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## **Cultural Brokering Intervention for Families of Children**

### **Receiving Special Education Supports**

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#### **Abstract**

The intersection of disability and other identities can present significant challenges to culturally diverse families and schools. Cultural brokering is an emerging practice that shows promise for helping parents navigate the special education system. In the past decade, cultural brokering has been increasingly used in healthcare and education as an intervention to provide appropriate and effective services to culturally diverse families. Using an intersectionality theory framework, this chapter highlights a cultural brokering initiative in a statewide parent to parent program to introduce the practice and utility of a cultural brokering intervention for diverse families of children with disabilities. Program evaluation for the project demonstrates that the cultural brokering intervention is effective in engaging parents to build connections and collaborations with schools and other service agencies and to be more confident in navigating educational and healthcare systems.

**Keywords:** cultural brokering, community services, special education, family support, disabilities

## **Cultural Brokering Intervention for Families of Children Receiving Special Education Supports**

Parenting a child with a disability can present unique challenges. Research has demonstrated that parents of children with disabilities have increased levels of isolation and stress as compared to parents of children without disabilities (Hayes & Watson, 2013; Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). Culturally diverse parents<sup>1</sup> of children with disabilities face additional obstacles. Language barriers, cultural conflicts, unfamiliarity with disability systems, resettlement issues, and financial problems are challenges frequently reported by culturally diverse families in navigating disability services (e.g., Brandon & Brown, 2009; Jung, 2011; Lynch & Stein, 1982).

In recent years, the practice of using parent to parent (P2P) cultural brokers is emerging as an intervention to build connections and collaborations among diverse families of children with disabilities, schools, and community-based agencies (Dodds, Yarbrough, & Quick, 2018; Lindsay, Tetrault, Desmaris, King, & Pierart, 2014). This chapter highlights a cultural brokering initiative within a statewide P2P program as a promising model to better prepare culturally diverse parents who have children with disabilities to partner with schools and other support organizations.

### **Cultural Brokering**

A cultural broker is an individual who serves as an intermediary between individuals or different cultural groups with aim of helping people effectively navigate the human service

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<sup>1</sup> Culturally diverse parents (families) in this chapter refers to parents of families (families) that have non-mainstream cultural patterns in United States because of their different countries of origin, races, ethnicities, cultures, languages, traditions and/or religions.

system (Robinson & Weng, 2014). Cultural brokering is defined as the “act of bridging, linking or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural systems for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change” (Jezewski, 1995, p. 20). It is an intervention increasingly used in healthcare and education to provide appropriate and effective services to culturally diverse families (Brar, 2010; Yohani, 2013). In education, school administrators, counselors, and teachers have been known to take on the roles of cultural brokers to facilitate the communication and collaboration between schools and families (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983). However, this can be very challenging in the special education setting because of the differences in special education systems, divergent cultural perspectives on disability, and language barriers (Rossetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, 2017).

### **The Need for Cultural Brokering**

The intersection of different cultural identities, such as nationalities, races, ethnicities, disabilities, and/or languages, create strong barriers for culturally diverse families and schools to understand each other and build effective partnerships (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Lindsay, King, Klassen, Esses, & Stachel, 2012; Mueller, 2014). Culturally diverse families may have little knowledge about the special education system in the United States (Lynch & Stein, 1982; Mirza & Hernemann, 2012), speak a different language (Jung, 2011), and not understand their rights and responsibilities in special education (Tratcher, 2012). Culturally diverse parents frequently reported that they felt lost, overwhelmed, stressed, powerless, and marginalized in the special education system (e.g., Childre & Chambers, 2005; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Valle, 2011). Schools also report difficulties in engaging culturally diverse families in their children’s education (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006), because minority teachers are largely underrepresented in the school system (Wolfe & Duran, 2013) and school staff are not well

prepared to address language barriers and cultural differences when working with culturally diverse students and their families (Burke & Goldman, 2015).

Research indicates that strong and effective partnership between families and schools is critical for children's success in school adaptation (Aceves & Higareda, 2014; Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2008). Strong parental involvement in their children's special education journey can enhance the appropriateness of educational services and improve the long-term success of children in schools (Epstein, 2005; Tratcher, 2012). Schools are in need of culturally adaptive interventions to ameliorate barriers caused by cultural differences and cultural intersections and help culturally diverse families of children with disabilities better engage with schools and other human service agencies (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2017).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Cultural brokering interventions have increasingly been recognized as an effective approach for linking diverse families of children with disabilities to schools and local service agencies (e.g., Cooper, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2014; Hasnain, 2010). This intervention is based on intersectionality theory asserting that an individual is collectively constructed by his/her different cultural identities and all these intersecting identities should be taken into account when human service agencies support culturally diverse populations (Crenshaw, 1989; Garran & Rozas, 2016). Focusing on only one or two identities and ignoring other social components of an individual will lead to misunderstanding, discriminations, and social injustice in services (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality theory lays a solid theoretical foundation for the necessity and importance of using cultural brokering approach to people with divergent cultural backgrounds.

### **Model Project**

### **Cultural Brokering Initiative in a Statewide P2P Program**

This chapter will share the cultural brokering initiative embedded in a statewide P2P program. P2P programs offer parent-to-parent support as a core resource for families with children who have a special health care need, disability or mental health issue. These organizations recruit, prepare and match Support Parents with families seeking the support of an experienced parent (Santelli, Turnbull, Marquis, & Lerner, 1995). P2P support has been shown to enhance referred parents' capacity for meeting challenges and collaborating with schools, provide valuable information for the overall child care and help parents access legal, healthcare, special education, and other social services (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2009; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008; Singer et al, 1999).

A P2P program, established in 2005, received an increase in federal and state funding in 2009. The program director allocated funds to focus their services on culturally and linguistically diverse communities and develop a cultural brokering initiative in response to the difficulties and barriers these families were experiencing accessing and understanding disability benefits, services and supports.

### **Cultural Brokers and Their Roles**

Since 2009, the P2P program has hired seven parents of children and youth with disabilities (aged 3 to 22) to act as cultural brokers. The cultural brokers represent African American, Arabic, Asian, Latinx, and Refugee/Immigrant communities. Of the seven cultural brokers, one is male and six are females, and two were born in the United States with the remainder identifying as foreign born. These cultural brokers work 12 to 20 hours per week providing enhanced one-to-one emotional, informational and systems navigational support to racially, ethnically and/or linguistically diverse families of children with disabilities.

Specifically, cultural brokers map the school system, cultural/ethnic associations, healthcare providers, and other community based organizations for the community they support; understand traditions and beliefs of the diverse community for whom they represent or support and develop and sustain a trusting and supportive relationship with schools, organizations and families in that community; use culturally appropriate outreach methods to find and support families of children with disabilities, educating families the special education system, providing emotional support and helping them locate and access the education and other resources they need; and serve as a “bridge” between schools and culturally diverse families of students with disabilities. All of this support is either provided in person, in a group, or by telephone. Cultural brokering is not a one-time effort. Families may not be clear about their needs, their needs may change over time, and/or they may identify new needs during their support by a cultural broker. While most cultural brokering occurs at least two to four contacts with a family, there are some instances where more than 10 contacts with the family occurs to accurately identify needs and support the development of the parent’s confidence in accessing services that will meet those needs.

In addition to these supports to families, cultural brokers also build connections with professionals and culturally specific organizations to address the divergent needs of children and families in their respective communities. Cultural brokers also recruit and train qualified parents to serve as volunteer “family navigators<sup>2</sup>” for the statewide P2P program to provide peer support for families with similar cultural context.

### **Training and Support for Cultural Brokering**

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<sup>2</sup> Family Navigators in this chapter are parents of children with disabilities who volunteer to provide peer support to families of children with disabilities to help families identify key issues they need to address to get specific services for their children and help family overcome barriers to obtaining these services.

As cultural brokers in this statewide P2P program are parents of children with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse communities who have themselves navigated a variety of human service and special education systems, they are in the unique position to serve as a bridge between these service systems and the immigrants and refugees. This requires ensuring cultural brokers have several levels of training upon hire: four to six hours of basic employee onboarding training (i.e., team work, goal setting, public speaking, data entry); eight to ten hours of P2P model implementation (i.e., role of cultural broker, active listening, cultural agility); and four to six hours of leadership behavior development (i.e., emotional intelligence, effective collaboration and communication). They are also encouraged to participate in on-going professional development opportunities such as person-centered practices training, special education topical conferences and webinars, and culturally specific events in order to build their brokering skills and increase their knowledge of education topics for which parents typically call.

One cultural broker supporting African American communities commended the training provided by the statewide P2P program.

It [the training] had to do with cultural competency. They [the statewide P2P program] invited all kinds of really great speakers on cultural biases, how to be culturally agile if you are matched with someone [say if they are African American], how to help kids avoid [cultural biases] but knowing what is happening, so you can kind of work around it. That was really helpful!

### **Cultural Brokering Process**

The cultural brokering process in Figure 1 has been adapted for the statewide P2P program based on the cultural brokering model developed by Jezewski and Sotnick (2005). In this program, cultural brokers follow the three stages shown in Figure 1 to bridge culturally

diverse families of children with disabilities to service providers including schools and other human service agencies. The three stages include: (1) identifying problems, (2) selecting strategies, and (3) evaluating outcomes.

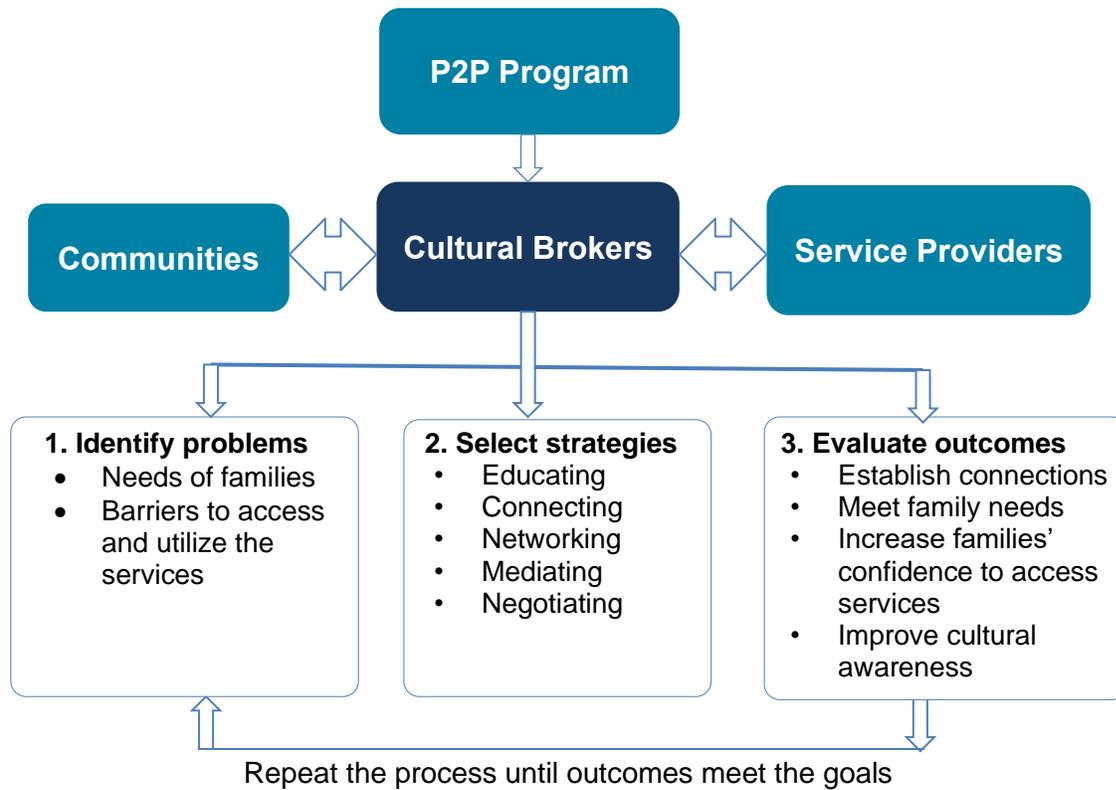


Figure 1. The Cultural Brokering Process of the Statewide P2P Program.

In the first stage, identifying problems, cultural brokers learn about families' needs and identify barriers families experience in accessing and utilizing school services and other

resources. In order to learn about families' needs and barriers, cultural brokers usually spend a great amount of time and effort building effective connections and trust with the families. They learn about families' culture, recognize cultural differences and share personal experiences in an effort to make families feel comfortable sharing their own stories and expectations. This helps cultural brokers accurately identify families' needs and possible strategies the family can employ. One cultural broker working with Spanish speaking families highlighted some key ways to build relationship with and learn about the needs of culturally diverse families:

First, we have to have a very clear communication. We have to be very sensitive between the two cultures. We have to have cultural awareness. And we have to have linguistic competence. I think these are the very key ingredients [to build relationship with culturally diverse families].

Once cultural brokers are clear about the families' needs and reach an agreement with families on goals they expect to achieve, the next step is selecting appropriate strategies to achieve these goals. There are several strategies frequently used by cultural brokers to interact with parents: educating, connecting, networking, mediating and negotiating. Factors such as culture, educational level, and families' experiences are taken into consideration during this stage. Another cultural broker who works with Arabic speaking families shared one of her major strategies during the brokering process:

I mean most of them [Arabic speaking families], when they come here, they have no idea what the services are and where to go to get them or even don't know there is such a thing to access like Medicaid, because a lot of countries, like Afghanistan, don't have programs like Medicaid and special education. So, educating them on what is available is very important.

The final step of this process is evaluating the outcomes. Connections with families being successfully established, families' needs being met, families' confidence to access services being increased, and cultural awareness being improved are identified criteria for successful cultural brokering. Cultural brokers follow up with families to see if they get the services or resources they want and if they have other unmet needs. If families' needs are still unmet, cultural brokers review and examine the cultural brokering process, identify problems, and discuss with families other strategies or ways to adjust currently employed strategies they have used in order to improve the outcomes. Here is an example from a third cultural broker working with immigrant families who followed up with families to check if their needs were met or problems were solved:

I follow up on them. I say, "Hey, how are you doing? Have you done this? Have you done that?" If they say, "No, we haven't done it." I will ask, "Why [haven't you done that]? It is very important to do that. Try to do it this week." So, I put a little bit pressure on them... If they say, "We have been doing it. Everything is just doing OK. We are fine." I just leave them like that [and will not call the families again].

If the outcomes do not meet the expected goals of families at the end, cultural brokers will restart the process, re-evaluating the problems, and taking new approaches to meet families' needs. For example, one of the cultural brokers helped a refugee family with three children with autism spectrum disorders get an appointment set for disability programming and funding eligibility. In this family only in the U.S. for two months, the father worked outside of the home during the day. He spoke some limited English. The mother stayed at home to take care of their three children. She neither understood nor spoke English. The cultural broker was able to convince local social service staff to conduct the eligibility assessment and evaluation of the

children in the family's home because of transportation issues and language barriers. At the end of a four-hour appointment, the mother refused to sign any documents related to the assessments and evaluation (outcomes did not meet the goals). It was at that time that the cultural broker learned that the interpreter present in the house (arranged by the social service agency) did not speak the same language (Dari) as the mother. The mother did not stop the appointment when she first realized the language barriers. The social service agency staff never confirmed with the family prior to and at the beginning of the appointment the correct language. It required the cultural broker's problem solving skills to bring the father into the discussion by cell phone to determine the issue and to connect immediately to a language line with a Dari interpreter (re-evaluated the barriers/ problems). Because everyone was tired at this point (almost 5 hours had passed since the appointment began), the cultural broker helped the mother reschedule the evaluations and assessments for a later date, confirmed with the social services staff that a Dari interpreter would be present to ensure the next appointment was successful, and spent a few minutes reviewing with the mother the purpose of the disability services, how they could meet the family's needs, and why an eligibility process was needed (took another approach to solve the problem).

### **Program Outcomes**

The statewide P2P program has identified two major outcomes for its cultural brokering initiative: First, individual advocacy. Culturally and linguistically diverse parents of children with disabilities use information and resources provided by cultural brokers to collaborate with professionals in making decisions about their children's special education, health care and other special needs. Second, peer advocacy. Culturally and linguistically diverse parents of children with disabilities receive one to one support through a network of experienced and trained cultural

brokers and support the development of the families they support to “pay it forward” and become volunteer family navigators themselves.

Since 2009, there have been seven parents of children with disabilities paid as cultural brokers in the P2P program and eight volunteer family navigators were recruited and/or trained by cultural brokers to provide peer support to families across different areas in the state. For the calendar years 2013 through 2017, 233 culturally diverse families of children with disabilities received enhanced cultural brokering support by the statewide P2P program. Among these families, 2 (1% ) are Asian; 98 (42%) Hispanic/Latino; 123 (53%) Black/African American; and 9 (4%) identified as “some other race”. These families were offered a survey that could be taken online (available in Spanish and English) or conducted via a phone call with language interpreter assistance. The survey is designed to learn about their satisfaction with and the impact of the support they received from cultural brokers. One staff and a graduate intern in the P2P program conducted the survey on phone and used the Language Line for any family members who preferred to use their native language to do the survey. The survey was not developed by the P2P program. The questions and protocol are mandated by one of the federal funders of the P2P program to evaluate program outcomes. The nine questions in this survey cover families’ satisfaction on the timeliness, thoroughness, and helpfulness with the P2P program staff and volunteers and the usefulness of the information in helping them make decisions, learn about community services, build confidence and represent children with disabilities and their families. Some example questions are “How useful was the information in helping you talk with professionals to make decisions about your child’s care?” “How useful was the information in helping you learn about community services (such as health care, school, Medicaid, Early

Intervention, etc.)?” “How useful was the information in helping you feel more confident about getting the health care and services that he/she needs?” “

Of the 233 families served by cultural brokers, there were 63 families who responded to this survey . In general, approximately 91% (N=57) of the respondents reported they were very satisfied with the services they received. Over 88% (N=55) reported they were highly satisfied with the contact in terms of timeliness, thoroughness and helpfulness. When asked whether the information provided by the cultural broker helped parents talk to professionals to make decisions about their children’s support and care, about 90% (N=57) of the participants agreed that the information was useful or extremely useful. Finally, more than 84% (N=53) reported that the information helped them feel more confident about getting their children the health care, education and other services they need.

### **Continuing Challenges and Implications**

There are challenges when implementing P2P cultural brokering initiatives. One challenge is related to design. Since cultural brokering has a fairly broad definition (i.e. one-on-one support, catalyzing for organizational change, and advocacy for system change), P2P programs and other entities need to be very clear about the goal of their particular cultural brokering initiative, their working definition of cultural brokering, and articulate clear expectations for cultural brokers. When this is not done, it can cause confusion among the cultural broker staff and also for schools or other community service agencies about program scope, expectations, and outcomes.

Another challenge to consider when developing cultural broker programs is the complexity of the role of a cultural broker. Cultural brokers can serve as interpreters, educators, listeners, mediators, advocates and collaborators, and interact with various agencies in different

fields including special education, health care, and other human social services. This requires cultural brokering entities to commit to providing at least 16-20 hours of initial training as well as ongoing training and coaching support for cultural brokers to be knowledgeable in a broad range of topic areas. It is a significant commitment.

Finally, one other challenge is the lack of a uniform understanding of cultural brokering approaches. Even though cultural brokers typically follow the three general stages of practice when they work with families, the specific ways that they interact with families can be very different, driven by cultural contexts and starting with “where the family is.” This can create obstacles when conducting evaluation of overall program outcomes and the effectiveness of cultural brokers as an intervention.

As cultural brokering initiatives supporting diverse families who have children with disabilities continue to develop and grow, it will be very important to expand program evaluation and research efforts to clearly define the outcomes of the intervention. Recognizing this need, the case example program recently began such an effort to define: (1) the practices of its various cultural brokers; (2) characteristics of a successful cultural broker; (3) cultural brokers’ roles; (4) challenges faced by cultural brokers; and (5) typical steps of cultural brokering. From this work, this program and others conducting similar kinds of work will need to refine practice to identify the essential components of the intervention. With that completed, more extensive research can be conducted to identify program impacts of this promising intervention.

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