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# **LEGACY**

**TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION**

## **“Power Poker” at IEP Meetings**



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**The Worthy Educator**  
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## “Power Poker” at IEP Meetings

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We’ve all been in meetings. Some meetings we facilitated, some we were invited to, some we were required to attend and others we attended by default. Now, perhaps not all of us have played poker, so in contextualizing the message of this article, a brief definition of poker is: A card game where players compete to win (chips or money) by having the best hand or by convincing others to throw in their cards (give up/quit). Each player is dealt cards and uses information, strategy, probability and psychology by managing risk and reading other players.

With 34 years of service to public education in a variety of roles from Teacher to Speech Language Pathologist (SLP), Educational Diagnostician, Assistant Principal, Principal to district-level administrator, my experience includes *many* meetings. From parent/teacher conferences, new staff orientation, documentation meetings, staff meetings, data meetings, training that I provided, training that I attended, mad-parent meetings, celebration meetings, mediation meetings, planning meetings...you get the picture. Let’s not forget, information is power. And if information is power, consider what a “lack of information” is - no power, less power, unawareness of power?

My experience has led me to this conclusion: IEP meetings are typically “power poker.” While this truly came to light for me during my 17 years as a Director of Special Education, my reflection has confirmed that it was also true in the IEP meetings where I served in the roles of special education service provider and campus administrator/district representative. We sit around a table with information (cards), knowledge (experience) and a preferred outcome that we try to facilitate (strategy). Among the members there is always a variation of each of these three elements, as well as titles, presumed influence, actual authority and compliance due to uncertainty. When a “power poker” meeting is over, there are winners, losers, those who are bewildered, those who weren’t deeply invested, so their response is neutral, those who only shared what they were willing to lose, and those who gained nothing.

Research informs us that meetings in which participants experience intimidation, stress, nervousness, anxiety and/or being unprepared, there is less participation, weaker communication, reduced confidence, unwillingness to ask questions and avoidance-based compliance, which results in lower meeting effectiveness. Nobody wants that, but many educators have been in IEP meetings like this. Any of the stakeholders may experience any/all of these emotions at any time during the meeting.



Examples include:

1. The general education professional with no data to share regarding the effectiveness of accommodations.
2. Everyone in the meeting who has no idea that the parent is already upset, much less why.
3. The special education service provider(s) who prepared the paperwork but never heard back from the parent about the plan (goals, accommodations, testing, etc.)
4. The Special Education Teacher who has no/limited data to back up student progress.
5. The parent, who does not understand the terminology or procedures well enough to ask questions.
6. The campus administrator who has to implement a break during the meeting so he/she can call the Special Education Director or School Attorney with questions.
7. The Educational Diagnostician who hopes no one asks questions because he/she doesn't know how to explain the data any other way.
8. Everyone in the meeting when the parent brings an unexpected advocate with them.

The list of examples could go on and on. The point here is not to highlight the negative, but to raise the level of empathy and understanding that IEP meetings can be difficult for many team members for different reasons.



*Can we control what other people think or feel?*

*No.*

*Can we control if someone is or feels prepared?*

*Yes.*

*Can we control whether or not the environment is respectful, informative, collaborative and caring? Yes.*

Two key elements to consider:

1. How people use the information they have  
and
2. How people obtain the information they need.

The question is not “*How can we eliminate ‘power poker?’*” because we cannot control others.

The question is:

***“What can each of us do to make the IEP meeting a beneficial experience where attendees are valued, listened to, and collaborated with through nonjudgmental mindsets and a focus on outcomes that impact the big picture instead of egos?”***

The leaders' role is the most impactful in this setting, but when done effectively, it is not the most powerful.



Some tips that can expand our awareness and support progress toward reducing “power poker” include:

1. Start the meeting on time.
2. Be sure all members have a physical seat before the meeting starts (don't grab chairs later).
3. Be sure all members are present when the meeting starts (late arrival communicates a lack of care).
4. Be sure all members can see (or have a printed copy) of the meeting agenda and encourage them to take notes and write down questions.
5. Make introductions & listen to each introduction. This is a key opportunity to connect with each person.
6. Smile. Create a welcoming environment, no need for flowers and food, but have items that may be needed readily available (agendas, pens/pencils, post-it notes, tissue, name plates if necessary, etc.).
7. Actively listen (even if you've heard the information 1,000 times before).
8. Put away your phone and laptop (unless you are using your laptop for the meeting and, if so, be willing to share your screen with the parent and/or the whole team).
9. Refer to people by name; start respectfully (Mr./Mrs., Dr.) and let them clarify otherwise.
10. Verbalize the intention of the meeting and the need for input from everyone in order for that intention to be realized.
11. Regularly check in with members in ways that are not condescending. Ideally, open ended questions or clarifying comments such as, “This is a lot of information, so clarifying questions and comments are welcome.” or “If anyone wants an example or something repeated, we can all learn from that.” (vs. asking the parent, “Do you have any questions so far?” or “Are you following us?”).
12. Verbalize and model acknowledgement of new ideas, questions, admission of “not knowing” and clarification.
13. Reflect/restate the input of others and respond to it; build on it, offer how it contributes to learning/progress, highlight the insight, and thank them for sharing.
14. Encourage participants to voice their questions, concerns, and celebrations to make their voices more valuable.
15. Do not face-judge the input of others (this requires mirror work, which is explained below).
16. Affirm new learning and new perspectives; you don't have to agree, but acknowledge the risk others took to share more than compliance input.
17. Give the IEP meeting the time it needs; not rushed, but not slow motion. The district representative sets the tone, so figure out the most natural and effective way to keep a forward-progress pace during the meeting, unless circumstances call for a data-based conversational pause, reconfiguration of goals or deep discussion about a new decision. Find the rhythm that serves the purpose of the meeting.
18. Resist the urge to overtalk or overexaggerate the value of your own perspective; give everyone time to process information.



If you are a leader who is truly invested in reducing the “power poker” of IEP meetings, another strategy is to refer to yourself (your learning, experiences, empathy, etc.) as an example at reasonable opportunities.

Examples include:

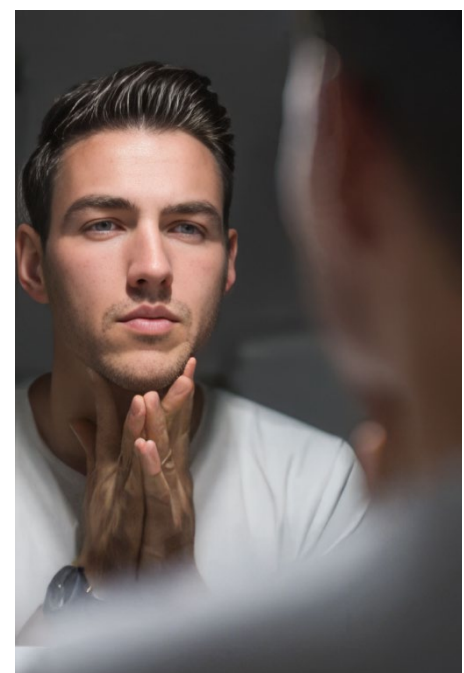
- Briefly share ideas and experiences, ask questions (which means you are actively listening) and model brainstorming this (helps others see you as “human” vs. all knowing).
- Volunteer to go first; break the stress of silence for the team.
- Ask for input from others by name, but be careful not to sound demanding, demeaning or have a “roll taking” tone.
- Take notes, especially about parent input. It is a literal demonstration of you valuing the voice of others.
- Be authentic about your own learning and “not knowing.” Personal examples help people relax because they can typically identify with being a learner. This also reduces the pressure for everyone. You can say, “I’m not sure about that, but I’ll find out,” or “I don’t want to misspeak, so I’ll get us the answer to that.”
- Remove your ego; progress does not require it.
- Intentionally communicate the value of a variety of perspectives/ideas.
- Prepare your team with non-verbal cues for things like bringing a comment/point to a close, referring to data (feedback that is too personal), paying attention, etc.

While doing “all the things” you’ll also want to be sure to pay more attention to others than you do to yourself. These days, our undivided attention is a gift, and awareness of how others respond is the bow on top. Self-awareness is key.

Going back to my days as an SLP, it helps when we remember that as the “sender”, the intent of our message is our responsibility. If the message received by the other person (“receiver”) is unclear or erroneous, it is the sender’s responsibility to provide clarification, restatement, examples and/or contextual support. We cannot control what others understand, but we are responsible for our message being clear, contextual and understandable. Examples of how we can do that include eliminating jargon, justification and judgment, maintaining an intentional pace of speaking at a reasonable volume while monitoring our facial expressions. This leads me to the “mirror work” mentioned earlier.

Mirror work is simple and only requires four things: A mirror, your face, your brain, and the bravery to be authentic. I highly recommend it. Why? It was highly recommended (ok, it was a directive) to me in the first few years of my career in public education. Here are the directions:

- Look in the mirror - do not look away, no matter what
- Think of something that makes you happy
- Think of something that makes you laugh
- Think of something that makes you frustrated
- Think of something that makes you angry
- Think of someone you love
- Think of something boring
- Think of something exciting
- Think of something you are looking forward to
- Think of something you dread
- Think of a problem that you want to figure out
- Think of a problem that you’ve already figured out but others haven’t



The context of this recommendation includes me being an SLP sitting in a weekly campus staff meeting while they were talking about state accountability testing. My Assistant Principal pulled me aside after the meeting and said, “It is obvious that you don’t see any value in state testing...” and then he recommended the mirror work. *Mirror work lets you see what others see based on what you are thinking.* Were you surprised? This work can take self-awareness to the next level, which can greatly impact both your verbal and non-verbal cues as you increase your effort and intentionality.

In “power poker,” someone has to lose; maybe multiple people. They may lose a debate or a vote, but they also lose their confidence, patience, trust, willingness to collaborate and the opportunity to learn. When (not if) but *when* you take intentional actions that value others, create a sense of acceptance, provide opportunities to learn and facilitate collaborative solutions, your meetings will be something others don’t dread; a place where stress is addressed with patience and acknowledgement and people feel safe enough to contribute ideas, ask questions and verbalize opinions. There is no guarantee that an IEP meeting will end in agreement, but in my experience, the probability of having more opportunities to build relationships - which can lead to respectful facilitation and collaborative agreement - goes up when these strategies are implemented. It allows us to focus on the people and progress instead of the procedures and paperwork. Take a chance at being better. If you are willing to do that, you will learn something whether or not the chance you take works out as you intend.

My foundational belief is that we all want to do our best, be our best, and facilitate the best outcomes for our collectively invested groups. It’s what drives my efforts to empower others. Helping everyone be a part of “better” so that we can make education special for all, is the passion that permeates all of my work, whether I am training, facilitating, speaking, making phone calls or consulting.

If you relate to this mission - either as someone who shares the same goal or someone with similar ideas - I hope we can connect.



Texas-born & raised, *Dr. Amy Mathews-Perez* recently retired from a 34-year career of serving public education. General Ed. Teacher, SLP, Diagnostician, SPED Supervisor, Principal, Assistant Principal & Director of Special Education are roles she’s held. She has also worked in the private sector as a Coordinator of Education for a county alternative school and as an SLP in nursing homes/home health. Amy is the founder of Making Education Special for All (M.E.S.A.) through consulting and speaking. Her passions include communication, laughter, empowerment & authenticity. “Life is short but our influence is never-ending.” Amy finds joy through connections, collective learning and highlighting the potential in others. [in](#) [✉](#)

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