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## **Immigrant Students in Special Schools: Parents' Perspectives**

**This small-scale study focused on the parents of immigrant children in special schools for students with moderate to severe learning disabilities in Ireland. It sought to explore the experiences and views of parents in relation to the educational provision for their children. Immigrant parents' reluctance to ask questions and address concerns highlights the need for service providers to be proactive in relating to and working with their immigrant families.**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The arrival of diverse cultural groups in Ireland impacts on all aspects of Irish society and has implications, in particular, for the education system. Some additional educational support is available to primary and post-primary schools catering for immigrant students who have significant English language deficits (Department of Education and Science, 2000). Ireland's largest minority ethnic group, the Travelling community, also benefits from additional support services. Special schools, in contrast, do not receive any additional resources for immigrant students.

The author's own school experienced difficulties meeting the needs of some of the immigrant students recently enrolled. Discussions with other school principals indicated similar experiences with regard to establishing strengths and needs of the students, communication, cultural and behavioural issues, and implementing the curriculum.

At a national level there is a paucity of research studies relating to immigrant families and schools. McCray and Garcia (2002) highlight a lack of attention to the voice of the minority population within international studies. Given the importance of parents in the education of their children, recent legislation (Ireland, 2004; Ireland, 1998) and the author's own experience, an in-depth study of the views of immigrant parents seemed appropriate.

### **DISCLOSURE PROCESS**

Hatton, Akram, Robertson, Shah and Emerson (2003) point out that the disclosure process has a huge impact on a parent's understanding of their child and their eventual acceptance of their child's learning disability. Good practice in disclosure meant that parents were more likely to be able to access formal and informal supports. Immigrant families can have some difficulty understanding and accepting their child's diagnosis (Warner 1999; Bywaters, Ali, Fasil, Wallace and Singh, 2003). Parents need the assessment process explained to them and language barriers can impact on their understanding of the diagnosis (Bywaters et al., 2003; Hatton et al., 2003).

Earlier studies also note that parents who did not use English as a first language reported difficulties in understanding the information given to them about their child's diagnosis, low service uptake and low levels of satisfaction with services (Hatton,

Azmi, Caine and Emerson, 1998; Fatimilehin and Nadirshaw, 1994). Even when information is provided in the relevant language, professionals should also be aware that conceptions of disability vary across cultures (Shapiro, Monzo, Rueda, Gomez and Blacher, 2004; Rogers-Adkinson, Ochoa and Delgado, 2003; Harry, 2002; Gatford, 2001).

Bywaters et al. (2003) found that a number of parents expressed feelings of shame after learning that their child had a learning disability. Warner (1999) points out that when diagnosis was delayed for parents, it was harder for them to accept their child's difficulties.

## **PARENTS' RELATIONSHIP WITH SCHOOLS**

Park, Turnbull and Park (2001) found that parents' limited proficiency in English isolated them from professionals, limited their access to basic information and affected their advocacy skills. Some parents did not have a basic understanding of the special education system and other social services.

Much emphasise the importance of cultural values and beliefs of various ethnic and cultural groups (Hwa-Froelich and Westby, 2003; Rodriguez and Olswang, 2003). Assumptions about race, ethnicity or culture can affect the nature of service provision for people with learning disabilities from minority ethnic communities (Hatton, 2002). Lack of familiarity on the part of educators with the cultural traditions and practices of immigrant families can lead to misunderstood cultural values and misunderstood responses from parents (Lahman and Park, 2004; Huer and Saenz, 2003; Wolfendale, 1999). Harry (2002) argues that the challenge for educators is to take cognisance of lifestyles, beliefs about disability and child-rearing practices which may not only differ from but conflict with their own views.

Communication difficulties can exist in links between schools and their immigrant families (Lahman and Park, 2004; Hwa-Froelich and Westby, 2003; Wathum-Ocama and Rose, 2002; Lian and Fontanez-Phelan, 2001). Wathum-Ocama and Rose (2002) found that while parents experienced high levels of satisfaction with the education that their child was receiving they did not know how to become involved in the school and had low academic expectations for their child with hearing difficulties. Parents said they were not aware of their child's strengths and weaknesses. All of the parents reported language and cultural barriers to supporting their child in school and at home. Park et al. (2001) reported similar results and found that parents' lack of understanding of what was happening at school contributed to their lack of involvement in school. Mir, Nocon, Ahmad and Jones (2001) suggest that staff need to encourage parents to participate in school activities. Researchers warn against interpreting a lack of parental involvement with the school as a lack of interest in school (Lian and Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Kluwin and Corbett, 1998).

## **PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY**

This mainly qualitative study was the first in the Irish context to explore the experiences of recently arrived immigrant parents of children with moderate to severe general learning disabilities who attend special schools. Semi-structured interviews

were used to elicit parents' views of the current education provision for their children and their interactions with the special education system. Their perceptions of learning disability were also explored. Access to the parents was gained through the schools and eleven parents of African and Asian origin participated. All said they had English prior to coming to Ireland so the findings are not necessarily representative of parents with limited fluency in English. The purpose of the interview was explained and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

The author also used this research opportunity to collect statistical information on the student profile and to elicit the views of principal teachers in similar special schools throughout Ireland. Principals were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. The study was carried out during February and April 2005. Following analysis of the data it was evident that common themes permeated the experiences of the parents despite the varying needs of their children and their diverse backgrounds.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Of the forty special schools surveyed, twenty-one had enrolled immigrant students. There were fifty-five immigrant students in the schools. Two thirds of the students had only enrolled in the schools within the previous two years and were under 9 years of age. The largest numbers of immigrant students in any one school were located in two Dublin schools that had each enrolled eight students. The largest group (seventeen) of immigrant families was from Nigeria.

### **Barriers to Accessing Information**

#### *Language*

Parents in this study stated they did not perceive their proficiency in English to be a barrier to communication, although the speed with which the indigenous population spoke, accents and terminology were mentioned as difficulties. In contrast, school principals experienced difficulties in communicating both with parents and with students. The literature reviewed noted a lack of English as a barrier to communication between immigrant parents and service providers (Wathum-Ocama and Rose 2002; Park et al., 2001; Hatton et al., 1998; Fatimilehin and Nadirshaw, 1994). School staff need to be mindful that some parents may experience difficulties in fully comprehending conversations but they may not necessarily articulate this.

#### *Reluctance to Ask Questions*

Both parents and principals highlighted parents' lack of knowledge of available services and of how the special education system operated. Similar findings were found in the literature (Lian and Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Park et al., 2001; Hatton et al., 1998; Fatimilehin and Nadirshaw, 1994). The problem of gaining access to services was further compounded, for the parents in the current study, by their apparent lack of previous experience in interacting with service providers and their reluctance to ask relevant questions of professionals. Parents were unclear about the referral and assessment process and were frustrated by the lengthy timeframe involved. All of the parents in this study said they were only referred to special schools following assessments.

Parents' unwillingness to ask questions and their lack of knowledge about the special education system was further evidenced by their lack of knowledge about their right

to enrol their child in a school of their choice. While parents acknowledged the improvement in their child since starting in the special school, some parents still desired their child to attend mainstream schools, but they said they did not know how to pursue this further with professionals. These findings resonated with the literature reviewed (Shapiro et al., 2004; Bywaters et al., 2003).

A worrying statistic that emerged from the results is that there were twelve immigrant children awaiting places in special schools. It is not clear if these children are receiving any educational service at the moment or why they have been unable to commence in a special school. Given that immigrant parents whose children are already in school seem to be reluctant to ask questions and lack information about services and rights, it is possible that parents awaiting places in schools may be in a similar position and their children may not be receiving their statutory entitlement to an education as mandated by the Education Act (Ireland, 1998).

Sufficient information was not forthcoming from the parents in this study to explore if parents' experience with the education systems in their own country influenced how they currently interact with the special schools. It is possible that parents felt that asking questions could be viewed as an expression of ignorance of the special education system or of their child. Parents may also have believed that by not asking questions they were less likely to be seen as having problems and that their children would just blend into schools and society. As recently arrived immigrants in the country they may have been keen not to bring attention to themselves and not to appear different to the indigenous population.

### **Mixed feelings About School Placements**

In comparison to the education system in their home countries eight of the eleven parents believed their children were getting a better education here in Ireland and six believed they would stay here because of the services their children were receiving. The parents' reluctance to ask questions of professionals disempowered them when it came to acquiring information about their child's education. Parents described ways in which schools provided information to them about their children, yet they continued to have concerns about their child's progress. However, they did not address their concerns to the schools and as a result had unanswered questions about the present and the future needs of their children. Wathum-Ocama and Rose (2002) noted similar findings, where, despite parents' high level of satisfaction with the education their child was receiving, the parents were unsure as to what they could do themselves at home to help their children.

Despite some feelings of uncertainty for the future of their children and some reservations about their current school placements, parents said they were very happy with the schools and did not openly express any frustrations, even when referring to their aspirations for their child to attend a mainstream school. The parents' knowledge that the author was principal of a special school similar to the school attended by their child may account for the lack of any overt negative comments about special schools. It should also be acknowledged that parents and teachers were at an early stage in the relationship process as most of the children in this study were in their first year in their current school. It is possible, that perhaps in time when significant trust had developed, parents would ask more questions. The author also recognises that only

parents were interviewed in the current study and the views of other stakeholders would provide a more comprehensive picture.

### **Disclosure Process and Perceptions of Disability**

The parents in this study had varying experiences of the disclosure process in various countries, but all experienced similar feelings of disappointment, shock and sadness on learning of their child's special needs. These results echoed the findings of other studies (Bywaters et al., 2003; Hatton et al., 2003; Wathum-Ocama and Rose, 2002; Warner, 1999). Half of the parents had only received a diagnosis for their child's difficulties within the last two years and were still coming to terms with the disability. The emotional conflict experienced by the parents in accepting their child's disability was greater when the child's behaviour became difficult to manage.

The findings of the current study indicate cultural variations in attitudes to children who were slow to develop. Research also shows the significance of cultural beliefs in relation to learning disability (Shapiro et al., 2004; Rogers-Adkinson et al., 2003; Harry, 2002; Gatford, 2001) and this has implications for schools.

Significantly, many of the African parents expressed a desire for their child to "catch up". They were unclear about what the future might hold for their child. It seems likely that the reluctance of parents in the current study to ask questions of the various professionals with whom they came into contact may be hindering their understanding and acceptance of their child's special educational needs. Other factors that may have affected their understanding and expectations were: attitudes to and a lack of acceptance of disability in their own country, earlier indications from doctors that their child might be all right in the future, cultural and religious beliefs, and recent disclosure of the diagnosis.

### **Downplaying Own Culture**

The parents' expressed lack of attachment to their own culture is in contrast to that observed in most of the literature reviewed by the author (Rodriguez and Olswang, 2003; Rogers-Adkinson et al., 2003; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel, 2001). In these studies parents placed a high value on their own culture and this influenced their role in their child's education.

Given the experience of some of the parents in the current study in their home country, it is possible that they may have felt let down by their own culture and may have been keen to just get on with their lives in their new country. It is also possible that as some of the children were perceived as problems in their home society that they did not want to be reminded of this negative experience.

### **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The lack of information among immigrant parents about services and their rights presents a significant deficit in the special education system. It seems that health service agencies and schools need to actively inform immigrant parents of available services, educational opportunities and entitlements. Parents' reluctance to ask questions of, and their dependency on professionals place an obligation on those providing information to do so in a consistent, proactive and transparent manner. In

this way, immigrant parents can be facilitated to make more informed decisions for their children with special educational needs.

The Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health and Children should make available information about all special education related services in appropriate language, format and location. Additional support services for special schools with immigrant students are also required. These could include: an extension of the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, a visiting teacher service, and financial provision for schools to engage appropriate support personnel.

This study served to shed light on a complex area within special education and as a final reflection the author hopes it may have gone some way to encourage others to connect with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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