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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT/CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

by

Milena V. Varbanova

The purpose of this study was to describe immigrant parents' experiences with the Special Education process involving their children. There were two major objectives of the study: to determine the parents' understanding of the key concepts, activities, and implications of the process; and to identify specific challenges parents faced in their experiences. This study utilized a phenomenological case-study design to obtain in-depth information by conducting individual semi-structured interviews with the parents. The setting was a large high-performing suburban district with a very culturally and linguistically diverse population in which one-third of the families represent 80 different home countries and 70 different languages. The majority of the parents in the community are middle class, college-educated professionals. Some of the families may be in the U.S. temporarily due to work assignments and others have experienced multiple job-related moves within the country. Twelve immigrant families, representing nine different home countries and seven different home languages, completed the interviews and provided information which was coded and analyzed for themes. Although the participants had different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they reported some similar experiences and needs. They shared appreciation for Special Education services and valued the relationships with and information provided by the school-based teams. Participants indicated a need for more information about general education, progress in relation to grade-level standards, and immediate and long-term implications related to receiving Special Education support. These services were often perceived as the mechanism through which the gap between the student and typical peers would be closed or at least minimized. The findings also suggested many divergent experiences and understandings primarily resulting from limited familiarity and experience with American culture and schools. Ultimately, factors such as skill with the English language, education level, country of origin, and types of identified disabilities had less of an impact on their perceptions of and involvement in the process than time lived in the U.S. High educational and English language proficiency levels of the parents were shown not to compensate for the lack of adequate knowledge and understanding about how the system functions and the parental role in it. Given the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of Special Education services and related staff shared by participants, it would be beneficial to examine the beliefs in relation to more objective outcomes and results in a mixed methods study of parent perceptions and student academic and social outcomes.

EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT/CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to all of the immigrant families who have directly and indirectly contributed to this work. The experiences of immigrant families I have witnessed over the 25 years I have lived in the U.S. have enriched my personal and professional life and fueled the motivation to provide insight into them that many educators may not have. It has been a privilege to connect with many immigrant families over the years and interview those who agreed to participate in this study. I am a better human and educator because of their gift of sharing their life experiences, needs, and hopes for their children. It is my hope that a greater understanding of these experiences will lead toward a truly inclusive and just educational system in which students and families with diverse backgrounds have a true sense of belonging and control over their experiences and outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would have been impossible without the families who took time from their lives to engage in a conversation about difficult experiences and sensitive topics. Their willingness to be vulnerable and share personal insights into the experiences of their families is greatly appreciated. They committed to this work with the hope that such conversations would create better future experiences for families.

This work is a product of a long personal and professional experience finding my place in U.S. society in general and the education system in particular. The multiple barriers I faced over time could only be overcome with the relentless support of great educators (during my studies) and colleagues (during my professional career). These individuals had their minds and hearts open to the experiences of CLD families, as well as insight into my personal ones. Without the tremendous care and support provided by Dr. Markey Winston during my first year of graduate school, I may have never finished it. When I was deeply discouraged by the significant language and cultural barriers, she managed to show me how these struggles are not unique to me and that, by persevering and getting into schools later, I would be in a position to help others in similar situations. Her belief in me was there when I did not have it.

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My immediate and extended family members have created many of the conditions that led to this final product. We came to the U.S. because of the brave efforts of my husband to complete his doctorate in an unknown country, speaking a different language, and not knowing anybody. As a mother of three children, I was “forced” to interact with the schools while struggling to understand the language and how the system works. I’ve learned so much through being a parent, and it was through that experience that I developed the commitment to “climb the invisible wall” and join the other (educators) side in order to help immigrant families and the system to serve them better.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents who have instilled the importance of hard work and service to others in me. Their selflessness and support over the years is deeply appreciated.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

Parental involvement in the educational process has been viewed as a critical factor for the short and long-term success of a child (Carter, 2002; Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Hirano et al., 2016; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Sauer & Kasa, 2012; Turnbull et al., 2011; Wellner, 2012). Legal federal mandates (e.g., The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1990, and Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015) have been put in place to promote the parent involvement in general experiences, activities, and choices and to safeguard the education of students with disabilities (SWD). Regardless of the established legal mandates, many parents face a number of barriers in their engagement in general and in Special Education (SPED) processes (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Parental engagement and the barriers parents face have been studied from many different perspectives and determined to be highly complex and quite stable, as issues have remained unchanged for the past 30 years (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Parents from marginalized groups typically have faced more significant barriers of both a personal and systemic nature in that process (Montelongo, 2014; Smith-McClelland, 2017).

Cultural and social capital has been proven critical in the context of understanding, navigating, and engaging in standard general education practices (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Various social and cultural resources are of even higher importance in the area of SPED. SWD are often more vulnerable as they face multiple social, emotional, and academic challenges, and their educational achievement and outcomes are not commensurate with their peers (Korobkin & Meller, 2019). Because of that, the stakes of decisions are often higher. In addition, SPED decisions tend to be made in complicated academic, linguistic, and legal contexts. Educational professionals who guide parental engagement need to be knowledgeable of the impact of such resources and invisible barriers to the process when families with diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds are involved. Unfortunately, the families who are impacted the most by collaboration barriers are the ones blamed by the schools for these difficulties (Harry, 1992; Harry et al., 1995). Even worse, their contributions are often neither welcomed nor valued (El Shourbagi, 2017). With misplaced blame, lack of social connections, cultural disconnect, and deficit perceptions, the already vulnerable families, some of whom may be new to the country, face higher risks of being manipulated. As a result of attributing the challenges to families'

limitations, school systems have not addressed the underlying systemic issues negatively impacting the needed collaboration (Cummins, 2001; Harry, 1992; Olivos, 2006).

Parental perspective and advocacy are especially important in the situations where cultural, educational, linguistic, and experiential differences could be misinterpreted as a learning disability by educators. The well-documented limited opportunities for meaningful collaboration and sense of distrust and resistance (Smiley, 2006) are compromising the educational experiences of many culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, but especially those who are struggling socially or academically and may be identified as students with disabilities in the educational setting (Afolabi, 2014; Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2013). CLD students are those who come from a home environment where a language other than English is spoken and whose cultural values and backgrounds differ from the mainstream culture. Although linguistic barriers have often been cited as a major collaboration challenge (Wolfe & Duran, 2013), evidence that language is not the primary reason for unfulfilling collaboration can be found in research involving native English speaking African-American families (Hernandez et al., 2008; Lynch & Stein, 1987). In their study, Hernandez et al. (2008) identified socioeconomic status as a powerful factor shaping the collaboration around SPED processes. Although Hernandez et al. (2008) did not engage in analysis of why socioeconomic status impacts engagement and satisfaction of participation, it could be hypothesized that the higher income level corresponds to higher educational levels and access to various resources. The combined negative impact of racial, ethnical, linguistic, and class barriers in addition to deficit perceptions puts a heavy burden on CLD families.

The struggles many parents experience in the process of general school involvement can be intensified in the context of conceptually and legally complex area of SPED (Ciracy & McGinnis, 2007; Gershwin-Mueller, 2015). CLD parents often feel disempowered, and their satisfaction with the process is minimal (Fish, 2008). Ironically, education and legal practices designed with inclusivity in mind result in creating drastically different, yet rarely improved, experiences for CLD families (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Laws mandating collaboration only ensure attendance and not authentic collaboration and often may result in creating a sense of further isolation. Taking legal action in order to be heard is an extreme step for most and is highly unlikely for parents who have limited access to financial resources and cultural

knowledge. As access to legal services may be extremely challenging for many immigrant parents, they often may be the lone advocates for the needs and rights of their children.

Legal obligations by themselves do not necessarily positively impact the culture, individuals' perceptions, and relationships. Stereotypes and biases have a powerful role in shaping educators' deficit perspectives towards marginalized populations. The strong negative beliefs educators have are often shaped by social factors and are based on limited to non-existing efforts to get to know the individuals involved in the process. As a result, valid valuable input that parents contribute is viewed as irrelevant, and all divergent opinions are ignored as long as legal compliance is maintained.

Much of the research I have read has been focused on documenting and analyzing the challenges CLD parents face in the engagement process around general and Special Education needs of their children (Grolnick et al., 1997; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). While these insights are valuable and while the issues studied in that research are real, the focus on surface-level issues prevents educators from adequately understanding the more substantive, systemic issues. The focus needs to be shifted to the system's issues and the role of educators as change agents in multiple areas—policies, procedures, cultural understandings, and diverging perspectives. The identification of practices promoting authentic collaboration starts with the deep belief that parents and children with diverse backgrounds are not of a lesser value, and their identities and cultures do not need to be changed, “improved,” or “fixed.” This is especially important at this time of dramatically changing demographics and continuous growth in numbers of CLD students.

Context

Immigration has played a significant role in the U.S. since its inception. Starting in the early 17th century, Europeans began immigrating and establishing a new society based on their own belief systems, cultures, languages, and religions. The flow of immigrants from all over the world has been steady ever since, adding to the initial diversity presented by the Europeans. Consequently, the demographics of U.S. schools have significantly and consistently changed over time. According to the Census Bureau in 2000, 34% of all youth aged 15–19 were from minority groups; and by 2025, this will increase to 46% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, as cited by Kao & Thompson, 2003). Approximately one third of young children who are U.S.-born have diverse backgrounds based on language, socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, beliefs, and

values (Hanson et al., 1990; Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Individuals classified as immigrants represent 13% of the population with a documented 40.8 million people in 2012 (Nwosu et al., 2014). Immigrant children represent 25% of the 69.9 million children under the age of 18 in the U.S. (Batalova & Zong, 2015). Almost half (46%) of the immigrants in the U.S. are classified as Hispanic/Latino, 25 percent as Asian, 20 percent as Europeans, and 9 percent as Black (Nwosu et al., 2014). Half of the immigrants are naturalized U.S. citizens.

Various categories have been established to describe the characteristics of students who differ from culturally dominant groups. Some of the most relevant and frequently used ones are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and a subgroup of CLDs, English learners (ELs), meaning students who are not yet fully proficient in English and for whom English is not the first and/or only language. Based on U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2019b) data, almost 10 percent—4.9 million—of public school students were identified as ELs, of whom over three quarters were identified as Hispanic. The report also indicated that, since 2000, the percentage of White students has decreased from 61 to 49 percent, and the percentage of Hispanic students increased from 16 to 26 and Asian/Pacific from 4 to 5 percent (USDE, 2019b).

While these numbers represent the great diversity of U.S. society, they also demonstrate a well-established practice for sorting groups of people based on narrowly defined norms and superficial criteria such as skin color. The practice of such categorizing impacts many students in the U.S., and the labels take away the individual's complex identity and often mask rich intra-group diversity. For example, it is a common misconception that all ELs come from families that have recently arrived in the country, but 85 percent of K-5th grade and 62 percent of 6th-12th grade ELs are native born children (Batalova & Zong, 2015). The term immigrant is generally defined as a person who comes to a foreign country to take up permanent residence, but the legal definition for school classification purposes is based on being born in a different country and having been in U.S. schools for less than three years. Like many other labels, this one does not capture the experiences of many individuals who may be impacted by it. For example, many students may be born outside of the U.S. and be in schools, but their families may not be seeking long-term residence in the country. For the purpose of this study, the term immigrant will be used to refer to participants who were not born in and who have been living in the U.S. between 1-15 years. The three labels (CLD, EL, and immigrant) will be used interchangeably as they represent different aspects of experiences of the group who will be the focus of this study, who

will be immigrants whose native/home language is other than English, who spent most of their educational careers in countries other than U.S., and who have children in a SPED program. Additional details on participants will be provided in Chapter 3.

Despite the fact that the U.S. has been built by immigrants who continue to play a vital economic role and contribute to society in so many different ways, there has been on-going anti-immigrant sentiment that has varied in intensity over the years. While in the past the tension was most intense during war and economically unstable times (Mayda, 2006), in the current political climate and narrative, it has been dominant and “normalized.” This negative atmosphere characterized by active and open hostility and discrimination presents challenges in the lives of many culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse individuals who may or may not have been born in the U.S. Many of the students coming from such families face a variety of unique educational challenges that often result in experiencing a lower quality education in the same country where others thrive emotionally, academically, and socially (Haas & Huang, 2010; Kim & García, 2014). In addition to often attending segregated and underfunded schools, CLD students are disproportionately represented in Special Education (Donovan & Cross, 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015) almost half of the identified students with disabilities in K-12 have CLD backgrounds.

Given the increasing diversity of the student population in the U.S. and the significant risks they are facing in a system based on Eurocentric values and perspectives (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994), it is critical to further examine the experiences of CLD immigrant families. Parents who may be overwhelmed by the demands of a life in a new country (Gallagher et al., 2006; Serrano, 2000) and dealing with a school system that is very different from the one they are comfortable with often present compliant behaviors, which are wrongly interpreted as understanding and agreement. Many immigrant students come from countries with drastically different social, political, and educational structures and may experience significant cultural conflict in the process of integrating into the U.S. society (Harry, 2002). Remarkably, this struggle is equally powerful in communities in which “minorities” are the norm. This happens because the system is shaped and controlled by white culture, which dominates and permeates every aspect of life in the U.S. (Hammond, 2015).

The issues discussed here are not trivial ones. In his extensive work around the aims of education in a democratic society, Dewey (1916) emphasized that the purpose of education is

significantly broader than simply obtaining content knowledge. The goal of education is to cross institutional boundaries and develop independent, self-determined individuals who are active citizens and who work toward positive social changes. The results accomplished through a meaningful and well-rounded education should impact not just the personal success of the individual, but the progress of the democracy as well (Dewey, 1916). The democratic way of life, according to Gutmann (1987), is the overarching goal of education, which needs to be shared by all involved (educators, parents, students, community). Minority students, who typically represent families with limited social and economic power, are especially in need of a well-rounded education and learning beyond basic knowledge and skills. As Moses (2002) suggested, the long-dominating educational inequality would, in part, be addressed by an increased focus on the education of the whole child and development of social consciousness and advocacy for justice. The failure to achieve the civil goal of education, especially in relation to underrepresented groups, could potentially lead to confused, socially-vulnerable, disengaged citizens who are participants in perpetual social injustice (Stitzlein, 2017). As Stitzlein (2017) pointed out, the citizens of a democratic society have a critical responsibility in defining the aims of education as well as supporting their public schools.

This engagement and collaborative deliberation unfortunately remain a challenge for some publics and require strategic efforts and planning on the part of educational leaders (Knight Abowitz, 2015). Education in a democratic society is a powerful vehicle toward a just society, and the social prosperity of the most vulnerable groups is most heavily dependent on it. In addition, immigrant families are often most actively engaged with the new culture through the schools, as education is compulsory, and children participate in it regardless of their comfort level. Thus, schools are the institution through which many immigrant families are socialized and acculturated. The rich culture of education is created by the meaningful and active participation of all involved institutions. All citizens, including those who may be defined as CLD, have the right and responsibility to be a part of that process.

There are many ways to determine the effectiveness of the U.S. school system. One relevant way, in the context of this discussion, is the numbers of identified SWD. According to the American Youth and Policy Forum & Center on Education Policy (2001), the number of SWD served in SPED programs across the country increased by 75% between 1980 and 2000. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2019a) reported that in 2017 more than 6 million/9.2

percent of school age children were identified as SWD. The impact of Special Education is more powerful for CLD students who have higher representation in SPED. According to the USDE (2019b), for the school year 2015–16, the percentage of SWD was highest for those who were American Indian/Alaska Native (17 percent), followed by those who were Black (16 percent), White (14 percent), of two or more races (13 percent), Hispanic and Pacific Islander (12 percent each), and Asian (7 percent). The USDE (2016) also reported that children of color are identified as SWD at higher rates than their peers and, in many cases, misidentification—both over and under—remains an issue.

EL students who are identified as SWD face the most significant challenges in terms of equitable education and access to programs (Obiakor & Utley, 2004). Regardless of longstanding issues with disproportionate representation of ELs in Special Education and a number of attempted solutions, this finding has proved difficult to change (Gage et al., 2013). Data provided around the most common disability category (Specific learning disability, SLD) are indicative of an issue, as almost 50 percent of ELs with disabilities are identified under SLD compared to 38 percent of non-ELs (USDE, 2016). As many ELs face a multitude of additional socio-political and economic challenges, this possible misidentification could lead to increasing inequality and social injustice.

What is particularly concerning in thinking about such inequalities is the educators' narrative around identifying ELs as SWD. The notion is typically based on the “best” interest of the child and the noble goal of obtaining needed services. The critical missing pieces from this type of discourse include in part the following:

- General education should be robust and responsive to the diverse needs of students; students' cultural, linguistic, and other experiential differences from the norm should not constitute a disability;
- The evaluation is at best biased and tests are not valid for many
- Most SWDs are seen as “less than” and deficient for their entire educational careers and beyond; and
- The academic and social expectations and the accountability for learning are decreased following the identification and social and academic outcomes are lowered.

The most unethical aspect of this, in many instances, harmful practice is that SPED is “sold” to the parents as the supreme help their child(ren) need and as the program that will provide what

general education can't and somehow help them do better in school. By making such unfounded statements and promises, educators mislead vulnerable parents and create a situation in which any divergent position would be seen as uncaring and irresponsible. Furthermore, nobody talks about the “dead end” nature of the program and its overall limitations. Federal guidelines define “dead end” programs as those that do not promote the achievement levels of students receiving services under them. In the context of SPED, the most frequently desired and rarely achieved indicator of the program's effectiveness is an increased academic performance, which at some point reaches grade-appropriate levels. Korobkin and Meller (2019) note that examining the effectiveness of SPED is a relatively new notion, as during its relatively short history, SPED has primarily focused on paperwork, efficiency, and compliance. However, SWDs' difficulties in terms of achievement, grade promotion, graduation, and post-secondary options have been documented (Korobkin & Meller, 2019).

The powerful truth that remains hidden is that the difficulties a CLD student experiences are seen as deficits associated with their identity, language, culture, background, etc. They are not attributed to limitations of the system, and the deficit is placed instead in the students and their families. For many “educators, special education referrals are a way to explain and cope with failure while insulating ideologies about students, and preserving teachers' sense of professional efficacy” (Gathright, 2001, n.p.).

Consequently, discussions about systemic discrimination, school policies, and organizational and curriculum issues are typically considered unnecessary, as the system is working well for those who have defined it (Cummins, 1989). Bourdieu (1977) argued that schools explicitly and implicitly reinforce the dominant culture and institutional bias in a powerful way, which in turn dramatically impacts the identity of diverse students and their ability to become part of the societal “norm” and obtain cultural and social capital. The strong focus on sorting and categorizing students in various ways is often promoted as a way to individualize support and receive more appropriate services; however, this “quality control” is part of a hidden agenda (Baker, 2002). The goal of this agenda is to maintain the hegemony of the white culture through which CLD students and parents are judged and valued—or rather devalued—and deficits that could be attributed to the system and context are viewed as individual internal deficits (Klingner et al., 2005).

The imbalance of power impacts every aspect of the students' experiences, as well as the ability of parents to become equal and respected members of a team discussing their child's unique needs. The subordinate position in which CLD families find themselves is isolating and highly controlled by professionals who do not have an authentic interest in a partnership, but instead prefer those families to be recipients rather than contributors to the decision-making process (Harry, 1992; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Legal Mandates, the Achievement Gap, & Disproportionate Representation

The primary way the U.S. education system has tried to adjust to demographic changes is through federal and state policies (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 1985; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001; Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015), using accountability measures, educational programming, and establishing standards for learning (Conger, 2012; Powers, 2014). Laws, such as the Educate America Act of 1994, were developed in part in response to findings of reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) by the National Commission on Excellence in Education and led to increased focus on achievement and reducing achievement gaps between subgroups. The widespread standards-based reform efforts focused on school accountability and corrective actions for systems that failed to produce mandated results (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004; NCLB, 2001; Rudo, 2001). The most recent and updated Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) similarly focuses on accountability and superficial procedural requirements, which by themselves have not led to meaningful change.

The passing of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) marked the beginning of systemic efforts to make U.S. schools more inclusive and responsive to the needs of diverse students (Dudley et al., 2014). These policies resulted from civil rights advocacy and were designed to address the educational and social inequalities impacting disadvantaged groups, including CLD students. Children with disabilities, who prior to 1970 were excluded from general education settings, began to participate in experiences alongside their typical peers. Terms such as free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE) gained importance at that time and were actively considered in the education services for students with disabilities (SWD). These mandates also recognized the importance of parental participation in the educational decision making process (both in general and Special Education classrooms). That recognition was further emphasized in the IDEA Amendments of 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, and the

NCLB Act of 2001 (Blackbourn et al., 2004). As equal team members, parents are expected to contribute valuable information about their child(ren) as well as their input around identification, assessments, placements, and other related services. Parental involvement is defined in NCLB as participation in meaningful communication about learning and other school activities, including child-specific and general school decision-making (e.g., various school committees) (USDE, 2004, p. 9). IDEA mandates that team discussions regarding evaluation, identification, and placement must include parents and schools must “make reasonable efforts to ensure that parents understand and are able to participate in such discussions” (IDEA, 2004, 34 C.F.R. Sec. 300.501).

What these mandates and educational practices fail to recognize is the social power imbalance between participants and the fact that the promoted forms of parent participation are deeply rooted in the dominant culture about which the parents may not be knowledgeable or comfortable (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Consequently, assumptions are made about the skills and abilities of parents to engage in a critical process, which on the surface is welcoming to parents but in reality is inaccessible to many CLD families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). This paradoxical outcome could only be truly understood by in-depth examination of sociopolitical and historical context and understanding how policies and procedures are impacted by it.

While the notion of inclusion is a noble one for which many parents of students with disabilities have been aggressively advocating, there are some unintended systemic consequences that may be impacting many students who may not have a “true” disability and whose families may not have the social, cultural, and financial capital to advocate for them. While the desired and legally mandated integration created more opportunities for students with disabilities and decreased the associated stigma, it also played a role in normalizing the concept and has created room for new ways to conceptualize disabilities and segregate students. One negative impact is that many students who are seen as different from the narrowly defined norm could be called disabled based on a highly subjective judgement, and the implication that something is wrong with them is validated and solidified. This is especially concerning as the numbers of “diverse” families increases and the proportion of people fitting the normal profile decreases. The fact that the observed discrepancies from the “norm” are documented through the use of concepts such as intelligence and “valid and reliable” standardized tests does not make these practices less questionable and potentially dangerous to already disadvantaged groups.

Thus, the superiority of those in control is reinforced, hierarchy is maintained, and those deemed inferior are not seen as equal in any process. Furthermore, as Danforth and Rhodes (1997) stated,

By failing to question and contest the disability construct as universally true and real, inclusion advocates have unintentionally worked against their own integrationist and civil rights purposes, supporting the devaluation and stigmatization of students “with disabilities” while decrying the same. (p. 357)

Legal mandates ensure that all students in the U.S. have the right to receive a free and appropriate education (IDEA, 2004). However, the U.S. school system is not well-prepared or even willing to serve all students well, and only those who fit a certain profile are the ones being successful (Klingner et al., 2005). Many marginalized groups have been achieving at drastically lower levels than those representing the dominant culture (Jiménez-Castellanos & García, 2017). The achievement gap experienced by black students has a long history and is well documented (Jencks & Phillips 1998; Miller 1995). The same pattern is observed for many other ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students. In spite of the mandated integration and programming, many students identified as ELs are not achieving grade-level standards. The academic achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs is well documented for both school-age (Abedi, 2002; Fry 2008) and postsecondary level students (Kao & Thompson, 2003). As they are typically viewed as limited and deficient, ELs are often presented with less complex and cognitively demanding learning goals (Hammond, 2015). This practice remains in place even though historical results demonstrate that it is detrimental to the learning and overall educational experiences of minority groups (Hammond, 2015). Although students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic and racial minorities, students with special needs, and second-language learners are heavily impacted by such practices, in their review of literature on student achievement, Barton and Coley (2009) identified curriculum rigor as a powerful but insufficiently studied variable. Students with disabilities have also been achieving at lower levels than their non-disabled peers (Eckes & Swando, 2009; Hurt, 2012). The analysis of academic achievement differences shows that it is a complex phenomenon explained by structural/system level factors as well as cultural differences and orientations (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

The differences in terms of academic performance have an impact on the students’ overall school experience and educational attainment as well as lifelong economic and social outcomes (Kim & Kim, 2013). As suggested earlier, CLD students in general and ELs in

particular are at a higher risk for being misidentified as SWD. The disproportionate representation (both over and under representation) is well illustrated by the national data, which show great variability across states (Kim & Kim, 2013). According to data provided by Henderson et al. (1993), 26.5% of ELs in Massachusetts, 25.3% in South Dakota, and 20.1% in New Mexico were identified as students with disabilities, while less than 1% of ELs were identified in Colorado, Maryland, and North Carolina. Research has identified multiple contributing factors for this situation, including lack of diversity in the teaching staff, lack of adequate understanding of CLD students' needs, deficit perspectives, and ineffective core instruction. The untold story behind overrepresentation is about creating a system within a system for "dumping" students who have diverse (from the white norm) needs, which general education is not willing to meet. These findings are especially concerning, given the projection that half of the U.S. population will be identified as belonging to "ethnic minorities" by 2050 (Nagayama & Maramba, 2001).

In addition to access to free and appropriate public education, the IDEA legislation mandates nondiscriminatory Special Education assessment, identification, and placement. While the law mandates that students should not be identified as having a disability due to academic gap/low achievement, environmental disadvantages, or cultural and/or linguistic factors, these factors are often not effectively and deeply evaluated in the process as teams are expected to check a box indicating that they have considered them. As a result, many ethnically and linguistically diverse students are inappropriately identified and overrepresented in Special Education (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). The overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority students in Special Education programs has been observed since data started being collected in 1968 (Artiles et al., 2004; Gamm, 2007).

The number of students placed in such programs has been growing steadily since 1975 when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA) was passed. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2020) in 2018-19 nationally, more than seven million students, 14 % of total enrollment, received Special Education services. After the initial drastic increase of 75 percent in numbers of identified SWD during the last two decades of the 20th century (American Youth and Policy Forum & Center on Education Policy, 2001), current growth has been more gradual. From 2011-12 to 2018-19, the numbers increased from 6.3 million (13 percent) to 6.7 million (14 percent) (NCES, 2020).

The overrepresentation of CLD students in Special Education is a complex phenomenon impacted by federal, state, and local policies, procedures, and practices and can often be seen as an indicator of the responsiveness of various structures to the needs of diverse students. As such, it could be seen as one of most critical issues faced by the U.S. education system. If the quality of the educational experiences of CLD students, who represent half of the student population in U.S. schools, is questionable, the implications need to be considered. The high and increasing number of SWDs, as well as the overrepresentation of marginalized groups in Special Education, necessitate a closer look at its impact.

The Problem with Labels

One easily identifiable issue is the negative impact of the SWD label. Any label associated with a group of students powerfully shapes the perception of self and that of others. Social comparisons are powerful forces in the development of a self-concept, and the impact of labels in U.S. schools should not be overlooked (Link & Phelan, 1999). The negative individual consequences of labeling have been studied for some time, and concerns have been identified (Coleman, 1983). At the individual student level, one issue is the social stigma associated with the SWD label (National Research Council, 2002). For marginalized groups, who are often seen in negative terms, adding more labels to capture their “deficits” is yet another form of “problematizing,” which intensifies the injustice they experience. Labels are not just words to facilitate distribution of resources in school systems; labels have real effects and consequences for students and families (Baker, 2002). Labels have the power to undervalue and limit vulnerable populations simply as a function of the subjective perceptions and decisions made by those with power.

Misidentifying the “problem” and placing it within the child instead of focusing on the system’s failure is another critical issue. A student with identified disability who was not served well by the general education system faces further challenges in accessing rigorous curriculum, programming, and general opportunities (Harry & Klingner, 2006). The common beliefs that Special Education supports are the solution for closing the achievement gap is challenged by the fact that, once identified for Special Education, students remain there for the duration of their educational careers (Harry & Klingner, 2006). This is, in part, a result of the lowered expectations for students with disabilities and decreased access to academically able peers (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; National Research Council, 2002). While the

intent of the legal mandates has been inclusion and equity, the disproportionality of Special Education identification contributes to the separation of CLD and limits their opportunities for successful integration in society (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Most importantly, as Slee (1997) argued, placing the “perceived” problem within the child and treating them differently in an “inclusive” institution is one more way to problematize and manage otherness.

The term disability, a core concept in Special Education, is, perhaps, one of the most critical cultural differences. It is the basis on which one can receive services. Disabilities are often identified for the first time in the child’s life in an educational setting, and so disability is a term in part dependent on the student’s academic success. While some disability categories identified in IDEA are purely based on physical ability that interferes with learning (hearing, vision, orthopedic, medical disorders), others only become evident in the process of learning and are often otherwise “invisible.” It is not uncommon for “global” disabilities, such as intellectual ones, to be suspected and identified at school age.

The most common disability condition identified in schools is learning disability (NCES, 2018). It was established as an educational category as a “state designated handicapping condition” in 1969 in the Children with Learning Disabilities Act as part of Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Baker, 2002). There has never been a strong agreement on the definition of and criteria for identifying learning disabilities. However, as noted above, the number of identified students has been growing steadily, and students from marginalized groups are disproportionately represented in it (Donovan & Cross, 2002; USDE, 2016). While the general term of disability is a social construct and based on established norms, this category seems especially open to interpretation and ultimately defined by those who have social power and are in a position to judge abilities and judge what is normal and what is a problem.

The U.S. society’s understanding of and beliefs about disabilities have evolved over recent decades, but this change has not been shared by all of the countries in the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2009), there are two somewhat universally accepted categories of disability: impairments of (a) body functions and structure; and (b) activity and participation. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) describes an individual with a disability as a person who “has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits

one or more major life activities; has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment” (n.p.) The framework for identifying and supporting SWD, as defined in IDEA, is closely aligned to a western medical model that places the disability within the child and focuses on fixing the deficits.

Theoretical Perspective

The research topic presented here will be primarily explored from the perspective of Critical Disability Theory, which views key disability concepts as social constructs used to further disadvantage already marginalized groups. This social aspect of the involved constructs distinguishes disability from impairment (Hosking, 2008), and it gives the dominant class control over those in disadvantaged positions. A product of the dominant deficit-based perspective towards CLD families is the observation that educators “could barely conceal their contempt for parents who were marginalized and undervalued” (Klingner & Harry, 2006, p. 2274). This theory shifts the focus from individual-based deficits to the larger system in which people function. Furthermore, the theory acknowledges that, while both sides (families and schools) may function well and be successful in some context, it is the relationship between the two that is problematic and in need of change (Tozer et al., 2009). That mismatch impacts both regular and Special Education and shapes the disproportionate representation of CLD students in the latter. The pervasive discrimination and prejudice could be lessened by taking action to challenge it in educational settings and by looking at curriculum/instruction as well as the more targeted practices, including Special Education.

The perspective of Social-Cultural Capital theory will also be useful for the examination of the impact of cultural resources and social networking on power differentials and outcomes. Differences can become a powerful social construct, and their value is often determined by the dominant class, which tends to result in individuals from marginalized groups being put in disadvantaged positions across settings and experiences (Klingner et al, 2006; Minow, 1990). The disadvantage comes in part from differences in access to capital that is useful in U.S. society. Bourdieu (1986) identified three types of capital—economic, cultural, and social—and emphasizes that all three are critical for navigating social systems and establishing social status. Another critical insight from Bourdieu’s work is the understanding that individuals and groups with established capital can access additional resources more easily than those who are lacking it. I believe this helps explain why Special Education may have a different impact on students

representing various socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Special education is less likely to have a negative impact on white middle class families who have adequate capital to navigate the systems and experiences of their child(ren). In such cases, students only benefit from the “good” aspects of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), such as testing and other accommodations. These individual independent powerful forces create conditions that are not supportive of authentic partnership between schools and CLD parents. It does not matter how well the parents can learn English or familiarize themselves with the procedural safeguards. As long as there is a social capital differential and powerful hidden rules that drive the “collaboration” process, there will not be a true partnership.

The U.S. society in general and schools in particular validate the positions of the dominant class by continuously transmitting cultural capital via seamless mechanisms such as policies, context-specific discourses, school content and practices, and relationships among others (Bourdieu, 1977). In combination, all these social aspects lead to a difficult to detect but powerful institutional bias. These conditions, in turn, leave very limited room for acculturation and make assimilation—a much less desirable option—the only option left for many. By establishing practices that allow sharing that social-cultural capital, schools would be in a position to develop meaningful partnerships with CLD parents (Yan & Lin, 2005). It is critical for educators to recognize the role they have in building relationships with CLD students and families. An institutional self-examination, in addition to cultural belief and behavior realignments, are a big part of that (Lynch & Hanson, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Critical Discourse analysis will add further insight into the interactions between language use and social power. In addition to deficit-focused SPED meetings, the highly specialized jargon used by educators intensifies the inequalities and establishes control for those in positions of power. Naturally, these established structures and the familiarity educators have with them enforce dominance in a powerful way. SPED meetings are dominated by oral and written communication, and not having fluency can be a challenge for native English speakers, as well these parents who have native languages other than English. By focusing on the language aspect, educators can influence the structural aspects of dominance and discrimination (Wodak & Mayer, 2009).

To understand the complexity of the experiences of CLD families, the perspective of the Intersectionality Theory as described by Crenshaw (1989) is powerful. Although her ideas

emerged from Black feminism, her theory about racial discrimination, sexism, and oppression could be applied to other marginalized groups. According to McCall (2005), Intersectionality “is the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations and is itself a central category of analysis” (p. 1771). As previously discussed, CLD immigrant families have many identities, which often are subjected to some form of oppression. A student identified as an English learner has many dimensions and life experiences in addition to just learning English. However, in most of their educational experiences, they are defined by the often disparaging labels. The cumulative impact of these experiences can create a significant power imbalance between CLD families and the dominant class. The move towards inclusion of diverse populations in structures and processes established by the dominant culture has only solidified the existing barriers and allowed them to function as less-visible gatekeepers.

Purpose of the Study

Many immigrant/CLD students experience an intense intervention/Special Education evaluation processes due to their heightened risk of experiencing academic and other school-related challenges. Their families are often expected to understand these complex and often convoluted processes and actively engage in the educational decisions that are being made for students. These decisions are high-stakes and have long-lasting social implications. Legal and ethical guidelines are, thus, put in place in an effort to ensure the desired collaboration and informed input/consent of parents. While school teams typically strictly adhere to the legal compliance paperwork, in my experience, they often fail to ensure true parental consent and understanding. As a result, parents who are present in the process may not have adequate understanding or the ability to effectively represent their positions and ultimately advocate for their child.

This problem of practice deserves deep and nuanced exploration, especially given its potential for increasing already existing social and academic inequalities many diverse students face. The improvement in the implementation and outcomes of these processes is largely in the hands of educators and teams working with immigrant/CLD families. One of the first steps of any effort to improve those processes is for educators to understand how parents experience the processes and what they perceive to be obstacles, misunderstandings, and needs for improvement.

Accordingly, I was interested in doing a study designed to address the following overarching research question: What are the experiences of immigrant/CLD families who have participated in the intervention/SPED process? The following three supporting questions aimed at identifying specific challenges and potential solutions.

1. How do they understand key concepts, activities, and implications related to this process?
2. What are some specific challenges that could be identified as a result?
3. What specific steps can be taken to proactively address the documented challenges?

Many, but not necessarily all, immigrant students come from CLD families. While the specific experiences of CLD families may differ, they commonly share some of the following: languages other than English being spoken in the home, diverse prior social and educational experiences, diverse cultural values, and limited access to social resources and support. The “distance” between the home and U.S. culture and language may differ, but regardless of the intensity, that distance can still impact the students’ (and their families’) integration into the new social and learning environments. While students in this category may share many similar needs, it is critical for educators to recognize that each family has a unique story and experiences that shape different collaboration needs and opportunities. The families differ in terms of numerous critical aspects beyond language, including education, socioeconomic status, family structure, religion, ethnicity, professional experiences, beliefs, and values. Regardless of this complexity, typically the language and academic differences of students become the focus of educators, leading students’ identities to be narrowly defined as low-achieving English learners. CLD students and families are often involved in a more individualized problem-solving process, designed to facilitate social integration and academic growth. This process, while well-intended, is not always effective enough to produce the desired student outcomes. This is often the case, in part, because the team’s attention is primarily on the individual student, ignoring powerful environmental or system-level factors.

As an educator serving primarily CLD/EL/immigrant students for the past 15 years, I have observed many of the challenges CLD families can experience when they interact with schools. It might have been easier for me to detect these struggles because of my personal experiences as an immigrant, whose home language and culture are quite different from the mainstream U.S. ones. I have directly and indirectly experienced the transparent and hidden

barriers interfering with the processes discussed here—from the simplest interactions to the most complex educational decisions. I have witnessed the discomfort, helplessness, and hopelessness of some families while interacting with educators. I have also noticed how little it takes to change some of the dynamics in the process. The first 10 years of my life in the U.S. were powerfully shaped by my experiences as an immigrant with limited language and culture knowledge. My experiences as an immigrant parent of three children greatly contributed to my interest in integrating into the U.S. school system as a professional. After I became a school psychologist and an administrator, I gained more social capital and power. Over time, I have become deeply committed to using my voice to challenge the power imbalance and empower parents and schools in creating more just and equitable systems.

Organization of the Study

This study will be organized in five chapters, the first three of which make up this proposal. Chapter One focused on introducing the topic and the problem of practice. Chapter Two contains literature review of relevant studies around parental involvement in SPED processes with a focus on CLD and immigrant families. Chapter Three discusses the research design and methodology of the proposed study. Collected and analyzed data will be shared in Chapter Four. The final chapter, Chapter Five, will organize the findings, limitations, and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As a country built by immigrants, the U.S. is home to many individuals who share a number of differences from those that make up the white, able, English speaking, Christian norm. Each additional difference from that norm adds additional degrees of marginalization for those who are characterized and often defined by these differences. Many of the social barriers for diverse groups are invisible to those who have created them and those who have to overcome them, but they are there to maintain the status quo. That is accomplished not by physical or apparent force but in a number of settled ways that make it difficult to be challenged. In this context, the valued idea of a melting pot becomes a death sentence for those who would like to integrate, as, in order to be accepted, one has to lose his/her identity. This is well illustrated by the powerful efforts to promote English-only education. This subtractive approach to language and culture is damaging for individuals and limiting in terms of growth of the society as a whole.

For the purposes of discussing these defined differences within this study, the following key terms will be utilized. Their meaning is defined below:

1. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD students and families) – CLD students and families are those who share a home environment where a language other than English is spoken and whose cultural values and backgrounds differ from the mainstream culture in U.S.
2. Immigrant – The term immigrant refers to an individual (parent) who was not born in the U.S. and has been living in the U.S. between 1-15 years.
3. English Learner (EL students) – EL students are not yet fully proficient in English, and English is not the first and/or only language. Some students in this category may not be proficient in other languages but are consistently exposed to them.
4. English Learner (parents) – EL parents have a primary language other than English and may be at various stages (from not at all to functional in many settings) of using English for oral and written purposes.
5. Marginalized – Individuals or groups who, due to culture, ethnicity, race and other identity characteristics and historical experiences, are not viewed as equal by the dominant class and culture and, thus, face higher risk of discrimination are considered to be marginalized.
6. Students with disabilities (SWD) – SWD refers to students with various physical, developmental, or learning disabilities as identified under the guidelines of IDEA.

7. Culture refers to shared values, beliefs, rules for communication, and other social practices and behaviors that are shared by groups of people. It is based on shared knowledge, assumptions, and expectations.

Parental Participation

Parent involvement has been an important component of federal and state legislation (ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 2004). Its significance is defined not only by the positive effects on individual students, but also by the impact on the larger educational system. It is well documented that effective home-school collaboration improves the experiences and outcomes of students (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). However, a more profound benefit of active family involvement is the increased opportunity for CLD families to have an active voice in democratic processes and, thus, challenge systems and practices that are unjust and discriminatory. The progress that typically results from various well-deliberated cultural and other conflicts is critical for an evolving democratic society. These advancements cannot materialize if all families are not actively engaged and represented in the process. Due to the many obstacles CLD families face in navigating schooling, the educational community needs to assume an active role as a change agent in this process. Many immigrants and refugees arrive in the U.S. daily because of better educational opportunities for their children. Although most parents are highly invested in their children's wellbeing and education, they often are not familiar with the new country and its educational systems. The process of developing familiarity with the U.S. social norms and cultural and educational expectations is extremely challenging for immigrants without the support of others who have that proficiency. The active communication and deliberation required in order to promote a positive change in that context need to be facilitated by the schools and other social institutions. The creation of active and mature publics is not accidental and requires significant organic efforts and collaboration. If effective and systematic, such efforts can improve education for diverse students and close not only the gaps in achievement, but possibly in social status as well (Knight Abowitz, 2015).

There are many recognized forms of parental support. Epstein (1992) describes six types of parental involvement in education—parenting, communicating, volunteering, supporting academic work, engaging in decision making, and collaborating with the community. While each one of these is beneficial by itself and in combination with the others, engagement in the SPED

process represents a different level of significance, expectations, expertise, and confidence from the parents.

Many have recognized the critical importance of parent engagement in the education of SWD (Hepworth Berger & Riojas-Cortez, 2012, Collier et al., 2015) and the additional challenges for parents from marginalized social groups (Harry, 1992; Huang & Gibbs, 1992). Due to their perspectives, beliefs, and established practices, educators do not always recognize many of the barriers and do not make the engagement easier. This is true even in cases of active engagement leading to divergent perspectives and perceived conflict between the parents and professionals (Lawson, 2003). In these situations, educators who have disproportionately higher power and control over the outcome tend to dominate, enforce their opinions, and push well-meaning parents further away from the decision-making process. In other cases, foreign-born parents engage in the collaboration process with powerful beliefs about respect based on regard for the educator's expertise (Horvat et al., 2003). The differences between expected and familiar behaviors of the parents combined with some educators' lack of interest and respect for diverging opinions can result in an unspoken frustration that is not acknowledged by anyone.

The federal general education and Special Education laws designed to ensure socially just practices have built procedural safeguards that require active parent participation in the education of all children, especially those with disabilities. This accountability mechanism is well-intended but ultimately flawed with significant limitations for CLD families. The legal compliance aspects of the process are clearly defined in federal and state laws, and schools are expected to keep precise and comprehensive documentation. IDEA (2004) provides specific provisions for parents including the following rights: to participate in meetings, review records, obtain an independent evaluation, deny consent, and resolve disputes using mediation or due process. The school's compliance with required paperwork is closely monitored and adhered to, but the enforced parent participation is typically passive and superficial. What legal mandates and educational practices fail to actively consider is that the concept of "parent participation" in the educational process is a social construct and may seem foreign to many immigrants facing these new expectations. Clearly, the working relationship aimed for here is defined, structured, and led by the educators, which is a major issue when cultural beliefs differ. Providing a copy of the procedural safeguards as part of standard compliance protocol is not sufficient for many families, and signing forms is not indicative of shared understanding (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006).

Unfortunately, even with the mandated parental involvement and established legal rights, active and meaningful participation has been hard to achieve, and little progress has been made. Parents who are in a position to express their opinions continually express disappointment and frustration with the nature and level of collaboration (Elbaum et al., 2015). Some of the specific complaints parents share include lack of interest in parent input, limited access to decision-making, and staff and parent training (Elbaum et al., 2015). The documented barriers for parent participation impact many parents, but they are most powerful in relation to CLD families (Thorp, 1997). The obstacles for meaningful parent participation are a result of the interaction of many social, economic, political, and cultural factors that are often outside of the control of CLD families. Given the inherited inequalities impacting CLD students and the multidimensionality of experiences, research has devoted insufficient attention to the needs of ELs who receive Special Education (Alhassan, 2019; Almutairi, 2018; Booth, 2017; Donovan, 2013; Honey-Arcement, 2016; Hwang, 2019; Jones, 2017; Kisel, 2020; Kwon, 2015; McLeod, 2012; Munroe, 2015; Nelson, 2017; Ratemo, 2016; Urquhart, 2006; Wolfe & Duran, 2013; Zechella & Raval, 2015).

There is a consensus among researchers that CLD families experience many challenges in the process of collaboration with the schools, and as a result, they demonstrate lower levels of participation than mainstream families (Harry, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Some identified barriers stem from linguistic, cultural, and experiential factors. Others are shaped by the lack of educators' awareness, knowledge/skills, and desire to create effective partnerships. Research has identified the following common reasons for limited CLD parent participation: (a) communication (language proficiency and educational jargon), (b) lack of familiarity with the school system/insufficient information about general education and Special Education, (c) discomfort in interacting with school personnel, (d) trust in educators' work and decisions/viewing educators as experts, (e) lack of respect for the parent and negativity towards the child, (f) unfamiliarity with the role of parent involvement in schools, and (g) cultural clash and lack of diverse teaching staff (Constantino et al., 1995; Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Others add additional barriers, such as lack of transportation (Harry, 1992), work schedules and childcare (Nibel & Jasper, 2012), and concerns about immigration status (Conger et al., 2007). Rock (2000) categorized barriers in the following categories—attitudes, cultural background, logistics, and parent responsibilities. The barriers further intensify the already

disadvantaged position of CLD families in the educational processes and prevent the school systems from gaining valuable new perspectives.

Systemic Barriers

Although schools have the legal, ethical, and moral obligation to understand and address the obstacles CLD families experience, some of the barriers for meaningful collaboration are systemic. The nature and priorities of all learning institutions in the U.S. have been shaped by the dominant culture, and thus, they reflect injustices that are present in the larger society (Shannon, 1996). One contributing factor is limited diversity amongst faculty members who typically represent the mainstream culture and reinforce educational practices created by it. These staff members do not often have awareness and/or knowledge about the power of cultural differences and how they impact the learning and social-emotional experiences of students. These blind spots impact not only their pedagogical practices, but also their views of and interactions with the parents (Garza & Crawford, 2005; Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Sheets, 2005; Walker et al., 2004). Although significant in depth and importance, these gaps are rarely addressed in pre-service teacher training or in-service professional development. While educators believe that their beliefs are not biased and that they are advocating for all child(ren), research has shown that their actions are limiting and discriminatory (Harry & Klinger, 2006).

Furthermore, the social distance and status differences between dominant and subordinate social groups powerfully shape norms, beliefs, and behaviors across institutions and settings. Cummins (2001) argued that a true collaboration is almost impossible under the current broad societal culture. After studying parents' perceptions of SPED meetings, Stoner et al. (2005) noted that parents felt the experiences were traumatic, dissatisfying, complicated, and confusing. Ramirez (2003) documented that parents feel unsupported and intimidated by the professionals in the meetings. Some African-American parents go further to claim that educators misuse SPED as an option to remove a child from general education to a more segregated setting (Williams, 2007). In a study completed by Balli (2016), parents with regular participation in the Special Education process reported that they were not seen as valuable contributors with equal decision-making power in various meetings. Results from other studies show the limitations of "attendance-only" involvement, meaning the parents responded to mandatory invitations, showed up for the required meetings, and signed the compliance paperwork capturing the team's decisions (Covert, 1995; Lynch & Stein, 1982). Lynch and Stein (1982) who surveyed 400

parents, the majority of whom indicated active involvement, reported that only 14% of them were able to make specific contributions. More recently, Covert (1995) completed a study with 78 families and reported similar findings about one-sided decision-making processes.

It is hard for a single voice to be heard when the collective needs of CLD families are categorically denied. A society that believes that one culture is superior to the rest and in which educational institutions value only certain types of knowledge and skills can certainly create powerful barriers for true collaboration. Due to this power imbalance and lack of cultural capital, educators need to take the lead role in the efforts to make the educational experiences more inclusive and effective for diverse students. Studies involving immigrant families and SWD support that notion, as parents report that they feel the relationship is asymmetric and that they are discriminated against (Balcazar et al., 2012). While it is often reported that parents do not feel valued by the educators, a number of studies have validated these feelings by capturing the beliefs of teachers that families are not viewed as credible sources of input (Elliott & Sheridan, 1992; Lake, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997) or are seen as adversarial (Rosin, 1996) and, thus, not worth the investment of communication with them (Baker, 1989).

The behavioral and other differences between members and non-members of the dominant white culture often lead to negative perspectives, disconnect, and deeper alienation of CLD families. Parents who are frequently perceived as passive participants in the educational process of their children are blamed for the lack of collaboration. Educators typically fail to examine their own role and identify the sources of this unsatisfactory relationship and, thus, perpetuate the problem (Cummins, 2001; Harry, 1992; Olivos, 2006). Most educators are fully immersed in the dominant culture and have insufficient awareness of the powerful impact of cultural proficiency and capital, two things with which CLD families struggle to attain. Because of the different levels of access and power to shape institutions and norms, schools often exhibit (explicitly and implicitly) an approach of “superiority” towards CLD families that further alienates them. The lack of meaningful collaboration means that parents do not have an opportunity to challenge the deficit perspective of the educators by sharing cultural and experiential context for students’ “problem” behaviors. Given such barriers, the legal accountability mechanism based on the advocacy expectation of parents could not be effective for CLD families unless schools do more to understand the present gaps and address them by building shared understanding and expertise around the discussed topics.

Given the limited awareness of systemic issues, the existing research around parent involvement primarily focuses on the parent variables as seen through mostly deficit perspectives (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Seeing the world from the narrow perspective of whiteness impacts students from the moment they walk into school where knowledge and skills not recognized by the dominant culture are not acknowledged (Obiakor et al., 2002). Because no assets are recognized and differences are interpreted as inherent deficits, referrals for SPED are often made to “fix” the students.

This negative perspective might impact how even “technical” differences are addressed. For example, English language skills of the families are readily acknowledged as a powerful barrier, which is also easy to discern and accommodate. Regardless, schools rarely take this responsibility seriously and take proactive measures to provide adequate support. Even when interpreters are provided, their quality may be challenged by language (concepts and terms) and human factors (lack of expertise and experience) (Al-Hassan & Gardner, 2002). The English language skills directly impact the parents’ ability to access and process information, both outside and within the educational settings. Many CLD parents report significant difficulties learning the SPED language (Fish, 2008). Jegatheesan (2009), who studied the perception of Asian (China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, and India) mothers of children with developmental disabilities, documented their intense language and cultural struggles. Communication has been consistently recognized as a barrier leading to further alienation and a sense of being inadequate and judged (Jegatheesan, 2009; Jegatheesan et al., 2010). The limited language and communication skills are often paired with a feeling of being disparaged by the educators (Kim, 2013; Shapiro et al., 2004).

Based on a comprehensive review of studies of CLD parent involvement in and perceptions of Special Education, Wolfe and Duran (2013) pointed out that, although most CLD parents shared similar struggles, there are some differences, as European American parents’ engagement was more active than that of Hispanic and African American ones. Interestingly, few studies focus on and report the socioeconomic status of the participants. This finding, in my opinion, is a significant limitation of the available research, as socioeconomic status often indicates access to social and cultural capital, and that is a more accurate distinguishing factor than ethnicity. While ethnicity may be a useful descriptor in large sociology studies, it may limit the validity of studies with few participants. Similar to the dangers of categorizing students and

the associated risks of overlooking important personal attributes, when we study parents, it is critical to focus on the “power” variables. Many CLD parents who participated, themselves, in the U.S. school system may have had negative experiences that contribute to their comfort level and ability to participate. Limited accessibility leads to limited familiarity with school norms and expectations. It is hard to know what one does not know unless the communication is designed to address such possibilities. The combination of these experiences can place the CLD families in a disadvantaged position from which it is hard to relate to and collaborate with school personnel (Olivos et al., 2010).

Differences in Cultural Beliefs and Practices

Cultural experiences and perspectives are some of the most powerful aspects of the collaboration experience, but they are not easily understood and addressed. Due to their “hidden” nature, these differences are simply overlooked, and assumptions replace curiosity and understanding. Culture impacts all aspects of a person’s life and influences practices outside of school as well. Beliefs about child rearing practices are quite different across cultures and growing up in the same country does not minimize them (Rueda et al., 2005). The role of parents in the educational experience of their child(ren) varies significantly from country to country but are generally very different from the expectations in the U.S. schools. Sadly, although most CLD/immigrant parents are highly interested in the educational experiences of their children, their forms of support and engagement may not always be acknowledged by schools. Moreover, the contributions they provide are often ignored (Huang & Gibbs, 1992). Educators often fail to recognize that the home-school relationship looks very different across countries. An inaccurate assumption is often made that the concept of collaboration is a shared understanding between school and parents. The parental role in terms of participation in school experiences is a culture-specific, locally-defined concept (Rogoff, 2004). The expected partnership is even more culture specific when it comes to interaction around SPED topics. As a result of this lack of understanding on the educators’ part, combined with the lack of parental voice, the shared decision-making aspect of these practices is often only superficially adhered to by both parties (Olivos et al., 2010). The lack of specialized knowledge around critical concepts such as disability has been acknowledged as a common one (Fish, 2006; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006).

The increased challenges for CLD parents are intensified by language skills, religious beliefs, and cultural perceptions of human differences and disabilities. Many individuals with

disabilities are hidden from society in other countries, and children do not receive services by schools or other institutions. Such experiences have a powerful and potentially limiting impact on families facing new, often dramatically different, cultural norms and expectations.

Furthermore, the concept of disability is another social construct that is not universally shared and that can be hard to understand, especially in the context of an educational setting.

Many immigrants struggle to conceptualize academic and/or behavior struggles as a disability. In fact, many behaviors or varying abilities that could be considered a disability in a U.S. setting are viewed as being on a continuum of “typical” across the world. The complexity of the disability and the observed differences in understanding are a result of, in part, the interaction between the physical aspects and the social variables (Epstein et al., 1997; Helman, 2007). Even the more easily understood concept of difference from the norms is still challenging because the norms across countries and cultures are drastically different. Existing research has established the significant impact of culture on the understanding of human differences and attitudes toward them (Kuo, 2011, 2013). These differences are often well-illustrated by the fact that the terms used in U.S. culture to communicate regarding disabilities do not exist in other languages and cultures, and the conditions are viewed as a Western phenomenon (Dobson et al., 2001). Harry (1992) captured what educators often perceive as a paradox and sometimes as uncooperative parent behavior, namely the agreement that the child has academic and/or behavior difficulties and the disagreement that the child has a disability. Child development norms and behavior expectations are heavily embedded in the specific culture and, thus, differ significantly across countries (Sameroff & Feil, 1983; Sameroff & Fiese, 2003). While “agreement” around severe disabilities can be more easily achieved, CLD parents may still have very different expectations about the child’s integration in society and life-long goals. The societal perceptions of disabilities shape how parents view children with disabilities, and in many countries outside of the U.S., these individuals are intensely stigmatized and socially isolated.

Lee and Yuen (2003) provided good insight into the cultural clash in terms of disability understanding by noting that some cultures have a “limited” disability continuum including a birth defect, a mad-crazy person, and severe bodily injury. Many of the “soft” disabilities identified in U.S. schools may be seen as too mild to constitute a label from the perspective of CLD families. It is important to recognize that, even after developing some cross-cultural competence and language skills, many immigrant parents would be impacted by these conceptual

differences. Cho et al. (2000) noted that immigrant parents have very similar perceptions and responses to disability-related experiences with the families in their home countries. One major difference was the ability of the parents still living in the native country to navigate the available systems and advocate for their children, a task much more challenging for the immigrants in the U.S. Studying the perceptions of a disability and SPED of West Indian families revealed that cultural beliefs shape the perceptions of SPED and disabilities. One point of difference included the perception of disability as only demonstrated through a visual condition (parents' perception) versus hidden manifestations of it (educators' perspective). Another power discrepancy was the definition of a normal range and how broad it is (McCleod, 2012). The biggest gap and, in my opinion, the most critical one is the understanding of SPED and related services. Understandably, the educators' knowledge was shaped by the legal guidelines and information, whereas the parents were lacking basic awareness around that. Valdes (1999) reported similar findings in a study involving Mexican-American parents. Berek (2014) added the importance of faith and traditional treatment for Ethiopian immigrant parents. Other studies (Chan, 1986; Gabel, 2004) documented distinct cultural beliefs that disability is a sign from God and punishment for parents' sins. The negative connotation and links to evil spirits were captured in a study involving East Asian families (Huer et al., 2001). The opposite view—the disability is a gift from God that should not be interfered with—was found by Jegatheesan (2009). All these findings illustrate how many different possibilities there are for understanding and negotiating differences and challenges. Such findings illustrate the need to actively seek understanding and not depend on assumptions. One common need CLD families experience is learning the culture, terminology, and rules of SPED on their own, as schools do not provide adequate support (Fish, 2008). This could be a huge burden for most, as their background knowledge and access to resources can be quite limited.

It is important to recognize that other factors, such as socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, shape the integration of CLD families into the U.S. and impact their ability to get involved in the child's schooling experiences (Harris, 2010). Some families who come as refugees face more challenges in their adjustment. Understanding and addressing the multiple complex and interrelated variables has the potential for pointing the way to more effective collaboration.

Solutions

Active parental voice in a meaningful collaborative process around SPED decisions is considered imperative for CLD students (Friend & Cook, 2003; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Integrating culturally diverse perspectives and practices in the process would be beneficial not only for the families, but also for the educators and the system as a whole. The perspective of CLD families can add critical insight into situations perceived as problematic by mainstream educators (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994). Parents have unique and valuable expertise about their child(ren) and experiences, as well as powerful investment in their wellbeing and overall success. It is not the compliance aspects of the federal laws that would bring a meaningful change to the existing barriers, but rather true partnership and advocacy around CLD students. In order for such a partnership to form, school systems need to take the initiative to understand, accept, and seek input from CLD families with a truly open mindset and not from a deficit perspective. Authentic partnerships need to be cultivated over time with a greater understanding of the needs and values of everyone involved.

The desired benefits of collaboration may only be achieved in a culturally responsive system built on a strong foundation of respect and equity. When these conditions are met, parents feel welcome, comfortable to share their positions, and appreciated by the educators (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997, 2001; Turnbull et al., 2006). In order for that to happen, the core beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors of white middle class educators need to evolve. Developing shared understanding around terms and experiences that may be very culturally specific is the next building block in the collaboration process.

While some researchers have accurately identified the need for training of immigrant parents to advocate for their children (Lindsay et al., 2012), this approach oversimplifies and ignores powerful systemic issues. The language and processes used in SPED meetings are very technical and require an extensive knowledgebase across academic, legal, medical, assessment, and other specialized areas. It is true that often meaning is negotiated through a dialog, but the highly structured and school-controlled meetings do not allow for the deep learning that may be needed.

CLD families and students face complex and interrelated challenges in the context of the U.S. society in general, and the school system in particular. As formal schooling is compulsory in the U.S., it is a setting in which many CLD students struggle to belong. The challenge is that

the dominant culture permeates every aspect of schooling and is strategically disseminated through policies, curriculum, interpersonal relationships, and social discourse (Bourdieu, 1977). The resulting impact of these cumulative challenges is profound and difficult to change. The implemented policies at the federal and state levels have failed to shake the status quo and actually seemed to add layers to the existing systems of oppression. Due to the critical impact of parent involvement on student decisions and outcomes, I see the active voice of CLD parents as a potentially powerful disruptor of the dominant deficit-based narratives. This is the primary reason I would like to engage in further exploration of the experiences of CLD parents in the SPED processes.

Understanding the multidimensionality of these issues may lead to an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. However, I believe that educators, most of whom are deeply committed to serving all learners, are often in a position to make a difference. In this case, one great opportunity to do so is to further explore the role of the parents in the educational experiences of their children.

Chapter 3: Methods & Methodology

I found that research around immigrant parents' perspectives on Special Education (SPED) was limited, and little seems to be known about the experiences of those who are highly educated professional individuals. The overwhelming consensus from the literature I reviewed appeared to be that CLD/immigrant families experience significant challenges in advocating for their SPED students through the process of understanding and engaging in pre-referral and Special Education decision-making processes (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Most of the research has been focused on the cultural and linguistic "deficits" of the families involved in the process. Observed negative attitudes often held by CLD/immigrant families towards key aspects of SPED practices (e.g., testing, labeling, involvement of some professionals, such as psychologists) have been attributed to lack of accurate understanding and proficiency with the U.S. culture and education system (Kisel, 2020). The clash between the cultures diverse parents bring to their experiences with SPED, while well documented in the literature, is often explored through the deficit perspective toward marginalized groups. Smith-McClelland (2017), for example, reported that African-American parents lacked adequate understanding of SPED and may not realize the potential benefits for their children. However, the problem is not simply the divergent perspectives of students' abilities and their needs; the issue tends to be the limited power of and opportunities for CLD parents to advocate on behalf of their children. This is a critical issue given the long-term, life-shaping impact of participation in SPED.

A Parental Perspective

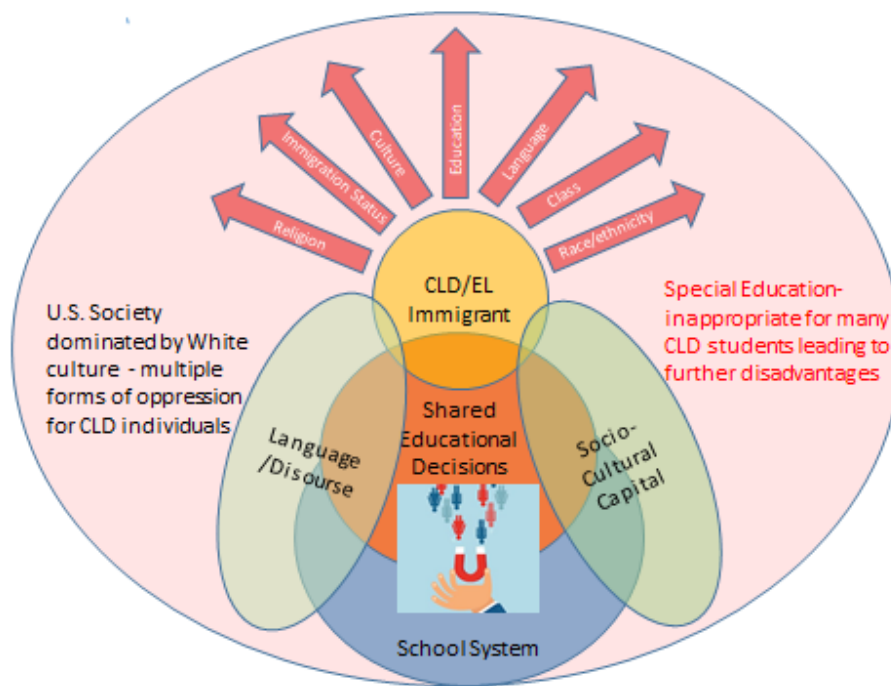
While the issue is a systemic one, this study explored it from the parental perspective. The focus here was on what generally well-educated (mostly in other countries), professional, middle-class, immigrant parents perceived, both mentally and emotionally, regarding their experiences with having children in SPED, as well as their understanding of its short- and long-term impact. Although cultural and language proficiency may not be seemingly a big barrier for such families, their voices are muted, and they are equally vulnerable to manipulation within the system. This study adds to the limited knowledge base by examining the perspectives of immigrant families who may not be as challenged by linguistic, economic, and educational statuses as some but who still experience significant barriers to meaningful participation. My study, thus, sought input from the parents about their experiences and how, from their perspectives, educators can help develop collaborative relationships. As the needs of CLD

families and students are highly heterogeneous and dynamic, schools need to keep growing their understanding of culturally and linguistically responsive practices that are appropriate for the individual background and circumstances of each family. Thus, the path towards meaningful connections should not be limited to one approach, but should reflect the specific context and individual needs of participants.

The graphic below represents the conceptual map I created for this study. The concepts and experiences discussed in this paper are heavily structured by the dominant class in U.S. society, with and very little room left for positive interpretation of differences.

Figure 1

Conceptual Map



The school system, similar to other social institutions, contains a lot of invisible power and control over all aspects of the family/student experience and is not truly welcoming to CLD students (Klingner et al., 2005). In spite of legal mandates promoting integration, the system is not always responsive to CLD students who are often categorized in various problem/deficit-based groups (i.e., students with behavior problems, students with limited language, students who do not have grade-level academic skills across content areas). For example, students who are learning English as a second or third language have not been labeled as bilingual and trilingual, but as being limited in English proficiency. Students in Special Education are often

defined as students with disabilities, and they are typically referred to as the “SPED students.” Intervention processes at schools typically use a “problem-solving” process. This is often done with blatant disregard of the assets students have to offer and a primary focus on presence or lack of markers of white culture.

The core identity features defining many CLD immigrant families (culture, ethnicity, origin, language, legal status) are often factors that pull them away from the school system, which is based on white middle class beliefs and practices (Baker, 2002). Thus, the identity of the families becomes the problem. Given the power imbalance, the society in general and school system in particular have the responsibility to actively pull in CLD students and families by creating mindsets, cultures, practices, processes, and procedures that facilitate these critical relationships.

Research Questions and Design

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of immigrant parents who had children in SPED by exploring the following overarching research question: *What are the experiences of immigrant families who have participated in the SPED process?* The following three supporting questions are aimed at identifying specific challenges and potential solutions.

1. How do the parents understand key concepts, activities, and implications related to this process?
2. What are some specific obstacles and challenges they could identify?
3. What specific steps can be taken to proactively address the barriers?

A qualitative approach was the best fit for exploring the perceptions of Special Education held by immigrant families, as it allowed the researcher to study the meaning of live events through the perspectives and views of the participants and their unique contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By focusing on the unique lived experiences of the participants, the researcher gained insight into their beliefs and behaviors and was better able to understand the experience from their point of view (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). This topic was studied from the social constructivist and phenomenological perspectives, as they allowed me to document the individuals’ understandings of the relevant constructs. The social constructivist worldview is based on the notion that individuals seek an understanding of their individual context and develop subjective meanings as a result of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological perspective focuses on the lived experiences with and description of a specific

phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Based on that, my goal was to capture the complexity of the development of key constructs specific to each participant, as well as to gain an understanding of patterns or themes across participants. Given the highly diverse background and experiences of the participants, I encountered a variety of perspectives. The “subjectivity” of each participant added value to this experience and findings. To some extent, such a study is also impacted by the transformative perspective, which broadens the context of experiences and invites needed change as indicated by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This action-oriented aspect of the study is reflected in the development, based on findings from this study, as well as relevant literature, of a brief guide for IEP teams that is focused on building awareness of barriers and describing actions that would promote meaningful collaboration.

This study utilized a phenomenological case-study design (Bhattacharya, 2017). The goal was to obtain in-depth, detailed information from the parent participants about their personal experiences and understandings of the shared phenomenon of Special Education and its concepts. I focused on documenting the individual narratives of the participants, capturing their experiences, and identifying the shared essence of the experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). The case study method was a good fit, as it is defined as “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). The phenomenological aspect of this study allowed the complexity and diversity of the life experiences and assigned meanings of the participants to be captured and examined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach also allowed me to add much-needed context of the lives, cultures, and views of the participants as they related to their SPED experiences. Existing research has often documented the challenging experiences of CLD families with the SPED process (Alhassan, 2019; Almutairi, 2018; Booth, 2017; Donovan, 2013; Honey-Arcement, 2016; Hwang, 2019; Jones, 2017; Kisel, 2020; Kwon, 2015; McLeod, 2012; Munroe, 2015; Nelson, 2017; Ratemo, 2016; Urquhart, 2006; Wolfe & Duran, 2013; Zechella & Raval, 2015), but the background stories of the involved individuals are often ignored. Participants are typically categorized by ethnicity, race, or country of origin (Latino, Asian, Indian), which can lead to oversimplifications, generalizations, and consequently questionable validity of findings. It is difficult to capture the authentic SPED experiences of immigrant parents without actively accounting for the context and individuality of each participant. The findings of this study, thus, provide strong validation for considering other contextual variables besides ethnicity, race, or

country of origin. Collecting and analyzing information about the educational levels of the participants and the time they have lived in the U.S. led to powerful insights into their experiences and involvement.

In addition to understanding each individual experience, identifying shared challenges was critical to the ultimate goal of providing guidance about needed supports. Being able to capture the essence of diverse experiences around the common phenomenon allowed for possible solutions to be generated. Husserl (1970) identified the concepts of natural attitude and lifeworld as critical ones in the phenomenological approach and defined them as a way to interact with the world. These concepts are shaped by the individuals' life experiences and are often hard to become aware of, as they may feel natural and absolute. However, another individual with different life experiences would have his/her unique natural attitude and lifeworld. This, in my experience, is a fundamental understanding that is lacking in the design and implementation of SPED processes. The current legal framework and associated practices do not recognize the powerful impact of the diverse experiences of participants. The phenomenological approach recognizes that the same event could be experienced and conceptualized very differently. Failure to understand that, combined with lack of focus on the systemic issues, could be the primary reason for the struggles parents have in the context of SPED. Genuine interest in and focus on the parents' lived experiences could provide insight into how best to improve the processes so they produce meaningful collaboration. The interpretation of such experiences could lead to better understanding and outcomes.

Site Context, Selection, and Participants

The setting for the study was a large suburban district with an ethnically and linguistically diverse population. More than one third of the students have parents who were born and raised in a country other than the U.S. Across the student body, 70 different languages are used either instead of or in addition to English in students' homes. The majority of parents in the community are middle class, well-educated professionals working for major corporations, academic institutions, and medical facilities. Some of the families have been in the U.S. for a limited period, and some have lived in the U.S. for decades. Some plan to live in the U.S. temporarily (3–5 years) due to job assignments. Many families are transient due to their legal documentation statuses and relocate as employment opportunities dictate. Many of the families who do not have long-term plans to live in the U.S. are less focused on active integration and

success in the American schools and are more committed to keeping up with the students' growth in their native languages and home country's academics. Districts with such a dominant immigrant presence are typically not high achieving (Abedi, 2002; Fry 2008), but this district has a long history of high achievement as measured by the current accountability system and has been consistently one of the top performing districts in the state. Additionally, immigrant students who at some point have been designated as EL have been the top academic achievers in the district.

I first became familiar with the district 15 years ago as a parent. As an immigrant and a parent, I have personally experienced many struggles similar to the experiences described by the participants in this study. My current personal professional familiarity with educational matters related to U.S. schools is significantly higher than my initial understandings at the beginning of my life in this country and is generally higher than that of other, especially newer, immigrant parents. Obtaining additional graduate degrees in education from U.S. universities and the lived experience of being a parent of three children educated in U.S. schools have significantly contributed to my current, much deeper, and more accurate understanding of American schools.

My employment as a district administrator has allowed me to professionally interact with hundreds of international families and students, some of whom have been impacted by the SPED process. This specific site was selected because of the unique and understudied demographics of the immigrant population (middle class, graduate degrees holders, professional individuals) and my professional involvement with this community. My own culturally and linguistically diverse background put me in a better position than most other white middle class researchers to engage with the participants who more easily connected to another immigrant. My personal experience and the cultural conflicts I have negotiated have helped me recognize the value of each individual representing other cultures and not assign a superior position to the dominant one.

The parents selected to participate in the study were (a) immigrants (born and raised in another country) who (b) have personally participated in the SPED process/meetings and (c) have a child(ren) who had been identified by the school as having disabilities and who (d) qualified, at the time of the study, to be on an IEP and receive SPED services. One or both parents, as determined by them, represented each family. The goal was to invite families with varying CLD backgrounds representing different countries, languages, and experiences in the U.S. Factors such country of origin, language(s) spoken at home, number of years in the U.S.,

age of students, and disability categories were reviewed in the selection process with the goal of creating a diverse group. Disability categories primarily associated with physical differences (orthopedic, blindness, deafness) were purposefully excluded in favor of categories associated with psychological or emotional differences (autism, emotional disturbance, cognitive disability, and specific learning disability), as those categories often are accompanied by more varied cultural perceptions and provided the greatest potential for diverse views on the topic.

Families who did not meet the federal definition of economically disadvantaged were invited to participate. This was done for two reasons. Most similar studies have involved immigrant parents of lower socio-economic and educational statuses, leaving the group of interest in this study—parents of higher socio-economic and educational statuses—generally under-represented. The second reason was based on my extensive experience working with immigrant families with educational, literacy, and economic disadvantages. Unfortunately, I have observed that, in most situations involving parents with disadvantaged backgrounds, parents tend to indicate general agreement with the positions of educators and do not challenge those positions regardless of their true feelings about and understanding of them. I have also previously observed that parents who face the most significant obstacles, in terms of active and meaningful collaboration with the school teams, experience great discomfort expressing their limited understanding of how school in general and SPED in particular work. Many of the questions used in this study, if put to those with less cultural capital, thus, may have put intense pressure on a person who is not comfortable discussing educational settings and practices. Schools have a currently unfulfilled role of educating immigrant parents around general and special education systems and practices. The parents who face the most barriers would have a more meaningful opportunity to express their positions and needs after that is done.

Based on SPED records and recommendations from SPED staff, 20 families were approached with the request for participation, 12 of whom agreed to participate and completed the process. The parents who declined the invitation cited availability limitations, often indicating that dealing with life demands associated with the pandemic made it difficult to take the time for the study.

Parents were initially contacted via a phone call and follow-up email to introduce them to the idea and gauge their interest in the study. The parents were able to ask questions and indicate what additional information they might need to make their decision about participating. Initial

information about the language needs of the participants was obtained via the district's database of information regarding parents' preferred language for communication about school matters. Interpreters were used to make the initial contact over the phone with families who wanted to use their native language. The parent had a chance to finalize the choice of language support provided by an interpreter/translator during the initial phone conversations.

The following important demographic information was collected from the participants:

1. Birth/Home Country
2. Preferred language for communication with the school
3. Years of living in the U.S.
4. Highest level of education
5. Grade level and disability category of the student receiving SPED services

The participants were asked to choose the format and location of the interview to accommodate the individual comfort and needs associated with safety concerns due to COVID-19. The following options were offered: face-to-face meeting in a big room allowing for plenty of distance between the individuals or a virtual meeting via Zoom. The option to meet at the family's home was not discussed due to COVID-19 restrictions. One parent indicated that she was willing to participate only if the interview occurred over the phone.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Validity

I used semi-structured interviews with immigrant parents who had been participating in the SPED process for their child. The interview was based on a systematic approach founded in the phenomenological theory of Husserl (1970) as described by Bevan (2014). Bevan (2014) emphasized that, in order to truly understand the participants' positions and experiences, the phenomenological approach needs to be integrated into the interview and not only in the data analysis. He argued that, if the critical concepts of phenomenology are not integrated in the data collection, the quality and validity of the collected information could be questionable. Bevan's (2014) systematically organized interview has a consistent approach in terms of structure, while still allowing flexibility in terms of questions so that they could be adjusted for individual participants. The interview has three components—contextualizing the phenomenon, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon (see Table 1; Bevan, 2014).

Table 1*Bevan Interview Structure*

Phenomenological Attitude	Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method
Phenomenological reduction (epoche)	Acceptance of natural attitude of participants Reflexive critical dialogue with self Active listening	Contextualizing the phenomenon (eliciting the lifeworld in natural attitudes)	Descriptive/Narrative context questions
		Apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing in natural attitudes)	Descriptive and structural question of modes of appearing
		Clarifying the phenomenon (meaning through imaginative variation)	Imaginative variation: varying structure of questions

According to Bevan (2014), the systematic nature of the interview process elevates the quality of the research project by providing dependable information and, thus, increasing the trustworthiness of the research. The information could have increased validity as the participants have two distinct opportunities to reflect on the experience—first during the initial questions about the phenomenon and second during the differentiated/individualized clarification phase. The clarification phase allows the participant to produce deeper and possibly more nuanced answers. This component is based on Spiegelberg's (1971) notion that the clarifying/imaginative questions take the participant to another level of reflection. An interview organized in such a manner would require limiting the sense of judgement (epoche) and engaging in active listening, which allows the researcher to start with general open-ended questions followed by much more specific questions based on the input from the participant (Giorgi, 1997). An example of such a tiered approach yielding quality input could be that, if the participant indicates that language is a barrier for meaningful engagement as part of the initial reflection, the interviewer could past a follow-up question, such as: What would be different if the educators spoke your language? One other very valuable feature of such interviews is the practice of adjusting the language for the specific needs of the participant (Benner, 1994). I find this to be critical, because the highly specialized school jargon is often not comprehensible to non-educators and typically results in parents feeling isolated and teachers maintaining control over the situation (Harris, 2010). An

open mindset and authentic curiosity and commitment to capture the individual reflections regardless of how similar or different they are with the beliefs of the researcher is a must in this process.

Instrumentation

The main instrument used in my research study was the semi-structured interview. Most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. One participant requested that no recording (audio or video) of the interview be made. The interviews were completed in a language that was selected by the participants (home language or English) based on their comfort level and ability to understand others and express themselves orally. Interpreters were utilized in the situations when other languages were needed. Each interview was preceded by an initial phone conversation to introduce the researcher and the study's focus. Based on questions and requests for additional information made during the initial phone conversation, an email communication was sent to parents who expressed interest. The Parent Participation Consent form and information about the questions/topic to be covered were included in the email. Some parents requested specific information about the questions/topics related to SPED as a condition for their possible participation. They indicated that they needed to know more about what was going to be covered in the interview in order to determine their comfort level and willingness to participate. Although the email communication was not a part of the initial plan, I believe the changes had a positive impact. After receiving the consent form, parents had an opportunity to review it and discuss it with the other parent(s) before signing it. Sharing information about the specific questions allowed parents to make an informed decision and also helped to lower their anxiety and possible discomfort associated with potentially undesirable topics. Parents who reviewed the questions prior to the interview indicated that they quickly reviewed them and felt comfortable with the topics. Based on observations made during the interviews, participants engaged in deep and authentic reflection for the first time during the interview. This was determined by their additional questions, need for clarification, processing time, and content of the responses provided during the interview.

The goal of the interview was to establish rapport with the participants and use descriptive/narrative context questions to develop an understanding of their unique contexts, as well as establish apprehension of the phenomenon (See Table 2).

Table 2*Interview Structure*

Interview Structure	Method	Questions
Contextualization (eliciting the lifeworld in natural attitudes)	Descriptive/ Narrative context questions	Tell me about your family and life prior to coming to the U.S. What comes to mind when you think of school in the U.S.? If your child attended school in another/other countries, what was that experience like? What are your family goals for your child(ren) and specifically the one identified with a disability?
Apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing in natural attitudes)	Descriptive and structural questions of modes of appearing	In your own words, please describe the SPED process. Walk me through your experiences and point out what incidents were most important or memorable to you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What were the meetings like? b. What did you like about the meetings? c. What did you not like about the meetings? d. Who was mostly in control of the meetings? How do you think your child was doing in school prior to the evaluation process being initiated? Describe the process of identifying your child as an SWD. Describe what your role was in that process. What do you think the role of the parents in this process needs to be? Describe how you felt about the decision. Reflect on emotions and thoughts please. Tell me in your own words what disability means in general and in this context. Tell me what you think the role of Special Education is. How do you think the identification will impact your child's life, immediate and long term future? Did you wish some things were different about that process?
Clarifying the phenomenon (meaning through imaginative variation)	Imaginative variation: varying of structure questions	What would have made the process better for you? How would the process have been different if it was done in your native language? What do you wish was different about the experience?

The task of clarifying the phenomenon (imaginative variation) and checking for understanding of previously provided information was accomplished during the interview and in follow-up written communication with the participants. In general, the input provided during the interview was comprehensive and did not leave many unanswered questions or needs for clarification.

Following the interview, each participant received a brief summary of their answers in relation to the discussed topics along with highlighted questions that were not addressed explicitly during the interview. Parents were asked to provide needed clarifications, additions, or modifications by responding to the email. That was deemed appropriate for the specific group of

participants due to their demonstrated comfort with technology and English language skills. The interviews completed with interpreters allowed extra room for processing and clarifying during the interviews. Two of the parents whose interviews were supported by an interpreter indicated that the information provided during the interview was all they would share and that they were not interested in a follow-up opportunity. Although the format used for completing this last step of the data collection varied by participant, the quality and quantity of the input provided originally and later insured the quality and completeness of the data.

Most participants responded well to the interview format and were grateful to share their stories. My approach in each situation was to allow for the most natural flow of information and capturing each story as the parent shared it. My goal was to address all of the questions to the extent possible and appropriate given the direction the parent had chosen. For example, one of the parents spent a significant amount of time talking about a specific general education practice that was not directly and critically related to the discussed topic. My response was to listen and find out what need was behind the story to gain an understanding of what was important to the family that I may have not accounted for in my interview questions. All of these steps supported the quality and validity of the data and minimized possible misunderstandings. Ultimately, each interview was very different in terms of the content that was discussed and how much time was spent on each topic/question. The differences resulted from the highly individualized specific context and input provided by each participant.

The questions in all three parts could also be categorized in the following manner: experience/behavior questions, opinion/value questions, feelings questions, and knowledge questions (Glesne, 2016). Based on my experience interviewing parents for other purposes, I have noted that parents often have some additional information that they may wish to share. Because of that, I closed the interview by inviting the participants to share something that was relevant and important that was not discussed earlier. In addition, I asked for specific recommendations about the SPED process from the participants' viewpoint. That was very important, as one of my goals was to develop recommendations/guide for educators.

Data Analysis

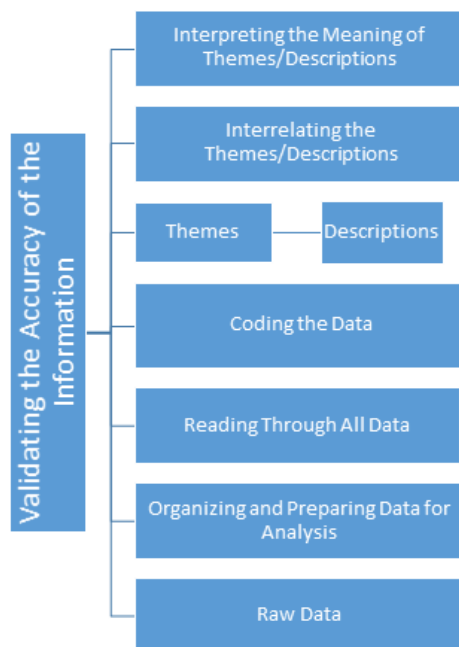
The analysis of qualitative data can be challenging given that the process is less straightforward, technical, and clearly defined than what is typical in quantitative studies (Lichtman, 2006). The ultimate goal of the process is to comprehensively evaluate and

understand the collected information in a manner that will allow for accurate and meaningful conclusions. The process typically is based on determining categories that capture the communicated meaning of the collected data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The categories are defined in the context of the specific research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined the following steps guiding the process: familiarizing the data, producing the codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, and presenting the report.

The data analysis process for my study started by organizing the demographic data and transcribing the interviews. Consistent with the phenomenological approach, the data were organized and reviewed multiple times so that specific units of analysis (codes and themes) could emerge. Based on the review of the data, codes were developed and organized into common themes. Creswell and Creswell (2018) provided a useful framework for this process:

Figure 2

Process for Creating Codes from Interviews



(Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

Data were first organized to focus on large categories, such as expected codes, surprising codes, and codes of unusual or of conceptual interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By actively focusing on possible content in all three categories, I was able to minimize overlooking data that were unique but powerful. The data were also approached from an event or subtopic point of view. For example, the questions about the IEP team meetings produced rich data about those

experiences. The process of initial identification for SPED services was also an area that generated valuable data. Many of the parents shared similar experiences related to a distinct experience or topic, but some also shared unique situations and needs.

The three theoretical perspectives (Critical Disability Theory, Social-Cultural Capital, and Critical Discourse) guiding the study directly shaped the specific questions of the interview, and the data analysis was focused around important theoretical features of those perspectives. Through the lens of the Critical Disability Theory, I was looking for any evidence of deficit-based perspective of educators towards the CLD students and families and possible actions leading to further disadvantages at school and the larger society. I was also closely examining the concept of disability from the parents' perspectives, realizing that, as a social construct, the term may be interpreted differently across cultures and often in conflict with the meaning it has in the mainstream U.S. culture.

Examining power differentials in the process was a big part of the data analysis. This aspect of the Social-Cultural Capital theory along with the impact of familiarity with and access to the social and cultural resources on the parents' experience with the process were closely examined and analyzed. The barriers parents faced in the process of accessing and managing access to Special Education support were evidence evaluated in the data analysis. The mandated partnership between school and family in the decision-making process was evaluated in relation to a desired shared social and cultural capital. Evidence for shared understanding and meaningful involvement was closely scrutinized.

Furthermore, the method I used to extract meaning from various events and experiences was shaped by Critical Discourse Theory. Although specific oral and written language was not analyzed as part of the study, the impact of language used in meetings and written documents was indirectly evaluated by inquiry into the parents' understanding of key concepts, activities, and outcomes of the process. Examining the interactions between all these factors and their impact on the experiences of the immigrant families was the primary focus of the data analysis.

Validity

Creswell and Miller (2000) stated that the nature of a qualitative study, by design, ensures validity, as the data are very specific to the participants and their contexts. Based on recommendations made by Creswell and Creswell (2018), I used the following approaches to ensure the quality of the data. Member checking was a meaningful and practical step I took once

I went over the data, organized themes, and summarized the meanings. Having participants check the accuracy of the findings created opportunities to identify possible misunderstandings. In the interviews supported by the interpreters, there was an additional person supporting the checks for understanding and needs for clarification. The process of using sequential interpreting allowed for extra time and natural integration of multiple checks for understanding.

In order to counter my own biases and beliefs formed because of my previous personal and professional experiences, I paid close attention to data that were contrary to my expectations. Many of the parents shared very different preferences and positions than those that I would have adopted. This discrepancy allowed for a deeper discussion and, ultimately, a better understanding of the parents' rationale, choices, and behaviors.

While the term reliability, as commonly used in quantitative research, does not fit well in qualitative designs, it is still important to consider the "stability" of the data and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I checked transcripts for accuracy and codes for consistency. While looking for any unique contributions from the participants, I also focused on consistency with previous findings. As one of my goals is to come up with specific practical recommendations for educators and parents, I needed to closely examine the shared and unique aspects of the information provided by participants with widely differing backgrounds and experiences.

Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Ethical considerations are critical for any study and topic, but their importance is significantly increased when areas such as disability, immigration, and diversity are involved. In addition to being socially and politically charged terms, these topics have a major influence on the daily experience of the involved individuals. Because of that, I had to be extremely cautious and respectful of the participants' preferences, comfort levels, and willingness to share information. I had to stay away from questions I was previously considering that were related to why and how the family ended up in the U.S. as well as how long they plan to live in the country. I also avoided questions about employment and specific job positions and plans. That was done out of respect for the lack of control families may have as well as emotional discomfort the subjects may cause.

Some of the limitations of the design could be associated with the very personal and sensitive nature of the topics. I needed to be very careful with the data collection and prevent the

collection of any possibly harmful information. The sensitive nature of the topic might have led to fewer parents who would be willing to discuss their experiences for research purposes. In order to minimize this possibility, I explained the possible benefits of participation. Two examples of benefits that resonated with the participants included the opportunity to add to their own understanding of special education practices in the context of their child's needs and the chance to improve the experiences of other immigrants in similar future situations.

In my experience as an educator who is an immigrant and an EL, I have had many opportunities to connect with other families with similar life experiences. Regardless of how different our countries of origin were, the shared experiences of being newcomers/outside to the U.S. facilitated the development of meaningful connections. There are many contributing factors to that reality, but I anticipated being able to continue to engage in open and honest conversations for the purposes of a research project. In general, the participants responded well to the interview format and content. Many of them were motivated by the possibility of indirectly helping other immigrant families going through the SPED process. Parents passionately talked about the obstacles they encountered and shared their hope for change. Many parents used the opportunity to talk to me on these topics to ask questions and seek clarification and even guidance. That was indicative of the overtly shared need for more support and deeper understanding of the process related to SPED.

As an immigrant/CLD parent, I share many of the experiences of the parents I interviewed. My own background and learning in the U.S. have shaped how I see the practices discussed in the study. As I have strong beliefs and positions, as a school psychologist actively involved in the Special Education process, I had to keep my mind open to other experiences and points of view. With my powerful current beliefs, it was hard for me at times to accept that a parent whose child may not be truly disabled could see the identification as a positive thing. I had to be very conscious of the risk that I might influence parents to think in ways that would be more consistent with my perceptions.

That said, the representation of immigrant, non-native, English-speaking educators in U.S. schools is very limited. It is hard to find many other professional areas in which the fact that the person is not a U.S. born native English speaker plays such an important role. There are many CLD doctors, researchers, scientists, and other professionals who more easily integrate into their professional arenas than educators. This, in my opinion, has a negative impact on the

increasingly diverse student population, the teaching staff, and the system as a whole. My experiences as an educator (school psychologist, consultant, administrator) are most likely different from those of my colleagues who represent the dominant culture. The most important motivator for my daily work as an administrator of the EL program in a large suburban district and for conducting this research has been my commitment to advocating for the needs of CLD immigrant families and students. My personal and professional experience has been that CLD immigrant parents, who may be at different levels of speaking English and cultural proficiency, are often put in a “less than” category. Deficit perspectives and negative interactions can have a profound impact on students and parents. While the hurt and frustration may be tremendous, those impacted the most often do not have the voice to express themselves and advocate for their children. As a school psychologist for over 10 years, I have worked with the three largest EL populations in the area and have witnessed firsthand the limited collaboration with CLD parents and the educators’ control over decisions even when the parents did not fully understand the process and implications. As discussed earlier, the system’s limitations are not often acknowledged, and the needs of CLD students are often used to blame the child, target their identities, and label them as deficient.

These experiences have shaped my understanding of the SPED process in a powerful way. Over time, I have observed many situations in which parents have fully agreed with observed student behaviors and have been willing to consider problem-solving strategies to address them. However, they would adamantly disagree that the child had a disability. At this point, the divergent opinions can be seen as defiant behavior, whether they are or not. CLD parents typically have a much richer and broader definition of “the norm” simply because the U.S. norm is narrowly defined in terms of white middle class beliefs and worldviews. Being different from that norm, especially in the context of diverse experiences, should not constitute a disability. What I would classify as inappropriate identification is a result of multiple systemic and individual factors: culturally, linguistically, and conceptually non-responsive general education; the power of standardized tests and related constructs; superficially conceptualized accountability; normalized “disability” culture; and a lack of advocacy for students and families at all levels (national, state, regional, district, and individual). Unfortunately, in my personal experience, identifying a CDL student with a “soft” disability does not have any positive impact on the student. Regardless of the “good” intentions and misguided “advocacy” for the student,

the identification of an unfounded disability is a major disservice guided by a system and individuals who are not invested in addressing the real issues. There are many points of entry in the efforts to truly improve the experiences of CLD families and students. This study focused on improving that collaborative relationship as much as possible, which is an area of study available to me based on my current standing and one that I hope to continue to pursue based on future opportunities.

Timeline

The group of potential participants was identified in October of 2020. The participants were contacted in November of 2020, and interviews were completed over a five-week period (December 2020–January 2021). Transcribing was done in January of 2021, and data were organized and coded in February of 2021.

Summary

This qualitative research utilizing a phenomenological case-study design focused on gaining insight into the experiences of the immigrant parents with the Special Education process in the U.S. This understanding is considered critical because of the significance of the decisions and the intended collaborative manner in which they are made. Twelve families participated in personal interviews sharing their stories and reflecting on key concepts and outcomes. This chapter described the process of organizing and conducting the study, as well as the experiential context of the families who participated. The next chapter takes an in-depth look at the collected information and summarizes the findings resulting from the data analysis.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of immigrant parents with SPED processes. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do the parents understand key concepts, activities, and implications related to this process?
2. What are some specific obstacles and challenges they could identify?
3. What specific steps can be taken to proactively address the barriers?

This study used a purposeful sampling method and a convenience sampling approach for participant selection. The targeted population was selected using the following criteria: (a) immigrant parents (born and raised in another country) who (b) have personally participated in the SPED process/meetings and (c) have a child(ren) identified by the school as having disabilities and who (d) currently qualify to be on an IEP and receive SPED services. My goal was to include a diverse group of families who represented different countries, disability categories, and levels of English proficiency and acculturation.

Table 3

Information About the Participants and Interviews

Parent	Home country	Years in the USA	College or graduate degree	Language(s) used in the interview	Format	Interview length (mins)
1 Mother	Venezuela	4	Yes	Spanish	Face-to-face	68
2 Mother	China	20	Yes	English	Zoom	61
3 Mother	Uzbekistan	9	Yes	Uzbek and Russian	Zoom	55
4 Mother	India	16	Yes	English	Phone	48
5 Mother	India	7	Yes	English	Zoom	49
6 Mother	Honduras	20	Yes	English	Zoom	50
7 Mother	India	18	Yes	English	Zoom	52
8 Mother	Guatemala	19	Yes	English	Zoom	67
9 Mother	Japan	2	Yes	Japanese	Zoom	52
10 Mother and Father	Brazil	4	Yes	English	Zoom	30
11 Mother	Japan	1	Yes	Japanese	Zoom	58
12 Mother	Rep. of Korea	5	Yes	Korean	Zoom	90 min

The parents were asked to indicate the language they would like to use to complete the interview, and the researcher provided interpreters as needed. The 12 families represent nine different home countries where the parents were born and raised. None of the represented countries have systems to identify and/or support students with disabilities that are similar to the ones in the U.S.

In the State of Ohio, children with developmental disabilities or other special needs are supported by the Help Me Grow (HMG) agency from birth to age three. At age three, students who have documented special needs and qualify for services as determined by a school-based team in collaboration with parents and possibly other agencies transition to preschool services. These services are specified by the IEP team and are available free of charge through the local school district of residence. The Special Education services are provided by the district-based staff in a public, school-based, preschool program, and others are delivered in the child's home or daycare facility. Preschoolers with such needs could attend one extra year of preschool prior to entering Kindergarten as determined by his/her IEP team. School-age Special Education services are provided to students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. Some students with significant disabilities may be served by the school system until the age of 22, at which point they transition to adult-based services.

None of the participating parents attended elementary or secondary school in the U.S. All of the parents have attained college or graduate degrees in their home countries and/or in the U.S. Some of the interviewed parents do not currently work outside of the home. Others currently hold professional, highly specialized jobs. Three of the families plan to stay in the U.S. temporarily (3–5 years). Two of these three families will leave because of company assignments, and the other one will leave after the children complete formal secondary education in their current schools. As many of the interviewed parents and/or their spouses have professional positions that may require transfer to another country, they are prepared to leave the country as determined by their employer. None of the families were involved in such transition during the time the interviews took place.

The students whose parents were interviewed represented the following grade levels: preschool (2), elementary grades K–6 (8), and secondary grades 7–12 (2). Two of the students were females and 10 males. Half of the students (6) were born in the U.S. and half (6) in the home country. Four of the students participated in formal education in their home countries for a

range of 1–7 years. The students were identified for special education services under the following categories: Preschooler with a Disability (2), Autism (3), Emotional Disturbance (1), Intellectual Disability (1), Speech and Language Impairment (1), Specific Learning Disability (2), and Other Health Impairment (2). The number of years for which the students have been receiving Special Education services ranged from 1–10 years, with a median of 3.5 and an average of 4.

All of the students who were educated in another country prior to coming to the U.S. had documented learning or social-emotional difficulties that required some level of individualized support in their home countries. Two of these students received some form of additional support to meet their educational needs. One moved to the U.S. shortly after starting school in their home country and did not receive any individualized supports while there. One of the students with such needs did not receive any support, as they were not available. The student's parents looked for ways to better understand his needs and find ways to support him independently from the school. Ultimately, they moved to the U.S. due to these challenges and with the understanding that the needs could be met in the schools here. Six of the school-age students were born and raised in the U.S., and five of them were identified for Special Education services when they were preschoolers. Four of the students were supported between the ages of 0–3 by the Help me Grow (HMG) agency. Two of the students who were identified when they were preschoolers lived in other U.S. states. All of the children who are currently or had been previously identified as Preschoolers with a Disability received some guidance and support through pediatricians or day care providers. The parents of five of the seven students who at some point were identified as Preschoolers with a Disability actively advocated for their needs and possible identification and services. The parents of three of the five students identified for special education as school-age children also actively advocated for Special Education services. Three of the students were initially identified for Special Education services while attending other school districts (two locally and one out of state). The two who were identified locally moved to the current district specifically for the special education services.

Individual transcripts represented each participant's input organized by the questions as well as the flow of the story as they told it. The information was then organized by the specific topics reflected in the questions, and data across transcripts were compared and analyzed for themes. The analysis of the parent input revealed many shared experiences and beliefs as well as

some that were unique to a few participants. The findings are organized in tables below. Table 4 includes the study's research questions, the interview questions designed to provide relevant information and the topics that emerged from the questions and answers. Table 5 highlights key topics and themes that were prevalent in the answers, as determined by having been discussed by more than eight (over 75%) of the participants. Appendix E provides a full table of all topics and themes discussed, and Appendix F provides a table that contains information about the responses given by each family in relation to the identified themes.

Table 4

Research Questions, Interview Questions, & Topics

Research Question	Interview Questions	Topics
What are the experiences of immigrant parents with the Special Education process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What comes to mind when you think of American schools? • How are the American schools in general different from the schools in your native country? • If your child attended school in another/other countries, what was that experience like? • How do you think your child was developing/doing academically prior to the evaluation process being initiated? • Describe the process of identifying your child as an SWD. • What were the Special Education meetings like - what did you like, did not like about the meetings? • Describe how you felt about the decisions made as part of the process; reflect on your emotions and thoughts please. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of U.S. schools • Perceptions of school staff • Process of initial identification for Special education services • Perception of team meetings • Parent role in the process • Emotional response • Challenges
How do the parents understand key concepts, activities, and implications related to this process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your long-term goals for your child? • Tell me what you think the role of Special Education is? • Who was mostly in control of the identification process, meetings, and overall decisions? • What do you think the role of the parents in this process needs to be? • Describe what your role was in that process. • Tell me in your own words what disability means in general and in this context. • How do you think the identification will impact your child's life, immediate and long term future? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role and impact of Special Education • Parent voice • Term disability
What are some specific obstacles and challenges they could identify?	Did you wish some things were different about that process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges • Needs • Solutions
What specific steps can be taken to proactively address the barriers?		

Table 5
Key Topics & Themes

Topics	Themes	Number of Participants
Perceptions of U.S. schools	a. Significant differences between American school system and those in the home countries	12
	b. Flexible education system that is responsive to students' needs and allows all students to go through	10
	c. Appreciation of the opportunity to attend school and have needed supports provided to their child	12
Perceptions of school staff	a. Knowledgeable	12
	b. Collaborative	12
Experiences with the initial identification for Special Education services	a. Challenging experience	10
	b. Need to understand various resources and Special Education process	11
Perceptions of team meetings	a. Valuable form of communication	10
Role and impact of Special Education	a. Long-term goals for the students	12
	b. Positive impact/closing the gap	12
Parent voice	a. Actively invited to contribute	12

Perception of U.S. Schools

The most dominant theme around the parents' perceptions of U.S. schools was appreciation of the system's ability to meet the needs of their students. Parents made statements such as: "here there is a lot of help for the students; education is so much better," there are "limited opportunities to support special needs back home, more supports here," and "it is not easy for you if you are behind; you do not have supports." Parents described the system as more "flexible" and "responsive" to the diverse needs of students and as creating more opportunities for the students to learn and be successful in school. They also stated that "the U.S. schools had more abundant resources (infrastructure, staff, materials) compared to the schools in their home countries." The perception that the education system and instructional approach are less structured and rigid and "more positive and encouraging" was also strongly represented. The parents were grateful that their children did not have to drop out of school or be subjected to

segregation as a result of their special needs, something many described as a common practice in their home countries.

Overall, the parents emphasized the significant differences between the home country school system they are familiar with and the one in the U.S. They shared that the school system is “very different; the way they teach and curriculum is totally different.” Differences were perceived both positively and negatively. Several of the participants did not feel the U.S. schools provided enough clarity about general education, curriculum, learning targets, and objectives. While parents focused on the lack of “textbooks” and the use of more informal “papers,” their need was primarily around understanding what core curriculum is focused on and how they can support their children. The lack of adequate information and awareness of local general education approaches created space for negative perceptions of academic learning in U.S. schools. For example, one of the parents extensively and passionately discussed the lack of focus on handwriting as part of first grade curriculum. This priority was deemed important due to the parent’s personal experience and the belief that it should be a universal instructional target. Other parents openly expressed their confusion about general education practices and what they perceived as a very unstructured environment and instructional approach to learning. While they did not assign value to these differences, they were puzzled by them and concerned about effectively supporting their children.

Perception of School Staff

Most parents perceived school staff to be very “supportive,” “understanding,” “collaborative,” “patient,” “dependable,” and “responsive” to the family’s needs. Seven of the parents used the word “helpful” as the first one to describe the staff with whom they interacted. Parents also indicated that the special education staff seemed to know their children well and the parents “learn more about their children from the teachers.” The participants also stated that school staff is knowledgeable and prepared to meet the needs of the students as well as open and responsive to the input from parents. One parent was pleased that “they are not authoritarian.” In addition, a much-appreciated aspect of the relationship was the staff recognition of the emotional needs of the families as captured in statements like “they know how we felt” and “we felt their support.” Overall, the parents were grateful for the systems of support built into the schools as well as the staff addressing their children’s special needs.

Experience and Challenges with the Initial Identification for Special Education Services

The process of the initial identification as a preschool/student with a disability was a very challenging one for most of the participants. The challenges varied in nature. One of the most intensive ones were associated with the difficulty of developing a shared understanding of the needs of the children and the need for the parents to engage in on-going “relentless” advocacy. This obstacle was mostly associated with the process involving younger children (preschool age) but also present in the school-age children experiences. In the words of one of the parents: “there was a battle to fight the system.”

Some of the differences regarding the children’s needs and possible services resulted from a transition from the home country where different sets of rules and understandings guide such practices. In one family’s situation, the child had documented developmental challenges and was receiving related therapies in the home country, but getting access to the same services in the U.S. proved to be very difficult. The parents were aware of the needs and started seeking professional support right away but encountered multiple obstacles. Due to their concerns being dismissed initially, the parents needed to seek the input from multiple medical professionals in order to find needed help. Parents were frustrated with these experiences and unnecessary delays due to the local medical and intervention staff not accepting the information from the home country and not understanding the needs of the child. Their frustration increased when they noticed differences in how various agencies perceived the student’s needs—some agreed and others disagreed with the need for support. The process improved significantly, according to the participants, once the student was connected with the school-based team and started receiving preschool services.

Another aspect of the process, especially for the preschool children, that was very challenging for families was the need to interact with and have multiple appointments with general and specialized medical staff, early intervention providers, and the school system. The fact that each agency functions independently and follows a unique set of rules and regulations is very confusing and overwhelming for parents. While there were good reasons why parents were directed to various places and professionals, one parent shared, “We did not know what to do next. It was a mess. We really hoped someone could help us.” The family was not only overwhelmed with the finding that the child had special needs, but they also felt lost in terms of accessing services. “Actually,” the participant added, “We did not know there were Special

Education services for young children.” The parents had a hard time understanding the lack of more seamless connection between medical and education providers and were puzzled that once they got connected to the school, another evaluation process had to be initiated (“there were many appointments, many evaluations”). The perceived delay in delivery of services was upsetting to them because they believed that “when we got the diagnosis from a very good hospital, we were thinking maybe, when they see that, they would automatically accept him.” The parent stated: “I understand the process, but I wish it was faster as early intervention is very important.” However, once the initial school-based evaluation was completed, the parent felt satisfied with the plan and support.

Some of the families received much needed guidance from day care centers and pediatricians’ offices. The parents who were not aware of the Special Education system for young children reached out to daycare and preschool providers or depended on the guidance from their pediatrician. One parent shared that they “enrolled the child in the preschool because he was not speaking at age 4.” The parent shared her concerns with the providers upon enrollment, and they were able to provide information about evaluations/services options. Based on the guidance, the child was able to access Special Education services in another state prior to moving to the current one.

Another family who had a prematurely born child who needed a number of services (Brain balance, occupational, physical, and outdoor therapies as well as nurses visits) still struggled to provide on-going support as they received varying opinions, and finally, when the child started regular preschool, the staff there raised concerns that lead to the parents going back to the hospital to seek the professional assistance that was needed in order to connect them to the school system’s services.

Pediatric care providers were also instrumental in noticing and/or validating concerns and making recommendations for specialized evaluations and care. However, a couple of parents indicated that their concerns were dismissed and/or minimized by a pediatrician because another language than English was spoken in the family home and the child had exposure to two languages. Parents indicated that the professionals would attribute the differences to the bilingual environment and “they would say because you speak Spanish and I would hate that” and I would say “don’t you understand she has the same problem in both languages?” One parent concluded that when the professionals did not have good explanations they would say “it is because of the

languages.” Another parent shared that the documented developmental concerns in the home country were dismissed in the U.S. because of the presence of two languages.

Most families who had children needing specialized support at an early age stated that the awareness of resources was extremely limited, and connecting to providers was very challenging. However, once the connection was established, the relationship was productive and helpful in the transition to school age services. According to one parent, “They helped us with the process. It was a smooth transition, but the connection was hard. When you are foreign, you do not know what to do. It was overwhelming.”

Even when the diagnosis and supports changed over time and more evaluations were needed, parents found comfort in connecting with school-based or other professionals who were able to assist them with guidance and relevant information. Most found the need to interact with a regular and specialized medical staff, intervention providers outside of school, and school-based teams very overwhelming and complicated.

One of the parents described a long (several years) process of advocating for the daughter’s “invisible” special needs. The “nightmare” began at an early age when the parents noticed some concerning differences between the child and her siblings. As the parent noted, “It was hard to understand her case,” which ultimately involved a number of specialized evaluations and professionals who noted that “the case was confusing” as “some numbers are really high and some really low.” In this situation, the testing and professional opinion of evaluators outside of the school system provided the family the tools to effectively advocate for the services they perceived as needed. The parent expressed a lot of frustration with the time it took to get the desired result at school. “I told them she has something, and you need to do something, but it was me who came up with the diagnosis. Otherwise, they would not do much. They just said the teacher would help you.” The parent also showed understanding that school teams have to follow education laws and practices, which often are very different from those in medical settings.

Another parent identified the lack of awareness about available services and access to them as a major source of concern and frustration. Shortly after going through an international adoption, the parents noticed behaviors that indicated developmental challenges. It was hard for the parents to figure out how to support the child, so the mother started her own research. This was how they connected with the early intervention provider. She said, “It is only through them that we realized that the public school/preschool was an option at the time.” This parent

explained how the process continued to be overwhelming and confusing over time: “We felt uncomfortable and lost at the beginning, did not know about early intervention and preschool services, still not sure how to best support especially in relation to future goals, learned how to advocate better over the years.” She also emphasized that “immigrant parents are at a disadvantage as far as awareness and access to services.”

The significant differences between the home country and U.S. school systems and the way students with different needs are supported in them is the main reason the process was challenging for some of the families more recently arriving in the U.S. These parents did not feel they knew nearly enough about the general and Special Education systems in the U.S. schools and felt uncomfortable and lost in the process. Although they appreciated the opportunity to be involved and the support from an interpreter, they did not really know how to engage and were not comfortable with that role. One mother stated that,

in my home country, the educators came up with the system of supports, and they told the family, others told us, what they are going to do and asked us for our understanding, but here we are asked about our opinion, and that is confusing.

In addition, the IEP as a concept does not exist in the same form, and additional supports are provided outside of the regular school day. Another mother with similar experience shared that “it is hard to understand what is going on; when we get questions, it is hard to answer because we do not know much about the school system.” She added that, “when the school communicates with us, it would be helpful to state what the expectations from the parents are, as otherwise the communication is confusing.” Both of these parents said that they are still not clear about the roles of various teachers and other related service personnel in the school. In the words of one parent: “I still do not understand what the IEP is for and what the ESL teacher does.”

Some of the parents who did not report significant challenges in the process have children with more “mild” forms of a disability (e.g., speech and language difficulties, attention problems, specific learning disabilities) and their needs were not as intense or as difficult to understand and support. Their access to needed services was easier and parents were satisfied with the process. Other parents who experienced a smoother transition to obtaining services benefited from relevant documentation from the home country. The dominant parent experience was that when in contact with the school-based team, the process was better, and they experienced fewer obstacles. Finally, a parent who spent tremendous amounts of energy to figure out a way to

support her child in the home country found much better success here in spite of the language and cultural barriers. She was relieved that her child was able to be evaluated and provided with additional services in the regular school setting.

The student's special education services were reported to be better understood than the general education goals, but even with the close and relatively frequent communication, some parents needed more. For example, a parent shared that "different agencies and therapy providers use different approaches" and that it is hard to merge them for the benefit of the child as well as determine which one(s) is(are) a good fit. This parent also expressed need for support for the parents going through the process on several occasions during the interview. Simply regularly attending team meetings is not enough to help parents understand the process and how to effectively engage in it. Even the parents who have had several years of experience with Special Education expressed frustration that, while they did not agree with some decisions—some as significant as the disability category, some less critical as the form of behavior reinforcement—they did not know how to challenge them. Some instances of misunderstanding and frustration included situations when professionals would dismiss the concerns the parents shared due to their diverse cultural and linguistic background. One parent said: "It was such a struggle to be heard and convince them that the same issues were present in the home language as well." The need for parent education and support in the process was overtly stated as well as evident even when the parents did not explicitly mention it. The above-described experiences illustrate the need for developing shared understanding around the system of special education but also making the connection with general education practices and needs.

Perceptions of Team Meetings

Team meetings are one of the most dominant forms of collaboration between the educators and families in the process. Critical decisions about initial and ongoing eligibility, specific services, accommodations, and future planning are made and documented as part of the meetings. Because of the powerful short and long-term impact of the team decisions, the meetings have a critical importance for the student and families. Special education meetings are often very structured and driven by the mandated paperwork. The process is very routine and compliance focused (e.g., deadlines, parent participation, agreements). Parents are required participants, and decisions cannot be made/finalized without their explicit permission. The meetings are attended by Special Education services providers (e.g., intervention specialist,

speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, counselor) and general education teacher(s) or a representative directly involved in the child's education. The meetings are also typically attended by a school psychologist and a school administrator. If the parents have language needs an interpreter is present as well.

Most parents (10) found the meeting to be a valuable experience and an appreciated form of communication between school and home. They found them helpful due to the information that was shared by "the experts" and the opportunity to collaborate with them. The participants who appreciated the meetings also liked the fact that various professionals were present and that they could learn from them and ask questions about "every aspect of the child's development." Although some parents found the meetings very long with overwhelming amounts of information presented— One parent shared that she leaves "with a headache every time."—they believed the experience was worth it due to the critical importance for the student. Parents found it helpful that information is shared in advance for a parent review. Some wished that the important information and decisions could be revisited in a more informal and on-going manner. Parents shared an understanding of the extensive required paperwork—"if it is helpful, we will do it anytime"— and while some felt that it made the meetings more compliance focused, they accepted it as a necessary part of the process.

Almost half of the parents expressed some degree of confusion and lack of clarity regarding the meetings. Some were not sure what the purpose was; others did not see how they could successfully integrate in the process. While their input was invited and they had to indicate their agreement, the signatures did not necessarily indicate true understanding. While some parents felt they knew enough about the education system to ask questions and make suggestions, others shared that they did not know enough to formulate meaningful questions. The parents shared concerns that when they had questions that were not directly related to the specific topics discussed at the meeting, they did not have a chance to ask them. For example, a parent said that "going over the specific objectives is helpful, but I do not know how these impact the long term plan for my child."

Regardless of the noted rigidity and limitations of the meeting format, most parents felt welcomed and supported by the school staff. Two of the parents who struggled to answer the question about the role of the parent in the process (discussed further below) provided limited input regarding the meetings. It was hard for them to see "the big picture," and in their responses,

they focused primarily on specific issues around the IEP and disagreements with the educators. This by itself shows the need for further and more meaningful collaboration within the student's team.

Role of the Parent in the Process

In response to the question about their role in the process, most parents emphasized the importance of knowing the developmental and learning needs of their child and responding to concerns by initiating conversations with professionals (pediatricians, teachers, psychologists, therapists). In separate interviews, participants explained that their role as parents is “to know your child,” “trust your instincts,” “seek help,” and “relentlessly advocate for their [child's] needs.” One of the participants described the role of the parents in the process as “fundamental.” For some of the families, the identification process started as a result of the parents' concerns, and they talked about the critical need to take action and make sure the process leads to a support plan for the child. Several parents discussed at length the burden of figuring out the system of support available to children, especially the younger ones who are not yet school age. “Knowing the resources out there” was identified as a key first step in the advocacy process by the parents in the cases in which the parents initiated the evaluation. Awareness of the resources was also identified as one of the major obstacles for immigrant parents, especially those with young children (preschool age). In addition to lack of information about early intervention and other support services, parents reported that the collaboration between agencies is challenging, and the communication with all involved was overwhelming for them.

The advocacy role was identified as a “critical one” regardless of the age of the children as parents had to engage in it at various stages of their children's educational experiences. According to one of the participants, “parents have to be very active and critical in the education process.” Parents also emphasized the importance of a nurturing home environment supportive of the plan for addressing the special needs of the child, as “the goals need to be aligned.” As one of the parents said, “The school and other services are a bonus, but the major responsibility is on us, the parents.” The need to develop collaborative relationships with the educators was also indicated in the responses.

Not all participants expressed awareness of the active role of the parents in the process. Two participants struggled to understand the question and come up with answers. They saw the process as mostly driven by the “professionals” and saw their participation in more passive

terms. Two other participants explicitly stated that they did “not feel comfortable” with the level of active participation in the school-based process. One reason for this preference was the limited familiarity with the U.S. school system and lack of skills to navigate it well. Another reason given was the cultural norms of the home country, which did not promote collaborative relationships and shared ownership of the learning process and support between school and home. The two participants viewed the “school to be in charge” and did not feel the need to challenge that regardless of how they felt about the team decisions.

Emotional Response

Answering the question about their emotional responses and experiences was not the first time the participants had a chance to express their feelings. Many had already talked about their gratitude for the support their children receive and their appreciation of the system that created more opportunities for diverse learners. When asked explicitly to talk about their emotions, most parents (9) reflected on the strong emotions they have felt at different points in the process. Most started with naming the negative ones: “overwhelmed,” “shocked,” “frustrated,” “disappointed,” “heartbroken,” “scared,” “lonely,” “confused,” “worried,” “lost,” and “uncomfortable.” Some of the responses were in relation to agencies/organizations outside of the school system, such as doctors’ offices, early intervention services, and how they responded to the parent’s concerns and advocacy efforts. Many of the initial strong negative feelings were experienced in relation to the realization that the child had special needs, some of which were significant. Some emotions were provoked by the lack of a support system around the family to help them manage the new and often unwelcome experiences. The need for such support was most powerfully expressed by the parents of young children who did not yet have a school-based team.

The positive emotions parents shared—“supported,” “validated,” “understood,” “encouraged,” “relieved,” “grateful”—were mostly related to the school-based IEP teams. After the initial struggle to find appropriate professionals and manage an unknown, often complicated system of various providers and rules, parents felt more supported and understood by the school teams. The negative feelings that were expressed in relation to the school setting were in the context of general education practices and the difficulty of the parent having to initiate a formal Special Education evaluation. Otherwise, the participants had mostly positive experiences and associated feelings in relation to their student’s IEP team.

Three of the participants had a hard time addressing this topic. One of the parents stated, “nothing has provoked me,” and the other two explained that the experiences have been difficult to understand and make sense of but did not share their emotions regarding that. It was interesting to observe that the interpreter who supported both of these parents used the English word for emotions instead of the native language one. These two parents shared the same home country and have arrived in the U.S. relatively recently. Another unusual response was when one participant admitted to being “uncomfortable with the efforts done for my child.” This feeling was shaped in part as a result of lack of support in the student’s previous schooling in the home country.

Role and Impact of Special Education

All twelve families expressed strong hope that their children, regardless of their current differences from typical peers, will overcome their challenges to a degree that will allow them to be independent, productive citizens who have “normal” experiences. While some parents explicitly mentioned college education as one of their hopes, most expressed hopes that their children will have jobs that allow them to do what they “are good at.” While parents were aware of the students’ special needs, they did not see these necessarily as long term limitations. Some were more cautiously optimistic about their child becoming similar to peers. One participant said, “Well he has Autism. You have to take it for what it is, but I hope he will be a productive member of the society, have a career of his own ... everything else is a bonus.” One parent whose child has been receiving special education services for a number of years expressed concerns about the lack of in-depth discussion about the relationship between the IEP goals and objectives and the long- term goals for the child. This parent was also concerned about the possible “limiting” impact of the IEP on the student’s future life goals. For example, the parents were not sure if students on an IEP would have access to college education. A common theme was the goal to “overcome their challenge” and be similar to others, to “realize their potential,” “be normal/typical,” and “independent and successful.”

Most parents saw the special education services as a critical support needed for “closing the gap,” and “help[ing] them catch up with the rest of the students.” Parents stated that the program is “worth it” because of its “positive impact” on addressing the “students’ weaknesses and strengths” and “trying to solve their issues.” One parent focused on the need to become deeply familiar with the educational system in the U.S. and how to “successfully navigate it” in

order to “use the system to your advantage.” She acknowledged that, while it is very challenging to learn the different laws, practices, school, and community resources, is it worth going through the process in order to obtain Special Education services. Consistent with previously discussed positions, most parents were grateful for the support available and provided to their child. One parent expressed disbelief that “so many people, 8 or 9, were there just for my child,” and she added, “You can’t find this anywhere else.” Several of the parents talked about the improvement in their children they have noticed over time and how they have “trust in the process.” One parent stated that if their child were not on an IEP, she “would have suffered more.” Another said that the support provided in his current school was something that the schools back home or the parents could not provide while they lived there.

Three of the parents reflected on possible negative impacts of the identification and Special Education services. One parent stated that she has “mixed feelings due to the narrow focus of the IEP.” Another expressed her concerns that the current identification may negatively impact applying to college—“if he is on an IEP what happens in the future?” The same parent shared her confusion about various kinds of support that school teams have discussed in the past. Specifically, she was not sure what a 504 Plan is and how it differs from an IEP. A parent who struggled for a long time to convince educators of the need to evaluate her child shared, “I have doubts” about the IEP but added, “She is still improving, she is making steps forward, she is going up so I have to calm down, and if it is not working, I would start worrying.”

The positive perception of the Special Education services dominated the parent input. Parents did not associate the additional support with stigma and limiting the child’s experiences. Only a few expressed some vague concerns about the long-term impact of going through school on an IEP. Some of the parents also acknowledged the lack of conversation around this specific topic during the special education meetings.

Parent Voice

All parents indicated that their input was consistently invited during the various meetings and interactions with the schools. Most parents also felt that their voices were heard, and their input considered. Some parents indicated that the same could not be said about some of the other agencies/organizations (e.g., Early Intervention Services, medical offices) they interacted with. A couple of parents indicated that their position on various issues was not given enough weight and ultimately did not change the team decision. One of the situations with disagreement involved

the specific disability category and another was about forms of behavioral reinforcement. One of the parents shared that their opinion did not seem to matter as much prior to the child being identified as a student with a disability, but that changed once the student had an IEP. This specific parent also shared that it took a long time and effort on her part to advocate for what she perceived to be special needs of her child.

While all parents felt invited to share their input, they struggled to make meaningful contributions due to lack of familiarity with the system and its processes. Parents did not feel they could influence the decisions and actions of the team due to their limited understanding and ultimately perceived their involvement as superficial. As a result, they felt that they had missed opportunities to shape the team decisions. Comments on this theme included the following: “we did not know what we were doing,” “we would have been more active if we knew more at the time,” “we are asked to make suggestions, but it is hard to think of what to say or do,” and “we believed the educators are the experts, and we did not think we should be giving input.” Some parents shared that the lack of familiarity with general education practices limited their ability to understand the Special Education process and ultimately limited their ability to advocate for their children. Some parents were confused and overwhelmed by the general, open-ended questions such as “what questions do you have,” or “what goals you would like to see.” One parent stated, “broad questions are not helpful because of lack of familiarity, so specificity is critical.” Though they felt they had limited understanding of Special Education processes, many parents felt they had a better understanding of and impact on those processes and supports than the general education ones. Some expressed a desire to get the same level of communication about general education practices.

The Term “Disability”

The term disability is often discussed in relation to its stigmatizing impact and is often identified as a barrier for immigrant parents. More than half of the participants explicitly discussed the word stigma, but when they did so, it was to say that the term disability is “not so negative,” “not a bad word,” “not a difficult one for me,” and “I am ok with the word.” In the words of one of the parents, “People in the U.S. are more accepting,” and “It is harder for me to face the problem my child has than the word used to describe it.” The same parent further discussed the differences of opinion around the term Autism and how it is not “necessarily a disease” but “a broad concept” and “a continuum of differences.” Most participants in this study

had been aware of their child's differences, and they were mostly accepting of the labels used as part of the identification and service delivery models.

Eight of the participants focused on the benefits of the label given to their child's needs in the process. They expressed their belief that the help the child received outweighed any possible negative impact of the term. Several parents shared that "some terminology is needed" and that "you have to see things in perspective and be open minded." Some found the label to give much needed clarity around the needs of the child and possible treatments and support. Overall, there was shared understanding that the label "was needed to get the help," and help was needed and welcome. One of the parents shared that she uses "the word according to her audience." For example, she would use the word disability in the school or medical setting, but in everyday conversations, she would use the word condition.

Parents also explicitly and implicitly referenced cultural differences in response to the term disability. Some shared their initial reaction of shock and disagreement when the term was mentioned and their resistance to it. However, they changed their response when further explanation and context were provided. Another reflection was focused on the fact that maybe children are not identified as easily and/or as early in other countries, but that also meant that needed intervention was delayed or not provided. One parent discussed at length the confusion and frustration about the fact that two different labels were assigned in the home country and U.S. Another parent remembered their initial concern about possible different (segregated) programming for their child, as well as worries about the impact of the label on future post-secondary plans. Two of the more recently arrived parents focused on their difficulty in conceptualizing the word given lack of equivalent in their home country, as well as their lack of familiarity with the new (U.S.) context. Because of that, it was difficult for them to express what they think or how they feel about the term disability other than saying it is a sensitive topic.

Similarly to the question about emotional response, the interpreter used the English word for disability. This again is an indicator of cultural differences and the presence of concepts that are defined and perceived differently in other countries. The parent input around the critical term disability was more consistent with the American perception than the way it is conceptualized in the home countries of the families. Most parents accurately perceived the use of the term as a necessary step in the process of obtaining desired services. This understanding shifted the focus from the term to the outcomes of the process.

Needs and Possible Improvements

A few of the participants added specific needs and possible solutions. They expressed the desire for their concerns to be validated or closely examined and their voice be considered even when not in agreement with the other team members. Another need was the ongoing support for the parents to fully understand the process and decisions and their place in relation to general education.

One of the participants talked about the power of cultural differences in terms of communication and asking for help. She indicated that “it is not easy in our culture for parents and children to be open about difficulties; it is considered shameful,” but their “lives could be better if we ask for help.” She concluded by saying that “difficulty and disability are not easily admitted in our culture, but that is the right thing to do for your child.”

Summary

This chapter contains the findings based on interviews with 12 immigrant families around their experiences with the Special Education process. Although the participants represented nine different counties of origin and the students qualified for Special Education under seven different categories, the parents shared a lot of similar experiences and needs. The parents expressed overwhelming appreciation for the additional services for students with disabilities that are integrated into the regular school structures. They also valued the relationship with and support received from their students’ school-based team. Most participants appreciated the opportunity to be informed and actively participate in the IEP process, and the majority also experienced the need for more guidance and information about how to best contribute to the decisions made by the teams. Based on their understanding of the purpose and impact of the IEPs parents expressed the belief that the additional services will minimize or fully close the learning and other gaps that led to the initial identification for Special Education. In their reflection on this topic, parents indicated a need for more information and collaboration around general education practices and performance levels so that they could be in a better position to evaluate their students’ progress. That has a high importance because of the parents’ hopes that the children will have future experiences and outcomes that are the same as their typical peers. The two most significant challenges in the Special Education process as expressed by the participants fell in two categories—navigating the experiences working with multiple agencies during the preschool

years (e.g., early intervention, pediatricians, evaluators at Children's Hospital) and understanding the process for families with little experience with U.S. school system.

One important area that falls under the experiences with schools is understanding the general education system. Parents were provided with access to detailed information about their child's special needs and IEP goals but had a limited understanding of what the students are learning in the regular classroom. This is a critical piece relevant to most immigrant families, not just the ones who have students with identified disabilities. All participants were educated in their countries of origin, and they indicated that there are significant differences between the systems they are familiar with and that of U.S. schools, which can be complicated many differences among schools within the U.S. as well. Learning enough about school organizations, processes, supports, and learning expectations is an overwhelming task for many parents. Schools and families would greatly benefit from a close collaboration and partnership around that need. Most participants expressed strong commitment to providing support for their children in the learning process but found it hard to do that well in the absence of shared understanding.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the experiences of immigrant parents within the Special Education process. One goal was to determine the parents' understanding of the key concepts, activities, and implications related to this process. Another goal was to identify specific obstacles and challenges parents face in the process. Insight into these areas was needed so that schools could support the families accordingly. This chapter provides a summary of conclusions drawn from the interviews. Implications for future research are listed, and specific recommendations for schools related to these findings are included.

Conclusions

This research showed that experiences of immigrant parents who have gone through the process of identifying their children for Special Education were highly divergent. It would be presumptuous and dangerous to stereotype the needs of and make assumptions about the ability to navigate Special Education systems based on the parents' language proficiency, educational level, or country of origin. Further, the data from this study suggests that factors such as skill with the English language, education level, country of origin, and types of identified disabilities have *less* of an impact on the perception of and involvement in the process than time lived in the U.S. and the parents' level of familiarity with the U.S. mainstream culture and general and special education school systems. The longer immigrant families have lived in the country *and* the more integrated they were in the American society, the more similar their experiences appear to be as compared with those of U.S. born, native-English-speaking parents. It is critical to recognize that, even when the parents are highly educated and have command of the English language, being new to U.S. schools can mean that they do not have adequate knowledge and understanding about how the system functions and their role in it. In general, parents who have an awareness of U.S. laws and educational practices learn over time how to navigate the complex education and medical systems and use them to their child's advantage. With that said, time lived in the U.S. that does not include time spent in active engagement with the educational and other systems is not sufficient to develop the comfort and proficiency level needed to effectively participate in these processes.

Most of the participants in this study reported that they did not experience language-barrier-related difficulties within the Special Education processes; this was due to their own

proficiency in English or because they had the support of an interpreter. However, they also noted that being able to understand the words used in those processes did not equate to an adequate understanding of the complex meanings behind the words and resulted in limited ability of the parents to engage in the discourse. This resulted in a sense of confusion and lack of clarity around specific issues, such as how to resolve a conflict around the disability category, behavior management techniques, or what the long-term impact of these decisions on the child may be. Several of the parents used the interview opportunity to ask me questions about specifics around their child's IEP and other related experiences. Although it was not the point of the interviews, for them, this was an opportunity to discuss questions they did not know how to address otherwise. Some of the issues that were discussed in this manner had been going on for years. This finding supports my professional observation that, while most parents are in regular attendance at their children's meetings, they may leave them with unanswered questions.

Regardless of the perceived success of the process and reaching the goal of creating a support plan for the student, the initial evaluation can be overwhelming, confusing, and frustrating. Some of the reasons for that were related to the need to engage with multiple medical, social, and educational institutions that function independently, based on different sets of laws and regulations. These differences lead to different criteria for determining a "need" for support, as well as different approaches in responding to the identified need. This is often confusing for the parents because the differences are not always explained, and the interaction with each entity is not presented in the more global context as part of a comprehensive process. This is a major limitation of the current system impacting all families and children but especially preschool ones. All parent participants who, due to the nature of their child's special needs, had to interact with multiple entities expressed the need for some guidance and support while going through the process. They also emphasized the need for more systematic and systemic collaboration between all of the agencies so that the parents do not have to be responsible for navigating through the process. The parents who were connected to the local early intervention organization generally felt more supported and experienced smoother transition to preschool Special Education services. Parents also felt support in navigating the process from the school-based teams once that connection had been established.

Establishing effective communication channels for on-going collaboration with the local community and immigrant groups should be high priority for any district. The specific ways this

is done will be different depending on the resources and needs of each community. There are a number of ways in which a school district can support families in the process of navigating the initial experiences with the process both before the child is school-aged and after they are enrolled in the school system. Schools are often in a better position than the early intervention agencies, hospitals, and pediatric offices to have close relationships with the local community. Schools can utilize their knowledge of the community structures and organizations to connect with parents in a proactive as well as reactive way. For example, if the local community of immigrants already living in the district is familiar with available resources, such as early intervention services, they can share that with newly arrived families. Many new immigrants initially depend on guidance and support from their respective immigrant communities. The relationships are maintained over time, and the community, if not very transient, can develop a well-informed system of supports. In many communities, there are established formal organizations supporting immigrants and refugees. They often provide mentors/sponsors for new families to help them integrate into the new society. Such organizations would be a good way to help families become aware of resources. The schools can also connect with local pediatric service providers, make them aware of the challenges, and collaborate around overcoming them.

Once the student enrolls in a school district, the school staff can obtain parental permission to connect with other service providers; parents need to be informed about that possibility and be supported in the process of completing required documentation. Because of their experiences in their home countries, parents are often not aware of the importance of cross-agency collaboration and, as a result, may not share critical medical documentation. Educating parents around such practices is an important support schools can provide for immigrant families.

The immigrant parents in this study who had experiences with school systems that do not accommodate the needs of diverse learners expressed gratitude for the support and attention given to the special needs of their children. They were appreciative of all of the resources allocated to Special Education services and the time spent designing and monitoring the specific plans. Many were also thankful for the invitation to actively participate in the process, something that is often different from established practices in other countries. While parents are legally mandated participants in the U.S. process and ultimately required to give permission for all educational experiences that deviate from the typical, the participants did not feel that the

“compliance-focused” participation was particularly meaningful. The parents were challenged by the opportunities to actively participate due to lack of familiarity with the education system and knowing how to determine the impact of each practice and decision. For some, the need for active involvement was not well understood and was perceived as confusing and burdensome.

The narrow focus of the IEP was seen as problematic by many of the participating parents in part because the meeting conversations do not typically consider the relationship between the Special Education goals and general education grade-level learning standards and learning outcomes. In general, the benefits of Special Education in relation to the specific IEP goals were recognized, but parents in the study expressed concern about the more global picture and outcomes for their children. Several participants emphasized the need for more collaboration and communication with general education teachers. Knowing how the two systems interact and support each other was identified as a key aspect of making informed decisions. This point was especially important given the parents’ high hopes for “typical” future experiences and for their children becoming productive and successful members of society. Most parents saw Special Education services as the support needed to close the gap between their child and typical peers; however, none of the participants talked about specifics in that respect or offered any other way to validate this belief.

The parents’ diverse cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and educational practices did not seem to have a negative impact in terms of seeking and accepting special education support in the U.S.—including labeling the child as a student with disability, creating a formal plan, and involving specialists in various developmental and academic areas. Parents indicated that they were open minded in the process of understanding their child’s special needs, welcomed the input from various specialists, and embraced the findings and services. Most parents were also very accepting of the term “disability,” which has strong negative connotations in many other countries, can lead to stigma and segregation of the students, and is initially rejected by immigrant parents when brought up in a U.S. school setting (Kisel, 2020). Parents who have lived in the U.S. for a number of years, once aware of their children’s different needs, showed skills in navigating the local culture without a limiting influence of the native one. Similarly to being proficient in two or more languages, many parents showed proficiency in the native and U.S. cultures. The parents who perceived the impact of the Special Education services positively

expressed a desire to help other immigrant families, directly and indirectly, with the process. They were willing to do that because they knew how challenging the learning process could be.

One of the most critical findings is that, while parents have some shared perspectives, the experiences and needs of each family are unique and need to be understood as such in the process of developing a collaborative relationship. This makes it imperative that educational teams take the time to get to know each family and develop positive and trusting relationships with them, as well as a comprehensive system for on-going support.

Connections with Reviewed Literature

The findings of this research are consistent to varying degrees with some but not all of the previously identified obstacles to meaningful participation of immigrant parents in the Special Education process. The following are reasons for limited parent participation specific to CLD families that have been established by the literature: (a) communication (language proficiency and educational jargon), (b) lack of familiarity with the school system/insufficient information about general education and Special Education, (c) discomfort in interacting with school personnel, (d) trust in educators' work and decisions/viewing educators as experts, (e) lack of respect for the parent and negativity towards the child, (f) unfamiliarity with the role of parent involvement in schools, and (g) cultural clash and lack of diverse teaching staff (Constantino et al., 1995; Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994; Wolfe & Duran, 2013); lack of transportation (Harry, 1992); work schedules and childcare (Nibel & Jasper, 2012); and concerns about immigration status (Conger et al., 2007).

Contrary to the conclusions established in the studies cited above, findings from the present study show that communication with the school was not a significant problem in terms of language access or level of comfort. Participants did not share distrust in educators' work or decisions. Their perception was the opposite, as they found them knowledgeable, trustworthy, and caring. The parents did not report any lack of respect for the family or negative attitudes towards the child. Most parents demonstrated a level of familiarity with and understanding for the need to label the child as a preschooler or a student with a disability. They also showed awareness of and skills regarding how to address the possible associated stigma with their families and communities. Issues related to transportation, work schedule limitations, and concerns about immigration status were also not reported, but this is most likely due to the higher educational and socio-economic level of the participants. The typically observed lower

than mainstream level of family participation (Harry, 1992; Lynch & Stein, 1987; Wolfe & Duran, 2013) was not true in this study. Most parents played a very active role in pursuing Special Education evaluations and services, and even those who were not initiating the efforts were actively involved at every step of the process. Many of these noted differences from previous findings could be explained by the higher educational level of the participants and a greater familiarity with U.S. culture that had come with integration in more complex social structures. The social and cultural capital of this subset of immigrants is greater due to their professional skills, as well as the access to various social structures in the U.S. Having professional backgrounds and employment allowed the participants the needed financial means to be involved in the process and attend meetings. Language was not a significant barrier due to the participants' command of English and/or interpreters/translators provided by the district. Furthermore, this group of participants had the technology skills required to access and navigate related resources.

However, similar to findings in the literature, the lack of familiarity with the school system (both general and Special Education) and effectively engaging in the process as a parent were noted as barriers for most participants to differing extents depending on the family. As previously discussed, families who had lived in the U.S. for a while and had been able to integrate in multiple social settings and structures were more comfortable and confident with their knowledge and ability to communicate with the schools. A few participants, mostly newly arrived families, experienced a culture clash in terms of the school system and the approach to designing additional supports. The current findings are most closely aligned with previously documented struggles to engage in a *meaningful* participation in the Special Education process and feeling disappointment and frustration with the nature and level of collaboration (Elbaum et al., 2015). Some of the specific complaints parents previously reported, including lack of interest in parent input, limited access to decision-making, and staff and parent training (Elbaum et al., 2015) were shared by the participants in this study as well.

Implications for Future Research

The experiences of immigrant families with Special Education are very diverse and multi-dimensional, and as such, they will need on-going and deeper examination. Depending on their experiences, in the home country and U.S., immigrant families may have similar experiences with Special Education as those of native English-speaking, U.S.-born ones. Further,

experiences of marginalized groups often amplify system's barriers that are not limited to those particular populations. Because of that, the suggestions below may have validity that is more global, as the recommendations provided could be helpful for a much broader group of parents/guardians. Given the findings of this research, the following implications/recommendations for future research are made.

Mixed Methods Study

Given the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of Special Education services and related staff shared in this study, it would be beneficial to examine the beliefs in relation to more objective outcomes and results in a mixed methods study of parent perceptions and student academic and social outcomes. It is helpful for parents and staff to have a positive and trusting relationship, but given the high stakes of the decisions, it is important to validate the perceived benefits of Special Education for the children who receive it.

Longitudinal Studies of Families

A longitudinal study of families who are involved in the process would be beneficial to capture the experiences and perspectives of parents and possible changes over time. Having an opportunity to capture immediate reflections as well as perceptions of past experiences would add valuable insight. Parents' perceptions are influenced by multiple factors, and looking closely at that will add knowledge needed for further guidance.

Closer Examination of Team Meeting Dynamics and Outcomes

All key decisions about Special Education eligibility and services are made during team meetings that are structured and led by educators. Therefore, a closer examination of team meeting dynamics and outcomes is warranted. Analyzing the communication and decision-making power during and after the meetings would add valuable insights into the parents' experiences, satisfaction, and frustrations.

Parents' Perceptions of Standardized Assessments

Depending on the special needs of the child and the suspected disability category, the parents typically complete a number of assessment tools designed for mainstream students, which may or may not be appropriate for immigrant families. Although the topic of standardized assessments was not explicitly discussed in this study, they are an important aspect of the process and often determine eligibility, access, and outcomes. How parents view these assessments is critical for completing a valid evaluation, as well as parent advocacy.

Learning in the General Education Environment

Students with identified disabilities are some of the most vulnerable learners. While they receive specially designed instruction provided by a Special Education staff, most of their time at school is spent in the general education setting. Studying the learning experiences of students with disabilities in the regular classroom would be a valuable addition of knowledge to both educators and families.

Recommendations for Schools & Special Education Service Providers

The results of this study helped identify many specific family needs and possible improvements the schools can make to support the development of active, collaborative, and supportive relationships with parents in general and specifically immigrant parents.

Establish Open, Appropriate, Flexible, and Strong Communication Channels

Schools should establish open and flexible communication channels that are appropriate for the parents' language and cultural needs and build strong relationships with each family. Immigrant parents, regardless of their language proficiency in English, can experience significant challenges adjusting to the U.S. school culture at the beginning of their lives in the U.S. Even if a family is helped by an interpreter, it is not the interpreter's role to assign meaning to important information and assist the family outside of the language need. Interpreters are typically not well informed about school practices and lack proficiency with specialized educational information. The responsibility for educating the parents about school practices and their involvement should be taken by the people with that expertise—the school's faculty. Having an interpreter is a critical but not sufficient part of the process.

When immigrant families transition to U.S. schools, they need to learn as much as possible about both general and Special Education systems in a proactive and timely manner whenever possible. These opportunities need to be on-going, as students enroll at various times during the school year. Regardless of the timing of their arrival, students and their families need to have a chance to integrate well. Cultural differences related to general and Special Education, parent participation, and accepted communication patterns in the society are factors that should be closely examined by the educators and addressed in the process. As evident in the collected data, experiences vary, and assumptions and generalizations are dangerous and harmful to effective partnerships.

Having a system of support available to parents in a more individualized manner would be highly beneficial for new immigrant families. Larger school-wide or grade-level events are often not sufficient to address the information and communication needs of these families. Even if the parents can successfully communicate, they need a “cultural broker” who can help them understand how the system works and what they can do to feel connected and equipped to support their children. A type of a mentoring system in which one or more adults are available to assist the family with on-going needs and questions would be highly impactful. If that person is proficient in both languages and cultures, that would be ideal, but if not, one proficient with the local ones and mindful of cultural nuances can make a difference as well.

Improve Access to Relevant Information and Resources

Meaningful communication that provides access to relevant information and resources about children with special needs should be part of early intervention, preschool, and school age services, whether that information comes from the schools or medical care providers. Federal law mandates that school districts locate and evaluate all children who have disabilities, including preschool students. As part of the district’s process, relevant communication is shared with the community. This communication is typically designed for native-English-speaking families who have some awareness of the resources and can interpret the communication in a manner consistent with the desired outcome. However, when communication is shared in that way, immigrant parents may not understand its meaning. Because of this, targeted methods for effectively communicating the information with opportunities for parents to ask questions should be provided. Having important information just shared in another language is typically not sufficient for immigrant families to understand the meaning of messages that involve social structures and services that may be foreign to them. Having to figure out what resources are out there is an unnecessary burden on an immigrant parent when there are organizations in place to help the families. Many immigrant parents maintain strong relationships with other families from their home countries in the community. Developing a relationship with members of each community, especially those with more experience in the U.S. would be beneficial for the school district and will allow more natural flow of information.

Furthermore, collaboration between the school district and local medical, pediatric, day care, and early intervention providers around the unique needs of the immigrant communities would be impactful in developing more supported and coordinated processes. For example,

immigrant families often do not conceptualize developmental differences in the same way they are seen in the U.S., where early intervention services are provided. If the medical doctors are the ones interacting with the immigrant families before other agencies/institutions, it would be critical for them to share information about services. Early intervention organizations would benefit from a similar collaboration and possibly further education around the needs of immigrant families.

Immigrant families typically do not have the social capital and agency needed to provide access to critical resources. In some cases, one of the parents/guardians may still be outside of the country, which presents additional challenges. Most do not have any extended family in the U.S. and, thus, have limited family support. Immigrant parents often primarily interact with their immigrant community, especially during the first years after the transition to the U.S. While the local immigrant communities provide much needed general social guidance and emotional support, they often lack adequate professional or specialized knowledge about schools. In some cases, the information shared there could be inaccurate. Educating parents about their role in U.S. schools should be done by the educators. Structured opportunities to discuss the Special Education process in general and the parents' involvement in it would be very beneficial, especially for parents who are newer to the country. A combination of information sessions and on-going opportunities for formal and informal interactions between schools and families would lead to meaningful learning.

Ongoing Support for SPED Families

Families navigating the experiences of Special Education need access to on-going support for the duration of the process. While often the strongest emotions are experienced at the beginning of the process, parents feel the need for ongoing assistance to negotiate experiences and truly understand the decisions and their impact. This could be accomplished in many different ways. The district could have a parent advocate or liaison who could be present at the meetings to help parents understand what is happening and process the information afterward. A parent group for families who have children with special needs that is accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse families could provide some additional support.

Another way to support families is to have additional meetings, outside of the mandated ones, with Special Education knowledgeable educators. The regular IEP meetings are very structured and efficient, involve many different professionals, and are driven by the educator's

agenda. In less formal meetings that are not driven by mandated paperwork and signatures, the parents may feel more comfortable asking questions that are specific to their child but in a broader context that would allow them to learn other relevant information. For example, parents could learn more about the possible long-term impact of having an IEP and how to decrease undesired outcomes or how to advocate for their child during the IEP and other standard meetings/procedures. If the parents are not in agreement with any aspect of the plan or other practices, they need to know what steps they could take and what support is available to them in the process of possibly resolving the issues. Educators need to do more than just inviting the parents to participate and asking them if they have any questions during the meetings. A helpful approach for a more meaningful and supported participation could be explaining to the parents in a comprehensible and proactive manner what the purpose of the meeting is *and* asking the parents what important topics they would like to discuss. During and after the meeting, the educators should ensure that the parents' hopes and goals have been addressed to a satisfactory degree. If educators are truly interested in a meaningful communication with the immigrant parents, checking for their understanding about events and decisions is critical. Instead of asking parents if they have any questions at the end of the meeting, the facilitator could ask the parents more potentially generative questions like:

- Can you tell me in your words what the team just decided?
- What do feel these decisions mean for your child?
- What do you think will happen next?
- What questions or concerns specific to these decisions do you have?

Although parents are very appreciative of Special Education services, they need to be informed about the short and long-term learning and social outcomes for students with identified disabilities. As the importance of “closing the gap” between is a top priority and a reason for the parents to pursue and/or accept Special Education services, educators' feedback on that topic should be a regular part of the process. If the parents are to continue to agree to the services as outlined in the IEP, they need to know whether the results they were hoping for are being achieved. In other words, the immediate impact of Special Education services in relation to general education grade-level goals and objectives needs to be actively addressed so the parents can make informed decisions. The participants showed strong appreciation for the attitudes of and support provided by Special Education staff. This establishes a good foundation for deeper

collaboration and trust. It would be advantageous for the students if families ask the staff to share their professional goals and hopes for outcomes. In the absence of explicit discussion about that, assumptions are made on both sides, and the parents may believe that the staff members have similar goals for the students in relation to the larger context and outcomes.

Having a new teacher each year is a commonly established practice for all students in U.S. schools as they progress through the grade levels, especially larger schools where educators often stay in the same grade level. This practice often includes Special Education Intervention Specialists. In many school districts, the Special Education providers (speech and language, occupational, and physical therapists), especially the Intervention Specialists who provide specially designed instruction, are different for each grade level. Several of the families noted that they wished this were not the case and indicated that “each transition is difficult.” Fewer changes and longer contact between students and Intervention Specialists may allow for better opportunities for meaningful collaboration with the families and possibly better outcomes for the child. The Intervention Specialist typically is the member of the IEP team who most closely communicates with the family, and this valuable connection with the school is much appreciated by the parents. It might be beneficial for all involved if that relationship lasts more than the standard year.

Summary

Decisions about having a disability and receiving Special Education programming have significant consequences. They affect the immediate and future experiences of students and their families. Legal and procedural safeguards have been mandated across schools to support the active involvement of families and minimize undesired outcomes. These measures are often not enough to ensure active and meaningful collaboration between evaluation/IEP teams and families. Furthermore, the process, as evident in the stories shared by the participants involves many agencies with their own unique legal rules and procedures and limited collaboration with others involved. Given the complex and often confusing nature of the process, it is imperative that everyone involved understands the family’s needs. Families from marginalized groups can face powerful obstacles in their engagement in the Special Education process, and specific challenges experienced by immigrant families have been well documented in previous research (Conger et al., 2007; Constantino et al., 1995; Harry, 1992; Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994; Nibel & Jasper, 2012; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Creating space and opportunities for immigrant families to

express their thoughts and feelings is of fundamental importance in the efforts to make positive changes. This study aimed to do just that, invite immigrant parents to share their experiences and needs so that they are heard and supported. The purpose of the study was to develop better awareness and understanding of those needs to place schools in a better position to effectively support immigrant families.

The importance of such a study and need for change was validated by the families' willingness to take the time to engage in the research process and discuss experiences and topics that were not easy for them. The struggles that they have experienced led to a desire to be recognized and addressed so other families can benefit. The input from participants was indicative of needed changes that, if made, could lend integrity to the process and potentially improve outcomes. Formal legal guardrails can be effective to prevent some harm, but they do not necessarily insure substantive, high quality outcomes. This is the work that professionals directly involved in the process need to do, and nothing can replace that.

Meaningful collaboration between schools and families starts with developing positive and strong relationships with the students and parents/guardians. This study highlighted the importance of understanding the individual needs of each family, as categories related to education, language proficiency, and ethnic and cultural background were not indicative of shared needs. Having lived in the U.S. over an extended period of time and being integrated in social and school life was the foundation for better understanding of the process and associated decisions. The family's ability to comfortably engage in and successfully navigate the process increased as a result of accumulated lived experience. However, this way to increase collaboration and meaningful participation is far from desired and optimal as valuable opportunities for valid input and direction from parents may be lost. This is especially critical given that, once the process is initiated and first identification is made, outcomes are hard to change and reverse. Legally mandated and highly promoted practices, such as addressing the language barrier, did not show meaningful impact in the experiences of the participating families. The assumption that highly educated families would accurately understand the process and its implications was also challenged.

Due to conditions created by legal mandates for parent engagement in the Special Education process, schools have access to critical capital—the structure and collaboration process of the IEP teams. Schools have the ethical responsibility to build on that valuable

resource to impact the quality and social outcomes of the process. Based on the study's findings, parents, once connected to the schools, depend on and appreciate the efforts school-based teams make to guide them through the internal process, as well as facilitating collaboration with other agencies. This trusting relationship is a privilege and a great opportunity to make families a critical partner with equal power in the process. If this level of partnership were accomplished, teams could be confident in the identification, assessments, instruction, and other decisions made for individual students. In addition, a true partnership has the potential to greatly affect student academic and social outcomes outside of the narrowly defined IEP goals. The process of making important educational decisions for individual students should not be controlled by compliance factors and professionals with the greatest technical expertise, but by the family who has the highest investment in the well-being and success of their child. Actively listening to their voice and positions should be an essential aspect of the process.

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Appendix A – Request to Conduct Research

October 26, 2020
Jonathan Cooper
Mason City Schools
210 N. East Street
Mason, Ohio 45040

Dear Mr. Cooper

I am a doctoral student in the Education Leadership program at Miami University interested in completing a research project at Mason City Schools. The purpose of this letter is to request your permission to complete my dissertation research, which is described below. Once permission to move forward is received, I intend to contact parents who meet the criteria identified below and invite them to participate in the project.

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of immigrant parents who have children receiving Special Education services by exploring the following research question: What are the experiences of immigrant families who have participated in the SPED process? The objective is to understand the barriers immigrant parents have in these processes and minimizing/eliminating them in the future.

The desired participants in this study would be selected using the following criteria: 1/immigrant parents (born and raised in another country) who 2/have personally participated in the SPED process/meetings, 3/have a child(ren) identified by the school as having disabilities, and who 4/qualify to be on an IEP and receive SPED services. Participants would be invited to participate in two face-to-face or virtual interviews with Milena Varbanova.

Procedures: Participants will meet with the researcher in-person, if possible, or virtually via zoom, on two different occasions for the purpose of the interview. The researcher will ask questions about the experiences as a parent/guardian of a child that has participated in special education programs. The interviews will be recorded in audio (in-person) or video form, so that it can be transcribed to paper. In the second recorded interview, participants will be given the opportunity to review the written summary of the first interview in order to confirm, or deny, its accuracy, or to provide clarifications. Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions posed by the researcher as well as choose to remove themselves from the study at any time.

Confidentiality/Risks/Benefits: All precautions will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The actual names will not be used in any publication. Names and contact information will be stored in the password protected computer until the dissertation is defended (expected defense May 2020). While initially collected, names will be omitted from any long-term saved data. The audio/video recordings of the interview will be deleted after the interview has been transcribed. Any notes will be scanned to the computer then shredded. The benefit to the participants is in contributing to research aimed at helping to understand what the

experiences of immigrant parents with special education are and how schools can better support parents in that process.

Voluntary Participation: Taking part in the study is voluntary. Parents may choose not participate or can withdraw participation at any time over the course of the year without penalty. During the interview, the participants may elect not to answer any of the questions asked of them. Declining to participate will not affect any future opportunities they may seek.

Contact/Questions: If you or the participants have any questions they/you may contact the researcher, Milena Varbanova, or her faculty sponsor, Lucian Szlizewski, at the numbers below at any time during the course of the study. Additionally, if there are any questions or concerns about the right of research subjects, you may contact our reviewing body: the Research Ethics and Integrity Office at Miami University at (513) 529-3600 or humansubjects@miami.edu

Researcher: Milena Varbanova (513)290-5944 or varbanmv@miamioh.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Lucian Szlizewski, Ph.D. (513)529-0001 or szlizewski@miamioh.edu

I hope you will consider my request,

Respectfully,

Milena Varbanova

5058 Julianne Drive

Cincinnati, OH 45241

Appendix B – Participant Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

You are invited to take part in a study designed to understand the parent experience with the Special Education processes at school. The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of immigrant parents by exploring their perspectives. One objective is to understand the barriers immigrant parents face in these processes and minimizing/eliminating them in the future. The study consists of two face-to-face or virtual interviews with a researcher from Miami University's Educational Leadership Program.

Procedures: You will meet with the researcher in-person, if possible, or virtually via Zoom, on two different occasions for the purpose of the interview. The researcher will ask questions about your experience as a parent/guardian of a child that has participated in special education programs. The interview will be recorded in an audio (in-person) or a video form (Zoom) so that it can be transcribed to paper. In the second recorded interview, you will be given the opportunity to review the written summary of the first interview in order to confirm, or deny, its accuracy. You have the right to refuse to answer questions posed by the researcher as well as choose to remove yourself from the study at any time.

Confidentiality/Risks/Benefits: All precautions will be taken to maintain your confidentiality as a participant. Your actual name will not be used in any publication. Names and contact information will be stored in the password protected computer until the dissertation is defended (expected defense May 2020). The audio/video recordings of the interview will be deleted after the interview has been transcribed. Any notes will be scanned to the computer then shredded. The benefit to you, the participant, is in contributing to research aimed at helping to understand what the experiences of immigrant parents with special education are and how schools can better support parents in that process.

Voluntary Participation: Taking part in the study is voluntary. You may choose not participate or can withdraw participation at any time over the course of the year without penalty. During the interview, you may elect not to answer any of the questions asked of you. Declining to participate will not affect any future opportunities you may seek.

Contact/Questions: If you have any questions you may contact the researcher, Milena Varbanova, or her faculty sponsor, Lucian Szlizewski, at the numbers below at any time during the course of the study. Additionally, you may contact the Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at Miami University, see below.

Researcher: Milena Varbanova (513)290-5944 or varbanmv@miamioh.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Lucian Szlizewski, Ph.D. (513)529-0001 or szlize@a@miamioh.edu

Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship: (513)529-3600 or
humansubjects@miamioh.edu

- ☐ I have read and/or heard the explanation provided to me.
- ☐ I voluntarily choose to participate in this study.
- ☐ I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Parent Signature

Date

Parent Signature

Date

Appendix C - Initial Phone/Virtual Contact Protocol

- ☐ Introduction
 - ☐ Who I am
 - ☐ How and why I obtained their information
- ☐ Description of the study
 - ☐ Immigrant parent experiences with Special Education processes
- ☐ Request to participate
- ☐ Parameters of anonymity
 - ☐ Names will not be recorded in any published or public
 - ☐ A summary will be shared with them and the superintendent
 - ☐ Dissertation submitted to university
- ☐ Details of requested commitment
 - ☐ 2 one-hour meetings in November and December of 2020
- ☐ Options to remove themselves from participation at any time
- ☐ G. Set meeting date

Appendix D – Interview Questions

Demographic/Background Questions (Could be completed in writing prior to interview)

1. Parent name(s)
2. Parent Birth/Home Country
3. What is your preferred language of communication with the schools?
4. How long have you lived in the U.S.?
5. What is your highest level of education received in the home country or the U.S.?
 - a. Parent/Guardian 1
 - b. Parent/Guardian 2

Interview Questions (to be completed in person/Zoom/or a phone conversation)

Tell me about your family and life prior to coming to the U.S.

Tell me about your life in the U.S.

What comes to mind when you think of school in the U.S.?

If your child attended school in another/other countries, what was that experience like?

What are your family goals for your child(ren) and specifically the one receiving Special Education Services?

In your own words, please describe the Special Education process. Walk me through your experiences and point out what incidents were most important or memorable to you?

1. What were the meetings like?
2. What did you like about the meetings?
3. What did you not like about the meetings?
4. Who was mostly in control of the meetings?

How do you think your child was doing in school prior to the evaluation process?

Describe the process of identifying your child for Special Education Services.

Describe what your role was in that process.

What do you think the role of the parents in this process needs to be?

Describe how you felt about the decision(s); reflect on emotions and thoughts please.

Tell me in your own words what educational disability means in general and in this context.

Tell me what you think the role of Special Education is.

How do you think the identification will impact your child's life, immediate and long term future?

Did you wish some things were different about that process?

Appendix E – Data Topics & Themes

Topics	Themes	Number of Participants
1. Perceptions of U.S. schools	b. Significant differences between American school system and those in the home countries	12
	c. Flexible education system that is responsive to students' needs and allows all students to go through	10
	d. Appreciation of the opportunity to attend school and have needed supports provided to their child	12
	d. Better communication and understanding about Special Education practices than general education ones	4
2. Perceptions of school staff	c. Helpful/supportive/caring	7
	d. Knowledgeable	12
	e. Collaborative	12
3. Experiences with the initial identification for Special Education services	c. Challenging experience	10
	d. Need to understand various resources and Special Education process	11
	e. Coordination between agencies/organizations	5
	f. Need for advocacy	7
4. Perceptions of team meetings	b. Valuable form of communication	10
	c. Overwhelming	3
	d. Need for more on-going communication	3
	e. Confusing	5
5. Role of the parent	a. Knowing the child well and seeking professional help	8
	b. Advocating for the child's needs throughout the process	8

	c. Supporting the child's developmental and learning needs at home	8
	d. Discomfort associated with active participation	2
	e. Lack of response	2
6. Emotional response	a. Negative emotions	7
	b. Positive emotions	6
	c. Lack of response	3
7. Challenges (integrated in 3)	a. Shared understanding of the child's needs	7
	b. Access to resources and critical information	5
	c. Understanding the Special Education process and how to contribute	8
	d. Needed support in the process	3
8. Role and impact of Special Education	c. Long-term goals for the students	12
	d. Positive impact/closing the gap	12
	e. Possible negative impact	3
9. Parent voice	b. Actively invited to contribute	12
	c. Parent opinion/position actively integrated in the process	7
	d. Difficulty knowing how to best contribute	8
	e. Less impactful in the context of general education	7
10. Term Disability	a. Stigma	7
	b. Benefits	8
	c. Cultural differences	8

11. Needs and possible improvements	a. Understanding the parent concerns	2
	b. Education and support for parents	4
	c. Better communication and focus on general education	2

Appendix F – Topics Discussed by Family

Family	Topic 1 a,b,c,d	Topic 2 a,b,c	Topic 3 a,b,c,d	Topic 4 a,b,c,d	Topic 5 a,b,c,d	Topic 6 a,b	Topic 7 a,b,c,d	Topic 8 a,b,c	Topic 9 a,b,c,d	Topic 10 a,b,c	Topic 11 a,b,c
1	a,b,c	a,b,c	a,b,c,d	a,c	a,b,c	a,b	a,b,d	a,b	a,b	a,b	a,b
2	a,b,c	a,b,c	a,b,c	a	a,b,c	a,b	b,c,d	a,b	a,b,c	a,b,c	b
3	a,b,c	a,b,c	b,d	a,d	a,b,c	a,b	X	a,b	a,b	a,b,c	X
4	a,c,d	b,c	a,b,c	a	X	X	a,c	a,b,c	a,c,d	b	X
5	a,c,d	b,c	a,b	a	X	a	a,c	a,b	a,c,d	c	c
6	a,b,c	a,b,c	a,b,d	a,b,d	a,b,c	a,b	a,b,c	a,b	a,b,c	a,b,c	X
7	a,b,c	a,b,c	a,b,c,d	a,c	a,b,c	a	a,b,c	a,b	a,b	a,b	a
8	a,b,c,d	a,b,c	a,b,c,d	a,d	a,b,c	a	b,c,d	a,b,c	a,c,d	a,c	b,c
9	a,b,c	b,c	a,b	b,d	d	X	a,c	a,b,c	a,c,d	c	X
10	a,b,c,d	a,b,c	d	a	a,b,c	b	X	a,b	a,b,c,d	a,b	X
11	a,b,c	b,c	a,b	b,c,d	d	X	a,c	a,b	a,c,d	c	X
12	a,b,c	a,b,c	a,b,d	a	a,b,c	b	X	a,b	a,b	b,c	b