

# FAMILIES

An Essential Component of  
Special Education

**Edited by** Festus E. Obiakor  
and Jeffrey P. Bakken

ADVANCES IN  
SPECIAL EDUCATION

**VOLUME 39**

# FAMILIES

# ADVANCES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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ADVANCES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION VOLUME 39

# **FAMILIES: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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## PREFACE

Families are the multidimensional engines of life; however, like all things in life, some of them can be caring, negative, disorganized, disillusioned, and downright nonchalant. Based on these presumptive characteristics, it behooves general educators, special educators, and related professionals to look for innovative and sensitive ways to work with families. The reasons are simple: Generally, families are at strategic positions to know their children—we cannot avoid them even if and when we try. In addition, we are legally obligated to work with them, whether we like it or not! This makes a book like *Families: An Essential Component of Special Education* to be a very critically needed text. Broadly, this book addresses the importance of families in general and special education processes. Not only do they need to be involved physically, they must also be empowered mentally.

At all levels of general and special education processes, families must feel valued and motivated to speak up and offer ideas or suggestions in how to educate their children. Gone are the days when teachers and administrators alone dictate what educational strategies and outcomes are most important for children with disabilities. It is essential that families, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and vulnerable backgrounds become involved in this process and that their ideas and suggestions are seriously considered and valued when discussions about their children happen. We must also understand that general and special education processes are intertwined with thought-provoking and well-sequenced strategies. Amazingly, this book, *Families: An Essential Component of Special Education* focuses on families and how we can maximize their involvement in the educational process of their children with exceptional needs. It also explicates the unique relationships that are necessary to accomplish educational goals and objectives. In other words, without families, collaboration, consultation, and cooperation in special education will fail woefully.

*Families: An Essential Component of Special Education* is a book that is aimed at helping researchers, scholars, and educators in the field of special education to positively and intentionally engage in professional reflections. It has well-written chapters and ideas that have futuristic benefits, impacts, and implications. In more ways than one, this book has exposed the important nuances and intricacies about including families in the special education process. Since families know their children, we must make them to feel important and empowered in the special education process. Clearly, without the participation and input of families, we fail in our collaborative and consultative ventures to educate our children.

Finally, these are serious times! In this book, we highlight our beliefs and convictions as researchers, scholars, educators, leaders, and knowledge producers who advocate for treating families and their children with quality and equity. Hopefully, our ideas in this book will guide future researchers and actions, especially in developing our students, transforming our schools and communities, and advancing our future in general and special education and other related fields. We have made the case for why a cutting-edge book of this nature is critically needed. Cumulatively, this book acknowledges *CHANGE* and calls for positive voices on how best to effectively deal with families and their students with disabilities. To a large extent, this book's authors and its contributors believe families are integral in enhancing educational opportunities for students, especially those with exceptionalities.

In the end, *Families: An Essential Component of Special Education* is a worthwhile book that must be on the reading desk of *ALL* educators and leaders, especially special educators and their related professionals. We thank the staff of Emerald Publishing for their commitment to this book project. Additionally, we thank our respective families for always being there for us—they inspire us beyond imagination.

Festus E. Obiakor  
Jeffrey P. Bakken  
Series Editors

# CHAPTER 1

## FAMILIES: AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

*Family engagement is a critical component of Special Education that contributes to improved academic performance, social development, and long-term success for students with disabilities. Federal mandates, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, require schools to involve families in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to ensure equitable access to resources and decision-making. However, despite these legal requirements, many families face barriers to meaningful participation, including systemic challenges, limited knowledge of rights and procedures, power imbalances, and cultural differences. As a result, families, especially those that are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), have continued to experience trust issues with schools, thereby exacerbating historical and systemic inequities, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with special education processes. Research highlights the importance of fostering collaborative partnerships through clear communication, accessible resources, and culturally responsive practices. Strategies such as facilitating trust-building, ensuring language access, and addressing logistical challenges can enhance family engagement in the IEP process. By actively supporting and empowering families, educators can promote more equitable educational experiences that ultimately improve student outcomes and strengthen family-school partnerships in special education.*

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Families

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## INTRODUCTION

Family advocacy plays a vital role in expanding educational opportunities and enhancing outcomes for students with disabilities. Since 1975, when parents were formally recognized as equal partners in their children’s educational decisions under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), their involvement has been essential. In consequence, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) ensures that parents have rights within the special education process to enable them to advocate effectively for services for their children. These rights include giving consent for evaluations, initiating services, and utilizing safeguards for resolving conflicts. In addition, advocacy has helped families to secure essential services for children with disabilities (Burke, Rios, et al., 2016; Cohen, 2013). While there are various approaches to advocacy, the ultimate goal remains to achieve positive outcomes for the individual being represented (Turnbull et al., 2021). This means that advocacy is indispensable for accessing special education services.

The requirement for family engagement under IDEA has contributed to the emphasis on advocacy by families (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Additionally, schools’ focus on meeting IDEA compliance standards, sometimes at the expense of individualized programming, can heighten the need for parents to advocate for their child’s best interests (Phillips, 2008). Funding limitations under IDEA also reinforce the need for parent advocacy. Though the Congress’ initial aim was to cover up to 40% of the extra costs for educating children with disabilities, federal funding has yet to exceed 15% (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Research suggests that federal mandates alone are insufficient for ensuring effective school policies, as their success depends significantly on the values and skills of local stakeholders, including families, community members, and school leaders. Instances of sustained family engagement highlight the importance of cultivating positive school cultures through active partnerships with families and communities. Building trust, improving communication, and establishing two-way support systems are essential for fostering meaningful family engagement and implementing effective strategies to promote high-quality involvement (Boberiene, 2013; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

The growing recognition of family advocacy’s impact on educational outcomes for children with disabilities has driven a focus on strengthening school–family partnerships. Effective advocacy is closely tied to families’ understanding of their rights and the available resources within the educational system (Trainor, 2010). For culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families, however, language barriers and cultural differences may present unique challenges in navigating the special education system (Lo, 2012a). These families may face added obstacles in communicating their needs, understanding procedural safeguards, and ensuring their child’s needs are met within an often complex bureaucratic system (Harry, 2008a). Such challenges underscore the

need for schools to prioritize culturally responsive practices to support all families, including CLD, in advocacy efforts (Burke, Magaña, et al., 2016). By fostering inclusivity and providing accessible information, schools can empower all stakeholders, enabling them to advocate effectively and participate fully in their child's educational journey (Fish, 2008).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The participation of family in the special education process is federally mandated. Educators recognize that effective collaboration with families leads to improved academic outcomes, social development, and the overall well-being of students (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Mazzotti et al., 2016; Rossetti et al., 2017). Specific expectations are written into laws and policies designed to ensure that students with special needs not only receive the appropriate support to succeed and achieve, but that schools must involve family members so that both children and families have equitable access to resources and fair treatment (Ferguson et al., 2014). Family engagement is a complex, multifaceted idea that involves many ways in which parents and caregivers support a child's education at home, within the community, and at school, which has been correlated with positive outcomes across their educational experience, from elementary to high school and beyond (Jensen & Minke, 2017). This engagement is critical because Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings serve as the springboard for educational placement, goals, services, and instructional supports (Banks et al., 2021; Carlson et al., 2020; Goldman & Burke, 2017). Therefore, educating families on their rights, on how they can successfully engage in the IEP process, and on maintaining successful partnerships throughout their child's educational experience is of utmost importance.

## DEVELOPING THE IEP

Family engagement is essential in the development of an IEP for several reasons. Family engagement is legally mandated and IDEA (2004) states that caregivers must be members of the IEP team and be granted opportunities for meaningful, active participation; because the family members of children with special needs understand them better than anyone else; families hold important perspectives for the IEP team to consider when developing an educational plan (DeMatthews & Means-Parker, 2024; Goldman & Burke, 2017). These meetings offer the primary forum to make decisions about a child's eligibility and services that impact the child's education (Banks et al., 2021; Carlson et al., 2020; Goldman & Burke, 2017) and inform long term goals that shape postschool outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2016).

Along with family engagement, IDEA (2004) also emphasizes student engagement in the IEP process, especially for older students who are preparing

for transition (Carlson et al., 2020). At its core, the purpose of education for students with special needs is to prepare them for life after high school (Prince et al., 2019) and a significant concern for families informing the choices they make during IEP meetings is how their child might fit into the larger community as an adult (Ferguson et al., 2014). As such, the IEP must include applicable measurable postsecondary goals based on transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and skills of independent living, and the tangible services needed to support the student in achieving these goals (Prince et al., 2019). Engaging students and families in planning for transition provides opportunities for students to practice and develop self-determination skills which are linked to higher graduation rates and better postschool outcomes such as community access, employment, and greater independence (Carlson et al., 2020; Mazzotti et al., 2016).

To promote a high level of engagement, families must possess a basic knowledge of their rights, and an understanding of special education processes, such as state and federal guidelines, the initial evaluation process, and the available services and accommodations for students with special needs (Burke, Rios, et al., 2016; Goldman & Burke, 2017; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022). Families must also be aware of procedural safeguards and their due process rights, which detail ways to actively resolve educational disputes if they should disagree with the school's recommendations regarding their child's education (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Families should also understand that planning for students' educational programming should occur before and during the IEP meeting where school personnel provide data reviewing the student's past goal performance to further support collaboration in developing action plans for improving student performance (Carlson et al., 2020). When families understand the special education process clearly, they can make more informed and equitable decisions about placements, goal development, and identify the most beneficial services, resulting in improved family-school partnerships and student outcomes (Banks et al., 2021; Goldman & Burke, 2017). However, there is great variability across families in terms of language skills, resources, and influences (DeMatthews & Means-Parker, 2024; Ferguson et al., 2014); and recognizing how to tailor support based on child and family characteristics is an integral step in fully engaging all stakeholders in the special education process (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Because families vary in their composition, from conventional two-parent households to households containing multigeneration and other shared communities (Ferguson et al., 2014), educators must widen their scope regarding who should attend an IEP meeting. Educators must ensure that families' diversity needs are addressed (DeMatthews & Means-Parker, 2024; Rossetti et al., 2017). They have enough information to make informed deliberations, and that their priorities for their children are considered when making decisions on programming (Ferguson et al., 2014). In fact, families have the right to invite anyone who knows the student to the IEP meeting, including a special education advocate. Families can consult Protection and Advocacy agencies, which provide legal assistance in the educational planning process, and also seek support from Parent

Training and Information Centers, where they can receive education regarding their special education rights for children from birth to age 26.

Despite the legal mandate and available resources, family engagement at IEP meetings remains low (Goldman & Burke, 2017). Many families have noted a lack of collaboration during the IEP process, reported feeling like they must fight for services, and have described the school as unwelcoming, intimidating, and a place where specialists decide what their child needs (DeMatthews & Means-Parker, 2024; Rossetti et al., 2017). This speaks to the power differential between families and schools that has been demonstrated in prior research (Goldman & Burke, 2017), which may be particularly true for CLD families (Rossetti et al., 2017). For example, while some CLD families may be proficient in English, they may benefit from interpretation in their native language during IEP meetings to support greater understanding of technical terms and processing of such information (Rossetti et al., 2017). Families should be wary of the sort of relationship with school personnel that proceeds with minimal contact, where IEPs are prepared before families are invited to meet, and where families are asked to sign off on a series of documents that can be considered “in compliance” with law and policy (Ferguson et al., 2014).

## **BARRIERS THAT HINDER EFFECTIVE FAMILY–SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Effective family–school partnerships are essential in special education in order to provide the best services for students with disabilities. However, sometimes this is not the case with many schools in regard to providing effective partnerships with families. In fact, transition and team working are core areas that have been neglected in facilitating inclusive education for students with disabilities. Other major barriers to parental involvement in education include (a) laws and systematic problems, (b) lack of knowledge and support, (c) unequal partnerships, and (d) cultural barriers (Johnson, 2024).

### **LAWS AND SYSTEMATIC PROBLEMS**

Laws and systematic problems within the educational system are key barriers that lead to lack of parental involvement in special education. Federal policies, over the years, have been enacted in the United States to increase parental involvement in the education of their children with disabilities, however, proper funding or implementation strategies have not been associated with these policies in order to be efficient and/or effective. A big problem is that educational jargons are often complicated and new to parents and families during IEP meetings, they often feel as though they do not understand and leave the meeting feeling unheard and overlooked. This is a travesty and something that needs to be resolved so that the collaborative effort can improve to best serve students with disabilities (Johnson, 2024).

## LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND SUPPORT BARRIER

A few years ago, [Mereoiu et al. \(2016\)](#) found that parents have high expectations of teachers and staff that work with their children. However, these teachers often do not have the training and background to perform at the level of the parent's expectations. Many times, the education that they receive is lacking. Schools often lack the training and funding to carry out these improved policies and the knowledge to do so ([Spann et al., 2003](#)). The government has put policies and legislation in place that promote parental involvement, but the strategies, training, and action are typically absent with few or no policies to help make parental involvement a reality ([Hornby & Lafaele, 2011](#)). Research has found that both parents and school staff lack support. Parental involvement is often influenced by the community surrounding the parents; and community groups tend to influence beliefs such as "some students are just lucky enough to be smart," or the conflicting view of "effort is as important as ability." These beliefs, of course, partially determine how active parents can be in their child's education. Even when proper support is available from the school, it can be particularly difficult to take advantage of the support when parents come from CLD backgrounds. The knowledge and support barriers do also apply to teachers who are not always properly trained and supported. Some parents report that the teachers simply do not know what they are doing in keeping with legislation changes and specifics needed to meet the myriad needs in the classroom ([Johnson, 2024](#)).

## UNEQUAL PARTNERSHIPS

Parents of students with disabilities frequently feel as unequal partners in their student's education. Factors that make up this perception of inequality come from a lack of collaboration and communication, the varying views on the roles and expectations of schools and teachers, and parents' expectations about parental involvement in the schools ([Banks et al., 2021](#)). Educators and parents approach partnership in different ways; and this can cause problems. Some parents have less knowledge about the IEP process, even when they have knowledge about their child with disabilities. Parents and educational professionals have found that good communication is essential to build a trusting relationship. Unfortunately, such communication is much easier said than done. At times, special education teachers desire to have a collaborative partnership with parents but find the parents to be withdrawn, especially if they are in denial over some diagnosis.

Parents finding out that their child has a disability can be very difficult and teachers need to be aware of this. Sometimes, parents desire to collaborate but find that it is difficult to work with the school or educator. Ultimately, the key to a trusting relationship is that each party clearly understands their roles and expectations ([Banks et al., 2021](#); [Johnson, 2024](#)).

## CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC BARRIERS

Family involvement in special education has some cultural and linguistic barriers. These barriers can have high impacts on students and families. Embedded in these barriers are racism, xenophobia, and stereotypic assumptions. For example, language barriers can make it more difficult for non-English speaking families to communicate, especially in the nuanced language in an IEP. An interpreter can help to remedy this situation. It is now common knowledge that all exhibit our own biases and do not know that we carry them (Banks et al., 2021); and we must be careful when working with families to not judge them based on their race, culture, native language, to mention a few. This means that educators must have the knowledge, skill-sets, awareness, sensitivity, and disposition to work with all students and their families.

In some cultures, it is viewed as shameful to have a child with special needs and teachers need to be aware of this. Thus, educators may find it challenging to determine how to best provide services for students whose families have a very different worldview (Johnson, 2024).

## STRATEGIES FOR PRODUCTIVE COLLABORATION

Recent literature on collaborating with families in special education focuses on strategies that professionals can adopt to foster increased family engagement (Banks et al., 2021; Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Lo, 2012b; Staples & Diliberto, 2010). For example, to facilitate successful IEP meetings, parents and professionals must work together (see Banks et al., 2021; Cheatham et al., 2012; Lo, 2012b; Mueller, 2009). Research indicates that CLD families need to be effectively communicated and collaborated with. These families have a long history of trust issues with schools and school personnel in the United States for different reasons (Harry, 2008b; Obiakor, 2001, 2021). These trust issues may be based upon factors that include unfamiliar or intimidating general and special education systems, perceptions that family opinions are not valued, or language differences. Therefore, creating trusting relationships is one of the most critical steps in the process of collaboration when working with families of CLD students with disabilities (Matuszny et al., 2007). In consequence, Araujo (2009) found that long distances between school and home discouraged student and family involvement in school services and activities; and families were not involved in their children's education not due to apathy, but due to the lack of transportation and childcare services. As a result, it would be important for schools to recognize this situation, provide transportation for the family, and go to the home of the family to conduct business, as needed.

It is important to note, not all collaborative ventures and issues are the same. Factors that influence collaboration include the school system, teachers' capacity, parents' education, and cultural and linguistic differences. This means that there must be frequent efforts to improve school-home collaborations

(Banks et al., 2021; Clifford & Göncü, 2019; Stroetinga et al., 2019). Research indicates that students whose parents are involved in their education (a) showed higher academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Patrikakou, 2004); (b) improved social competence (Webster-Stratton et al., 2001); and (c) improved attendance, higher aspirations for postsecondary education, and career development (Caplan et al., 1997). It is critical that teachers and schools collaborate with parents and families with students with disabilities in order to try to help them to be successful in classrooms and schools.

Multidimensional factors influence the creation of successful parent–school partnerships (Banks et al., 2021). Teachers may feel overtaxed in their jobs and may resent the added burden of dealing with parents and, they may view parents as underappreciative, adversarial, or as simply lacking interest (Keyes, 2000). On the other hand, parents may be unfamiliar with special education procedures and relevant language, including acronyms, and may lack an understanding of the limitations of the school. They may also be reluctant to question school personnel about the supports and services available to their child (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Teachers and parents need to be better educated in order to work together to develop plans, programs, and strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Race and ethnicity play a role in parents' levels of participation in their children's school program. Parents of African American and Hispanic students are less likely than parents of White students to be involved in their child's education (Desimone, 1999; Obiakor, 2001, 2021). Cultural differences may affect beliefs that influence the creation of equal partnerships between parents and teachers/schools, including beliefs related to the authority of teachers (Keyes, 2000). Parents may (a) be unfamiliar with the US education system, (b) have different views and perceptions regarding parental involvement in schools, (c) have different communication styles and limited English proficiency (Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002), and (d) have differing cultural perceptions of disability (Lamorey, 2002). In the end, teachers need to be educated on different races, ethnicities, and family structures, and collaborative techniques.

The lack of collaboration and problem-solving skills that teachers exhibit frequently hinders the process of developing partnerships between parents and teachers. It is critical that teachers experience preservice and in-service education on these issues to improve effective collaborative and consultation with families (Broussard, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). As it appears, some states have responded to these needs by offering training to parents, educators, and administrators on such topics as cultural diversity, collaborative decision-making, multiparty dispute resolution, and negotiation. Parents and educators who take part in these training sessions show improved ability to work collaboratively to reduce incidents of legal proceedings initiated by families to challenge their children's educational programs (Feinberg et al., 2002).