



A Progressive Plan for Building Collaborative Relationships With Parents From Diverse Backgrounds

Rose M. Matuszny • Devender R. Banda • Thalia J. Coleman

It is May, the time of year when the majority of individualized education program (IEP) meetings are held at the local elementary school. Two special education teachers meet in the hallway after the students have gone home. One teacher's face indicates obvious frustration.

Joan: Hi, Martin. Can I talk to you?

Martin: Sure. What's up?

Joan: I'm concerned about parent attendance at the IEP meetings. I have been here nearly 3 years and I still haven't been able to convince many of the parents to attend and participate in IEP meetings. I am especially concerned about our African American, Hispanic, and American Indian parents; they attend IEP meetings even less often than the other parents and when they do attend, they usually don't say much. They just nod their heads, sign the forms, and leave. Not one of us is very familiar with their diverse cultures or the educational goals the parents might have for their children. Without parent input, we can't be sure that the goals we include in their child's IEP match those that the parents may have for them. I could sure use their input. I feel like I've tried everything.

Martin: Do you think the parents feel connected with what is going on at school? If they don't, they may not feel like they really belong. What have you done to encourage their participation in IEP meetings?

Joan: I've tried to maintain good relationships with parents and families by keeping them informed about what goes on in the classroom. I send home weekly class newsletters and post them on our school Web site. I try to give them enough time to plan to come to the meetings. I send the invitation home at least 7 days before the meeting, and I always include the parent right's brochure. I even call to remind the parents about the meeting, but it seems that many just do not care to participate. What else can I do?

Conversations such as this one undoubtedly are common, especially among teachers working with students with disabilities who come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Similar conversations are likely to frequently recur as the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse. Currently in U.S. public schools, students of color comprise nearly 40% of the total student population; approximately 22% of these students have disabilities (National Center

for Educational Statistics, 2002). It is predicted that by the year 2020, 50% of the students in U.S. public schools will represent diverse, nonwhite backgrounds (see Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Hodgkinson, 2000). However, cultural diversity is not limited to ethnicity and geographic origin; it is also recognized as differences in age, gender, language and communication style, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, sexual preference, and ability (Gollnick & Chinn).

Changing student demographics represent a challenge to the current education system. Just 14% or less of all professionals who work in and run U.S. public schools represent culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (Billingsley, 2002; National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). The mismatch between student and teacher populations means that teachers and other educational professionals may not be familiar with culturally embedded student behaviors, may not speak a student's or parent's language and, as a result, may not fully interpret all students' needs. It is highly probable that teachers will need guidance and support to meet the unique needs of students and parents whose backgrounds differ

from their own (Delpit, 1995; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006).

Although we have laws that support parent-professional collaboration in the educational decision-making process for children with disabilities (i.e., No Child Left Behind, 2001; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004), researchers indicate that culturally diverse families frequently are passively, rather than actively, involved in educational planning at the school level (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Harry, 1992). Researchers attribute the lower active involvement of culturally diverse families to numerous barriers including the inability to speak English, an unfamiliar or intimidating educational system, perceptions that their opinions are not valued by schools/professionals, and direct or indirect discouragement from teachers or administrators (Chavkin, 1989; Lopez & Scribner, 1999). Also, parental involvement in a child's educational process may be hindered by the lack of trust that some parents hold for professionals (Harry); insufficient information about community services and rights; and the need for increased communication and cultural sensitivity on the part of educational professionals (Connery, 1987; Harry, 2002; Matuszny, 2004).

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When culturally diverse families are not involved at the school level, teachers—especially those from mainstream backgrounds (i.e., White, middle to upper class)—fail to benefit from parental input and knowledge that is critically linked to the development of effective, culturally relevant educational programs (Brophy, 1998; Harry, 1992;

Positive Effects of Parent Involvement on Students, Teachers, Schools, and Parents

Parent involvement has a positive effect on

- Student achievement.
- Students' educational aspirations.
- The length of time students stay in school.
- Teachers' perceived efficacy of their own teaching habits.
- Teachers' perceptions of parent effectiveness.
- Parents' ratings of schools.
- Parents' ambition to increase or improve their own educational training.
- Parents' own perceived efficacy about their parenting skills.
- Students' drive to increase their independence.

Lopez & Scribner, 1999). Additionally, the school, teachers, students, and the parents themselves miss out on the additional positive effects of parent involvement (Ames, 1992, 1995; Hanzlik, 1989; Lopez & Scribner; Sarimski & Hoffman, 1993; see box, "Positive Effects of Parent Involvement").

We assume that all teachers make a good-faith effort to provide specific support for and build trust with all parents and/or families of children they serve. However, the barriers to and effects of parent involvement as reported in the literature indicate that teachers must follow more culturally sensitive measures to secure collaborative relationships with culturally diverse parents and/or families of students with disabilities (Lopez & Scribner, 1999; Matuszny, 2004; Robinson-Zañartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996). For people in many cultures, relationships with others are especially important. Parents from such cultures are much more likely to collaborate with individuals whom they believe are genuinely interested in their children and in the well-being of their children, than with professionals whom they perceive are "just doing their job." Professionals can facilitate a sense of caring

by becoming involved in some of the activities of the minority community (such as attending community festivals, neighborhood center activities, church events, etc.). The process of getting to know each other on a personal level may also aid in diminishing the "lack of trust" issue that often exists between people from diverse backgrounds and those from the dominant culture (Coleman, 2000, 2001).

Building collaborative relationships and partnerships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds requires that teachers meet two main goals: (a) prevent and break down barriers that divert culturally diverse families from becoming involved in the IEP process; and (b) encourage culturally diverse parent participation by meeting their need for support and comfortable involvement in the IEP process. It is possible for teachers to implement an ongoing plan that may progressively build, support, maintain, and improve collaborative relationships with parents whose backgrounds differ from their own.

What Is a Progressive Plan?

A progressive plan to develop such collaborative relationships

- ✓ Includes parents in the collaborative relationship from beginning to end.
- ✓ Helps teachers better understand the needs of families from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- ✓ Includes activities designed to strengthen the trust that culturally diverse parents hold for educational professionals in the IEP process.

Each step of the progressive plan is increasingly more related to cementing a collaborative teacher-parents relationship, reflecting the fact that the development of human relationships is not a one-step process. The plan focuses on diminishing or removing the barriers that deter culturally diverse families from becoming involved in the IEP process because it incorporates annual revision, allowing teachers to improve, support, and maintain the family's involvement and collaborative partnership in the IEP process. Finally, the plan is flexible, enabling parents and teachers

(present or future) to reflect on the past year's successes and revise and/or add to the plan those supports and/or activities that they believe will strengthen the parent-professional partnership in the subsequent year. A progressive plan is best implemented in four phases, which correspond to parts of the school year and include various activities intended to establish and enhance the parent-teacher collaborative relationship and are appropriate to the student's developmental level (see Figure 1).

Phase 1: Initiation

The initiation phase of the plan, establishing the parent-teacher relationship, is best launched prior to or during the pre-planning phase of the school year; get to know each other first as individuals, then as teachers or parents. The school could sponsor an informal celebratory event that allows teachers and parents to meet in a comfortable, informal, stress-free setting. The atmosphere should be festive and could include music, food, and cooperative/collaborative games, while bearing in mind appropriateness of activities for different cultures (e.g., if a dance goes against religious norms, it is best to select another type of activity or theme).

Once the school year begins, individuals will come to know each other in their roles as parents or teachers. However, if teachers wait until the middle of the busy school year to initiate relationships with parents and/or families, it is possible that neither party will find time to talk informally or really get to know each other as individuals. If this part of the plan is bypassed, it is likely that the relationship between families and educational professionals is likely to remain impersonal and uncomfortable for the educational professional and the parents, making collaboration much more difficult.

Phase 2: Building the Foundation

Once teachers and parents/families become acquainted as individuals, the next phase of collaborative relationship building begins, preferably within the first few weeks of school. During this phase, teachers focus on building trust

between themselves and family members. Some ways to build, establish, and/or strengthen trust are by (a) providing information to and sharing information with parents/families (see Sontag & Schacht, 1994; Turnbull et al., 2006); (b) providing choices to parents; and (c) asking for input in decision making (Turnbull et al.).

Teachers may begin to establish trust by inviting students' family members to the classroom. This allows the teacher to share basic information about the classroom as it relates to the child, such as general plans for the school year, classroom organization, classroom rules and behavioral procedures, and teacher-parent communication methods. Additionally, the teacher can ask families about their preferences regarding classroom/school involvement, receiving information from the school, the types of information they want to receive, and when and how they want to receive teacher communication. Family members may be unable to attend at a time or place that you propose; some researchers suggest that attendance might be improved by scheduling the meetings in places and at times that are more convenient for the parents (Coleman, 2000, 2001). For example, some employers will allow teachers to meet at the parents' workplace during lunch breaks. Such accommodations may alleviate the necessity for parents to take time away from work, or to have access to transportation, while still allowing teachers to share classroom information and seek parental input.

Most importantly, when building the foundation for developing collaborative relationships with diverse families, teachers should begin the process by asking them to provide input about the cultural congruence of the classroom and/or school rules, behavioral procedures, and the classroom set-up as they relate to the individual student. For example, some families' religious practices do not include the celebration of certain holidays or birthdays. This is a great time to gather such information using the parent preferences and needs survey (see Figure 2). Encouraging family input indicates that the teacher acknowledges and respects specific

needs for and unique contributions to the child's education. The foundation of the collaborative relationship is complete once the student's culturally diverse family and the teacher have shared their backgrounds, beliefs, and input, and the family's information needs are recognized and met.

Phase 3: Maintenance and Support

After the teacher establishes the foundation for the collaborative relationship, he or she must maintain, support, and continue to strengthen the relationship. Maintaining and strengthening this relationship can be accomplished through trust-building and communication efforts. Teachers should be aware of culturally specific rules of interaction with diverse families. For example, what are the rules for interactions across genders? Who normally makes the decisions in the family? It may not be the parents; it could be the grandparents or some other elder, or the community's spiritual leader. It might be helpful to include those individuals in the conversations. Additionally, during all phases of the plan, the teacher should continue to maintain communication with the parents/family within agreed upon timelines (e.g., honor the parents' wishes regarding information they want to receive related to their child). Communication must be positive; problems should be discussed as a natural part of learning. The teacher provides information as the parent needs it, while maintaining informational equity with the family regarding the child's needs and progress. Maintaining informational equity requires, for example, that the teacher share with the parents as soon as possible any new information about the child such as assessment results, successes the child exhibits, areas of difficulty, new approaches used to remedy learning difficulties, and upcoming meetings.

Phase 4: Wrap-Up and Reflection

The progressive plan does not end with the fourth phase: the plan recycles each year until the child graduates. At the end of each school year we suggest that


Figure 1. Suggested Activities for the Progressive Plan

Plan Phase	Possible Activities	Rules to Remember	Teachers Can Also . . .
Phase 1 Initiation	<p>Off-campus social event 3 weeks or so before school begins, to allow parents/family members and teachers to get to know each other.^a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potluck/picnic at a local park, indoor event such as a dance, auction or raffle with a theme that encourages collaboration and support • Cook-off (team up parents/families and professionals) • Cultural arts and crafts night where parents and professionals teach others how to create useful and/or fun items • Picnic and games at a local theme park, county or state park • Talent show and dinner with a multicultural theme 	<p>Events should reflect parent/family culture and respect for religious beliefs</p>	<p>Send personalized postcards or letters to students and families before the first day of class that indicates that you welcome/look forward to meeting them</p> <p>Develop a resource manual of available community supports/programs to share with parents/families</p> <p>Collect information about the cultural norms and beliefs associated with each student's culture/geographic place of origin, language, etc.</p>
Phase 2 Building the Foundation	<p>Communicate with family to share information and facts about the class/course, each other, and family members</p> <p>Provide opportunity for the family to contribute: try not to do all the talking</p>	<p>Develop cultural awareness; understand that body language may not mean the same to the parent(s)/family as it does to you</p> <p>Keep promises—do what you say you will do when you say you will do it</p> <p>Prepare parents for meetings by sending home a meeting agenda and a planning form prior to IEP or other planning meetings</p> <p>Maintain confidentiality (this must continue throughout the relationship)</p>	<p>Contact each child's family by the end of the first week of school: call or send a personalized note to share positive information about the child</p>
Phase 3 Maintenance and Support	<p>Personalize and maintain communication with families; make important calls yourself; provide written communication in parent/family's native language; provide interpreters when needed</p> <p>Celebrate/share positive events (not just negative ones)</p>	<p>Practice cultural sensitivity; include representations of other cultures (e.g., artwork, books, posters) around the school and in the classroom</p> <p>Use parent/family provided information as a guide for planning; consider the family's situation when planning, prescribing, or requesting activities (e.g., homework help, field trips, meetings)</p> <p>Treat family, parent, child, with respect; consider parent schedules, provide activities for siblings if parents bring them to meetings, provide enough time during meetings for parent/family questions and input</p>	<p>Learn simple words and phrases in the family's language (especially "hello," "thank you," "I'm glad you are here," "welcome")</p> <p>Invite individuals from the students' community/culture, to share cultural or other information with students; attend cultural events in the parent/student community</p>
Phase 4 Assessment/Reflection/Growth	<p>Meet with or call parents/families at the close of the year to discuss their experiences in working collaboratively with you and other professionals</p> <p>Ask parents to complete the Collaboration Review and Reflection Worksheet (see Figure 3), or use as an interview guide for a telephone conversation</p>	<p>Keep the meeting informal and upbeat; ensure that they understand the purpose of the meeting</p>	

^aNote. Teachers may seek additional support for suggested activities through local community participation and/or donations.

Figure 2. Sample Parent/Family Needs Survey

Parents'/Family's Needs and Preferences Information Sheet



Parent of _____ Date: _____

Directions: Welcome to (*Name of school*) school and (*child's name*) classroom. To help me ensure that your experience this year is a positive one, please fill in the information requested below. Your input will help me understand your preferences for receiving information and attending meetings, and will inform me about how I can better help you understand your child's educational program and progress.

1. I would like to receive the following information (please check all that apply):

_____ How to participate in individual education program (IEP) meetings
 _____ Parents' rights as they pertain to parents of children with disabilities
 _____ How to access community services for children with disabilities
 _____ How to work with my child
 _____ Materials that I can borrow for working with my child
 _____ Information about parent/family support groups
 _____ Information about transition from school to work
 _____ Other: _____

2. *I hope to receive information about my child (circle one choice):

Daily Twice a week Weekly Monthly As needed

***Note from the teacher: I will do my best to meet your needs; however, we may need to discuss our schedules before a commitment is made regarding the frequency for receiving information.**

3. Other needs that should be considered in planning meetings (please check all that apply):

_____ Transportation to IEP meetings that are held at the school
 _____ Meetings held closer to my home
 _____ Child care at the meeting location while I attend meetings held about my child
 _____ Professionals who use understandable language during meetings
 _____ Training on how to work with my child who has disabilities
 _____ A person of the same ethnic background who is trained to provide information about my child who has disabilities
 _____ School staff members who participate in my community (example: showing interest by attending community events, school sports events, etc)
 _____ Other: _____

Continues

the teacher and parents/family reflect on the progress of their relationship over the past year. A collaboration review and reflection worksheet (see Figure 3) assists parents in identifying what worked, what did not, and what must be added to further strengthen and improve their comfort level with professionals during the succeeding year. Each

teacher passes this information on to the next teacher as the child moves into new classrooms and/or schools, allowing the individual family's needs to be updated and strengthened regularly, without having to "reinvent the wheel" each time. The progressive plan is designed to help teachers build, support, maintain, and consistently

improve collaborative relationships with families from year to year (or school to school; class to class).

Final Thoughts

The progressive plan presented in this article is reflective of the literature regarding involving culturally diverse families in the IEP process. Through the

Figure 2. (Continued)

4. How would you prefer to receive information from the school about your child? Please number your top three preferences in order from most preferred to least preferred, using the numbers 1, 2, and 3; (1 = most preferred method and 3 = least preferred of your top three choices):

- Telephone call (Two best times for you to receive a call? _____)
- Please provide your e-mail address: _____
- Written note/letter (*Circle one:* sent in the mail; sent home with child; either)
- Home-school journal (small notebook that is passed on daily, from home to school and school to home)
- Other: _____

5. Please answer the following about attending and participating in meetings about your child:

- I will always attend meetings as long as I receive enough notice
- I am not comfortable attending meetings at school, but would attend if they are held closer to my home (e.g., at a nearby coffee shop, in your home)
- I can always be part of the meeting if a conference call is held
- I am unable to attend most/all weekday daytime meetings due to my work schedule, but could attend on the following days/times: _____

6. In which of the following types of events might you like to participate? (please check all that apply):

- Classroom celebrations
- School carnivals
- Field trips
- Committee member
- Sharing information with students (e.g., about your culture, your job, your birthplace)
- Other: please list _____

7. Do you have cultural beliefs and/or concerns that may affect your child's needs or participation in class that you wish us to be aware of? (If yes, please explain):

Note: The information sheet can be filled out by the parent/family, or with minor adjustments to a few sentences, it can be used as a guide for conducting a telephone interview or face-to-face interview.

implementation of this four-part plan, teachers can help eliminate and prevent barriers to the involvement of culturally diverse families in the IEP process. Additionally, the plan may encourage parental involvement while assisting professionals in gaining parental guidance and support to meet the needs of culturally diverse students with disabili-

ties. If teachers initiate and follow the progressive plan throughout a child's school career they allow themselves and receiving teachers to continuously and progressively strengthen collaborative relationships with culturally diverse families as their children transition from school to school, teacher to teacher, and school to work.

The progressive plan is designed to help teachers build, support, maintain, and consistently improve collaborative relationships with families from year to year.

Figure 3. Sample Review and Reflection Worksheet

Parent-Teacher Collaboration Review and Reflection Worksheet

Directions: Please answer the following questions. Where you see the word "other," if desired, please write in any information that you want to add.

**1. What helped you feel more comfortable working with your child's teacher?
(Check the events/activities that you believe were most helpful to you):**

- The beginning of the year celebration that gave parents and teachers the chance to meet each other as people first (event held before school started)
- Being asked about what I needed and how I wanted to receive information
(*The Parent Needs and Preferences Information Worksheet*)
- The information that was provided
- The way information was provided (Tell how info. was provided: _____)
- The frequency in which I received information (How often? _____)
- Adjusting meeting times to meet my schedule
- Other: _____

2. What was not helpful in making you feel more comfortable working with your child's teacher? (Check the events/activities that you believe were not helpful to you):

- The beginning of the year celebration that gave parents and teachers the chance to meet each other as people first (event held before school started)
- Being asked about what I needed and how I wanted to receive information (such as *The Parent Needs and Preferences Information Worksheet* that you may have completed earlier this year)
- The information that was provided
- The way information was provided (Tell how info. was provided: _____)
- The frequency in which I received information (How often? _____)
- Adjusting meeting times to meet my schedule
- Other: _____

3. Please write down any supports that you want to see more of and any additional ideas you have for how the school/teacher can help you maintain your connection and comfort in working collaboratively with them in the upcoming year. If more space is needed, please feel free to use the back of this page to provide your thoughts and ideas.

Additional Online Resources

Involving Families: Accessing Academics Through Family Involvement
<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/sate/Families2.pdf>

Elementary and Middle Schools Technical Assistance Center—Disproportionality
<http://www.emstac.org/registered/topics/disproportionality/principles.htm#family>

National Coalition for Parental Involvement in Education
<http://www.ncpie.org/Resources/ParentsFamilies.cfm>

Center for Educational Innovations
 World Wide Web Resources about English Language Learning
<http://www.cise.missouri.edu/links/mell-links.html>

National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems
<http://nccrest.edreform.net/subject/parentparticipation>

Education World articles

Hopkins, Gary. (2005). *Bringing families and schools together—FAST!*
http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin170.shtml

Fischer, Max. (2002). *What I've learned about cultivating parent involvement.*
http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr415.shtml

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Rose Matuszny (CEC NC Federation), Assistant Professor of Special Education, Department of Reading, Language, and Exceptionalities, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. **Devender R. Banda** (CEC TX Federation), Assistant Professor of Special Education, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership, Texas Tech University, Lubbock. **Thalia J. Coleman**, Professor of Communication Disorders and Departmental Ombudsman, Department of Reading, Language, and Exceptionalities, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

Address correspondence to Rose Matuszny, Reich College of Education, Appalachian State University, ASU Box 32085, Boone, NC 28608-2085 (e-mail: matusznyrm@appstate.edu).

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