



A Challenge to Professionals: Developing Cultural Reciprocity with Culturally Diverse Families

Saroja, who comes from India, speaks fluent English and has a post-graduate degree in English Literature. She keeps her maiden name, wears jeans and t-shirts on most occasions, and her hair short. Over the course of her ten years in the U.S., she has become well-acclimated to the nuances of interpersonal communication styles of mainstream America. "For example, now I'm quite used to setting up times to meet my friends, both Indian and American, before I visit them," she states "I miss people dropping in without notice, like they do in India, but, quite honestly, if they did, I'd find it hard to be a gracious hostess! I've learned the meanings of sports idioms like 'that's par for the course' and 'the bases are loaded' even though I know nothing about golf or baseball, and have become familiar with many American expressions and can repartee with the best of them. I've even come to understand that when they ask, 'How are you doing?' they don't want you to give them a list of your ailments!" Yet, Saroja, whose 14-year-old daughter with developmental disabilities receives special education services, admits that when it comes to communicating with the school about her daughter, "It's a whole different ballgame!"

What is it about home-school communication that makes otherwise articulate and self-confident parents feel inadequate? Research indicates that many middle-class, Caucasian or mainstream American parents experience feelings of inadequacy and loss of control when dealing with schools in the process of ensuring an appropriate education for their child with special needs (Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2001). However, there are additional factors or characteristics that specifically affect families from culturally diverse or minority backgrounds, that makes home-school communication "a whole different ballgame." This paper identifies some of these factors and describes strategies toward facilitating culturally reciprocal interactions. These strategies are informed by the notion that awareness of cultural identity occurs at three levels: overt, covert, and subtle (Kalyanpur, 1998). The overt level is an awareness of obvious aspects of cultural difference, such as outward



appearance. The covert level is an awareness of aspects of cultural difference that are not immediately identifiable, such as communication styles or religion. The subtle level is an awareness of aspects of cultural difference that are imbedded, even taken for granted, such as our values and belief systems. By developing our cultural awareness to incorporate

all three levels, we can develop culturally reciprocal interactions with the families we serve. In this paper, each level of awareness of cultural identity is illustrated through the stories of culturally diverse families. All names are pseudonyms.

Responding to Externalities

Externalities such as outward appearance, including color of skin, dress and even accent, often generate an initial negative response. As one African-American mother explained, "It's like you start off at a disadvantage and you have to prove yourself. They just automatically assume that just because you're black and you don't speak nice, like them, that you're less than them." A Pakistani mother described her experience: "I always make it a point to wear western clothes, like a skirt or formal pants, when I attend IEP meetings now. At my first meeting, I wanted to be formally dressed, so I wore my native dress, a shalwar-kameez. But when I entered the room, something in the looks I received from the principal and others who hadn't met me before made me realize I had made a mistake. I felt that I put myself at a disadvantage at the outset by looking different. The principal asked me if I spoke English and was rather condescending in her approach. Since then, I've tried to look 'American' (at meetings), and although we've changed two school systems, and met many new faces, I have never again been asked if I could speak English." Malka, who comes from Israel, said, laughing, "I always send Ben (her American husband) to meet the teachers in the beginning of school. Otherwise, if they met me first, with my accent, (the reaction) would be altogether different." This initial negative stereotype response to a difference in dress or speech makes participation harder for culturally diverse parents. Professionals who see

difference as deficit force parents into a position where they must establish their credibility as competent adults first before they can be perceived as partners in the decision-making process.

Reactions to externalities are instinctive, as they are based on deep-seated stereotypes about certain groups of people, can be positive or negative, and are fairly ubiquitous. Indeed, we are compelled in our everyday interactions to make snap judgments about the people we meet. Should I hire this young woman with shaven head, tattoos and numerous body piercing as a baby-sitter? Can I trust this non-white cashier to give me back the correct change? Or we might think: I can trust this man walking down the street in a business suit to give me the right directions to where I want to go. The challenge to professionals is recognizing these triggers, such as a different appearance from ours, and becoming aware that they generate such a response, particularly if the reaction is negative. This is an overt level of cultural awareness. A service provider who wears a long-sleeved blouse and long skirt at an IEP meeting on the assumption that she is responding to the religious sensibilities of a Muslim family is demonstrating a positive, overt level of cultural awareness (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

Providing Cultural Capital

Bowers (1984) has referred to “cultural capital” as the knowledge and skills with which we negotiate our way in society as competent adults. Acquiring cultural capital about the special education system, for instance, empowers parents to become effective partners in the educational decision-making process for their child. Knowing how school systems work is easier for parents who have been through the system themselves as children and perhaps observed how their own parents negotiated their way through it. This knowledge is harder to come by for parents who have not experienced the American public school system themselves, or may have had negative experiences while doing so.

Saroja recalls how difficult it was for her to acquire the cultural capital needed to help her negotiate her daughter’s schooling needs. “I still remember the time my older daughter came home and told me she needed to take some things to school that week for ‘show-and-tell’, and I had absolutely no idea what she meant by ‘show-and-tell!’” she said. “I noticed that the other Indian parents in our social circle were constantly asking parents with older children all the questions they had about school. Everybody was helping everybody figure out the system. But there weren’t any other children with disabilities in our group, so there was no one else to ask about special education. And special education is just so

much more complicated! At first, it was comforting to have them (the special education professionals) making the decisions, but I didn’t even have an idea what they were talking about, what they meant when they used these terms. I felt stupid saying, ‘Stop, I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ and nobody took the time to explain. Ten years later, I still feel sometimes that I’m groping in the dark.”

Often, the acquisition of cultural capital is difficult for culturally diverse parents because they are more comfortable using informal sources of information, through personalized connections and conversational language, whereas within the bureaucratized structure of the special education system, information is transmitted formally, that is, written and/or using technical language (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). For instance, while the professionals believed they were keeping Saroja well-informed at IEP meetings by making sure she heard their professional opinions and received all the documents, Saroja would have preferred if she could have built a personalized relationship with one person, with whom she would have felt safer admitting she didn’t understand.

When professionals recognize that not all families will access information through formal approaches, they allow the possible use of alternative, informal approaches and enhance parental empowerment. This is cultural awareness at the covert level. During her son’s first year in school, Rajni, who comes from India, found that the telephone conversations she had with the speech-language therapist once a month were more useful to her than the written notes from the special education teacher once a week. Talking directly to the therapist allowed her to get clarification, ask questions, and build a relationship. At the end of the year meeting, she asked the special education teacher if she would be willing to call her rather than send home a note. The special education teacher readily agreed to her request and was later surprised to find how actively involved Rajni was in her son’s education. Changing her communication style changed her attitude toward the parent and, in turn, enabled the parent’s further acquisition of cultural capital. We believe that it is the professional’s responsibility to help parents acquire cultural capital. Professionals are more familiar with schools systems and how they work, having been trained to work in them and/or having actually worked in them. Parents have not had these experiences. If we respond by saying, “But they can find out by asking,” we are overlooking the fact that, in new situations, people often don’t know what questions to ask, or even what they need to find out. For instance, the first time my son was diagnosed with an ear infection, the pediatrician gave me all the information she thought was relevant. She asked me if I had any questions and I said

no; as a new mother, I didn't know what to ask. When he developed severe abdominal cramps and I thought to read the literature that accompanied his antibiotic medication, I realized I should have asked about possible side effects. The next time, I did. It would be impossible for professionals to anticipate every contingency and provide parents with all the answers. However, if professionals are aware of this responsibility and make a conscious effort to help parents acquire cultural capital, especially those new to the process, they can provide information that parents may not think to ask about. As parents acquire more experience, they will be able to ask more informed questions.

Developing Creative Solutions

Some parents from culturally diverse backgrounds might find themselves in difficult situations that arise from the different values that they uphold. The following story illustrates how, in these circumstances, families will often seek creative solutions that are compatible with their own values, regardless of the solutions professionals might offer them.

Rajni came to the U.S. as a young bride and lived with her husband in her parents-in-law's house, on the culturally-based, tacit understanding that they would move out when they were financially able to maintain a separate household. Soon after, her first son, Bittoo, was born. Rajni recalled her mother-in-law's reaction to his disability: "In the beginning, she refused to believe there was any problem with Bittoo. First, she said it was in my mind. Then, she began blaming me. She said if she took him on a pilgrimage in India, he would be fine." On the other hand, Rajni knew that her son needed physical therapy and contacted the local human service agency, which sent an early interventionist and therapist over for an assessment. However, when the professionals arrived, the mother-in-law sent them away. "The therapists got upset and wanted me to speak to her, or they said they would speak to her. But what could I do? She is my mother-in-law!" To avoid creating a further rift within the family, Rajni decided to stop the process of seeking intervention. However, she didn't give up the fight.

While on the face of things, she appeared to have complied with her mother-in-law's wishes, thus maintaining the harmony of the household, over the course of the next year, she was able to convince her husband that they were financially ready to move out on their own. Since the reason for the move was presented to the in-laws in terms of their financial viability – a laudable achievement, and not in terms of Bittoo's needs, Rajni pointed out, "We left their house with a good relationship, and my mother-in-law is still a support to me

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN IEP MEETINGS

Follow up the letter of notice with a telephone call or e-mail reminder. This helps parents realize their participation is valued. It also helps to answer some of their questions about the meeting. This is a good time to find out if they would like an interpreter to be present at the meeting.

Be flexible with meeting times. Parents may be more likely or willing to attend if the meeting is held outside school hours when they don't have to take time off from work. Holding the meeting in the evenings or even in the child's home increases parent participation, and allows other family members to sit in on the meeting as well.

Arrange a pre-IEP conference meeting. It is helpful for parents if you explain ahead of time what they can expect to happen at the IEP meeting, who will attend, how they can contribute.

Let parents know they can invite other family members or advocates from the community to the meeting, if they wish. Parents are often intimidated by the fact that they are the only non-professionals representing the student at the meeting, and having another non-professional familiar to them be present can help to ease their discomfort.

Find out the reasons why they cannot attend and identify a resource to meet this need. For instance, some schools arrange to have someone look after the preschool siblings in the school while the mother attends the IEP meeting. Other schools arrange to have team members take turns to provide the parents with a ride to and from school. If the parent has difficulty getting to the school, let them know that they can choose to attend via speakerphone.

Involve the student or older siblings and let them know how important it is for their parent or guardian to attend. When one school promised the students a pizza party if they persuaded their parent to come to the meeting, a parent admitted that she had not initially planned to go because "it didn't seem to make much difference if she went or not," but changed her mind because she didn't want to let her third-grader down.

Find out if the time of the scheduled meeting suits them. Let them know they can ask for the meeting to be rescheduled for another time, if this time does not suit them.

and my husband.” Once established in her own domain, Rajni re-initiated the process of locating and procuring early intervention services. As she put it, “In the larger scheme of things, one year in Bittoo’s life won’t make so much of a difference. It was more important to keep good family relations.”

For the professionals, who were coming from the perspective that timing is crucial in early intervention, Rajni’s decision to stop services was upsetting, as she herself pointed out. But Rajni was not an uncaring, neglectful mother: while she recognized that Bittoo would benefit from the therapy, she also knew she would need to come up with a solution that would not compromise her family’s values and jeopardize her relationship with her mother-in-law. Professionals who understand her need to do so would be demonstrating cultural awareness at the subtle level.

Implications for Professionals

Banks (1997) has stated that cultural identity is fluid and highly nuanced, so that no two families may share the same values or levels of acculturation. By the same token, although there may be some convergence of professional values due to educational training, no two professionals will share all the same values. Developing culturally reciprocal relationships with families involves an understanding of each family’s uniqueness, and the recognition that the relationship is an outcome of the interaction of all the variables of cultural identities, of both the family and the professional. If, as professionals, we respond to, Saroja’s family based on stereotypic or preconceived notions about what we think we know Indian families do or believe, or without an understanding of what we think and believe, we are doing both her family and ourselves a disservice. For professionals, the first step toward cultural reciprocity is building self-awareness and developing a sense of one’s own cultural identity. Clarifying our personal values by identifying the adages we grew up with, the lessons our parents taught us, and our moral standards as adults is one strategy (Lynch & Hanson, 1998).

Another strategy is by asking the question “why?” when we recommend a service to a family. “Why does three-year-old Kavita need to eat independently?” “Why do I send written notes home to communicate with my students’ parents?” By doing so, we can identify the personal or professional value imbedded in the practice, such as the high value mainstream society places on independence and self-reliance or our professional reliance on the written word for documentation and accountability. This understanding facilitates a dialogue between professional and family where the values of the

QUICK TIPS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Ask parents what mode of communication they prefer. Sometimes parents may have trouble reading hand-written notes, or with reading itself, and are more comfortable talking directly over the phone. Other parents may be fluent readers, but still prefer the immediate feedback loop that a phone call provides. Some parents may want to receive and respond to email messages at their own convenience.

Encourage parents to visit your classroom. Let them know they are welcome to come in and observe. Some parents are happy to help around the classroom. Create opportunities for both open and specified times for parents to visit, and let them know of these times in your conversations, phone calls or other communications.

Let parents know that you recognize that they know their child best and that you want to learn from them. Brainstorm with parents when trouble-shooting through their child’s specific behavior problem. Ask them what strategies they use with their child at home. Share good news about their child as well.

Invite parents to share their cultural heritage. Many parents are happy to be guest speakers and talk about their customs and traditions. Include family elders, like grandparents, in this endeavor too, if possible.

Make time to engage parents in conversations to get to know them. At school events, walk up to parents and start a conversation instead of waiting for them to initiate (some may feel intimidated, others may not know if it’s okay to do so). Tell them stories about your life; they will feel encouraged to share stories of their lives.

Arrange a pre-IEP conference meeting. It is helpful for parents if you explain ahead of time what they can expect to happen at the IEP meeting, who will attend, how they can contribute.

Be reflective about your work. Ask yourself what values you uphold that might be imbedded in your professional practice. Identify what triggers negative reactions with some parents and positive reactions with others.

family, if different, are highlighted. As the family learns the mainstream value and recognizes where the conflict lies, they acquire cultural capital.

In a way, with cultural reciprocity, home-school communication is “a whole different ballgame,” but one that works for, not against, parents. No longer are the schools the experts, setting the rules of the game and establishing the parameters for how communication will occur. No longer are the families the novices on the field, the only players who don’t know what the rules are and can’t find someone to take the time to explain them. In this ballgame, every player is new to the game but is recognized and respected for bringing their area of expertise to the playing field; and every player has the responsibility for helping the other players learn from them even as they learn from the others.

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