

Centering Voices, Strengths, and
Healing: A Social-Emotional and Equity-
Focused Approach to Supporting
Children with Disabilities and Their
Families

BY DR. CLAUDIA DUNN

OPENING REFLECTION

When was the last time a family truly felt heard in an IEP meeting?

Consider:

- Who spoke the most?
- Who held decision-making power?
- What emotions were present in the room?
- What might the family have been carrying into that space?

WHY THIS MATTERS

Families of children with disabilities often experience:

- Power imbalances within IEP meetings
- Limited meaningful participation despite legal mandates
- Disproportionate barriers for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families
- Emotional stress associated with navigating special education systems

(Harry, 2008; Trainor, 2010; Burke & Goldman, 2018; Dunn et al., 2022)

RESEARCH LANDSCAPE: WHAT WE KNOW

Research on family engagement in special education shows:

- Families from CLD backgrounds report feeling marginalized or unheard
- Language barriers significantly affect participation quality
- Trust between families and schools predicts sustained collaboration
- Cultural mismatch can shape the interpretation of parent behavior

Strong partnerships are built on trust, respect, and cultural responsiveness.

Experiences of Latinx Immigrant Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities in the IEP Process

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Claudia Montoya
San Diego State University

Carly Gilson
The Ohio State University

Valeria Yllades
Texas A&M University

Abstract : Given the growing proportion of students receiving special education services who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), there is a critical need to understand the experiences of Latinx immigrant parents of children with disabilities. This qualitative study sought to understand the perspectives of nine Latinx immigrant parents of children with developmental disabilities regarding their child's individualized education program (IEP). We conducted semi-structured interviews and analyzed the data using a general inductive approach and constant comparison analysis. Seven themes emerged: (a) parents' insecurity of knowledge, (b) difficult terminology, (c) confusion with the IEP process, (d) discrimination or misconceptions, (e) language barriers, (f) need of parent advocacy, and (g) staff lack of knowledge. We discuss implications for future research and practice.

Study Participants

TABLE 1

Characteristics of Parent Participants and their Children with Developmental Disabilities

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Country of Birth</i>	<i>Years in the US</i>	<i>Level of Education</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Public Assistance</i>	<i>Child's Disability</i>	<i>Child's Age</i>
Juana	33	México	7	Associate Degree	Married	Yes	ASD	5
Rosio	42	México	23	Associate Degree	Divorced	No	ASD	5
Luz	44	México	13	Bachelor's Degree	Married	No	ASD	6
Laura	48	México	4	Master's Degree	Married	No	Down Syndrome	11
Martha	33	Perú	21	Associate Degree	Single	Yes	ASD	5
Maria	38	México	7	Bachelor's degree	Married	No	ASD	6
Sol	31	Venezuela	1	High School	Married	No	Cerebral Palsy	10
Tamara	40	México	5	High School	Married	Yes	ASD	7
Mary	42	México	10	High School	Married	Yes	ASD	8

Note. ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Participant Voices: In Their Own Words

Parent describing their first IEP experience:

“I was terrified because ... we don't expect 10 people there, I was like, what is happening? What are we going to do? I was very scared and anxious because I didn't know what was going to happen with my son.”

Participant Voices: In Their Own Words

Parent describing challenges (e.g., discrimination or feeling unheard)

“They sent me a document with my meeting time, and it said from 11:30 to 12:00 pm, because I swear they said they would dismiss this Mexican in 30 minutes. She doesn’t speak English. Look at the cactus on her forehead. Tamara thought that the professionals thought that of her, adding, “Si fuera anglosajona seria otra cosa.” If I were Anglo-Saxon, it would have been different.”

Participant Voices: In Their Own Words

Parent Describing Lack of Knowledge in the IEP Process

“I felt it was my fault, I was very scared. I felt pain because I didn’t expect any of that and I said: one, I don’t know English, two I really didn’t know how to get the special education services.”

Key Themes Identified

Participants (n = 9) described their experiences with the IEP process through 7 main themes:

1. **Parent insecurity of knowledge** – uncertainty about how to participate effectively
2. **Difficult terminology** – jargon and confusing language
3. **Confusion with the IEP process** – unclear steps and expectations
4. **Discrimination or misconceptions** – bias or assumptions about families
5. **Language barriers** – challenges accessing information in their primary language
6. **Need for parent advocacy** – having to fight for services and recognition themselves
7. **Staff lack of knowledge** – professionals are not fully informed about disabilities or the cultural context

From Family Experiences to Social-Emotional Learning





What is Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)?

- **Self-awareness:** recognizing emotions and strengths
- **Self-management:** regulating feelings and behaviors
- **Social awareness:** understanding others and relationships
- **Relationship skills:** communicating, collaborating, resolving conflict
- **Responsible decision-making:** making choices aligned with values and well-being

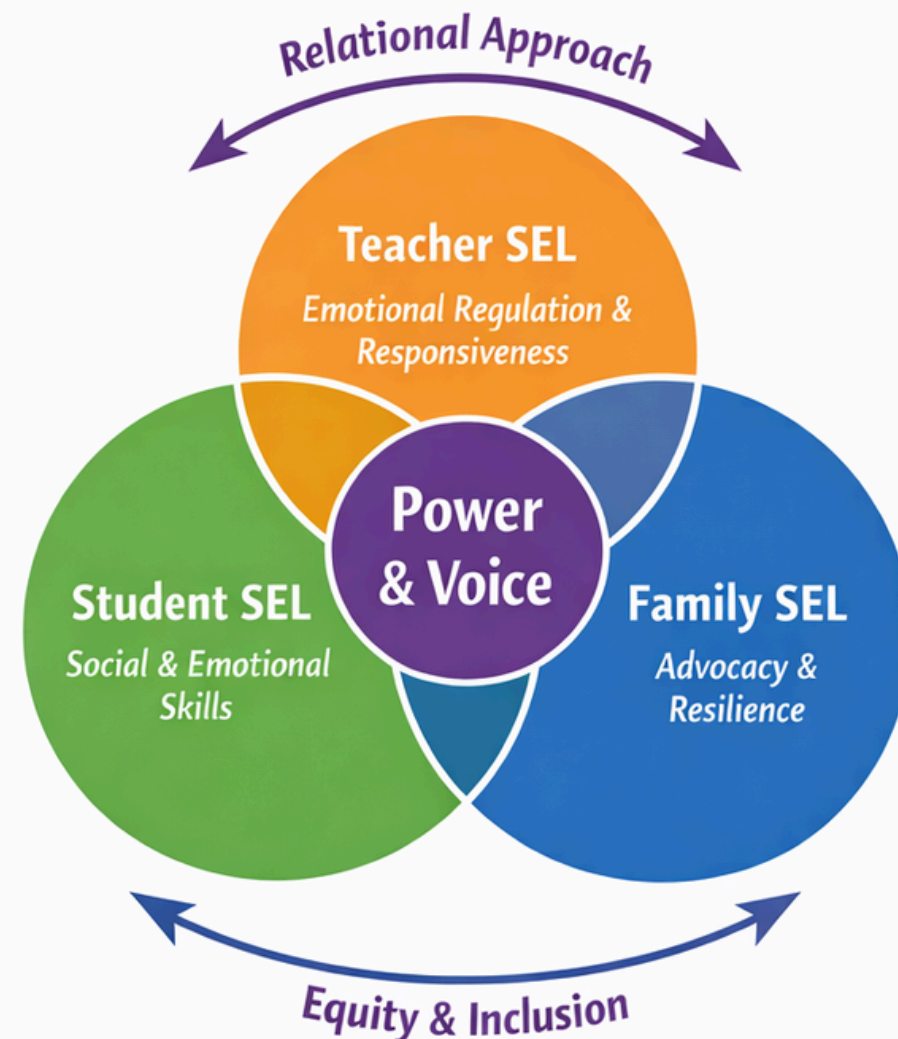
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020). What is SEL?
<https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

Family Social-Emotional Learning in Action

- Family SEL During IEPs
 - Families demonstrate:
 - Managing anxiety in high-stakes meetings
 - Navigating unfamiliar terminology
 - Advocating despite uncertainty
 - Persisting after barriers
 - Making informed decisions for their child

From Family Experiences to Social-Emotional Learning

Expanding SEL: A Family & Equity-Centered Framework



- Student Skills
- Teacher Wellbeing
- Family Engagement
- Equity & Inclusion

Why This Matters for Equity

- Emotional labor is unequally distributed
- Power dynamics shape participation
- Cultural and linguistic diversity require relational responsiveness
- Equity requires systemic—not individual—change



Implications for Educators and Schools

- Recognize and validate family emotional labor
- Use accessible, non-technical language
- Provide structured advocacy supports
- Build relational trust before procedural compliance
- Engage interpreters and cultural liaisons intentionally



Implications for Educators and Schools

- Training educators to recognize and support family social-emotional skills during IEPs
- Using accessible language and interpreters to reduce barriers for families
- Creating opportunities for family voice in school decision-making
- Designing programs and interventions that integrate family strengths alongside student SEL



Implications for Research & Policy

- Advancing the Field
 - Expand SEL frameworks to include families
 - Study family emotional labor in special education
 - Design relational engagement models
 - Move beyond procedural compliance toward relational equity



Key Takeaways

- Family voices reveal emotional and relational complexity in IEP processes
- Families actively engage in social-emotional competencies
- SEL is relational: student, teacher, and family
- Equity requires centering voice, strengths, and systemic awareness



When we center family voices, we don't just improve systems — we begin to heal them.

Claudia M. Dunn, Ph.D.
cmdunn@sdsu.edu

THANK YOU!