours (Brown & Clark, 2017).

The financial impact of having a child with a disability is significant for many families. A decrease in working hours and income for parents of children with disabilities has been reported (Marquis et al., 2019; Wondemu et al., 2022), especially for mothers. In fact, the more severe the disability, the more profound was the effect on the mother's ability to remain employed (Wondemu et al., 2022). These financial stressors coexist with increased expenses for many parents, including treatment costs and travel to appointments (Cheng & Lai, 2023), higher health care costs (Heiman, 2021), as well as longer-term childcare costs.

Navigating the educational system has also been described as a significant stress for many parents of children with special needs (Heiman, 2021). Parents of children with ADHD, for example, described the stress of responding to frequent negative reports and complaints from school staff about their child's behavior (Mofokeng & van der Wath, 2017). A synthesis of articles analyzing the impact of the educational system on families of children with special needs in North America and Britain highlighted high levels of stress for parents due to poor communication, lack of support in the school setting for the child, as well as negative opinions expressed by some teachers (Ott, 2015). Additional stressors have included time pressures

(such as missing work to pick up a child at school) and the emotional impact on parents when school relationships break down (Bennett et al., 2020).

For many parents the prospect of “lifelong” parenting (Heiman, 2021) creates an unpredictable future. Dattoo (2021) aptly stated that following a diagnosis, there is a shift from being “quintessential parents to being perpetual parents” (p. 216). Indeed, parents of children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities reported such grave concerns regarding who would care for their child in the long term, that some parents hoped that they would outlive their adult child (Kruithof et al., 2022).

Grief Versus Possibilities

Over time, the stages of grief identified in the sentinel work of Kübler-Ross (1969) on death and dying have been applied to many experiences of loss (Ross Rothweiler & Ross, 2019), including having a child with special needs (i.e., the loss of a “normal” child). The stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression have been described as a process of emotional reactions parents may experience leading to ultimate acceptance of their child (Rositas et al., 2023). A type of “cyclical grief” has also been described (Bravo-Benítez et al., 2019) whereby many parents experience fluctuating emotions over time ranging from painful feelings (such as sadness) to periods of acceptance and happiness. It is important teachers understand that parent reactions may reflect a complex process of “ups and downs” whereby challenging emotions may exist at the same time as a sense of resolution, especially during times of transition (Barak-Levy & Paryente, 2023). Acceptance of the child may be demonstrated by parent participation in the child’s activities, support for the child’s communication skills, providing guidance and encouragement to the child, and ultimately accepting the child without judgment (Rositas et al., 2023).

Allred (2014) suggested that the traditional model of loss has resulted in a negative view of child disability through the lens of burden and tragedy, with an inevitable grief response. Alternatively, Allred proposed a strength-based approach that identifies the “intrinsic resources” that parents bring, the need to honor the parent’s vision for their child, and the potential for personal growth, even during times of stress and pain. Indeed, there are a growing number of studies reporting the positive impacts that parents of children with special needs have identified, including personal growth, strengthened bonds between family members, and enriched social relationships (McConnell et al., 2015). Parents have reported increased resilience and appreciation for life and for their child (Wai Chau & Furness, 2023). Faith and commitment have also helped many parents develop a positive

outlook (Tekola et al., 2023). Indeed, many parents function well (Barak-Levy & Paryente, 2023) and are fully committed to the best education possible for their child (Estojero, 2022). Thus, while it is important that teachers recognize and appreciate the potential reactions and stressors that parents experience with empathy and compassion, it is also important to recognize and acknowledge the developing strength and resilience that most parents demonstrate in the face of significant loss, grief, and ongoing stress.

Parents as Experts

Both teachers and parents have been described as having an “expert” role with respect to children (Munthe & Westergard, 2023). Expert teachers have “well-developed pedagogical content knowledge”, reflect extensively on their practice, build strong interpersonal relationships with their students, and are continuous learners throughout their careers (Anderson & Taner, 2023, para. 1). Parents of children with special needs have been described as experts on their own child. They hold the entire child’s experiences within their memory (Solvason & Proctor, 2021). Parents can provide valuable details regarding the child’s history, characteristics, strengths and needs, routines, schedule, interests, and motivators, all very helpful information for teachers. Indeed, parents “have an unspoken record of details about their child which can provide the keys to success at school” (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 144). Parents have been described as the “constant” in their child’s life, and many become experts on the child’s disability over time (Kervick, 2017).

Parents of children with special needs have a “close and highly emotional relationship to their child for which they are broadly responsible” (Gartmeier et al., 2017, p. 7). Their parenting experiences include managing behaviors, teaching household chores, addressing sibling issues, as well as supporting their child’s communication skills (Estojero, 2022). Many parents become experts on their child’s medical status with respect to their child’s well-being, the child’s level of pain, and important knowledge to improve care (Kruithof et al., 2020). In addition to typical day-to-day parenting responsibilities, parents have also attended school meetings to identify learning goals, engaged in conflict resolution when needed, coordinated with multiple professionals, and navigated complex special education processes (Smith, 2016).

Parents of children with special needs often develop lived experiences and expertise taking on various roles beyond that of typical parenting. These are often roles that the parent did not expect nor feel qualified for, including

case manager, interventionist, and advocate (Shepherd et al., 2017). The role of *case manager* is a common experience for parents whose children have multiple service providers (e.g., educators, healthcare professionals, and/or various therapists; O'Hare et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2017; Smith, 2016). This involves coordinating and scheduling services with different professionals and responding to various strategies or interventions recommended to support the child. Indeed, parents of children with intellectual disabilities reported they were in a state of “perpetual navigation” (Bennett et al., 2020). Parents must prepare for upcoming transitions and engage in future planning that may require coordination with a whole new set of professionals and services (e.g., transition from preschool to school, or high school to adult services). Case management for parents may also include managing health-related and insurance documentation, as well as other paperwork related to educational, health, and therapeutic services.

Many parents also take on the role of *interventionist* with their child (Shepherd et al., 2017). This role involves parents actively working with their child at home to develop and reinforce skills (e.g., eye contact, toileting, feeding, positive behaviors). A review of child-focused parent interventions indicated that many parents were initially doubtful in their capacity to do so; however, they developed confidence through their interactions with health professionals (Burney et al., 2024). Indeed, parent intervention programs designed to reduce challenging behaviors of children with developmental disabilities have shown positive results (Ragni et al., 2022).

Lastly, parents of children with disabilities often take on an *advocacy* role. Parents translate their “experiential knowledge” to “objective knowledge” to access a range of needed supports and services for their child (Kruithof et al., 2020, p. 1146). Parents described key themes in their advocacy role including the need to develop knowledge and skills related to laws and policies, as well as knowledge of their child's disability. Parents also described key personal characteristics including determination, persistence, and tenacity (Taylor et al., 2019). Parent advocacy has been described as a “dynamic process” that changes over time depending on evolving circumstances and needs of the child (Smith-Young et al., 2022). Typical parent advocacy activities over time may include expressing initial concerns; seeking help, assessment, and diagnosis; acquiring services; addressing barriers to advocacy (e.g., limited time, financial restraints, lack of available services); and the development of advocacy skills. Indeed, “parents must continually anticipate their next course of action to acquire necessary supports for their children throughout the life course of their condition” (Smith-Young et al., 2022, p. 10).

Some parents described advocacy as their “job”, including the need to “push” for services and accommodations for their child (O’Hare et al., 2023). That said, parents have also reported feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with the advocacy role due to the amount of learning required, feelings of guilt for missed opportunities, the sacrifice of personal time, and the loss of employment income for some (Rossetti et al., 2021). Parents were also sensitive to the “perceived stigma” of being regarded as the “painful parents” by school staff (O’Hare et al., 2023).

Building Trust

The concept of trust is complex and multifaceted. Considerable research over time has addressed the various elements involved, different types of trust (e.g., interpersonal vs. institutional; Bormann et al., 2021a), as well as ways to enhance trust. Within the educational context, parents place considerable trust in educators each day when they send their child to school (Solvason & Cliffe, 2023). Parental trust in their child’s teachers supports student learning (Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2021), improves parent involvement (Santiago et al., 2016), and helps to resolve conflicts and reduce due process complaints (Wellner, 2012).

A review of the literature focused on trust in the home–school context from 2000 to 2020 identified several common themes (Shayo et al., 2021). Trust was described as occurring within a relationship involving a degree of vulnerability, confidence in the other, as well as trustworthiness characteristics, all of which take place within the context of shared goals. Trust is built over time based on “repeated mutual positive experiences” (Bormann et al., 2021b, p. 125) through different types of interactions. For example, mothers of children with disabilities reported their level of trust was dependent on the teacher’s response when they raised concerns about their child (Stoner & Angell, 2014). When teachers were asked how they built trusting relationships with parents, they identified the openness of the school, informal contacts with parents, as well as their own outreach to invite parents to the school (Leenders et al., 2019).

Several models of trust have been proposed over time with respect to home–school communication. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) initially described “*Five Faces*” of trust including: benevolence (kind and well-meaning), reliability (understandable and predictable behavior), competence (skill and professionalism), honesty (serious and well-founded statements), and openness (transparent sharing of relevant information). Combs et al. (2018) outlined four “C’s” of trust including: competence, care

(kindness), character (including honesty and transparency), and communication skills. A more recent framework described a relational model of trust including respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (consistent behavior) (Shayo et al., 2021). The importance of open and respectful communication to both develop and maintain trust has been highlighted (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023).

Teachers are encouraged to take a proactive approach to develop trusting and collaborative relationships with the parents of children with special needs (Lake et al., 2019). An important initial strategy is for teachers to establish communication with parents early in the school year “before there is anything substantial to talk about” (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 529). Based on the literature, key actions that are instrumental for teachers to build trust with parents include: welcoming families, reaching out to parents, acknowledging the expertise of parents and listening to their story, focusing on the child, avoiding jargon and deficit-based language, responding to parent questions and concerns in a timely manner, explaining special education processes and procedures, establishing positive and frequent communication with parents, inviting parents to participate on the team and share in decision making, providing information geared to both mothers and fathers, following through on agreed upon actions, and preserving privacy and confidentiality for the child and family (Chase & Valorose, 2019; Cliffe, 2023; Lake et al., 2019; Smith, 2016; Stoner & Angell, 2014; Wellner, 2012).

It takes time for trust to develop built on consistent and positive interactions. Parents of children with disabilities reported that trust in their child’s teacher varied from year to year (Stoner & Angell, 2014). Parents were more likely to trust teachers they viewed as competent and child focused (Niedlich et al., 2021). Parents also reported higher levels of trust when teachers contacted them in-person or by phone which provided “rich” opportunities for feedback, cues, and the potential to manage conflicts (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). In fact, in-person communication has been noted as a key predictor of parental trust.

While there are many definitions of trust, Cliffe (2023) identified two basic elements, describing trust as relational in nature, and involving expectations about both competence and a willingness to engage. Shayo et al. (2021) conceptualized trust as a state, a process, and a relationship. As such, teachers are encouraged to intentionally develop trust with parents by reaching out using effective communication skills to build bridges between school and home.

Communication Skills

Use of effective communication skills will help build positive relationships with parents to support collaborative planning to maximize children's learning. Effective communication skills build on the exchanges that have gone before and, importantly, set the stage for the communication exchanges to come.

Fiore and Fiore (2017) described communication challenges as “the root of most issues and misunderstandings” (p. 45). They described communication as a complex process involving three steps: (1) formulating ideas (internal process); (2) putting ideas into words; and (3) interpretation of the information by another. The authors noted that the potential for miscommunication with parents occurs when we fail to communicate our ideas effectively, when we choose a channel that may not suit the information, or when the message is not interpreted as intended. Many factors can lead to a communication breakdown such as the reading level of content, language and/or cultural barriers, as well as sensory barriers (e.g., vision or hearing loss). Misunderstandings may also result from varying communication styles and preferences (Major, 2023). It is important for teachers to ensure a thoughtful approach when communicating with parents of children with special needs given the complexity of the process as well as the sensitivity of the content to be discussed, resulting in increased potential for miscommunications to occur.

A review of teacher training programs in England identified communication skills with parents as essential for teachers, particularly the skills needed to run parent-teacher meetings and to manage difficult conversations (Jones, 2020). Indeed, the potential for teachers to face difficult conversations with parents of children with special needs is very real given that the framework of special education seems “built on adversarial relationships” (Wellner, 2012, p. 16). Effective communication becomes challenging within the context of complex special education processes and the potential for due process disputes. Thus, it is important for teachers to develop the skills needed to communicate effectively with parents, other educators on the team (including administrators and paraprofessionals), as well as specialist service providers who are involved.

The gap between the need for teacher training and practical skills to be trained was highlighted by Graham-Clay (2024b) who discussed a range of communication skills for teachers to support difficult conversations with parents. These included the use of clear vocabulary, active listening strategies, and the use of I-messages to own the message content. Questioning,

paraphrasing, and summarizing techniques help to obtain and clarify information received from parents. Indeed, Jorgensen (2023) suggested that open-ended and invitational questions will encourage parents of children with special needs to feel more comfortable providing information, for example, using sentence starters such as “What are some...?” and “How might...?” (p. 145).

Use of leveled information as a communication strategy was also described by Graham-Clay (2024b) based on the work of Tharinger et al. (2008). This approach categorizes information to be shared based on the parent’s perspective of the child. Level 1 information is consistent with the parent’s view of the child and is easily accepted. Level 2 information requires some reframing of the parent’s view, such as explaining a concern from a different perspective. Level 3 information conflicts with the parent’s view of their child, with the potential for a reactive response unless there is sufficient trust and relationship built with educators to support the disconnect. Lastly, the importance of attending to nonverbal communication was also highlighted (Graham-Clay, 2024b). Nonverbal messages may include body language, touch, paralinguistics (e.g., tone, pitch, volume, speed), personal space, as well as physical characteristics (e.g., hygiene and professional attire). Indeed, your body can speak for you even when you are not speaking (Kullar, 2020).

It is important that teachers strive for clarity in both their verbal and written communication. This includes the use of vocabulary that is expressed as simply as possible, use of conversational language, as well as avoiding technical terms and educational jargon as much as possible (and defined when needed; Weinzapfel, 2022). Communications should be accessible to parents, including the mode of communication (e.g., technology) as well as the language of the content. The readability of written communication is also an important consideration (i.e., the ease with which a reader can read written text). The American Medical Association (AMA) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) have recommended that the readability level for adults should not exceed the sixth-grade level. Unfortunately, the readability of many education documents intended for parents is much too high (Gordon et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2019; Nagro & Stein, 2016). Teachers and school district staff are encouraged not to make assumptions regarding the readability of their written materials and to seek to make written content accessible to all parents. Various methods to estimate text readability are available and described online.

Based on teacher interviews, Major (2023) summarized a series of key ingredients designed to maximize effective communication with parents

including regular contacts, common language use, a positive attitude, and appropriate use of technology (including sensitivity to families who lack access). Additional important interpersonal communication skills have included honesty and kindness (Solvason & Proctor, 2021) as well as openness and an individualized approach for each child (Sulistiyaningsih et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the “little things mean a lot” according to parents of children with disabilities who provided firsthand accounts of teacher–parent communication skills that facilitated partnerships (Mann et al., 2024, p. 102). Parents reported that effective partnerships were based on welcoming and relaxed day-to-day interactions (e.g., polite greeting, saying the parent’s name, engaging in casual chats as the teacher would with other parents), regular emails (including general feedback and updates on the child’s progress), and positive nonverbal communication (e.g., smiling, eye contact, warm tone of voice). Parents appreciated the use of “we” language. They also appreciated being informed of upcoming meetings including who would attend, the agenda, the timeframe, parameters of the conversation, and the objectives of the meeting. When difficult conversations were needed, parents preferred a private and quiet space with more time provided. Mann et al. (2024) noted that parent–teacher relationships thrived on “positive solution-focused communication,” and it was important to parents that teachers saw “their child rather than the disability” (p. 112).

Content, Mode, and Frequency of Communication

Teachers often need to communicate differently with parents of children with special needs. Not only is there general information to share, such as school and classroom specific details (e.g., supplies, events, activities), there is often additional specific information to share, such as the child’s schedule, specialist supports, health information, as well as a range of learning and behavioral goals and strategies in place. Teachers may find it difficult to determine the strategies that will work best “for the array of messages that must be communicated while individualizing the communication form” (González & Frumkin, 2018, p. 6). Thoughtful consideration is needed regarding the content, mode, and frequency of communication. When considering communication approaches with parents of children with disabilities, it is helpful for teachers to think about the relationship that currently exists with the parent(s), how the information may be received, the parent’s preferred mode of communication, and whether personal interaction will be needed to support the message (Graham-Clay, 2024a). Teachers should also ensure that the communication practices they use are

consistent with their school district and union/association guidelines, policies, and procedures.

Content

Parents of children with special needs were more likely to contact teachers about certain topics, including academic concerns, classroom behavior, and health issues (Hobday, 2015). Parents of children with ASD wanted “concrete and tangible” information from teachers such as specific activities to do with their child as well as books to read (Azad et al., 2018). Of note, parents of children with special needs were not always sure what information they “could or should” share with teachers (Butler et al., 2019). Teachers expressed a need for information from parents that would help the teacher prepare for potential challenges at school, even simple information such as how the child’s morning went before coming to school.

The impact of informative versus negative communication content on levels of parent engagement is important to note. Based on national parent survey data, informative communication (i.e., child’s progress, how to help with homework) was consistently associated with much higher parent engagement than negative content from school (e.g., behavior challenges and problems with schoolwork; Hine, 2022). That said, the families of students with disabilities reported receiving higher levels of negative communication content from teachers. Indeed, Kuusimäki et al. (2019) stressed the need for more balanced and encouraging feedback to parents and commented there is too much emphasis on a child’s needs versus strengths. Ultimately, Hine (2022) stated that “words matter” and stressed that informative and positive communications signal to families that schools want to build home–school partnerships. Teachers were encouraged to ask themselves how they personally would like to hear the message or what they would want a written message to say, and in doing so, be a “kind, considerate communicator” with parents of children with special needs (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 154).

Teachers also provide parents important content information regarding special education. Surveyed teachers indicated that schools encouraged parents to access several sources of information as well as to contact the special education teacher (Farley et al., 2022). The questions parents most frequently asked related to services and accommodations, eligibility, transitions, and the academic progress of their child. The majority of teachers (67.6%) described parents as satisfied with the special education information they received from schools. That said, teachers also wanted better resources for parents regarding advocacy and services.

Mode

Schools have at their disposal a broad range of both one- and two-way modes of communication. One-way communication occurs when the information flows in one direction (e.g., newsletter, email, report card) and two-way communication provides for “reciprocal dialogue” in real time (e.g., phone call, in-person or virtual meeting; Graham-Clay, 2024a). Powers (2023) reported that the most common modes of home-school communication included emails, phone calls, texts, apps, daily report/communication charts, parent-teacher conferences, handwritten notes, report cards, and informal meetings.

During the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, teachers went to “extraordinary lengths” to connect with all families and recognized the strategies that were most efficient (such as texting and mobile apps when phone calls and email with parents were not successful; Starks & Reich, 2022). Virtual platforms were also described as convenient and efficient to meet with parents (Scheef et al., 2022). The challenge for teachers is to determine the best mode of communication to use for the information they need to communicate.

Parent use of technology has also become more equitable post-pandemic (Cleveland et al., 2024). Most school-related matters or behavioral concerns can be appropriately dealt with through digital communication between teachers and parents (Kuusimäki et al., 2019) for parents who have access to and use technology. Emails and texts were rated as appropriate and efficient by parents when both had “a mutual understanding of the message” and the message required little interpretation (such as schedules; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023, p. 13). Parents appreciated that they could reread email messages before responding (Thompson et al., 2015). Powers (2023) also reported that most parents preferred an email from the teacher over a phone call. An innovative approach by Kawa’a (2022) incorporated digital photos as a mode of communication. Photos helped to provide parents a visual of the child’s day, to clarify written content, to link activities to IEP goals, and to personalize communication interactions.

Teachers are encouraged to use face-to-face meetings or phone communication with parents when information to be shared is sensitive in nature (e.g., social or health concerns; Kuusimäki et al., 2019). Many parents preferred personal contact with the teacher to discuss and better understand the concern and have their questions answered (Chase & Valorose, 2019). According to Hamm and Mousseau (2023), phone or in-person communication provides feedback, cues, and natural exchanges, thus reducing the potential for miscommunications to occur.

A key recommendation when communicating with parents of children with special needs has been to individualize the approach and establish a preferred mode of communication early in the school year to meet parents “where they are” (Shamash et al., 2022, p. 86). These authors outlined a series of sample survey questions for parents regarding their communication preferences including the timing, language, and mode of communication. Jorgensen (2023) created a communication plan template designed for teacher use, including information about the parent’s preferred mode of communication, priority topics, as well as timeline and frequency of interaction. Powers (2023) further encouraged teachers to learn and understand what type of communication format will “resonate” with each family. This is particularly important for the parents of children with special needs as they often face increased stress and decreased time availability.

Frequency

Although frequent, high-quality communication between teachers and parents of children with special needs is “necessary and expected,” unfortunately this is not always achieved (Azad et al., 2018, p. 64). Several authors have described variable frequency of contact between teachers and parents in the special education context. Hobday (2015) reported that contacts ranged from once or twice a month to not at all, across four modes of communication. Woods et al. (2019) reported contacts ranged from daily to weekly to infrequent. More recently, Mann et al. (2024) reported the frequency of preferred contacts by parents was highly variable, ranging from every two weeks to three to four times per year. Some parents of children with ASD desired monthly communication with their child’s teacher (Syriopoulou-Delli & Polychronopoulou, 2019).

Parents reported that the frequency of communication was often too little until a problem arose (Hobday, 2015). Regular and frequent parent–teacher communication was considered particularly important when the child did not have language to support sharing his or her school experiences with parents (Mann et al., 2024). Insufficient communication between teachers and parents resulted in parents having difficulty accessing information about their child’s educational status (Odeh & Lach, 2024).

Overall, research suggests that parents of children with special needs want frequent and positive communication with teachers about their child (Butler et al., 2019; Shamash et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2018). Parents are increasing their use of technology to connect with school which will help set the stage for more frequent and efficient communications going forward (Cleveland et al., 2024). “Clear and frequent communication is the

foundation for establishing trust among families and educational teams” (Shamash et al., 2022, p. 78).

Individualized Education Program Meetings

IEPs are an integral component of special education service delivery. The IEP itself is a written document that outlines a child’s performance, goals, and services including a range of modifications and accommodations in place, as well as transition planning for the future. Based on IDEA legislation (in the U.S.), the IEP team is multidisciplinary and includes the child’s parents as well as school professionals representing regular education, special education, a representative of the local education agency, and relevant service providers (Guerrero et al., 2023). Examples of service providers may include specialists who work with the child directly (e.g., speech-language pathologist, educational diagnostician, physical and/or occupational therapist, school psychologist) as well as paraprofessionals (also known as teacher aides, teaching or educational assistants, and paraeducators). Indeed, the changing nature of the IEP team members makes it challenging to create consistency across meetings for teachers (Beck & DeSutter, 2020).

The IEP meeting is a key interaction opportunity with parents of children with special needs. Indeed, the IEP is a legally binding document that implies a “higher expectation for communication between parents and teachers” (Powers, 2023, p. 118). Parent participation is essential to the process but may be negatively impacted by lack of knowledge needed by parents to participate in a meaningful way, a feeling of being overwhelmed by the information provided, or feeling uncomfortable in the school setting (Strunk et al., 2022). It is recognized that IEP meetings can be challenging and stressful on many levels for all involved, including extensive paperwork and time demands, use of complex language, and the potential for disagreement between school staff and parents regarding a child’s placement, goals, and services.

Schools are responsible to create a “safe, welcoming, and enabling environment” where parents can express their opinions and concerns regarding their child’s IEP (Datoo, 2021, p. 224). However, many parents feel considerable trepidation when they attend an IEP meeting for their child and see a group of people sitting around the table (Brown, 2022). Parents have described feeling “blindsided” (Brown, 2022), “outnumbered” (Kurth et al., 2019), “overwhelmed” (Datoo, 2021), “powerless” (Mueller & Vick, 2019), “unprepared” (Means, 2023), and an “unwelcome participant” (Garraway,

2019). One father commented that the focus on his daughter's deficits during the IEP meeting was "painful" to endure (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Parents reported feeling listened to, but not truly heard (Means, 2023). Indeed, based on the analysis of parent input noted in IEP documents, Kurth et al. (2019) reported about one-third of parent concerns and priorities were not captured on IEP documents. When parents were surveyed regarding their experience in IEP meetings, over half (54.6%) reported a negative experience including a deficit-focus, a predetermined plan limiting parent input (e.g., IEP written prior to the meeting), and school professionals who lacked knowledge or withheld information (Sanderson, 2023).

The use of "educational jargon" in IEPs has been highlighted by several authors as a notable concern. Walker et al. (2022) recommended that teachers write IEPs with language that clearly specifies "how, when, and where" services will be provided. It is important that key ideas, phrases, acronyms, and technical terms are defined and explained to parents to ensure their understanding. Importantly, Clark (2023) cautioned educators to be sensitive to the use of labels that may detract from a focus on the student and his or her individual needs.

Several authors have recommended a pre-meeting with parents before the formal IEP meeting occurs (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Brown, 2022; Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017; Lynch, 2023). An informal mini conference was suggested one to three weeks before the IEP meeting for about 20 to 30 minutes, with an interpreter arranged if needed (Jones & Peterson-Ahmad, 2017). Potential topics include the role of meeting attendees, explanation of technical terms and jargon, discussion of IEP procedures, a review of parental rights, updating parents on the child's progress, and discussing possible new goals for the child. Collier et al. (2020) also suggested that when educational diagnosticians reviewed their child's assessment results prior to the IEP meeting, parents were able to "process the information in a less stressful circumstance" and were thus better able to "participate as a partner" in their child's IEP meeting with school staff (p. 48). Indeed, parents of children with special needs reported that pre-meetings set the stage for more successful IEP meetings (Lynch, 2023).

A number of key strategies are summarized below to support communication with parents during IEP meetings based on recommendations from the literature (Beck & DeSutter, 2020; Chang et al., 2022; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Crockett et al., 2019; Elser, 2017; Fiore & Fiore, 2017; Goscicki et al., 2023; Parkin & Tyre, 2022; Sapp, 2021; Sistek-Chandler, 2017; Walker et al., 2022):

- Welcome all participants.
- Provide a checklist for each participant with details and expectations for their role.
- Ensure language and cultural considerations, including an interpreter/cultural liaison if needed, translated documents, awareness of cultural factors that may impact parent interactions, etc.
- Engage in initial small talk to accommodate the language use of participants.
- Clearly explain the purpose, process, goals, and expectations of the meeting.
- Ensure parents are aware of the importance of their role and their legal rights.
- Provide a written agenda including time frames to provide a reference point for discussion.
- Arrange for ample meeting time to ensure each participant has a chance to speak.
- Prepare in advance: gather and review relevant documents, data, and reports.
- Maintain a calm and friendly demeanor with a positive tone.
- Complement parents and use I-statements to frame concerns.
- Focus on the child. Highlight the child's strengths and successes.
- Review the student's past performance related to previously stated goals.
- Bring student work samples to provide visual examples.
- Use active listening strategies.
- Be sensitive to and validate the feelings of parents.
- Use open-ended questioning, paraphrasing, and summarizing to promote understanding.
- Attend to verbal and nonverbal communication (eye contact, tone of voice, body gestures).
- Model respect for the opinions of all participants and commit to consensus-building.
- Model and encourage feedback to signal misunderstanding ("I'm not sure I understand").
- Encourage parental input in the writing of goals and objectives for their child.
- Be open to new information and resources.
- Close the meeting with a brief review/summary of the IEP that has been developed.
- Discuss next steps and express appreciation to all participants for attending.
- Conclude the meeting with all participants leaving at the same time.

Panico (2019) suggested using a projector screen during the IEP meeting to allow participants to see “real time changes” as the IEP is being developed (p. 55). Use of technology has also become common to hold virtual IEP meetings with parents since the COVID-19 pandemic. Continued use of virtual IEP meetings as an alternative to in person meetings has been recommended to provide both parents and IEP team members with “flexible and accessible options for engagement” (Guerrero et al., 2023, p. 15).

“The majority of negative experiences and exchanges between parents and educators typically precede, and then become heightened at the IEP meeting” (Mueller & Vick, 2019, p. 100). Positive interactions with parents over time are a critical ingredient to successful IEP meetings. Parents reported that it was meaningful to them when school leaders took time before the IEP meeting to observe and get to know their child (such as learning about the child’s interests; Brown, 2022). Special education teachers reported that bonding with parents was built on trust, reciprocity, openness, and attentiveness when working on the IEP together (Dor & Stern, 2022). Parents of children with special needs focused on leadership attributes including honesty, empathy, listening, and asking for and being open to input (Lynch, 2023). According to Parkin and Tyre (2022), effective collaboration in special education meetings is built on “credibility, clear and logical communication, and acts of caring” (p. 14). Educators have been encouraged to imagine that the IEP meeting was about planning for someone they loved, and in doing so, hold parents through the process with gentleness and care (Elser, 2017).

Culturally Responsive Practices

The student population in American public schools is becoming increasingly diverse. Based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Irwin et al. (2023) reported that over 50% of public-school students were considered non-White, reflecting Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native backgrounds. Immigration in the past number of years has increased this diversity even more. However, the workforce is not diversifying at the same rate (Lavin et al., 2021), with only about 20% of public-school teachers identifying as individuals of color (Billingsley et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2023). Given the significant potential for cultural and linguistic differences to exist between teachers and parents, it is critical that teachers adopt culturally responsive practices to communicate with the parents of all their students.

Within the context of special education, the “intersection” of diversity and disability becomes even more complex (Fallah & Murawski, 2018; Kaplan & Celik, 2023). The overrepresentation of children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds in special education programs has been an ongoing concern for many years (Grindal et al., 2019; Kulkarni, 2020; Morgan, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2020). Concerns have been raised regarding the rapid increase and concentration of CLD students in rural areas and the implications for special education programming (Johnson et al., 2018). In addition, CLD parents of children with special needs have themselves described the special education process as challenging and have highlighted the need for teachers to develop greater cultural competency (Garraway, 2019). Teachers must be sensitive to the fact that CLD parents must “navigate a system that does not share their unique cultural views, beliefs, and parenting styles” (McLeod, 2022, p. 25).

Several important barriers have been discussed in the literature that impact teachers’ ability to communicate with CLD parents of children with special needs. These include:

- language and communication challenges (Fallah & Muraski, 2018; Kaplan & Celik, 2023; Lakhwani, 2023; Rossetti et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2021);
- cultural differences in nonverbal messages that may impact communication (Gašpar et al., 2023; Ren, 2014; Soukup, 2019; Tamzarian et al., 2012; Tiechuan, 2016);
- parent’s lack of familiarity with the school system, special education services, and relevant legislation (Burke et al., 2020; Datto, 2021; Lakhwani, 2023);
- differing views regarding disability and intervention (Harry, 2018; McLeod, 2022); and
- racial stereotypes, social stigma, and a deficit view of CLD children and families (Cherng, 2016; Fallah & Murawski, 2018; Walker et al., 2022; Zimmermann & Keynton, 2021).

However, even though the communication challenges are complex, there are many steps that teachers can take to improve communication with CLD parents of children with special needs.

Mindset

Teachers are encouraged to develop “cultural self-awareness” to create a positive climate for collaboration with CLD parents to occur (Chang et al., 2022, p. 133). This is an individual journey (Lavin & Goodman, 2023) that requires a mindset of self-reflection as well as an openness and willingness

to learn and an appreciation for the significance of diverse points of view (Chang et al., 2022; Harry, 2018; Singh, 2023). To accomplish this, Rossetti et al. (2017) proposed three guiding questions for teachers to consider that will facilitate relationship building with CLD parents of children with special needs (p. 174):

1. *How culturally responsive am I?* Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own cultural beliefs and experiences and how these may influence their personal perspectives of diversity.
2. *Who is this family?* Teachers are encouraged to convey an interest in and learn about the family's culture, experiences, primary language, perceptions of disability, and goals for their child.
3. *Have I developed a collaborative partnership with this family?* Teachers are encouraged to assess the quality of their interactions with CLD parents (such as during IEP meetings) and identify areas for improvement that will improve culturally responsive practices.

Building on the concept of self-reflection, Lavin and Goodman (2023) promoted the use of reflective journaling as part of an undergraduate course in special education to encourage preservice teachers to explore their own beliefs and practices as well as their own biases and "notions of deficit about others" (p. 8). Indeed, "culturally responsive practices require educators to develop cultural competence, challenge biases and assumptions, and actively engage with students, families, and communities" (Singh, 2023, p. 45).

It is important to recognize that definitions and practices related to disabilities are "culturally constructed" (Harry & Fenton, 2017, p. 161). This includes parental perspectives regarding their child's general development (Kaplan & Celik, 2023), the potential cause of the child's disability (e.g., genetic, fate, karma; Chen & Lee, 2021), as well as goals for their child that may differ from the norm (e.g., interdependence versus independence; Tamzarian et al., 2012). For example, differences in perspective regarding the meaning of disability was reported in a group of teachers and a multicultural group of parents (Lalvani, 2015). Teachers tended to view disability as "biologically defined" (i.e., physical, neurological, or cognitive limitations) whereas parents aligned with sociocultural views of disability. Teachers viewed labels as guides to educational planning, whereas many parents considered labels as restrictive and reflecting stigma or lowered expectations for their child. Thus, an understanding of the parent's cultural values regarding disability is critical for teachers to establish mutual goals that will support the child's learning.

Strategies

In addition to self-reflection, teachers are encouraged to use proactive strategies to remove barriers to engage with CLD parents of children with disabilities. It is important that strategies are individualized and based on the family's strengths, needs, and experiences (Rossetti et al., 2017). Indeed, there is no "one-size-fits-all" line of action (González & Frumkin, 2018).

Gerzel-Short et al. (2019) outlined four general approaches teachers can use to support cross-cultural communication: *interpret*, *invite*, *interact*, and *intend*. The first approach (*interpret*) involves recognition that language is a "lifeline" for CLD parents (Love, 2019). In fact, language has been described as one of the greatest obstacles to creating reciprocal relationships with CLD parents (Rubin et al., 2021). Recognition of language differences starts with welcome signs in the school building that represent the population of families in the school. Interactions with CLD parents include making interpreter services available to families, such as during IEP and other meetings (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). Similarly, special education documents should be translated into the parent's primary language (Walker et al., 2022). Additional language strategies include the use of "supportive dialogue" with CLD parents by defining key terms, ideas, and phrases; using "discourse markers" (e.g., signaling when topics change, repeating key words); prompting parents for comments and suggestions, and using visuals such as work samples to illustrate concepts (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018).

It is helpful for teachers to understand that differences in communication styles between cultures may become the source of miscommunication. Educators tend to use "low context communication" that involves direct and explicit communication based on words. Many CLD parents, on the other hand, rely on "high context" communication that stresses nonverbals (such as body language, facial expressions, and the timing of silence; Fallah & Murawski, 2018). As a result, CLD parents may interpret teachers as cold and distant, while teachers may interpret CLD parents as disengaged. Some CLD parents may also present as passive and lacking enthusiasm when in fact the parent may be respectfully deferring to the teacher's expertise and authority (Fallah & Murawski, 2018).

The second approach involves being *invitational*. Teachers are encouraged to get to know CLD parents and to show an interest in their culture (Mortier et al., 2021). Teachers can invite parents to share their cultural beliefs, perspectives, and approaches as well as their hopes and dreams for their child within a friendly and supportive context. Teachers are encouraged to

use active listening skills to ensure that parent voices are heard. Teachers can also invite CLD parents to visit the classroom and to participate in activities at the school, such as bilingual game nights, cultural celebrations, and creating family books (Protacio et al., 2020) to build connections.

The third approach to engaging CLD parents is to *interact* with purpose (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). As previously noted, teachers are encouraged to reach out to CLD parents early in the school year based on their preferred language and mode of communication. Teachers are then encouraged to interact with CLD parents regularly through the school year to review their child's progress (Feeney et al., 2024). Teachers should ensure equitable introductions during meetings (i.e., state the first and last name of each participant versus "Mom/Dad" for the parent; Harry, 2018), provide extra time for conversations with CLD parents, and follow up with parents for a post-meeting conversation a few days after the IEP meeting (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018).

Virtual IEP meetings have been highlighted as particularly helpful to engage CLD parents versus mandating in-person meetings (Feeney et al., 2024). To meet the specific needs of CLD parents, these authors suggested providing plenty of advance notice to allow parents to arrange for work and childcare, ensuring language supports are in place for the meeting (i.e., interpreter and translated documents as needed), and determining the technology needs of parents when a virtual meeting is planned (including the potential to provide a school device and training if needed). It was recommended that each participant be visible on screen and reminders provided during the meeting regarding participation options (e.g., chat, raise hand, mute/unmute, and emoticons).

The use of "cultural brokers" has been discussed in the literature as an additional way to engage CLD parents in the special education process. Mortier et al. (2021) described cultural brokers as mainly volunteers, many of whom were also parents of children with special needs. They supported parents by providing information (e.g., explaining the roles of IEP team members), encouraging parents to trust their knowledge and voice, assisting parents to understand documentation, and providing emotional support (e.g., after diagnosis and after IEP meetings). Sheehey et al. (2018) noted that paraeducators may serve an important role of cultural broker including interpreting and providing information to CLD families.

Finally, teachers are encouraged to be *intentional* in their approach to engage CLD parents. Chang et al. (2022) provided two practical checklists designed for teachers to support CLD parents/families through the IEP process. The "Levels of Understanding of the IEP" checklist helps

teachers assess how much support CLD parents may need to actively participate, ranging from limited to extensive understanding of the process. The “EPIC” checklist (explain, provide, inquire, coordinate) then outlines cultural considerations and practical actions teachers can take to support meaningful interactions with parents before, during, and after the IEP meeting. Intentional practices include use of active listening, being aware of power differentials, seeking parent input, using accessible language, providing parents with multiple opportunities to ask questions, and offering flexible ways for parents to participate (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019).

Final Thoughts

“We have the potential to learn so much more from parents, as individuals and as experts on their children, from their experience, their traditions, their values, and their cultures” (Solvason et al., 2019, p. 201). Indeed, communication with parents of children with special needs is not only legally mandated but also offers teachers rich information to support student learning. As the number of students receiving special education services increase in our schools, it is critically important that both regular and special education teachers are trained to effectively communicate with the parents of students who require individualized supports and services. This article provides teachers with a clear foundation from the literature to inform their practice as they seek to communicate with the parents of children with special needs.

An important first step is for teachers to appreciate the potential impacts on parents and families of having a child with a disability, including the “additional financial, physical, psychological and social” burdens that may occur (Cheng & Lai, 2023, p. 9). With humility and respect, teachers are encouraged to view parents as experts on their children. Information from parents about their child complements the expertise teachers bring in pedagogical content knowledge and practices, including knowledge about their learners (Anderson & Taner, 2023). Teachers are encouraged to use proactive strategies to build trust with parents, recognizing that trust develops over time based on consistent and positive interactions. Use of effective communication skills are an important component of building trust with parents, particularly when difficult conversations are needed.

Communicating with parents of children with disabilities also requires careful attention to the content of communication, the mode of interaction, and the frequency of contacts. Frequent positive contacts using the parent’s preferred mode of communication have been recommended. Use

of technology appears to be appropriate for most interactions with parents, ensuring a plan for those parents who do not have access. Conversations with parents about sensitive topics, however, require a more personalized approach. A key interaction point is the IEP meeting which many parents of children with special needs (and teachers) face with trepidation. A series of strategies have been outlined based on the literature that will facilitate communication during these important discussions with parents that set the stage for student learning. The goal is to create a “shared vision” for the child (Walker et al., 2022, p. 5).

An intentional plan is recommended to communicate with CLD parents who have a child with a disability, including use of interpreters and translation services. It is important to recognize that “people perceive reality through the prism of their culture and experience acquired with it” (Twardowski, 2022, p. 48). To support CLD parents, educators are encouraged to first look within and reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions. Teachers are then encouraged to approach cross-cultural communication from a place of empathy, respect, and curiosity, and to use culturally responsive approaches and practices that seek to break down barriers to build trusting partnerships with all families.

Teachers have the “chance to encourage parents and help give them hope” (Jorgensen, 2023, p. 143). It is important to “find the right words to be honest” (Solvason & Proctor, 2021, p. 470) while at the same time nurturing parental dreams and expectations for their child (Simon, 2020). Parents will remember teachers who demonstrate professionalism, small acts of kindness, a friendly and welcoming attitude, a willingness to reach out and listen, honesty and openness to learn, a nonjudgmental approach, as well as the ability to see beyond the disability and to value the whole child and family.

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