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Background

- Parents struggle to access services (Phillips, 2007)
- Parents turn to special education advocates for assistance
- Often need an advocate to effectively advocate to achieve all of the benefits granted for special education (Phillips, 2007)
- However, we really don't understand how advocates work with families

Aims

1. What is the advocacy process?
Are there similarities or differences among the advocates and parents?
2. How culture impact the advocacy process?
Are there similarities and differences between Latino and White families?

Methods

- 10 dyadic interviews ($N = 20$)
- 10 interviews with special education advocates
 - 10 interviews with families of children with disabilities who worked with special education advocates
- Dyadic interviews allow for a shared narrative of the advocate-family dyad (Arskey, 1996)
- Collect richer data with each individual separately and together (three interviews per dyad in total)

Results

Advocacy Process:

- Parents often felt desperate, lost, alone, and wanted to increase their knowledge
- Advocates & parents collaborate together over the phone to prepare
- Defining & respecting their roles: the advocate does not work for the parents
- Referring parents to trainings, groups, books, and other resources to learn more about special education, their parental rights, and community resources
- The participation of advocates in IEP meetings varied
 - Some attended & participated
 - Some attended and only talk when the parents asked them
 - Some didn't attend meetings, but helped parents prepare for them
- Advocate equipped parents with the tools to achieve their goals, rather than doing the work for them
- Advocates helped parents ask for services and information
- Advocates tried to improve the relationship with family & school throughout the process
- For older children, the advocate was a role model to teach them to become self-advocates

"I just don't advocate for these families and their kids but at the same time, we're teaching them. I'm teaching them how to learn to advocate for themselves because that's very important." – Advocate

"That day that she accompanies me, I feel protected. I feel because I know that she's going to fight for my son's rights." – Parent

How Culture Impacts the Advocacy Process:

- Lack of knowledge of what special education is in the U.S.
- Lack of understanding parental rights
- Language barrier:
 - Parent's primary language is Spanish
 - Often oldest child is used to translate (emails, letters, forms, assessments)
 - Difficulties with the context of language in special education & quality translators
- Misconceptions:
 - Thinking the school is the expert

"But that's another thing that the parents have to learn—terms, the special education terms. Even if they say it in English. So they want what they say [and] know what that means in Spanish." - Advocate

Conclusion

Implications for Practice:

- Schools need to do a better job explaining parental rights & their safeguards
- Schools need to do a better job incorporating parents in the IEP process
- Schools need to do a better job acknowledging language barriers
- Referring more parents to the Parent Training Information Center

Implications for Research:

- How to reach more volunteers to train to become advocates ?
- Are Spanish speaking families discriminated in the services schools will provide students ?
- How does advocacy impact the services provided for students ?
- How do schools perceive advocates?

References

- Phillips, E. (2007). When parents aren't enough: External advocacy in special education. *Yale LJ*, 117, 1802.
- Arskey, H. (1996). Collecting data through joint interviews. *Social Research Update*, 15, 1-4.

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