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Abstract

All parents of eligible students with disabilities have the right to collaborate as equal members of educational teams developing their children's Individualized Education Programs (IEP). However, culturally and linguistically diverse families typically experience barriers to collaboration with school professionals. In this paper, we describe findings from four focus group interviews with Chinese, Vietnamese, and Haitian immigrants examining their participation and language access in their children's IEP meetings, as well as their perspectives on what would improve their IEP meetings. Findings revealed that meaningful engagement was hampered by families' limited access to information, educators' lack of accountability, and limited opportunities for families to develop as advocates. Implications of the research addressing the within-meeting and between-meeting barriers are discussed.

Keywords: Cultural and linguistic diversity, family engagement, parents, Individualized Education Programs

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Parent participation in the special education process has been federally mandated for over 40 years. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (PL 108-446; IDEIA) of 2004 identified parental participation in their children's education as a core factor in improving the effectiveness of special education programs. Indeed, family engagement results in better academic and functional outcomes for students with disabilities (Newman, 2005; Ryndak, Alper, Hughes, & McDonnell, 2012). We use family engagement in this article as a preferred term to acknowledge those children for whom it may be a guardian or extended family member who represents them as part of the IEP.

All parents of eligible students with disabilities have the right to collaborate as equal members of educational teams in the development and implementation of their children's Individualized Education Programs (IEP). Members of IEP teams are expected to collaborate in all aspects of the decision-making process from determining a child's eligibility for special education to implementing a child's IEP on a daily basis (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). Meaningful family engagement is a shared goal of both school personnel and families. As such, some parents have reported being satisfied with their collaboration with school personnel on the IEP team (Fish, 2008; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000).

Unfortunately, extant research has consistently shown that the federal mandate is not being met for all families. Many parents have indicated they experience stress and negative emotions during IEP meetings, do not feel like equal and valued collaborators, and believe they must fight the school for desired services for their children (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Stoner et al., 2005; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). For example, parents of students

with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) surveyed by Tucker and Schwartz (2013) reported that their suggestions were not often considered during IEP meetings. School practices that can create barriers to family engagement in the IEP process include the use of professionalized language, an underlying deficit-based discourse, and meeting logistics such as scheduling meetings for short time frames and rushing through the agenda (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Even those reporting positive experiences in IEP meetings have described needing more information and wanting to be more involved (Fish, 2008; Garriott et al., 2000; Newman, 2005).

Notably, differences in family engagement in the IEP process by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have been demonstrated (Lalvani & Hale, 2015; Ong-Dean, 2009; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012). In particular, in two longitudinal studies of nationally representative samples of students with disabilities, researchers found lower rates of participation and satisfaction with their involvement in IEP and transition meetings by parents of non-Caucasian students and parents of lower socioeconomic status (Wagner et al., 2012). Of the limited extant research about culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families, results suggest they face greater barriers in understanding their rights, developing collaborative partnerships with schools, and retaining appropriate services (Fults & Harry, 2012; Harry, 2008; Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010). Such barriers may include insufficient information about IEPs, ineffective accommodations for language needs, lack of cultural responsiveness, and deficit views of families and children (Harry, 2008; Klingner & Harry, 2006; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). When educators fail to recognize issues at the intersection of race, class, culture, language, and disability, CLD families may not experience equity in educational services despite the legal mandates of IDEIA 2004 (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Wilgus, Valle, & Ware, 2013).

Our purpose in this study was to conduct needed research at the intersection of culture, language, and disability (Blanchett et al., 2009). Specifically, we sought to explore CLD families' perspectives on their experiences in IEP meetings to further examine the nature of the barriers they may experience with a focus on their agency and advocacy in overcoming them. We focused on IEP meetings as the intersection of policy and practice in special education, and the potential context for family-school partnerships (Turnbull et al., 2011). We further specified the exploration on CLD families' participation and language access during IEP meetings in response to the most common barriers preventing collaboration: marginalization of CLD families' contributions and limited language access (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). The research questions we addressed were: How do CLD families perceive their participation and language access in IEP meetings? What do CLD families believe will improve their IEP meetings?

Method

We used a qualitative approach to examine CLD parents' participation and language access in their children's IEP meetings. Data were collected through focus group interviews. Focus groups are particularly valuable in creating a context in which members of marginalized groups (e.g., CLD families of children served by special education) can share their perspectives as part of the group, and researchers can collect rich data emerging from participants' interactions in the group (Huer & Saenz, 2003; Morgan, 1996).

Participants

To be included, participants identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and as the parent of at least one child with a disability and an IEP. Following Wolfe & Duran (2013), we defined CLD families in the United States as those whose primary language is not English and/or who are not European American. The participants (N= 38) were all immigrants of

Chinese, Vietnamese, or Haitian cultural heritage (see Table 1). They were predominantly mothers (*n* = 33) and self-identified with limited English proficiency (*n* = 29). All participants spoke a language other than English as their native language. They discussed 42 total children served by special education in public schools in a large urban district. The children were predominantly male (*n* = 31) and educated outside the general education classroom for the majority of the day (*n* = 31). The parent-reported disability diagnoses included autism spectrum disorder (*n* = 26), intellectual disability (*n* = 5), and learning disability (*n* = 5).

Recruitment occurred with the assistance of two Outreach Coordinators from a local Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) who acted as cultural brokers. A cultural broker is an advocate engaged in the purposeful act of connecting people of differing cultural backgrounds to improve collaboration (Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001). The cultural brokers were themselves CLD parents of children served by special education, and they ran family support groups for parents within their cultural groups (i.e., Vietnamese and Chinese). The two cultural brokers shared information about the research study with the families in their support groups, other families on the PTI mailing list, and local community service organizations. Through this outreach, a third cultural broker from a community service organization supporting Haitian families joined the study and shared information about it with families they support. The three cultural brokers coordinated study recruitment with their regularly scheduled support groups to maximize the number of participants and ease the burden on families. All families had the option of engaging in regularly scheduled activities and opting out of research activities, or attending the meeting only for participation in the research activities. Each participant received a $25.00 gift card.

Procedures

Data were collected from the participants through a semi-structured focus group protocol. The protocol included filling out a demographic information form and participating in the focus group interview. The demographic form included specific characteristics of parents and children. We engaged in an iterative process to develop the focus group interview protocol and to ensure that it was culturally sensitive and accessible. We conducted an extensive literature search, developed an initial draft of the interview protocol, and presented it to the two initial cultural brokers and the third author who acted as a peer debriefer. They offered feedback, and we revised the protocol based on their suggestions. For example, the first question was about how parents typically participated in their IEP meetings. The cultural brokers suggested that this was too abstract and needed to be more concrete to fully engage the parents, thus we changed it to focus on participation in their most recent IEP meeting. We revised based on feedback from the cultural brokers and peer debriefer twice more for a total of three rounds of development. Once developed, all procedures were approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board.

We conducted one focus group with Vietnamese parents, two with Chinese parents, and one with Haitian parents. The first author conducted three focus groups, and a trained doctoral student who spoke Mandarin Chinese conducted the fourth. At least one of the authors acted as an observer at each focus group, writing detailed field notes on emerging themes and the participants' nonverbal communication. We provided childcare during each focus group so the parents could participate with minimal distraction. The focus groups ranged in size from seven to 13 participants. The focus group interviews lasted between 68 and 78 minutes; additional time was taken for the consent procedure and completion of the demographic information forms.

Language access was critical to these focus groups. Language access consisted of two components: a) live language interpretation during the focus group interview, and b) translation

of the consent form and demographic form into the participants' preferred language. We met these considerations in an individualized way for each focus group based on the participants' needs, cultural brokers' recommendations, and our resources (see Table 2).

Each focus group took place at the community center or public school where the family support group typically met to ensure participant comfort. Each focus group began by reading the study description and consent information. All parents consented to participate in the study. The focus group protocol included an introductory question, three content questions with possible follow-up questions, and a concluding question (see Table 3). All five core questions were asked during each focus group. The follow-up questions were either asked or did not need to be asked because they were addressed in other responses. Clarifying questions were asked by the facilitator to be sure all participant responses were understood by both the facilitator and observer. Upon completion of the interview, the demographic forms were passed out and completed by the participants. The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim by someone other than the facilitator of the focus group, and checked for accuracy against the recording by someone other than the transcriber. Focus group transcriptions (126), field notes (45), and demographic forms (228) yielded 399 pages of written data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and inductive, and it aimed to capture the participants' perspectives on their participation and language access in their children's IEP meetings. We engaged in a two-stage process of open and then thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four independent coders (the first, second, fifth, and sixth authors) met regularly to develop a codebook, discuss coding discrepancies, and identify themes in the participants' responses. First, we read each focus group transcription two to three times to become familiar with them. Then,

we independently coded each transcription by hand, marking data units with key words to highlight statements that were important or interesting related to our topic and the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). We met several times to discuss coding and share our codes, resulting in a master list of 115 codes. Through group discussion, we refined and categorized codes until consensus and developed a codebook with 35 codes in eight categories. The categories included Advocates, Barriers to Participation, Effective Practices, Meeting Logistics, Parent Education, Family Engagement, Preparing for a Meeting, and What Parents Want. The codebook included definitions of each code with examples and non-examples to clarify when to use it. Using the codebook and NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software, we independently coded each focus group transcription line by line. We then analyzed code-specific reports of all coded data units (i.e., NVivo node summaries) to identify sub-codes. For example, *Language* was a code in the *Barriers to Participation* category. Upon review, we developed the sub-codes of *English Proficiency*, *Interpreter*, and *Translated Documents*.

During the thematic coding stage, the analysis refocused on the broader level of themes rather than codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do this, we developed thematic maps based on patterns in the coded data. We identified themes by focusing on connections among and between primary and secondary codes and between the coding categories. We reviewed the themes for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity to ensure that there were strong connections among data within themes and clear distinctions between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed for further theme development, thus strengthening the analysis. To support the thematic analysis, we also quantified the qualitative data by examining code frequency and code representativeness (i.e., the number of participants per code) across all participants.

Quality indicators and credibility. Our methods adhered to quality indicators of an interview study (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). We also ensured credibility through member checks, investigator triangulation, and peer debriefing (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The first author consistently clarified the meaning of responses with participants during each focus group. We also engaged in second level member checks by reviewing thematic findings with the cultural brokers who attended the focus groups and received no changes from them. Investigator triangulation included the close collaboration of the researcher, cultural brokers, and research assistants through all stages of the research process, especially during protocol development and data analysis. Peer debriefing occurred throughout all stages of the research when the third author, an experienced qualitative researcher, provided critical feedback on protocol development, data analysis, identification of emerging themes, and interpretation of the study's results.

Findings

Through the thematic coding and quantification of qualitative data (see Table 4), we identified several themes. First, the parents in this study wanted to engage meaningfully in the development of their children's IEPs. Second, they needed support in order to do so, primarily learning about the IEP process from each other and the cultural brokers in their family support groups. Third, they described facing three critical barriers from schools that they perceived to prevent their meaningful engagement: families' limited access to information, educators' lack of accountability, and limited opportunities for families to develop as advocates for their children.

Striving for Meaningful Engagement: "When I could understand what they were talking about, I always actively participated."

All of the parents described a desire to meaningfully engage in their children's education, specifically stating they wanted improved collaboration with school professionals in the development and implementation of their children's IEPs. Working toward improved collaboration was frequently viewed by parents as a daunting but necessary task, as one Chinese mother of a child with ASD described: "As a parent, you should be brave and tell the school what you think and what you want." Additionally, many parents sought to help their children at home, as a Haitian mother of child with intellectual disability described: "I asked if it was possible for me to visit the school during a certain time of each month to observe how the therapists helped my child so I could help my child using the same methods at home." Hinting at the barriers to meaningful engagement that many of the parents experienced, one Chinese mother stated, "During my IEP meetings, when I could understand what they were talking about, I always actively participated in the discussion and tried to get the services that my child needed."

Learning to Engage Meaningfully: "I had no idea what an IEP meeting was."

As a complementary theme, all of the parents described needing support in order to begin working toward meaningful engagement in the IEP process. In fact, most parents described the experience of a learning curve in which they did not, at first, realize the importance of the IEP and the expectation of advocacy in the IEP process. One Chinese mother of a child with ASD described: "At the beginning, I took the suggestions of the IEP team without any reservation because I thought they were all there to help me and they were all well-meaning, but then it wasn't until afterwards that I realized that an IEP is a legally binding contract." The experienced parents had learned about their rights; the newer parents were in the midst of learning them. Several parents felt guilty and frustrated recognizing the consequences for their children, as one Vietnamese mother described: "I did not know that the IEP meeting is very important before, and

now I know that IEP meeting is very important. And now my child is turned 16 and he missed many chance in special education and we didn't know that."

As the second part of this theme, the parents described learning about the importance of IEPs (both the document and the meeting) within their social networks. They learned from the cultural brokers and experienced parents in their support groups. In fact, the benefits of support groups were cited frequently in each focus group and confirmed by emphatic nods of approval:

> Last year was the first time I actually participated in the IEP meeting, so I had no idea what an IEP meeting was. When they asked me to sign, I just signed because I didn't know what that meant. Now that I met this group of friends, I understand that during the IEP meeting I am able to ask for services, services for my daughter.

Engaging Meaningfully: "It's still intimidating unless someone comes with you."

Once they realized the importance of IEP meetings and the expectation of parental involvement, most parents made specific efforts to engage more meaningfully. Two thirds (n = 25) of the parents described engagement we coded as active participation, and over half (n = 22) engaged in some form of advocacy. *Active participation* referred to parents engaging in the IEP meeting by providing input, expressing concerns, and asking questions about particular services for their children. Active participation also included facilitating their engagement in meetings, such as by requesting a skilled interpreter:

> The first time I had an IEP meeting for my daughter the school provided an interpreter whose English was worse than mine and they misinterpreted a lot of the things that I was saying. I noticed so I told them that we need to hold another IEP meeting and that they must provide a professional and proficient interpreter.

For most parents, active participation also included preparing more purposefully for IEP meetings. Many parents wrote down ahead of time what they wanted to say during the meeting, often after consulting with others with more experience, as one Vietnamese mother described:

> I have the list of things that I receive from [cultural broker] that the thing I concern to prepare before the IEP meeting. Another thing is that I contact my advocate one week before, and she advise me what is the best thing I should talk in the IEP meeting and that turns out in a very good way because we prepare carefully before the IEP meeting.

The parent preparation for IEP meetings also included requesting to review reports and related materials prior to the meeting, as one Vietnamese mother described:

> I actually requested the services reports beforehand because I learned that by law by two days before the meeting they're supposed to provide that to the parents. I think two days before is still too short, but it's better than nothing. Just learning about your rights I think is helpful so that you're more prepared at the IEP meeting, but it's still nerve wracking to be alone. It's still intimidating unless someone comes with you.

Over half of the participants also described engaging in some form of *advocacy* on behalf of their children. This advocacy included continuing to learn about the special education process (e.g., attending the support groups), insisting in meetings on what they believed would benefit their children (e.g., specific service or educational placement), and especially, bringing someone with them to their IEP meetings. As a notably successful form of advocacy, multiple parents described attending IEP meetings with someone else who had more knowledge of the special education process (e.g., cultural brokers, parents in the support group with older children, advocates). Those who brought an experienced other to their IEP meetings all described the

benefits in terms of the meeting being noticeably different, running smoother, and focusing more specifically on the child's strengths, needs, and services. One Vietnamese father described this:

> For the last meeting I was lucky to have the advocate, and that was the best meeting ever. She fight for our right, and I wish that every parent can have an advocate to go with them in the meeting. Most of the IEP meeting, I prepare really well. When I go to the IEP meeting, I have no chance to talk at all because they just continuing to speak, but the last time with somebody present, the best IEP meeting ever!

The parents felt that meetings with advocates were successful for two reasons: a) the advocates concisely asked specific questions resulting in detailed action steps, and b) the advocates tended to be White, European American, and proficient in English, thus typically more similar to the teachers in the meeting. Describing these benefits, a Vietnamese mother stated, "The advocate is very important. They speak, do not look like us. They speak not a lot of sentence, one sentence, but they make the meeting just go fast but work very well. I don't know how."

Barriers to Family Engagement

Despite their preparation and intention to actively participate, most parents still felt thwarted by schools in their efforts to engage more meaningfully in the IEP process. They described three barriers to collaborative partnerships. These barriers were central to each focus group, and "Barriers to Participation" was the most frequent and representative coding category. First, most parents described that their language needs were not accommodated appropriately, resulting in limited access to information and modes of participation during IEP meetings. Second, school personnel engaged in actions during and after IEP meetings that conveyed a lack of accountability to families and what was discussed in the meeting. Third, although some

parents reported learning to advocate, the majority of parents described limited opportunities to develop their advocacy due to lack of collaboration by school personnel.

Limited access to information: **"I cannot really understand all those reports."** The parents described three components of language accommodation necessary to access IEP materials and meetings. These included live interpretation during IEP meetings, translation of IEP materials into their preferred language, and recognition by school personnel of the difficulty of participating in IEP meetings with limited English proficiency. The absence of these components prevented their meaningful engagement in IEP meetings by limiting their access to necessary information and modes of participation.

Over half of the parents (n = 20) indicated that they attended IEP meetings in which language interpreters were not present or were not skilled enough to support their engagement. A Haitian mother described her first meeting without an interpreter: "The first time I went to the IEP meeting, I didn't understand English. I didn't talk, but I went with someone and they did the meeting anyway, and they send me the IEP to sign. But I didn't understand." Others described meetings with unskilled interpreters, as a Chinese mother of a child with a learning disability:

> They asked me if I wanted an interpreter so I said yes, and they just kind of carelessly and casually provided me with an interpreter whose English was even more clumsy than mine. Then I got to know these parents and they were able to refer a more proficient and professional interpreter to help me with my meetings, and it made a world of difference.

Several parents brought friends or family to meetings to interpret for them, but realized the drawbacks of such an approach, as a Chinese mother of a child with cerebral palsy described: "Because, as an interpreter, she couldn't express her own opinions. So I think if the school doesn't provide an interpreter, you need to try your best and fight for it."

Regarding access to IEP materials (e.g., evaluations, the IEP document), two thirds of the parents (n = 25) indicated they did not receive translated materials related to their children's IEP meetings. The situation described by a Chinese mother was typical: "I think the most important thing before the IEP meeting is, because my English is not very good, I cannot really understand all those reports. This is the biggest challenge. In the past they never translate, so I always tell them I cannot understand all the document." Many parents turned to others in their social networks and community agencies for support in translating IEP materials, as a Chinese mother of a child with ASD described: "Before the meeting I asked the school for the progress report and all the evaluation report. We got family services from [community organization] to translate the reports into Chinese and discussed with me about my child's current level of performance."

It was also important to the parents that the linguistic difficulties of participating in an IEP meeting were acknowledged – and supported - by school personnel. This was certainly true of the parents with limited English proficiency. It was also important for parents who could speak English fluently because of difficulties understanding technical terms in special education, as well as processing information during such a high-stakes meeting. A Vietnamese mother of a child with ASD described such difficulties despite efforts by school personnel to support her:

> Usually they email me first, what are you goal and what are your concerns. Usually in the IEP meeting when they start they ask, "What do you want to accomplish today?" So they give you a chance to talk first, but it's hard for me because so many people there so I get nervous, too much information. Then I say first before everyone gets a chance to say, but I know my language is limited. Sometimes I need help, and lot of emotional, so many people that make me nervous, and difficult to take all the information in at one time. So that's what my difficulty try to get help on that.

Lack of accountability: "There's a world of difference between what the school says he can do and what he's doing at home." The second barrier included actions by school personnel during and after IEP meetings that the parents perceived to be insufficient, resulting in an overall sense of not being accountable to the parents' concerns and children's needs. In particular, the parents thought school personnel were doing only the minimum, felt they could not be trusted, and lacked confidence in their professional skills. The first example of this barrier was when school personnel reported only progress of the parents' children. Despite this sounding like a positive situation, many parents stated they were told "everything is going well" when their children were not improving at rates they anticipated. The parents felt school personnel were ignoring their concerns - and their children's needs - which detracted from the level of trust and commitment parents perceived in school personnel. For example, a Haitian mother of a child with ASD stated, "I have no idea what will happen when he's out of school because when I attend his IEP meeting they said he's doing this, he's doing that, but there's a world of difference between what the school says he can do and what he's doing at home." Parents of older children facing this disconnect between school and parental perceptions of progress were concerned about post-school outcomes and opportunities:

> The result of the IEP meeting, it always says my child is doing well, great, great, great, but I don't really see that progress. She is getting older, I have to make some decision on my own to look a little bit deeper into the school. Look to see what her needs are, and see if support can be provided for her in the hope of having a better future.

This was not a matter of disagreement so much as the parents voicing a desire for school personnel to talk about their children's specific needs and how special education services

addressed them. A Vietnamese father of a child with ASD described the parental perspective of wanting to see more urgency and focus on children's progress from school personnel:

> They always talk about our children like positive, but they not focus on negative about our children, parent concerns about our children, what we see that our children should have and deserve and need the support service at school. Our hope is that we have to be same with them, we can see the same goal so we can work together.

The second example of this barrier included instances in which parents felt school personnel were being reactive rather than proactive. The parents described examples of teachers doing the minimum or only responding to crises in the classroom and in IEP meetings, as a Chinese mother described:

> I feel like the school should just give the appropriate amount of services instead of putting Band-Aids every time there is some sort of fight because that's not useful and that's not helpful. For example, for summer usually we get three to four times of OT and PT, but this time because I neglected to look on the service delivery [grid] for the summer time they only allowed thirty minutes of speech, and I just kinda feel like the school has been sorta playing hide and seek or something to that effect with parents.

The third example of this barrier included descriptions of school personnel not following through on what was discussed at the meeting. Several parents described that school personnel did not engage in daily communication with them, though they agreed to. A Vietnamese mother of a child with ASD stated, "I would like to have daily communication. Even I wish to have like three, four years ago, and it never been done. My communication book always empty." This perception of team members not following through with what parents believed was going to

happen resulted in a lack of trust and confidence in the professional skills of school personnel. Several parents suggested audio recording meetings to avoid this in the future.

Limited opportunities to develop advocacy: "The general attitude is just very dismissive and just very impatient." This third barrier reflected actions by school personnel that limited collaborative participation by parents during IEP meetings, thus reducing opportunities to develop and exercise their individual advocacy. One example was school personnel making decisions regardless of parent input, resulting in parents feeling marginalized. A Chinese mother of a child with ASD described being disregarded even after sharing her views:

> For a good half an hour I was able to just have, um, a soliloquy, just expressing my perspective on why my son should stay [in his current placement]. And then there were supports from his teacher and feedbacks for me. Even though the meeting lasted for an hour and 45 minutes, the last five minutes of the meeting, the coordinator on his own made the final and sole decision saying that he represents the team and that my son must leave and go to another environment.

Some parents described meetings in which school personnel proposed an IEP or a specific service without collaboratively developing it and presented mediation as the only option for parents. One Chinese mother described this tension as the consistent tenor of her meetings:

> The general attitude is just very dismissive and just very impatient. They're not there to help me understand, but they tell me there's only one hour and the meeting will be over, and if we disagree, we could move forward to mediation. So we feel that there's a lot of disrespect or just disregard of parents' perspective and feelings, that the general attitude is that they know better, mom doesn't, and that no matter how many times mom would

> ask for the specific service, mom would be told that no, we disagree and she doesn't need it. There's just no moving forward. There's no meaningful projective resolution.

Such tension resulted in parents feeling they had to fight with school personnel during meetings.

The third example of this barrier was when parents perceived various meeting logistics (e.g., meetings that felt rushed or were too short) were not conducive to collaboration. One Vietnamese mother stated, "I do feel like it's very fast paced even though I don't require an interpreter. It's very intimidating." Many parents felt they were unable to participate as they had planned, and most parents felt strongly that meetings with live language interpretation needed to be longer, as a Chinese mother of a child with ASD described:

> They always limit my IEP meeting to an hour and even though there's a lot that I do understand on my own, there's just those few sentences that I might not be sure about. Then I feel like interpretation takes up half the time. They should just give me at least two hours because with interpretation it's twice as long.

Multiple parents also described that teachers frequently left meetings early, resulting in the sense that there was not true collaboration among the team. Some parents felt that teachers did not value the IEP process, their participation, or their children when they left meetings early. One Chinese mother of a child with cerebral palsy questioned this practice:

> Some of the team member say because I'm in a rush, so let me speak first. When he or she finish, they will just leave the meeting. So when it was my turn to speak, some team members had left. How can we work as a team if some of the members are not present?

What Parents Want: "Hope that the meeting will go as friendly as possible."

Each focus group ended by asking parents to name one thing that they wanted most that would help improve their experiences in IEP meetings. Their responses (see Table 5) reflected

the three types of barriers preventing their meaningful engagement in IEP meetings. In addition, some responses focused on the parental desire to receive specific or more appropriate services for their children. Thus, while they may desire improved participation and language access during IEP meetings, they ultimately advocated for what they think is best for their children.

Discussion

This study examined how CLD parents of students with disabilities perceive their participation and language access in IEP meetings and what would improve their meetings. Several thematic findings stood out across the focus groups. First, all of the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Haitian immigrant parents in this study explicitly indicated they wanted to engage meaningfully in their children's education by improving collaboration with school personnel to develop their children's IEPs. This finding supports the growing body of research countering the persistence of ethnocentric assumptions about CLD families' motivation and limited school involvement by educators from majority cultural backgrounds (Harry, 2008; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Second, in order to engage meaningfully, the parents first needed to learn about special education policy and practice from the experienced parents in their support groups. Following Trainor's (2010) application of capital theory to family engagement in the IEP process, the parents in this study utilized their social capital (i.e., social networks) to gain valuable forms of cultural capital (i.e., knowledge of rights and importance of IEPs) within the context of IEP meetings. The immigrant parents in this study gained support and leverage through their social networks to advocate for their children despite significant barriers limiting their meaningful engagement (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008).

Third, despite evidence of active participation primarily in the form of preparing for their IEP meetings, the parents described encountering barriers to their meaningful engagement in the

IEP process both during and between their meetings. The *within-meeting barriers* included lack of language access; ineffective meeting logistics related to pace, length, and full attendance; and little value for parental input. The absence of appropriate language accommodation inherently sabotaged collaboration by limiting parents' access to materials and modes of participation in IEP meetings. The systematic failure of school systems to provide appropriate language accommodation for CLD families is well documented in the literature, specifically with Asian American families (Jegatheesan, 2009; Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008) and Hispanic and Latino families (Correa-Torres & Zebehazy, 2014; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2010; Salas, 2004; Klingner & Harry, 2006). Our findings confirm this for Asian American families and add to the literature for Haitian families. Other studies have also cited a negative meeting atmosphere, concerns about meeting timing and pace, and school personnel's disregard for familial input (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Harry, 2008; Lo, 2008; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Our findings add to the literature by extending the consequences of these within-meeting barriers from affecting CLD families' engagement in IEP meetings to their individual agency as advocates for their children.

The *between-meeting barriers* included lack of accountability, little communication, and infrequent attempts to strengthen relationships with families. The parents described multiple instances of school personnel failing to maintain regular communication, respond to parent concerns during the school year, and provide services discussed during IEP meetings. The lack of accountability outside of IEP meetings prevented parents from building trust and partnership with school personnel. Broadly, this finding fits with other studies indicating that CLD families identify factors such as mutual trust, frequent two-way communication, and educator availability as facilitating partnerships with school personnel (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Chu, 2014; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Park et al., 2001). This emphasis

on relationship building and effective communication has been cited in literature with Caucasian parents as well (Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

This emphasis on accountability between meetings helps to explain how and why collaborative partnerships may develop. Even when asked focus group questions specifically about their experiences in their children's most recent IEP meetings, the parents consistently referred to instances outside of these meetings that left them feeling unsure about how to advocate because school personnel were nonresponsive to them. This is critical because, as Lalvani and Hale (2015) explain, in our current system, it is the "squeaky wheel" parents (who are most often educated, white, and English-speaking, with a high SES and social-cultural capital) who become effective team members and feel empowered and validated. This unfairly suggests that CLD families need to act more like the white parent advocates to be viewed as active partners in IEP meetings. However, this "advocacy expectation" (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013, p.693) is an American socio-cultural phenomenon that can lead to internalized conflict for CLD parents who may know and value different cultural norms (Olivos et al., 2010).

As in all research, there are limitations to be considered and addressed in future work. The sample was limited in that all participants lived in one Northeastern state, thus findings may not extend to those in other states. In addition, all participants were affiliated with their local Parent Training and Information Center (i.e., Vietnamese and Chinese parents) or community service organization (i.e., Haitian parents), thus findings may not extend to others without such affiliation. Despite these connections, the findings indicated a pattern of barriers to meaningful engagement, thus others without such affiliation may experience even greater marginalization. The findings were also limited by the data collection methods. Despite the participants all being immigrants, we did not probe specifically about this aspect of their experiences. Further, we

were surprised that the participants did not mention any specific cultural differences or issues. This may have been because we did not ask about it directly, or because the barriers to language access and advocacy opportunities represented more immediate concerns. Lastly, the data do not present a complete context for IEP meetings, as parents are one part of IEP teams. Collaborative home-school partnerships require engagement and support by school personnel, which should be studies in future research (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Additional studies could utilize data triangulation, such as through interviews with all team members or observations of classroom instruction and IEP meetings, in order to examine the broader context.

Despite the limitations, the findings add to our understanding of CLD families' participation and language access in IEP meetings. The emphasis on barriers preventing their meaningful engagement in the IEP process was disheartening. We know that many teachers understand the importance of CLD family engagement in their children's IEP meetings and work to support it (Trainor, 2010), but these findings point to the need for immediate and sustained improvement. Despite the perception that CLD families of students with disabilities do not want to be involved in their children's education (Blanchett et al., 2009; Harry, 2008), this study clearly suggests that many CLD families want to be meaningfully engaged in IEP meetings and are able to actively participate and advocate when given support and opportunities to do so.

The findings indicated both within-meeting and between-meeting barriers to meaningful engagement by CLD families in their children's IEP meetings. Therefore, implications for schools include addressing not only specific within-meeting practices (e.g., language access; logistics such as meeting pace, length, and full attendance), but also outside-of-meeting practices such as how they respond to and build relationships with CLD families during the school year (Rossetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, 2017). Extant research has documented many of the within-meeting

barriers, though our findings emphasize the importance of live language interpretation by professional and impartial translators with special education experience for all immigrant families, even those who may speak English fluently. To provide CLD families the support and opportunity to meaningfully engage in their children's IEP meetings, school personnel must ensure that CLD families have full language access to all IEP materials and to the meeting dialogue itself. School personnel should provide translated documents (e.g., assessments, meeting agenda, draft IEP) as early as possible. It is essential to provide skilled interpreters who not only can translate between the two languages but also who understand – and can effectively interpret - special education policy, process, and terminology. Additionally, school personnel should schedule longer meetings when interpretation will occur, ensure that all key members of IEP teams are present, and obtain family input (e.g., concerns, goals) prior to the meeting.

However, even when within-meeting barriers are addressed, CLD parents may still perceive a lack of accountability and an imbalance of power in IEP meetings. Because of this, many parents desire an advocate to be present in order to mitigate this imbalance (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Fish, 2006; Goldman, Burke, Mason, & Hodapp, 2016). Regarding accountability, teachers should ensure that they communicate regularly with families, as well as implement services and complete tasks that were agreed upon during IEP meetings in a timely manner. As the parents in this study benefitted from it, we also recommend that educators connect CLD families to other families through the local Parent Training and Information Center (PTI). The PTI provides workshops on special education policy and practice, as well as support groups and social networks with other families of eligible children with disabilities who will have a range of knowledge and experience.

In conclusion, the efforts to address the within-meeting barriers to CLD family engagement during IEP meetings are easily targeted recommendations. For the most part, these are specific and discrete problems (e.g., lack of skilled interpreter, lack of translated materials, rushed meetings, school personnel leaving meeting early) with known solutions. Moreover, many of them are legally mandated, thus there should be administrative support and urgency to address them. Addressing the between-meeting barriers related to school accountability and CLD family advocacy is a more complex and long-term undertaking that will require systematic and sustained reform efforts. While family advocacy remains an expectation in the current IEP process, these findings also alert us to consider the possible unintended consequences of individualized advocacy in perpetuating the inequities experienced by CLD families during the IEP process.

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Table 1.
Participant demographics ($N = 38$)

Characteristics	Vietnamese parents ($n = 13$; 16 children)	Chinese parents ($n = 15$; 17 children)	Haitian parents ($n = 10$; 9 children)
Gender			
Female	10 (76.9%)	15 (100%)	8 (80.0%)
Male	3 (23.1%)		2 (20.0%)
English language			
Limited English proficiency	9 (69.2%)	15 (100%)	5 (50.0%)
English proficiency	4 (30.8%)		5 (50.0%)
Annual income			
Less than $35,000	8 (62%)	14 (93%)	9 (90.0%)
Child (N= 42) gender			
Male	14 (87.5%)	10 (58.8%)	7 (77.8%)
Female	2 (12.5%)	7 (41.2%)	2 (22.2%)
Child grade level			
PreK-6th grade	11 (68.8%)	13 (76.5%)	1 (11.1%)
7th-12th/Transition	5 (31.2%)	4 (23.5%)	8 (88.9%)
Child primary disability			
Autism Spectrum Disorder	15 (93.8%)	7 (41.2%)	4 (44.4%)
Intellectual Disability	1 (6.2%)	1 (5.9%)	3 (33.3%)
Specific Learning Disability		3 (17.6%)	2 (22.2%)
Cerebral Palsy		2 (11.8%)	
Developmental Delay		2 (11.8%)	
Child school placement			
>80% general education	6 (37.5%)	5 (29.4%)	
40-79% general education	2 (12.5%)	5 (29.4%)	2 (22.2%)
<40% general education	7 (43.8%)	7 (41.2%)	6 (66.7%)
Other (i.e., special education school)	1 (6.2%)		1 (11.1%)

Note: PreK= Pre-school

Table 2.
Language Access in Focus Groups

Focus group	Interviewer (language)	Participant responses	Live language interpretation	Access to consent form and demographic form	Observer (note taker)
Vietnamese parents (*n* = 13)	First author (English)	Vietnamese; three parents responded in English	English into Vietnamese and Vietnamese into English by a skilled interpreter	Translated into Vietnamese via an online translation company; reviewed by cultural broker	Second and third authors
Cantonese[1]-speaking Chinese parents (*n* = 8)	First author (English)	Cantonese	English into Cantonese and Cantonese into English by a skilled interpreter with extensive experience in IEP meetings	Translated into traditional and simplified written Chinese by the doctoral student and translated back into English by a second translator as a check	Second author
Mandarin[2]-speaking Chinese parents (*n* = 7)	Doctoral student (Mandarin)	Mandarin	Mandarin into English by the cultural broker; the doctoral student listened to the audio recording and provided additional English translation in the transcription.	See above.	First author
Haitian parents (*n* = 10)	First author (English)	Haitian Creole; three parents responded in English	English into Haitian Creole and Haitian Creole into English by the cultural broker and the director of the Haitian family support program	In English; support was provided individually by the cultural broker and program director to parents to complete them	Fifth author

[1] Chinese dialect primarily spoken in the Province of Canton and Hong Kong
[2] Dialect from northern China; China's "common speech"

Table 3.
Focus Group Interview Protocol

Introductory Question	Please tell us a little bit about your child with a disability. This can include your child's strengths, interests, age, disability diagnosis, and challenges or needs.
Question One	How did you prepare or get ready for your child's last IEP meeting?
Possible Follow-Up Questions	How were you feeling before the meeting? Did you do anything specific before the last meeting to get ready for it? Did you receive the necessary materials from the school ahead of time? Were the materials translated into your native language?
Question Two	How did you participate during your child's last IEP meeting?
Possible Follow-Up Questions	Did you have the opportunity to be an active participant in the meeting? Was an experienced interpreter present? Tell us about the interpretation. Do you feel that you were listened to during the IEP meeting? Did school personnel use technical language and/or explain it to you? Did you have enough time to discuss everything you wanted to discuss?
Question Three	How did you feel after your child's last IEP meeting?
Possible Follow-Up Questions	What could have improved the IEP meeting? What did you think of your child's IEP? How well do you think the school is following the IEP? How did you learn about the US special education system?
Concluding Question	Please tell us one thing that would most improve your IEP meetings.

Table 4.
Code Frequency and Representativeness

Category/Code	Freq.	Rep.	Example
Barriers to engagement	250	38 (100%)	
Lack of accountability	70	30 (79%)	"I would like what has been requested during the IEP meeting. They agreed to it, such as I need OT, I need physical therapy. It's not happening."
Language	65	25 (66%)	"Translations [are important] because we need to understand these evaluation and progress reports in order to actively participate in the IEP meeting."
Lack of collaboration	57	25 (66%)	"It's also more important to have the daily communications about what my child has learned in school because there's no communication so I don't know."
Interpreter	33	20 (53%)	"They never proactively provided a professional interpreter for me until I asked."
English proficiency	22	16 (42%)	"I feel I have some communication problems with the school because of the language barrier. I cannot fully communicate with the school."
Negative atmosphere	22	12 (32%)	"It seems as if parents are always butting heads and going to war with the school when the appropriate and the right thing to do is simply provide that service because if appropriate service are provided at an appropriate time, students are able to thrive."
Parent engagement	107	28 (74%)	
Active participation	57	25 (66%)	"Before the meeting I was watching my child to find out what was going on. And then I wrote it down so in meeting I could read it at the meeting."
Advocacy	43	22 (58%)	"I collected all the documents from previous meetings, made an appointment with the advocate, and showed her all these documents. After that, the advocate sent an email to the school. The next day the school responded, scheduling a meeting with us."
Parent education/Learning curve	68	29 (76%)	
Initial lack of knowledge	31	21 (55%)	"When I went to the IEP meetings I did not understand the importance of such meetings. By the time I understand the meaning of that it was way too late."
Learned from others	23	17 (45%)	"What I found was helpful was attending the SPED PAC before I attended [the PTI support] group, which was the information about your rights that we learned here."
Meeting logistics	43	24 (63%)	

Meeting length	22	14 (37%)	"I have many IEP meetings, and usually during the meeting the teachers say many things and then we don't have a chance to talk and then the time is out."

Note: Freq. = Frequency; Rep. = Representativeness; SPED PAC = Special Education Parent Advisory Council; PTI = Parent Training and Information Center

Table 5.
What would improve IEP meetings?

Strategy or Support	Representativeness (N= 38)	Example
Collaboration and partnership with the school	42.1% (n= 16)	"I would like to have daily communication. Even I wish to have like three, four years ago, and it never been done. My communication book always empty."
An advocate to attend meetings with parents	31.6% (n= 12)	"When you go to IEP meetings, it will be helpful if you bring a more experienced parent or some other helper with you. They will help you and remind you about things that you haven't noticed or you've forgot to mention. They will also speak for you and ask the school for things that you, as a parent, don't want to ask. As a parent, I feel that no matter what happened, you don't want to have a direct conflict or argument with the school during the meeting."
Native language support for their children	26.3% (n= 10)	"We think it's absolutely necessary especially for the immigrant population that there would be the native language support within an academic setting inside the classroom."
More appropriate instruction for their children	26.3% (n= 10)	"I would really like them to appreciate and really consider the true needs of my child and really put him in a program that fits."
Translated documents in a timely manner	26.3% (n= 10)	"We would like to receive the report in advance at least two weeks in both language in English and Vietnamese so we can have time to prepare the meeting."
More reciprocal and respectful meetings	23.7% (n= 9)	"Family friendly meeting. You just don't have to feel that pressure, emotional. Hope that the meeting will go as friendly as possible."
Specific services for their children	18.4% (n= 7)	"The school provided OT services for my child, but he has many other problems and needs. He has language and speech problems, but the school didn't provide any services targeting these problems so I requested an IEP team meeting."
A skilled interpreter with special education knowledge	15.8% (n= 6)	"I really need the interpreter who has experience in special education especially for autism. Because the problem with that, even though there's interpreters at my meeting, they don't have the expertise that they cannot help me understand either."
Honesty and accountability from the school	13.2% (n= 5)	"I don't want to hear any more excuses about not having enough funding, not having enough resources, not having enough people, manpower, or whatever, to not do what they're supposed to do."