

Striving for Equity for Young Children of Immigrants with Disabilities

Immigrants who have children with disabilities often don't know how to navigate the special education system. Here's how to change that.

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As a U.S.-born, English-speaking mother who had to navigate public schools for a child with disabilities, I've often wondered: If this was so challenging for me, what is the process like for immigrant parents? How would the obstacles they face affect their children?

As a researcher, I took a scientific approach to find out. I wanted to better understand the challenges for immigrant parents who have children with disabilities and the ways school administrators can help parents find answers to their questions and improve services for students.

First, by analyzing data on all K-5 students in Massachusetts, available from the state education department, I found two patterns. First, regardless of family income, gender, grade level, limited English proficiency, and other characteristics, children with immigrant parents were significantly less likely than their peers with U.S.-born parents to participate in special education. And second, among children in special education, those with immigrant parents were significantly more likely to be separated from their non-disabled peers.

To dig deeper, I conducted a case study at a public elementary school in Massachusetts. It was an urban, Title I school serving 450 students – about half of them Hispanic. I reviewed school procedures for engaging with students' parents and for working with students having difficulty in school. I interviewed all the school staff and the immigrant parents of 11 children. They were in grades PK-5, eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and in their parents' eyes, were experiencing significant difficulty in school. We discussed how school staff members worked together and with parents to address the needs of each of the students. ¹ Five of the students were receiving special education; and six were not.

I learned that the students who were children of immigrants faced years-long delays in getting their needs met. But other aspects of how schools are organized impact all students. Educators work in a structure that requires them to focus their attention on large groups of students rather than individual students. And staff members—including general education, special education and EL teachers, counselors, and therapists--have inadequate opportunities to communicate with one another and with parents about children's progress.

I observed that children of immigrants were further disadvantaged by the failure of the school to communicate with parents in a language they understand or to familiarize parents—who are not fluent in English and grew up in other countries—with how the school operates. Also, when special education and general education teachers don't collaborate regularly, students pay the price. It's even worse for children of immigrants in schools with English-only instruction if schools don't involve educators who work with English learners.

In addition, students in the school's special education program for children with autism were not receiving services for English learners—a violation of state and federal policy.

1. Gittell, J.H., & Douglass, A. (2012). Relational bureaucracy: Structuring reciprocal relationships into roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 37(4), 709-733.

I found at least three reasons why children of immigrants are less likely to receive special education services and be included in general education classes with their peers.

- The school waits too long to evaluate children for special education—a process known as Child Find. For English learners, their policy is to wait at least a year and a half after educators surface a concern about a possible disability to conduct an evaluation. However, federal policy forbids delaying special education evaluations of English learners, and requires the use of most appropriate, non-discriminatory evaluations that account for students' limited English proficiency.
- The school provides insufficient language interpretation and translation services, contributing to newcomer parents' spotty knowledge of their child's performance and context at school.
- Finally, there was an absence of efforts to help immigrant parents understand district practices and systems and to know how to advocate for their child.

Let me elaborate on what this means for an immigrant parent whose child has, or might have, a disability. The parents in the case study whose children were not receiving services—and even those of a child that was—didn't know anything about the special education program. They didn't know their children's teachers thought their child might have a disability or that they could request an evaluation of their child. Those with a child in special education didn't know what was in the individualized education program (IEP)—the document that provides details on the student's placement and the services provided. They didn't know federal law requires their child to be in what is known as the "least restrictive environment" or that the parent could reject or partially accept an IEP they don't agree with. The parents in the study did not know the law provides a process for protecting the educational rights of their child.

But it doesn't have to be this way. I learned that districts can implement both schoolwide and targeted strategies to better serve children of immigrants with academic or social difficulties in school.

Here are my recommendations for what elementary schools can do to identify and address the needs of children of immigrants having difficulty in school.

- Ensure school staff members who work with students have time to regularly coordinate with each other and with parents regarding individual students. Monitor the extent to which staff and parents experience mutual respect and have opportunities to share knowledge and goals for each student. Check whether communication is sufficiently frequent, timely, accurate, and focused on problem-solving.
- Provide parents with high-quality language interpretation and translation in their first language, and a clear understanding of how to access services for their children. Explain to immigrant parents their rights to interact with and ask questions of school staff members and create opportunities for them to build relationships with U.S.-born parents.
- Provide joint curriculum and professional development opportunities for educators who specialize in general education, special education and English language education.
- Don't delay special education eligibility evaluations for children whose first language is not English, and ensure there is capacity to administer evaluations to students from all cultures and languages represented in the school population
- Ensure students have access to both English language learning and disability-related services when both are needed.
- Provide some multilingual homework that enables parents who do not speak English to work with their children at home.
- Include immigrant parents in schoolwide policy and program development and oversight. Provide the language access and systems knowledge they need to fully participate in this work.

With the pandemic particularly hard on English learners and children with disabilities, it's especially critical for schools to take steps to ensure that newcomer parents can meaningfully participate in their children's education and contribute their important lived experiences to the governance of the school. 🔄

Cady Landa, PhD, is the mother of a now-adult child who participated in special education. For 10 years, Landa taught middle and high school social studies to many students whose parents were immigrants. Her endeavors with policy- and program-relevant research, development, and implementation in education and human services, complement these experiences. Landa currently works at the Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work.

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