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AN EXTENSION OF THE PARENT COMMUNITY PROJECT: ONGOING SUPPORT FOR THE CHINESE IMMIGRANT PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Lusa LO
College of Education and Human Development, University of Massachusetts, Boston

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SPECIAL SECTION

AN EXTENSION OF THE PARENT COMMUNITY PROJECT: ONGOING SUPPORT FOR THE
CHINESE IMMIGRANT PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Community involvement has been considered as one of the crucial factors of increasing parent involvement in schools. This is especially true for culturally and linguistically diverse families who have children with disabilities in the U. S., since schools do not have sufficient resources and bilingual staff members to support their needs. This longitudinal study focused on a community project that was designed to prepare Chinese immigrant families of children with disabilities to be school partners and their children’s advocates. The initial project focused on parent education training, which was a success (Lo, 2012). Parent participants gained knowledge about special education and their roles as their children’s advocates and decision makers. Due to the needs of the community, the project was expanded and included a combination of information sessions and monthly meetings to address the challenges parent participants continued to face when working with schools. This paper focused on the development of the extension of the project and its effectiveness in preparing the Chinese immigrant families to become school partners and their children’s advocates. Evaluation results suggested that, although the series of training provided the parent participants with knowledge about the special education system and their parental rights, the ongoing information sessions and monthly meetings were needed. These sessions and meetings not only allowed the participants to discuss the current issues they faced when working with schools, but they also obtained support resolving the problems.

Keywords: Community involvement, special education, culturally and linguistically diverse, disabilities, parent training, school partners, disabilities
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INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, research has concluded that there is a positive correlation between parent involvement and students’ school performance, such as academic achievement and school behavior (Epstein, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006; Jeynes, 2007). When parents are actively involved, their children are more likely to be successful in schools and in life.

In the U.S., parent involvement is especially important for students with disabilities, since their parents are expected to be active members of their children’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2014), so they can work collaboratively with schools to ensure that the appropriate services and placement are provided for their children. For example, before students with disabilities can be formally evaluated, schools are required to inform their parents and obtain their consent (IDEIA, 2014). Additionally, parents are expected to attend each of their children’s annual IEP team and develop their children’s special education program, such as determining what services and placements should be provided to them (IDEIA, 2014). Before this type of active involvement can take place, parents of students with disabilities are required to have sufficient knowledge and skills about the special education system and process, such as knowing their roles and responsibilities in the IEP team and understanding their children’s evaluation results so they will know what services are appropriate for them. However, not all parents of children with disabilities are equipped with relevant knowledge and skills.

Previous studies consistently suggested that, due to challenges such as linguistic barriers and lack of knowledge about the special education process, families from diverse backgrounds are less likely to be equipped to take on active roles as advocates and decision-makers (Lo, 2009; Salas, 2004). Park, Turnbull, and Park (2001) phone-interviewed 10 Korean American parents of children with disabilities about their partnerships with schools. All indicated that they encountered various types of barriers, such as cultural and language barriers, and feelings of discrimination. They did not feel that the professionals provided them with sufficient information about the special education process. They also did not feel that the professionals took the time to understand their cultural values, when determining the services for their children with disabilities. Parent participants indicated that community support was needed. Similar results were found in Lo’s study (2008). She interviewed 12 Chinese-speaking parents of children with disabilities about their expectations toward American schools. The participants reported that
they had limited knowledge about their child’s disabilities. Schools also rarely shared with them what their child had learned and what strategies were used in schools, so they were unable to utilize the same instructional methods at home. However, when parents were trained and educated about how to support their children at home, the students’ academic performance improved (Lo, 2013).

While home-school partnership is important, Epstein (2010) suggested that community involvement can be equally crucial. In the U. S., almost half of the student population (48%) is from diverse backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2013a), but a majority, of the teachers (82%) remain White (U.S. Department of Education, 2013b). Due to budget constraints, and lack of resources and bilingual special educators, immigrant parents, especially the ones who are non- or limited-English-speakers, struggle to locate bilingual information and resources that can help them understand the special education process and instructional practices that are used in schools. Community becomes the only source of support for these families.

Many community organizations are federal and/or state funded, so they often provide parents with free resources. Additionally, many of these organizations are culturally-based, which means that their mission is to support certain ethnic population in the community, such as Haitian, Korean, and Chinese. These organizations have bilingual staff members to support the community members whose English is limited. They can also provide the linguistically diverse families with resources that target their needs. The purpose of this longitudinal study was to focus on the impact of a parent community project on educating Chinese immigrant families of children with disabilities about the special education process and their roles in this process, so they could become school partners and their children’s advocates.

PARENT COMMUNITY PROJECT

Project’s Period 1

In the last decade, the number of Asian-American students with disabilities has dramatically increased (U.S. Department of Education, 2013a). In Massachusetts, the number of Asian-American students with disabilities has increased by 36%. A majority of these students were Chinese American students with disabilities. Several local schools contacted two community organizations that supported the Chinese community in Massachusetts, because the Chinese immigrant families of students with disabilities often struggled to navigate the special education process and did not know how to be involved. For example, families did not know the importance of attending their child’s annual IEP meeting and did not understand why the school reduced their child’s special education services when they felt that their child had not made adequate progress.
In collaboration with the two community organizations, which were funded by federal and/or state grants and private foundations and approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB), the researcher initiated a parent community project (PCP) which was designed to train a cohort of 10-15 low-income Chinese-speaking parents each year. The main goal of the project was to offer a series of parent education training, which educated the parents about their child’s disability, the special education process, their parental rights, and how to work with schools collaboratively (Lo, 2012). The outcomes of this parent education training model were very successful. All the participants were thankful that there was such a training opportunity for the parents of children with disabilities in the Chinese community. For example, 10 of the participants attended all their child’s IEP meetings and knew how to be prepared prior to the meetings. Additionally, two of the parents became active in the community and in their district’s special education parent advisory council.

Project’s Period 2

While the parent community project was a success, the parent participants continued to encounter several challenges when working with schools. First, apart from the Chinese-speaking outreach workers in the two community organizations, there were no Chinese-speaking parent advocates who could help the families when they encountered difficulties working with schools. Second, although the knowledge they learned in the parent education training was very helpful, some of the parents felt that they needed more time to digest the new information. Refresher courses on the taught information were needed. Third, all the parents echoed the needs to meet monthly and discuss the issues they encountered when working with schools, and determine how to resolve the problems.

In considering the parents’ comments, beginning in 2012, the researcher and one of the community organizations decided to expand the parent community project, which was the focus of this article. In addition to offering a series of parent education training, the project offered monthly group meetings and focused on transitioning what the parents had learned during the training. These meetings also focused on how to utilize their knowledge and skills in day-to-day situations. We also hoped to use this opportunity to identify a few parents who had the knowledge and skills, English language abilities, and interest in becoming parent advocates to support other Chinese parents of children with disabilities.

All parent participants were invited to participate in the extension of the parent community project. Twelve of them agreed to participate (see Table 1 for demographics of the participants). Meetings were scheduled on a Friday evening of each month, which was the preferred time chosen by the parents. The monthly meetings took place at a local community organization. Each meeting lasted about two hours and was mainly led by the researcher. A
community partner also attended each meeting to offer support, such as room arrangement and clerical needs. Light dinner and child care services were provided.

Each meeting was divided into two parts. Based on the parents’ identified needs, the first hour focused on a specific topic, such as an in-depth look at their child’s IEP and evaluation reports, types of available support and services state agencies provided, social security disability benefits, development of a transition plan, and mental health issues. Depending on the topics, some lasted more than one meeting session. The second hour of the meeting focused on the current issues parents faced, such as how to handle a sudden request from the school regarding a change of placement. Discussion and role play formats were utilized, so parents could practice what they had learned and be engaged in each meeting.

Table 1
Demographics of Parent Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Proficiency Level</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-English Speaking</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited-English Speaking</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluent English Speaking</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Years in the U.S.</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Child’s Disability</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional and Behavioral Disorder</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than One Disability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s Grade Levels</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EVALUATION RESULTS

Short questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used to solicit parents’ feedback about the effectiveness of the monthly meetings. Parents were surveyed twice, at the end of the December and July meetings. The questionnaire consisted of eight Likert-scale questions ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample questions were: “I am satisfied with the way the monthly meetings were structured.” “The topics that were discussed at the monthly meetings were very helpful to me.” In addition to the questionnaires, each parent participant was interviewed using five guiding questions, such as “How helpful or not helpful were these monthly meetings?” and “How could the monthly meetings been improved?” Means and standard deviations of the survey data were derived. Probing questions were also included in the survey to clarify parents’ responses and to encourage parents to elaborate their responses.

Each interview was audio-recorded. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and then translated into English. The transcripts and the translated version were proofread by a research assistant who was fluent in Chinese and English. The written transcripts were read several times to obtain a sense of the parents’ perceptions of the monthly meetings. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2007), three phases of coding were used: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Then the researcher analyzed the interview data and open-ended responses in the surveys by searching for common patterns. The researcher and the research assistant met to discuss the differences at each stage of the coding process.

Results of the surveys and interviews, from 2012-2014, suggested that parent participants were very satisfied with the structure and organization of the monthly meetings ($M = 4.88; SD = 0.20$). All of them also indicated that the monthly meetings must be continued ($M = 5.00$). After analyzing the open-ended survey responses and interview data, three themes emerged: hands-on discussions, needed confirmations, and being parent advocates.

Hands-On Discussions

The parent participants felt that after acquiring the knowledge about the special education process, they needed the “hand-holding” process to transfer what they have learned to the current situations they faced when working with schools. One parent of a seven-year-old girl with autism said,

I enjoyed learning all the new information from the parent education training. Since I didn’t encounter any issues with the school at the time of the training, I just listened and learned. But now I have some problems with the school about placement; I don’t know what to do. I am glad that you have decided to add the monthly meetings. Each meeting is a time for me to learn how to troubleshoot.
Another parent of a 13-year-old son with emotional and behavioral disorder stated,

These group meetings are very different from the classes [training]. In the classes [training], I sat, listened, and learned. But I sometimes forgot what was taught. These meetings are different. We get to revisit what we have learned and connected the information with our real situation. That’s more practical. Taking the classes [training] is good, but we need these meetings to talk through our problems and learn how to resolve them.

Another parent of a five-year-old girl with autism said, “I liked the role plays that we did at one of the meetings. I got to see how I should communicate with the school. I learned something that I could go back to and use right away.”

**Needed Confirmations**

Five of the parents stated that although they felt that they had already learned a lot about how to work with schools, they often second-guessed whether the way they approached the problems was correct. The parents needed the confirmations from the professionals at the monthly meetings. One parent of two children with hearing impairment and specific learning disability said,

It’s great that you are at each meeting. I can check with you and see if the way I resolve the problems was correct or not. If not, I can find out what I should have done. If it’s correct, then I will know what to do from now on.

**Being Parent Advocates**

Among the parent participants, two of the parents felt that they would be willing to serve as parent advocates for other Chinese parents of children with disabilities. These parents were fluent in English. A parent of a son with cerebral palsy said,

We have to come together. I am sure that’s a lot I still have to learn, but I would be willing to help the other Chinese parents. Schools often gave us unqualified interpreters, which created more communication problems. There are also no Chinese bilingual advocates out there to help us.

When asked how we could improve the monthly meetings, all stated that we should continue running the monthly meetings as they were. Only one parent suggested us to extend the meeting time to two-and-a-half hours or meet bi-weekly, but s/he acknowledged that everyone was very busy and it would be difficult to do so.
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Two limitations in this study should be taken into consideration. First, this study only focused on the Chinese immigrant parents of students with disabilities. Results of this study might not be able to generalize to parents in other ethnic groups. Second, the extension of this parent community project required parents to have basic knowledge about the U.S. special education system. Therefore, only parents who participated in the 2012 study were invited to participate in the project.

FUTURE PLANS AND CONCLUSION

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the evaluation results of this study clearly suggested that adding the monthly meetings after the series of parent education training was needed, which were consistent with the results of previous studies about parent education and community involvement (Epstein, 2010; Lo, 2012). Although the parents in this study learned a lot of useful information in the training, they needed guidance regarding how to utilize what they have learned in their day-to-day situations. Due to numerous barriers, such as cultural values, language, and lack of knowledge about the school system, culturally and linguistically diverse parents were less likely to be actively involved in schools (e.g., Lo, 2010; Miller & Nguyen, 2014). Due to limited support in schools and community, the parent community project mentioned in this study is needed, especially for those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Often, these parents needed the opportunity to connect with ones who could speak their language and understand their culture (Park & Turnbull, 2001).

As the parents requested, we plan to continue the monthly meetings. “New” parents from other cohorts of the training group will also be invited to attend these meetings. Through the course of the monthly meetings and interviews, we identified two Chinese parents who were interested in becoming parent advocates in the Chinese community. We are exploring opportunities to collaborate with other community organizations and offer parent advocacy and leadership training to these parents.

REFERENCES


