

## Case Study: Family-Centered Practice and Culture

### Background

Malik is a 3-year-old boy recently diagnosed with global developmental delays. His mother, Ms. Johnson, is a Haitian immigrant who speaks Haitian Creole as her primary language. She works two part-time jobs and lives with her elderly mother in subsidized housing. She is unfamiliar with the special education system and has expressed anxiety about navigating it. The IEP team recognizes that cultivating a strong, trust-based partnership with Ms. Johnson is essential to ensuring Malik receives the support he needs.

### Equity

The journey begins with the Service Coordinator visiting Ms. Johnson at her home, accompanied by a Haitian Creole interpreter. This meeting is not merely logistical; rather, it centers on listening and building relationships. Ms. Johnson shares her concerns, her demanding work schedule, and her hopes for Malik. Through this conversation, the coordinator learns that Ms. Johnson prefers face-to-face communication and feels most comfortable speaking in her native language. Recognizing the systemic barriers she navigates, the district's social worker takes the lead on arranging transportation and childcare for the upcoming IEP meeting. Meanwhile, the Early Childhood Special Education Teacher reviews Malik's evaluation through a strengths-based lens, to ensure the team approaches the IEP meeting with the belief that Malik can thrive and that Ms. Johnson is a capable and essential partner in his education.

- Reflect on the concept of equity in this scenario. What are the risks of assuming equality over equity in IEP planning? How can professionals assess and respond to systemic barriers without making assumptions about a family's capabilities?

### Respect

At the IEP meeting, the School Psychologist begins by sharing positive observations from Malik's childcare program, like his love for music time and his warm smile. This sets a tone of admiration and appreciation. The Cultural Liaison, who has experience working with Haitian families, helps the team understand the cultural context of Ms. Johnson's beliefs about disability and caregiving. Ms. Johnson shares that she sees Malik as a gift from God, and the team listens, acknowledging the importance of faith and family from her perspective. The meeting becomes a space where her experiences and values are treated as essential to the planning process.

- How can educators and service providers ensure that respect is not just expressed but felt by families? What strategies can be used to uncover and honor cultural values that may differ from professional norms?

## **Communication**

Before the meeting, the Service Coordinator sends Ms. Johnson a translated visual guide to the IEP process, helping her feel more prepared and less anxious. During the meeting, the interpreter provides comprehensive language support, ensuring that Ms. Johnson understands the discussion and can participate meaningfully. The Speech-Language Pathologist asks open-ended questions about Malik's communication at home, while the Occupational Therapist attentively interprets Ms. Johnson's descriptions of his activities of daily living to identify potential areas to support his functional skills and participation.

The team encourages her to bring her mother to future meetings, recognizing the importance of family support. Throughout the process, communication is not just about speaking, but also about listening, connecting, and expressing oneself with empathy and clarity.

- What are the key elements of culturally responsive communication in early childhood special education? How can professionals balance technical language with accessibility and emotional sensitivity?

## **Advocacy**

As the discussion continues, Ms. Johnson expresses concern about finding a preschool that can meet Malik's needs and communicate in their primary language. The Service Coordinator immediately begins reaching out to local programs to identify inclusive environments with bilingual staff. A Parent Advocate, another Haitian mother who has navigated the IEP process, joins the meeting to share her experience, helping Ms. Johnson feel supported and empowered.

The School Counselor documents Ms. Johnson's priorities and works with community agencies to explore housing support. Advocacy becomes a shared responsibility, with each team member committed to removing barriers and finding solutions.

- In what ways can advocacy be both a professional responsibility and a collaborative process with families? How can teams ensure that advocacy efforts are aligned with the family's goals?

## **Commitment**

Following the meeting, the IEP Case Manager reviews the finalized plan with Ms. Johnson and requests her feedback. The Early Intervention Specialist schedules regular home visits to support Malik's development and assist Ms. Johnson in implementing strategies outlined in the IEP.

To facilitate the continued growth of the IEP staff, the team leader arranges ongoing professional development focused on collaborating with immigrant families and using

interpreters effectively. Ms. Johnson has been invited to join a parent advisory group, further reinforcing her role as a valued contributor to the school community. The team demonstrates its commitment through consistent action. Their proactive approach supports a strong and enduring partnership with Ms. Johnson.

- What does long-term commitment to family-professional partnerships look like in practice? How can teams evaluate and improve their partnership strategies over time?