

# Creating Conversation: Reflections on Cultural Sensitivity in Family Interviewing

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines culturally sensitive practices in family interviewing and developing individualized education programs. Participants were 14 professionals in the field of special education, who provided their perceptions and reflections on their experiences as members of cultural minority groups in the United States. The article reviews literature relevant to cultural sensitivity and family interviewing, describes the method and findings of the study, and discusses culturally sensitive practices in family interviewing, while avoiding stereotypes and generalizations. Recommendations for professionals include increasing their own knowledge base about other cultures; examining their own cultural biases; providing a family focus; allowing sufficient time for comfortable interviews; and considering time, place, and language needs.*

A good conversation is neither a fight nor a contest. Circular in form, cooperative in manner, and constructivist in intent, it is an interchange of ideas by those who see themselves not as adversaries but as human beings come together to talk and to listen and learn from one another. (Martin, 1985, p. 10)

**R**esearchers in both general education and special education have recently stressed the importance of providing services for individual students in culturally sensitive ways that respect, acknowledge, and promote their diversity and strengths (Banks, 1994; Harry, 1992; Lynch & Hansen, 1992; Procidano & Fisher, 1992). The family interview is a common

component of program planning in special education. Interviews are used by educational team members to identify important family priorities that can guide the development and implementation of individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities. Special educators are sometimes frustrated by what they interpret to be resistance or apathy from family members with cultural perspectives that differ from their own. In fact, both educators and family members are faced with problematic and complex issues when they attempt to work together in the development and planning of meaningful educational programs.

The federal rules and regulations of special education embodied in Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), were developed primarily in the context of traditional, white, middle-class, western assumptions and ideals. These assumptions may not be consistent with the values and beliefs of some families and children the regulations are intended to serve. Special educators are, therefore, challenged to explore flexible and culturally sensitive approaches to working with families in ways that can enhance effective communication, build trusting relationships, and open the doors for important family involvement.

“Cultural sensitivity” is a term used to describe an awareness and appreciation of the multiple factors that may influence the values and perspectives of individual families and children (Speight, Myers, Cox, & Highlen, 1991). Culturally sensitive practices are particularly important to special educators for several reasons:

- The number of minority-group children in the United States is increasing, so that by the year 2000, 38 percent of the children under 18 will be of non-European heritage (Hansen, 1992).
- The number of children who are from ethnic and racial minority groups who receive special education services are disproportionately high (Harry, 1992).
- In contrast to the characteristics of the children, the majority of U.S. educators (over 80%) are white, and most are women (Banks, 1994).

Although racial heritage and ethnicity are components of culture, many writers note that race alone cannot account for the unique cultural experiences of families and their children (Banks, 1994; Fracasso & Busch-Rossnagel, 1992; Morris, 1992). Cultural sensitivity implies an awareness of the influences of other isolated or multiple factors that can impact and shape the priorities and perspectives of individuals and families in our society. These factors include the following:

- The emotional climate of racial, religious or ethnic discrimination.
- The implications of poverty.
- Differences in family composition.
- Family work practices and family roles.

- Neighborhoods and living environments.
- The nature, degree, and duration of acculturation into the dominant cultural group.
- Language.
- The experience of living in a family with a child with special needs (Bray & Berger, 1992; Carlson, 1992; deHass, 1992; Gersten, 1992; Lynch & Hansen, 1992; Procidano & Fisher, 1992).

The changing social characteristics of U.S. families can pose particular challenges for both special educators and for the families and children of diverse cultures with whom special educators work. Families, as members of diverse cultural groups, may have a variety of perspectives on education, disability, the role of the family, and responsibilities of educators that are not necessarily shared by professionals. Special educators who attempt to provide culturally sensitive services need to be aware of these different values and views of family members and to further reflect on the biases that they themselves may introduce into their work with children and families. The assumptions and views that professionals bring to their work may arise from their own culture of origin, as well as from their professional training and experiences. Many professionals have come to value the challenge and rich opportunity that working with culturally diverse family members offer for increasing awareness, self-reflection, and personal growth.

The value and importance of ascertaining family perspectives in IEP planning and development is specifically described in special education law (i.e., IDEA) and is well documented in the professional literature (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1990; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986; Warren & Hopfengardner-Warren, 1989). Although few published protocols are available to guide practitioners in framing interviews with family members or approaching cross-cultural interview situations, several general approaches are described in the literature. The family-centered approach has been advocated in the literature of early intervention and early childhood special education. Practitioners and researchers have suggested that an interview guide or needs assessment that is effective in determining family-articulated priorities would be sensitive to the

family's cultural values (Dunst & Leet, 1988; Fewell, Meyer, & Schell, 1981). Rounds, Weil, and Kirk Bishop (1994) discussed other family interview strategies that are culturally sensitive and that expand on the interview guide or needs-assessment approach. These strategies include ethnographic interviewing, participant observation, and family assignments to critique family assessment instruments and program policies.

No cookbook approach or checklist will lead professionals to more culturally sensitive family interviews. Instead, cultural sensitivity begins with careful listening and personal reflection. One way to approach the exploration of cultural sensitivity in family interviewing is to obtain information on the perceptions and experiences of people who are members of cultural minority groups in the United States and who also work as professionals in the field of special education. The purpose of this study was to involve these educational leaders in a conversation in which they discuss cultural sensitivity in family interviewing, based on their personal experiences as both professionals and as members of minority groups in the United States. A qualitative analysis that involved listening carefully to their words and reflecting on our current views was conducted as a basis for constructing more culturally sensitive family interviewing practices.

## METHOD

This study grew out of a related research effort to gather information intended to improve a planning tool known as *COACH: Choosing Options and Accommodations for Children: A Guide to Planning Inclusive Education*. COACH is an example of a specific family-centered, team-oriented process for planning educational programs for students with moderate to severe disabilities in inclusive educational settings (Giangreco, Cloninger, & Iverson, 1993). COACH is organized into three major parts:

- Part 1, *Family Prioritization Interview*, is used to identify family-selected priority learning outcomes for the student.
- Part 2, *Defining the Educational Program Components*, is used to (a) translate the family-selected priority learning outcomes into IEP

goals and objectives, (b) assist the family and other team members in identifying other important learning outcomes in addition to those prioritized by the family, and (c) determine general supports and accommodations to be provided to or for the student to allow access and participation in the general education program.

- Part 3, *Addressing the Educational Program Components in Inclusive Settings*, is used to determine options for addressing educational program components in the general education setting and other integrated settings through use of a scheduling matrix and a set of lesson adaptation guidelines.

The COACH protocol has been regularly revised based on feedback from parents who have children with severe disabilities, experts, and field-based professionals (Giangreco, Cloninger, Mueller, Yuan, & Ashworth, 1991; Giangreco, Edelman, Dennis, & Cloninger, 1995). A national expert and social validation study of COACH highlighted the need to explore the design of the tool for use in more culturally diverse settings (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1993). In response to this need, we have sought reviews of COACH by special educators with experience and knowledge related to culturally sensitive practices in special education.

### *Participants*

We identified 14 participants in this study through a process of criterion sampling (Patton, 1990). Each participant met three predetermined criteria: (a) being a member of a cultural group that is a minority in the United States, (b) being knowledgeable about cultural issues related to his or her own heritage, and (c) being knowledgeable about current exemplary practices in the education of students with severe disabilities in the United States.

Initial sources for identifying the potential participants included the U.S. Department of Education (Office of Special Education Programs), The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (Multi-Cultural Committee), and a review of the literature on cross-cultural special education. Two potential participants judged themselves to be ineligible because they did not consider them-

selves knowledgeable about cultural issues related to their heritage. The remaining 14 participants met all three criteria, as evidenced by their publications, teaching, community service/activities, and involvement in local, regional, or national groups dealing with both special education and cultural issues. The participants identified themselves as members of the following groups: (a) African American, (b) Hispanic/Latino, (c) Chinese American, (d) Japanese American, (e) Native American/American Indian, (f) Asian Indian, (g) Native Hawaiian, and (h) Native Alaskan.

### *Instrumentation*

Study participants were provided a copy of *COACH* (Giangreco, Cloninger, & Iverson, 1993). The *COACH* protocol, particularly the questions for family members, served as the instrument of this study.

In the protocol, family members are asked questions about the current status of valued life outcomes (e.g., health, safety, social relationships) and desired future status of those outcomes (e.g., "Would you like to talk about what would be a desirable place for Emilio to live as an adult, or is that too far in the future to discuss now?" "What, if anything, would you like to see changed in Emilio's current health status or safety that would enable him to pursue a more enjoyable life?" "Which of the valued life outcomes do you feel should be emphasized during this school year?"). Parents are also asked questions about the selection of important curriculum areas outlined in the protocol (e.g., communication, socialization, applied academics) to be assessed, their child's level of functioning in critical skill areas, and which learning outcomes were priorities both within and across curriculum areas. Additional detail on the questions posed to parents can be accessed in the *COACH* manual (Giangreco, Cloninger, & Iverson, 1993, pp. 31-48). *COACH* has undergone a national expert validation (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1993), and its use and impact were recently studied in 30 classrooms across eight states (Giangreco et al., 1995).

### *Data Collection*

The 14 participants were provided a copy of *COACH* and asked to read it and write a report

critiquing the tool from a cross-cultural perspective. Thirteen of the 14 participants submitted written reports. Subsequently, we formulated interview questions, based on the content of the reports; we then conducted semistructured phone interviews with the 14 participants, each of which lasted about 1 hr. The interview questions addressed the following issues:

- Ways of more adequately addressing cultural diversity in the *COACH* manual.
- Valued life outcomes from a cultural perspective.
- Student supports and accommodations from a cultural perspective.
- Methods for interacting with parents in culturally sensitive ways.
- Parent-professional interactions.
- Interviewing families from cultural backgrounds that differ from those of the professionals.
- Individual questions specific to written reports to clarify or elaborate points the participants had raised.

We audiotaped the interviews, with participant permission, for subsequent transcription. We then sent participants draft copies of the final report as a member check, so they could respond to the accuracy and content of our analysis. We incorporated their feedback into the data.

### *Data Analysis*

The 13 reports and 14 audiotaped interviews were transcribed as separate files and entered into *Ethnograph* (Seidel, Kjolseth, & Seymour, 1988), a computerized data analysis program. We reviewed the files and made notations to reflect emerging categories or concepts. In the first level of analysis, we focused on data that addressed issues of cultural sensitivity on a global level. In subsequent data analysis, we developed a coding system that reflected common concepts or categories drawn from our review of preliminary notations (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). We then reanalyzed the data, revised and finalized codes, and recoded the data into thematic reports, using *Ethnograph*. We used 28 final codes in data analysis to support three themes grounded in the data.

## RESULTS

In this section, we present three related themes in the form of questions. Two of the themes, which are reported in conversation style, focus on the questions: “What does cultural sensitivity mean in family interviewing?” and “How do professionals approach their work in culturally sensitive ways?” The final question is “How can family interviews be conducted in more culturally sensitive ways?”

The ideas and perceptions presented in the following conversations reflect the perspectives of the study participants, shared through their written reports and interviews. Quotations used to create a conversation are not attributed to individual participants, but are joined together much as an informal discussion might be structured, and are intended to present a range of perspectives, rather than definitive statements about each conversation question.

Although each participant is a professional in special education or a related field and a member of a minority group in the United States, all participants indicated that they do not consider themselves spokespeople for their cultural or ethnic group. Instead, they are people who agreed to share their individual thoughts and views and with whom we can exchange ideas. When they refer to certain cultural or ethnic groups in the conversation, the intention is to generally raise our awareness about certain important issues. They do not imply a stereotype or generalization of a specific cultural or ethnic group, but seek to represent a broader principle.

### *What Cultural Sensitivity in Family Interviewing Means*

The family is a cultural group, unique by virtue of the values, beliefs, and experiences shared by its members. Each family member, in turn, may have personal positions, roles, experiences, and views not necessarily shared by others in his or her family. Families or individuals of a particular cultural or ethnic group may also have characteristics and experiences shared by other culturally distinct groups in our society. The unique views of individuals and groups of individuals who live as families make it difficult for us to identify exactly who or what educators should be sensitive to in

their interactions with families of cultures that are different from their own. The conversation begins:

I think the term “cultural perspective” doesn’t mean very much. It’s too broad. . . . To remove culture and make it a big umbrella kind of category . . . leads to more stereotyping than if the focus was on the families and how they see themselves.

I am hesitant . . . for fear of generalizing about a group of individuals. But given our commitment to individualization within our field, I would simply suggest that all Hispanic families, while sharing some general characteristics, are family units first and should be viewed in an individual manner.

Not all Hispanic families present the same conditions. Some of them could be dealing with issues related to immigration, others with learning the language. . . . They could differ in social backgrounds, even though coming from the same culture.

For many people that I know, saying you are of African descent is more political and philosophical than it is racial.

It is important to understand that within the context of African-American families, as with families of any other race or culture, there are different levels of socioeconomic status, knowledge base, family composition, and priorities based on many environmental variables.

Certainly, individualized approaches to families can reflect sensitivity to family culture; however, the meaning of “family,” the roles family members assume, and the expectations that family members have of one another are all components of cultural sensitivity to the family. The conversation continues:

Hawaiians believe in keeping the family together. As future generations are born, the family becomes an extended family (*O’hana*). It is not unusual to have three or four generations living in the same household, with *Kupuna* (elders) caring for the grandchildren while the parents work to support the family.

One of the strengths of Latino families is the close contact and strong family ties the children may have with their parents and brothers and sisters. . . . Often in Latino families, older brothers and sisters take care of their younger brothers and sisters.

Depending on the family composition, the major caretaking roles in the family . . . may be given to extended family members . . . an aunt, grandmother, or older sibling who cares for the child with a disability during the majority of the time while parents may be working or carrying out other responsibilities.

Another aspect of cultural sensitivity mentioned by our participants was an appreciation of the environment in which many families live. Literally knowing where families are coming from can help professionals interpret family priorities related to education, community activities, and social, recreational, and vocational goals they consider important for their children.

The issues of a safe environment may mean different things to families living in large versus small communities. Many parents in the inner-city ghettos have a major concern about [safety], that schools really are ill equipped to deal with (e.g., drugs, shootings, violence in the city, safe travel to and from school, work, or recreational activities, etc.).

Some Latino children come from migrant families that move from place to place. In some families, the parents do not allow their children to shop or go out in the community.

Families may also differ in their cultural assumptions and views of the role of children, and children with disabilities in particular.

Hawaiian children are not given much personal choice/control in the family. They are "seen but not heard." They are expected to be responsible for personal self, take care of younger siblings, respect their elders, contribute to family chores, and not "embarrass" the family by drawing attention to themselves. They are very protective of each other.

An Asian family may not define independence in terms of personal choice and control, nor may they perceive it as a valued life outcome. Indeed, it may conflict with their beliefs. Often Asians

regard independence as becoming rebellious, and they do not desire that their children be encouraged to make decisions for themselves.

In many Hispanic families, control of important decisions remains with the parents (or grandparents) until the child reaches adulthood or marries and moves away from the family. . . . To assume that the student with disabilities' choice supersedes that of the parents may violate the cultural patterns of the particular family and inject conflict into the family system.

Family members may be hesitant to participate in planning, implementing, or evaluating educational programs of their children with disabilities for many reasons. Because of traditional roles of educators and the high esteem with which education is regarded, some families may tend to defer to professionals in the identification of priorities for their child's program, be unaware of the value of family participation, or be unfamiliar with a system that is open to their input. Other families may be hesitant to participate in educational activities and processes because they or other family members have had negative personal experiences with the school or otherwise doubt the school's effectiveness in dealing with their children. Educators, in their professional roles, need to be sensitive how they and the schools they represent may be perceived by some family members.

In some families, the parents may defer to the teachers' decisions, and view their word as final. Traditionally, teachers hold a very high status in many Hispanic cultures. Attempting to collaborate may be difficult for families at first.

One of the major reasons cited for the nonparticipation of minority families is the imbalance of power in the parent-professional relationship . . . . All too often, professionals assume that because of their expertise, they have the solutions to a problem and do not consult families for their opinion and knowledge. . . . In ethnic groups where it is culturally normative to defer to authority, for instance the Asian communities, this professional stance is not challenged.

Other families are hesitant about special education, which they may equate with a particular educational setting. Their awareness of, and expe-

riences with, the implementation of services in their community may raise particular concerns about the value of special education for their child with disabilities.

Special education, for many Native children, has all too often been a “place” rather than a process. The reasons for such placements may not always be valid and can lead to negative feeling regarding special education.

They [families] may love and accept their child unconditionally, but would not impose on others. In other words, they may try every effort to prevent causing trouble to teachers and schools.

Professionals who work with families also introduce their own professional culture into the relationship with the family. Their position, as a representative of a public service or agency, can be perceived differently by families with whom they work. The questions professionals ask and the forms and other written materials that they commonly use to gather information from families may seem illogical, overwhelming, intimidating, or inappropriate to families unfamiliar with special education rules, regulations, language, and procedures.

Those families who live here on undocumented status may find the process and forms overwhelming. There are many families who simply do not participate in the education of their children for fear of their immigration status and who are uncertain about intruding on a process that they do not fully understand.

I think we take a lot for granted in terms of what might be a “common,” harmless question to us, but not interpreted as such by families living outside the mainstream. For example, a “simple” question like “Who does the child live with?” might result in suspicion from a parent who may not be married to a live-in boyfriend. The parent may be uneasy about providing this “private” information to outsiders, particularly “authorities” in the school system.

The norms and customs of appropriate social interaction within various cultural groups may be unfamiliar to the professional, or difficult to accommodate within the structure of formal family interviews. Even aspects of the family interview that may appear inconsequential to pro-

fessionals, could unintentionally offend some families. Cultural sensitivity includes an appreciation of the family’s view of proper social behavior, the purpose of the interview, preferred language, issues of time and pace, and the information-sharing style that is most comfortable for the family.

Should the meeting be taking place in the family home? Positioning oneself, as an outsider, between members of a family, unless invited to do so, would appear quite rude.

This [use of questionnaires and interviews] is a very culturally conditioned interaction style which can be, at best, effective and, at worst, intimidating for people whose pace may be either more personalized or slower and less direct. Also, many families will need prior familiarization with the material, and especially with the school personnel, if they are to feel comfortable enough to voice their real opinions and preferences.

Interviewers who give themselves just 1 hour per visit, refuse any refreshment, and maintain a professional distance, overlook important cultural expectations of interpersonal behavior.

Rushing, or even giving that impression, could lead to alienation and distancing and defeating the primary purpose of parental inclusion. . . . Native people may use stories to answer questions. Rushing people through answers may lead to (a) the questions not being fully answered, (b) a feeling of being discounted, and (c) a loss of important information.

There are different interpretations of time, sometimes based on cultural experiences. The entire notion of starting “on time” and finishing “on time” are not the same for some members of the African community.

### *How Professionals Approach Work in Culturally Sensitive Ways*

Professionals need to acknowledge that, at least, they have a responsibility for providing high-quality special education services to the growing numbers of children and families who may have cultural values and styles different from their own. Professionals must recognize cultural sensitivity as an important aspect of their practice, and they must take positive steps toward increasing

their effectiveness in working with diverse groups of people. These steps may begin with a recognition of their own cultural biases.

The success will be dependent on their (professionals') ability to interact in a culturally sensitive way, based on genuine respect for different beliefs and practices. A culturally intolerant interviewer or service provider can wreck the very best of intentions and the very best of evaluation approaches.

Professionals must be aware of their posture, their cultural assumptions, and the differences between their own perspectives and the family's when attempting to develop an educational plan that would incorporate priorities established by the family.

Maybe stop and think, what are my cultural values? I think sometimes in the larger society, in the Anglo communities . . . maybe they have forgotten that they have culture too. . . . How comfortable are they with themselves? Do they have some fears? What are their prejudices?

Professionals need to cultivate positive attitudes and show greater sensitivity and respect for other ways of thinking and being, even when these ways conflict with one's own cultural values and beliefs.

Professionals who acknowledge the importance of culturally sensitive practices must then purposely seek avenues to enhance their understandings and knowledge about "other ways of thinking and being." These avenues may include study and reading on the topics of families and ethnicity in interdisciplinary professional and nonprofessional literature or coursework. The professional's source of such formal information must be considered and acknowledged. Interactional learning, with the help of the people and families of other cultures, is another important source of professional knowledge and growth.

Family and ethnicity are intertwined and inseparable, and should be studied together.

Then again, do we know what we are looking for? Are we looking for the cultural stance or the cultural position of a particular group? Are we getting valid information? Who's telling us? Are we getting books written by Anglo people who

have visited the Navajos? Are we asking elders in the community? Are we asking families to tell us what their positions are? Do we know how to get at culture through interviews? . . . How do we get the information? Are we reading textbooks? Are we reading these books that are broken up into chapters on Chinese, American, African-American, and African-Caribbean? . . . Or are we asking the people within that community to describe to us what they think about themselves?

The extent to which professionals learn details about specific cultural groups must be balanced with an understanding of cultural processes and an appreciation for the particular family's experience of culture, their level of acculturation, and the changing nature of culture itself. It is perhaps this understanding that culture is constantly changing that leads professionals to continuously learn from a variety of sources, including the individual families with whom they work.

I teach a course on cultural perspectives in special education, and teachers take the course because they want to find out how *X* group does this. And I give a little bit of that information, but I spend the majority of the time talking about the process issues, and framework issues—and that's real frustrating to teachers.

Culture is not static. . . . If you are training people, you don't want to give them a list of things of what people do, or what people believe, because that is going to change dramatically with social class, education, geographic region.

We need to find ways to access information about general characteristics of the families we work with from different backgrounds, without risking generalizations or stereotypes.

For me, this is the essence of culturally sensitive practice; not that professionals need to know particular details of all cultural groups (this being, in fact, impossible and tends to lead to stereotyping), but rather that they are open to different belief systems, and capable of listening in a nonjudgmental way to concerns and beliefs or practices that may surprise or even shock them. Next, they must be able to collaborate with families in such a way as to respect their cultural framework, while simultaneously hon-



oring their own. This is a tremendous challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

Special educators have professional responsibilities to help other educational team members in the school and community better understand the cultural perspectives of the children and families they serve and to challenge cultural insensitivity or stereotyping in assumptions, procedures, or practices. Working in cross-cultural groups was suggested as one avenue for professionals to gain a better perspective on the biases and assumptions of their own professional or work cultures. Special educators also need to be willing to compromise their professional opinions when it is for the best interest of the family and child.

The values on which all of special education services are based are cultural specific values. So all of the services are built on that. . . . You are sort of looking at the whole theme of special education and saying this is all culturally specific, rather than saying that this is a technology. . . . It becomes very difficult for people who belong to that mainstream culture to recognize that, in fact, everything that they believe in as being scientifically true, is actually only a derivative of their culture.

They [families] want their children to be accepted, liked, loved, cared for, safe, healthy, and happy. Advocating best practice brings about new paradigms, which entail risks. Risks and change are hard on everyone, but especially on parents who don't necessarily care about theoretical best practice or legal mandates or universal rights. They tend to focus on what they perceive is best for their child and family, which may or may not jive with what is theoretical best practice.

### *Conduct Family Interviews in Culturally Sensitive Ways*

Professionals can adopt more culturally sensitive family interviewing strategies by learning from others who share the culture of the family and by inviting family members to evaluate what works and doesn't work for them. Further suggestions, categorized in Figure 1, focus on specific recommendations for improving practices, such as the following:

- Seek help from “cultural interpreters” before the interview.
- Carefully ascertain literacy and language status of family members.
- Involve family members in planning interviews.
- Preview the interview with family members.
- Be flexible and responsive to the family's interaction style.
- Adapt the time frame to meet the needs of the family.
- Carefully examine the nature of the questions you ask.

All participants emphasized the crucial element of flexibility and the importance of ensuring opportunities for family members to ask their own questions. An open exchange of questions and answers can help to build trust between professionals and family members. Most important, maintaining the well-being of the child as the common focus of the interview will help family members and professionals overlook each other's faults and work toward a better outcome.

## **DISCUSSION**

Participants in this research shared their insights regarding cultural sensitivity in family interviewing, based on their experiences as both special educators and as members of minority groups in the United States. They identified the following keys to conducting culturally sensitive interviews:

- Appreciate the uniqueness in each family.
- Be aware of the influence of your role as a professional.
- Acknowledge your own cultural biases.
- Seek new understandings and knowledge of cultures.
- Develop an awareness of cultural norms.
- Learn with families.

Each of these is described here in further detail.

### *Appreciate the Uniqueness in Each Family*

Professionals need to become aware of the typical roles family members play in each family, including extended family members, and the expectations that members of the family may have of

**FIGURE 1***Participant Suggestions for Conducting Family Interviews in More Culturally Sensitive Ways***Seek help from “cultural interpreters” before the interview.**

- Have someone from the community determine whether the interview protocol “fits” in the community.
- Become aware of the social interaction norms of the community, so that initial impressions will be appropriate.
- Have a community liaison worker who knows the specific cultural patterns of families within that neighborhood make initial contacts and present realistic choices to parents.

**Carefully ascertain literacy and language status of family members.**

- Adjust the interview style for nonreaders and speakers of other languages.
- Consider that family members may not be literate in their native language or English.
- Advise families who speak another language in the home that they are entitled to the services of an interpreter, rather than just asking if they wish one, since they may decline, thinking that it is too much to ask.
- Be knowledgeable of skills needed by educators to work successfully with interpreters.
- Do not use siblings or other students as interpreters.
- Familiarize the interpreter ahead of time with any documents that must be presented at the conference.
- Team members should address both the parent and the interpreter as they speak, rather than facing only the interpreter.

**Involve family members in planning interviews.**

- Let families know that their input is important by including them in scheduling a date, time, and location of the interview and determining who should attend.
- Consider meeting with parents at their places of employment during lunch or right after work, at a community center, at another agency location, or in the family home at flexible times so that the parent feels comfortable.
- Be aware that some families may be very uncomfortable with school personnel visiting their homes for various reasons (e.g., their undocumented status, embarrassment about the condition of their home, previous bad experiences with school personnel).
- Consider whether parents might feel intimidated by too many professionals, and adjust the number as appropriate.
- Allow for inclusion of “significant others” (e.g., extended family).
- Be sensitive to problems that may arise when both parents cannot be present.
- Consider meeting with several families at one time. Family members may feel more comfortable sharing information within a close network of family members and neighbors.
- Plan to involve a team member who knows the family or can establish rapport. If the interviewer is from the same culture, he or she can better individualize the information in terms of use of native language and vocabulary.

**Preview the interview with family members.**

- Let family members know that they will be respected and that if something annoys them, they can say that.
- Be sensitive to what parents would like you to do. Would they be more comfortable with a social visit, or would they like you to be more businesslike?

**FIGURE 1**  
(Continued)

- Put yourself in the learner role. . . . Acknowledge your own ignorance, and ask for ideas or questions the family may have to improve the interview.
- Follow the parents' lead right from the start, and allow them to establish the parameters of the interview.

**Be flexible and responsive to the family's interaction style.**

- Assess the situation; expect that every situation is going to be different.
- Allow the family to tell stories about the child. Parents need time to think when answering the broad, sweeping questions. . . . Their answers may not be specific or clear. Telling stories is one way they can clarify their thoughts on their priorities for their child. Stories can establish a common understanding of the background, family history, and relationships in order to build trust.

**Adapt the time frame to meet the needs of the family.**

- Be prepared to spend time with the family before and after the family interview.
- Be sensitive to the need for some families to confer with other family members and think through important educational decisions over time.
- Be aware that in some families it is important to "break bread" with one another and first "connect." It may take months before a family is comfortable with school personnel and willing to divulge the level of information that is requested by the system.

**Carefully examine the nature of the questions you ask.**

- Confidentiality needs to be highlighted and emphasized as much as possible. Discretion is critical; loss of confidentiality can lead to a failure to work with the team and ultimately, to the child's losing out.
- There are things you ask and things you don't ask. . . . A family member may be offended if someone were to ask questions without his or her understanding why they wanted to know. It might be a very spiritual or personal subject and may be perceived as having nothing to do with how their child is going to do in school.
- Issues of shame and guilt could arise if the parents feel blamed or if the child's problems are possibly related to parental substance abuse or other behaviors.
- Because some parents who may receive public assistance feel that their lives are constantly being invaded, informing them of the fact that they do not have to answer questions that are too sensitive is critical.
- Ask family members for feedback regarding questions that are not appropriate for future use with other families.
- Continually focus the conversation on what will benefit the child, because across all culture groups, what is most important is the welfare of their children.

each other and of their children, including those with disabilities. They must acknowledge the realities families may face in the neighborhoods and the environments in which they live, and how those environments may shape the priorities and goals they have for their children.

*Be Aware of the Influence of Your Role as a Professional*

Be sensitive to how educators, special educators, or public agency representatives may be viewed by family members. Professionals should consider the influence of the families' past or current

knowledge and experience of education in the United States, special education, and typical roles of public school personnel. Rather than assume that families are resistant or apathetic, they should consider cultural tendencies to defer to their professional judgments and possible strained relationships with schools or other public agencies. Hesitancy to participate in family interviews may also arise from a lack of agreement with many of the Western, middle-class cultural assumptions that underlie special education and are associated with the professional role.

### *Acknowledge Your Own Cultural Biases*

Professionals must be willing to examine the biases and prejudices that they bring to their work. These are rooted in their knowledge and personal experiences as members of their families of origin, as members of other social groups, and as professionally socialized practitioners. Professionals must examine the perspective from which they tend to make judgments and question whether they have knowledge or the right to make those judgments.

### *Seek New Understandings and Knowledge of Cultures*

Educators may address their need for new perspectives and knowledge through reading, formal study, or interaction with others, including the families and professionals of different cultures with whom they work. Interdisciplinary professional and nonprofessional study and personal interactions can enhance our understanding of cultures different from our own, but we must guard against generalizations and stereotypes of cultural groups. Professionals must view culture as a process that allows them to better understand the importance of the individual family context and the changing nature of culture for groups and individuals in our society.

### *Develop an Awareness of Cultural Norms*

Professionals should be aware that there may be norms of social interaction related to settings, behaviors, dress, and the pace and the style of interactions that families feel are appropriate, respectful, and with which they are most comfortable.

### *Learn with Families*

Special educators can assess the degree of cultural sensitivity they bring to family interviewing by asking themselves and the families they work with whether the interview has been successful and what might make it better. They can consider together whether there has been a mutual exchange of ideas so that both families and professionals feel they better understand each other's perspectives and can trust that their views are acknowledged and respected. The family should feel that the professional has at least communicated an openness and nonjudgmental acceptance of family views. This can lay the foundation for trust and a willingness to continue to work together for the child's best interests.

Cultural sensitivity, as both a personal and professional process, can always be improved. The voices of family members and children with disabilities are other important voices that should be included in further conversations regarding cultural sensitivity. Families, professionals, and others with experience, views, and knowledge of cultural issues must work together, with humility, self-reflection, and mutual respect to create conversations that will enhance our understandings of the children we work for, their families, and ourselves. Though specific practices can enhance cultural sensitivity in family interviewing, it is ultimately the quality of the interaction between individuals and the conversations we create that will yield the important information needed to design and implement meaningful educational programs for children with disabilities.

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