

# Empowerment

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## Addressing the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Different Parents

The U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse, and today, 10.4% of the population is composed of immigrants, the highest percentage in 70 years. As is to be expected, this diversity is reflected in the make-up of U.S. schools. The 2000 census revealed that school-age immigrant children in the U.S. number 8.6 million. Legal mandates have made it clear that schools are required to meet the needs of these diverse students and inform parents of their rights and responsibilities. For example, a 1974 Supreme Court decision established that “equal access to education involves having instruction in a language that the student can communicate in and understand.” Even though this ruling, along with other mandates, has resulted in an increased availability of translators and translated materials, effectively reaching out to and teaching immigrant children requires much more.

The toughest challenge a special

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# Learning Disabilities and Self-Disclosure

In a recent study reported in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Madeus et al. (2002) examined the rate at which employed postsecondary graduates with learning disabilities self disclose their disability to employers. Based on current statistics that report students with learning disabilities completing college and entering the job market with increasing success are approaching the figures for individuals without disabilities, this study sought to conduct an examination of why individuals do or do not share this information with employers. The small number of previous studies that have been conducted on this topic have indicated that although most respondents with learning disabilities feel that their work is affected by their disability, only about 20% report their disability to employers. The researchers comment on the fact that throughout school careers, students with learning and other disabilities are identified and must disclose their disability in order to receive accommodations. Legal reporting issues mandate this information for documentation purposes. Disclosing a learning disability in college is also used to gain legally required accommodations that may include extra time, note takers, etc. but entering the workforce presents a different set of complicated issues and individuals must make personal decisions about whether or not they want prospective or current employers to know about the disability.

The sample group in the study consisted of approximately 200 individuals with learning disabilities who graduated from a college program during which they identified themselves as having a disability in order to take advantage of specialized support programs that the college made available. A survey was administered that asked questions about demographics, job satisfaction, and self

efficacy related to employment. Over 85% of the respondents indicated that they were employed full time and the three most frequently identified career categories were business, education, and health care/technology.

In response to questions about the effect of learning disabilities on their work skills, respondents identified the impact on writing skills almost 50% of the time, followed by information processing difficulties, and then reading. Ninety percent reported that their disability had an effect on their work. However, only 30% reported self-disclosure to their employer. Of the people that did disclose, the most common reasons given were to be able to access technology supports and to establish the need for additional time to complete tasks.

Of the over 65% who chose not to tell, about half felt there was no need to. Although many did use accommodations in the workplace, this was frequently done without the need for specialized equipment and could be used informally and unbeknownst to anyone. In fact, many of the accommodations and strategies identified were the same ones that people without disabilities use like goal setting, time management strategies, and completing tasks outside of the workday. Maintaining a quiet environment and the use of proofreaders were also mentioned as helpful. Two individuals stated that personality characteristics of “perseverance” and “application of stubbornness” were instrumental in their success.

The researchers found it disconcerting though, that almost half of the respondents who chose not to disclose their learning disability, made their decision because of concerns about job security or work relationships

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with co-workers or supervisors. This finding does appear to be consistent with other study results.

Although this study used a relatively small sample, the results may indicate that persons with learning disabilities (whether through personal experience or not), despite negotiating through years of school-based identification, may have fears about employment discrimination and misconceptions when they attempt to enter the world of work. This is particularly interesting in examining the perspectives of a group of individuals whose disability is not visible or readily apparent.

The study provides both encouraging information and results that require further investigation. The fact that students with learning disabilities are successfully completing postsecondary studies and entering the job market represents a positive change. In addition, another positive finding is that the respondents indicate satisfaction with their current employment situation. If individuals are not disclosing because they have identified and implemented strategies that work for them and do not need additional external supports, this too is a positive result. If, however, according to the authors, individuals with learning disabilities are concerned about public misconceptions, misunderstanding or discrimination, there are significant implications for education, business, and vocational rehabilitation. For further information refer to the full document:

Madeus, J., Foley, T., McGuire, J. & Ruban, L.,(2002) Employment self-disclosure of post-secondary graduates with learning disabilities: rates and rationales. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35, 364-369.

## Book review: Educating Exceptional Children, 10th Edition

The release of “Educating Exceptional Children,” 10th edition (Houghton Mifflin Company) is significant in that previous editions set a standard that influenced the education of teachers in special education throughout the country for decades. In the 1960’s, when these authors first came together, there was no national policy for special education. At that time, children could be turned away from public schools or educated in substandard programs. The authors of this text have all had key roles in developing special education as it exists today. They shaped public policy by influencing national laws, research, and education for teachers as well as provided leadership in the development of national programs for children with disabilities.

The tenth edition continues to provide the insights and key concepts that will guide professionals in the education of exceptional children. It becomes evident that special education has advanced and changed when one reviews this edition. It includes a national perspective with a chapter focused on the role of social institutions, schools, government, and the courts as they affect the lives of exceptional children. The text reflects on special education today with key topic inserts on inclusion, diversity, assistive technology, collaboration, and multidisciplinary teams. It puts a face on special education with portraits of exceptional children and biographies of teachers and researchers. Chapters are structured with information for immediate

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# Addressing the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Different Parents

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educator may face in trying to address the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds is involving the parents in the educational process. Although in the United States parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities is a right mandated by IDEA, special education programs still lack involvement and participation from parents of CLD backgrounds. There are many potential barriers that can limit the parents' participation in their children's education. A recent article by Al-Hassan and Gardner (2002) addresses six potential obstacles and offers some possible solutions:

## 1. Language Proficiency

Limited English proficiency is a major barrier for many immigrant parents wishing to participate in the education of their child. If a parent is not comfortable with the language, he/she may avoid communication with school personnel. They may not understand letters sent home by the teacher, progress reports, and, understandably, their child's IEP. This lack of communication also limits their understanding of the special educational needs of their child and the nature of their child's disability. Maintaining an open communication channel between parents and teachers will be of great benefit for the parents as well as the educator.

### Suggestions:

- Informally assess whether English is an appropriate language for communicating with the family. This can be done by simply asking the parents if they feel comfortable receiving information in English or if another language would be more helpful.

Also, speaking to the parents or family members can help school personnel to determine the present level of English proficiency.

- Provide translators for meetings with parents. If possible, allow the parents to choose a translator with whom they feel comfortable or may have worked with in the past.
- Other parents who speak the same language can be a very helpful alternative.

## 2. Lack of Information

Parents of children with disabilities often state that lack of information is a problem for them. This situation is a bit more strenuous for immigrant parents of children with disabilities since the language issue will add to their inability to access important information. It is important that parents receive frequent and precise information about their child's needs and progress.

### Suggestions:

- Provide information in various forms, oral and written, to allow for more opportunities for the parents to understand.
- Make school reports as simple as possible. If possible, have them translated into the family's native language.
- Use direct and simple language. Avoid medical or psychological terminology.
- Don't assume your communication efforts have been effective; verify by following up with the parents to see if they can communicate to you what you have shared with them.
- Develop a survival vocabulary list in the languages of the families you work with, which should include basic special education terminology.

## 3. Develop Cultural Awareness

It is important to develop some familiarity with the immigrant parents' culture. Studies have found that while the diversity of

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the schools is growing, the teacher population in the schools has remained unchanged, typically coming from middle class Euro-American backgrounds. Educators can benefit from learning about other cultures, specifically the cultures of the students in their classroom.

Suggestions:

- There is a great number of books that provide a synopsis of countries and cultures around the world; this would be a good method to begin cultural exploration.
- Inquire about the parents' experiences with the education system in their native country, especially parents of children with disabilities.
- Understand the different needs, relationship systems, and cultural norms that influence families from different cultures.
- Be sensitive to issues of nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, gestures, physical proximity, and touching, which vary among cultural groups.

#### **4. *Negative Past Experiences***

Some parents may have had negative experiences with the school system or educators in the past. Past experiences may have created negative attitudes towards school personnel. It would be beneficial if the teacher gains the trust of the families and engages them in the educational process.

Suggestions:

- Send a welcome note to families of new students and invite them to visit the school.
- Keep continuous communication with the parents, either through a phone call or quick "home note" about the child's progress.
- Notify the parents about upcoming events.
- If possible, request an appointment for a home visit.
- Discuss educational strategies with the parents, making sure that suggestions

coincide with the parent's goals for their child.

#### **5. *Parent's Unfamiliarity with the U.S. Educational System***

Often immigrant parents are not aware of their legal rights and the rights of their child. They may not be aware of the educational practices of the U.S. and the services available to them and their child with a disability. Learning about services and how to access them can be difficult for parents; the difficulty is magnified for immigrant parents. Many other countries do not have laws concerning the education of children with disabilities and, as a result, parents may not be aware of their right to ask for special education services for their children.

Suggestions:

- Inform immigrant parents about their rights and their role in their child's education.
- Provide information about identification, referral, and intervention processes, as well as legal, financial, and other resources.
- Share manuals for parents (available from parent organizations) with families.

#### **6. *Disparity in Views Regarding Involvement in Schools***

Families from different cultures have different attitudes toward schools, educators, and family involvement in the educational process. Some parents may perceive their involvement as an interference with the school and the teacher's role. Many parents may have been passive participants in the educational process in their country and may not be aware of the different role they may be able to take now. Educators can inform parents of the participatory role they can take and how such involvement is encouraged in the U.S. school system.

Suggestions:

- Assess the family's beliefs as they relate to

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their child's education.

- Educate parents as to the importance of their involvement in their child's education.
- Provide an opportunity for families in similar situations to meet and discuss their experiences.

**Reference:**

Al-Hassan, S. & Gardner, R. (2002). Involving Immigrant Parents of Students with Disabilities in the Educational Process. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Vol. 34, May/June. 52-58.

**Following is a list of resources on the Web to assist with the offered suggestions:**

Beach Center on Families and Disability  
[www.beachcenter.org](http://www.beachcenter.org)

Clearinghouse for Immigrants Education  
[www.igc.apc.org/ncas/sr\\_essi.htm](http://www.igc.apc.org/ncas/sr_essi.htm)

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education  
[www.ncbe.gwu.edu/index.htm](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/index.htm)

The Parent Advocacy Coalition of Educational Rights  
[www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)

The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers  
[www.taalliance.org](http://www.taalliance.org)

Your Dictionary.com - online access to dictionaries in many languages  
[www.yourdictionary.com](http://www.yourdictionary.com)

## Association for Higher Education and Disability Celebrates its 25th Anniversary

The Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) has significantly impacted service provision to postsecondary students with disabilities over the last 25 years. *AHEAD* is an international, multicultural organization of professionals committed to full participation in higher education for persons with disabilities. To celebrate the passing of its 25th anniversary, AHEAD will host a conference in Dallas, Texas in July of 2003.

The conference theme will be "Advancing our Profession: Refining Our Vision," and AHEAD has recently released an official invitation to submit proposals to present at this event. The conference will offer plenary sessions, concurrent sessions, poster sessions, and other opportunities for networking and developing knowledge in the field of higher education and disabilities. Amongst others, Ahead suggests the following topics for proposals:

- Successful development practices
- Universal design
- Technology
- Diversity
- Best practices in disability services
- Legal/policy issues

The conference committee is also seeking in-depth, new, and innovative submissions for professional development sessions. A completed program proposal must be submitted electronically by October 7, 2002. For further information, check out their web site: [www.ahead.org](http://www.ahead.org).

# Assessing the Career Needs of Students with Disabilities

Despite current legislation to facilitate the transition of young adults with disabilities into the workplace, research has repeatedly shown that students with disabilities are still not being exposed to meaningful career development during high school or in postsecondary institutions. In their study, "The Career Development Needs of College Students with Learning Disabilities: In Their Own Words," Hitchings and colleagues examined college students': (1) perspectives of their career development experiences in transition planning, (2) ability to describe their disability to prospective employers when advocating for accommodations, and (3) understanding of how their disability influences future career development. The study was conducted to provide learning disability and career development specialists with the necessary information for developing "more effective career services or intervention as these students make the transition between postsecondary education and employment" (Hitchings et al., 2002).

The study found that only twenty percent of participants reported being involved in some form of transition planning during high school. Furthermore, although being eligible to receive specialized education services, students were not receiving these services. Thus, when questioned as to their career goals, only four percent of students expressed very specific goals. Moreover, although most of the participants indicated multiple work experiences, none reported working for specific career knowledge. As the nature of work continues to change creating more complex jobs, students with disabilities need to know

how to evaluate these changes in light of their disability. However, the study reported that not only did students have difficulty describing their disability, but also over half of the participants could not evaluate how their disability might affect future job performance.

Researchers noted that in spite of the legal mandates requiring high schools to engage in transition planning activities, many of these activities occur after high school when students enter postsecondary institutions. Thus, it is imperative that career development specialists at the postsecondary level become aware that the career needs of these students may not have been adequately addressed during high school and address these needs accordingly.

The study provides the following recommendations for both secondary and postsecondary professionals involved with developing programs and services that will help students with disabilities meet their career needs, both in academic and employment settings: (1) high schools should create multi-year plans incorporating academic preparation and career activities---including self-advocacy and disability awareness skills; (2) the disability services offices at postsecondary institutes should include self-advocacy and self-determination training into their orientation programs; (3) career planning and exploration activities should be provided during students' first year of college or prior to selecting a major; and (4) the disability services office and career development office at postsecondary institutions should collaborate when assisting students to prepare and manage their career development.

## Reference:

Hitchings, W. E., Luzzo, D. A., Ristow, R., Horvath, M., Retish, P., & Tanners, A. (2001). The Career Development Needs of College Students with Learning Disabilities: In their own words. *Learning Disability Research & Practice*, 16(1). 8-17.

# Book review: *Educating Exceptional Children, 10th Edition*

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use with practical tips and web site resources for working with children with particular disabilities. A new chapter on the nature of autism and autism spectrum disorders has been added in response to the increased incidence of children who have this disability.

Basic to this text is the theme the authors call the "Ecology of the Child," which emphasizes that the exceptional child is first and foremost an individual who is influenced by and must cope with the broad contexts of environments including family, peers, school, culture, and community. Included in every chapter is a section called Family and Lifespan Issues that focus on the role of the family, work, higher education, social adjustments in adulthood, and integration into the community. Included throughout the text is a section called Educational Adaptations that offer extensive suggestions for teaching to the strength of the exceptional child by varying the learning environment, the content, or the teaching approach. Finally, this new edition also offers a companion web site: <http://education.college.hmco.com/students>.

## Reference:

Kirk, S. A., Gallagher, J. J., & Anastasiow, N. J. (2003). *Educating Exceptional Children* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company. ISBN:0618214763

## ABOUT EMPOWERMENT

We are pleased to present this fifth issue of Empowerment, the newsletter that focuses on education, employment, technology, and policy for people with disabilities. Our goal is to empower professionals within the disability field with current information on relevant topics. If you know of any organizations that might be interested in receiving this newsletter, or if you would like to contribute to future issues, please contact the Research and Evaluation Center. Thank you for your continued feedback and support.

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