



Dis-labeling the Ables: The Overrepresentation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students Receiving Special Education Services

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ABSTRACT

There are significant changes in the education system's demographics due to the increased immigration into the United States. A growing demographic has unique characteristics and academic needs for educators to recognize. This lack of understanding often causes the misidentification of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students as having special educational needs. The present research examined the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of CLD students receiving special education services in an urban school district in the Midwestern United States. Through a qualitative phenomenological study of six CLD families regarding their perceptions of their children's evaluation for special education services, three themes emerged: inaccurate screenings, grade retention, and parental lack of awareness of special education services. Based on these findings, this research calls for preparing teachers to provide culturally responsive services, carefully identifying culturally and linguistically diverse students, and educating CLD parents about special education services in their native language.

Keywords: culturally and linguistically diverse, misidentification, overrepresentation, special education

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are misidentified as having a learning disability when the difficulties they face are often due to cultural and/or linguistic differences (Milner, 2021; Sullivan, 2011; Spinelli, 2007). This creates an overrepresentation of CLD students who are not receiving appropriate services in special education classrooms. When school personnel fails to distinguish between the shared characteristics of language acquisition and disability-related learning challenges (Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011), more English Learners (ELs) will be wrongly labeled as needing special education services. Harry and Klingner (2006) found that teachers at schools with a higher population of these students were less qualified and more likely to display inadequacies in the classroom than teachers at other schools.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act suggests, "Greater efforts are needed to prevent the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling and high dropout rates among minority children with disabilities" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA), 2004). Through interviews with six CLD families regarding their children's school experiences, the present research examined the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of CLD students in special education classrooms in an urban school district in the Midwestern US.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oswald et al. (1999) define disproportionate representation as the degree to which membership in a particular community is linked to the likelihood of being labeled as having a special education disability, compared to the representation of others with that label. "The reality of such a label is the label not only affects the labeled child, but all who interact with the child, often for a lifetime" (Tetzloff & Obiakor, 2015, p. 69). When this label inaccurately delineates a child's abilities, it can also lead to inappropriate interventions (Metzger, et al., 2010) that do not fit or meet the child's needs as interventions should; a predestined perception of the child (Blum & Bakken, 2010) through this label and not through their actual strengths, performance, or behavior (Cassidy & Jackson, 2005); and lower expectations for the child's academic outcomes (Tetzloff & Obiakor, 2015). The negative effects of mislabeling a child and the stigma around the special education label may also impact the child's self-determination, self-perception, and socialization (Gates, 2010). Further, this can and has inadvertently contributed to the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Obiakor, 2001).

A child's race, ethnic background, and linguistic abilities often play a part in the label assigned to them. The disproportionate representation of minority students has been a reoccurring theme in US special education programs for over 40 years (Sullivan, 2011; Rueda & Windmueller, 2006; Waitoller et al., 2009; Obiakor, 1999, 2001) explains that CLD students may be labeled as needing special education services when their physical appearance, articulation, and/or behavior is different from those of their peers although they typically experience hurdles that are specifically caused by their cultural and linguistic diversity (Park & Thomas, 2012). It is, as Jonak (2013) describes, problematic to rely on special education programs for help addressing those barriers. Artiles et al. (2005) reported that CLD students are overrepresented in high-incidence disabilities and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. This disproportion is due to over-diagnosis and under-referral (Sullivan, 2011).

Hardin et al. (2009) present three key explanations for why CLD students continue to be overrepresented in special education: (1) misunderstandings related to cultural differences, (2) a lack of special education staff with cultural and linguistic awareness, and (3) communication difficulties, i.e., language barriers between schools and families. These obstacles are especially evident during the complicated Individualized Education Program (IEP) process (Baca & Cervantes, 2004; Meyer et al., 2007; Harry, 2008; Hardin et al., 2009; Hart et al., 2012), which is foreign to many immigrant families (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Salas, 2004; Lo, 2008) and during which, too often, little to no interaction with CLD parents has been observed to occur (Valenzuela, 2004). Educators and service providers must understand CLD students' individual needs while staying knowledgeable about how to address them (Jonak, 2013; Gates, 2010) and avoid generalizations that can overlook those needs (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Zhang & Choh, 2010).

RESEARCH METHOD

This phenomenological, qualitative study aimed to uncover the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of CLD students who receive special education services. The researcher analyzed the perceptions of CLD parents as they discussed their children's evaluation of special education services. The researcher gathered information on participants' perceptions through qualitative research methods, including questionnaires and interviews (Lester, 1999), to investigate how much these parents agreed or disagreed with this evaluation. Through the experiences of Six CLD parents, this study explores the following research question: What are the

perceptions of CLD parents regarding their children's evaluation for special education services?

Qualitative Approach Rationale

Qualitative research methods are often used to answer questions about experience, meaning, and perspective from the participant's perspective. According to Lieblich (1996) when researchers invite people to talk about their reflections on experience, they can learn more than they plan to uncover. The study focused on learning about people's meaningful experiences. Interviews at the school district became sites for participants to tell their stories to active listeners (Gergen, 2001).

Phenomenological Method Rationale

This qualitative research followed a descriptive phenomenological approach that aligns with the purpose of phenomenological research, which is to "record the experiences of another person's life" (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). As defined by Teherani et al. (2015), phenomenology describes the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. This required the researcher to suspend her own attitudes, beliefs, and suppositions in order to focus on the participants' experience of the phenomenon and identify the essences of the phenomenon through epoche, also called the process of bracketing, to ensure that the researcher's individual subjectivity does not bias data analysis and interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher collected data at the Delfino school district (pseudonym) through, first, semi-structured questionnaires with all participants. Rivano & Hagström (2017) recommend the use of qualitative questionnaires to generate informative data on the respondents' everyday life. Second, the researcher led semi-structured interviews to allow parents to engage in conversations, discussions, and give the researcher windows for questioning (Newton, 2010; Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

The researcher organized the data, breaking them into manageable units to identify patterns and group parents' experiences into critical themes. Each part of the questionnaire and the interview was segmented and labeled with codes. Codes were examined for overlap and redundancy then collapsed into broad themes (Creswell, 2012). Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's modified method for analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994) was applied to analyze the collected information from participants.

Research Methods and Procedures

To participate in the study, participants had to be CLD parents who recently arrived in the US and have a child to be evaluated for special education services. Participants received an invitation letter from the Delfino public school district, which serves a large urban community in Midwestern US. Several internal validation strategies, including member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation were used to authenticate the findings. During the data collection meetings, the researcher explained the study thoroughly and answered any questions before the participants signed the consent form. The researcher then administered the questionnaire in a conference room assigned by the district’s administrator. Afterwards, an in-depth, face-to-face interview was conducted individually at the school with each of the six participants, who were found to have a child requested to be evaluated for special education services.

Research Ethics

Prior to the initiation of any research activities, approval for human subject research was obtained from the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before beginning the questionnaires, the participants read and signed an informed consent form, which provided participants with information about the purpose of the study, as well as a brief description of the procedure, possible benefits, risks of voluntary participation, confidentiality terms, and the researcher’s contact information. Participants were also given the right to stop participating at any time with no consequences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

Table 1 lists demographic information for each participant, including their relationship to the child requested for special education services evaluation. All names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Parent	Relationship to child receiving special education services	Country of origin
Hajar	Mother	Sudan
Ahlam	Mother	Syria
Omar	Father	Syria
Faten	Mother	Sudan
Nesmah	Mother	Sudan
Daniel	Father	Syria

RESULTS

An analysis of the questionnaire and interview portions revealed three major themes of CLD parents' perceptions regarding their children's evaluation for special education services.

Table 2

Developing the first theme based on participants' questionnaire and interviews responses.

Participant	Inaccurate screenings
Hajar	My child's school requested that he be evaluated for special education services; however, I believe that being new to the US is what made him unable to catch up on his academic work in English and that he needs individual support in the classroom.
Ahlam	I attended one evaluation meeting where it was decided that my daughter should receive specially designed instruction.
Faten	I was frustrated with a prior school in another district that sent me a form to sign for evaluating my youngest child for special education services, and his teacher told me that my son has a specific learning disability and needed tailored programs to fit his academic needs. I refused to sign, because I did not believe that he needed an IEP just because he is in the ESL program.
Nesmah	I went to the evaluation meeting for my daughter in junior high school. My daughter did not understand English yet and had difficulties in her classes, because instruction was given to her in English from an American teacher, who my daughter did not understand. My other two children have made progress because of an Arabic-speaking ESL teacher's support in all their classes.
Daniel	I received an evaluation-meeting request to put in place a plan for my preschool daughter, as she had difficulties with English communication. At the evaluation meeting, a decision was made to provide her with early intervention services.

First Theme: Inaccurate screenings

Several participants reported dissatisfaction with the evaluations their children received or the lack thereof. This is further elaborated on in Table 2. Parents reported that, overall, they did not agree with the school's decision to evaluate their child for special education services. These requests were often made in response to CLD children's poor academic performance; however, parents argue that these outcomes are due to their children's lack of English comprehension as opposed to their academic abilities. Parents also explained that their children performed well academically in their home countries.

Second Theme: Grade retention

Many studies discussed the negative impact of grade retention on students' academic achievement as well as their social and emotional wellbeing. Upon interviewing Omar, he shared his son's grade retention story with a downhearted tone, stating,

The school recommended that my child remain in the same grade level the following year since no progress was achieved from the early intervention services. I had to agree with their decision as I feel that the school is better informed than me.

During the school year following this decision, Omar's son started to lose his self-esteem and constantly asked his father to stay home from school because he was no longer surrounded by his peers and was always asked why he wasn't in their grade anymore. This was an unexpected complication, which caused Omar to move his son out of the district for his emotional and mental wellbeing.

Third Theme: Parental lack of awareness about special education services

Although parents received the school request for their children to be evaluated for special education services, they had no knowledge about it prior to the evaluation. A lack of awareness about special education services was very evident among all parents. The emergence of this theme is described in table 3.

Table 3

Developing the third theme based on participants' responses.

Participant	Lack of awareness about special education services
Hajar	I don't know what special education services are.
Ahlam	I don't understand what special education services mean. No one at my children's school explained it to me in Arabic.
Omar	I don't think I fully understand what special education services mean and the role of an IEP.
Khadra Nesmah	There is no need [to collaborate with the school]; the teachers know what they're doing

The questionnaire and interview responses show that CLD parents know little to no information about special education. For instance, when Ahlam was asked if she thought that her child should indeed receive special

education services tailored to her needs that facilitate her learning process, she replied that she does not understand what is meant by special education services, adding in the space provided that no one at her children's school explained this to her in Arabic before. However, Ahlam's high school daughter struggles with math and receives one-on-one explicit instruction through a pullout program. Ahlam could not name the type of service that her daughter receives and could not identify whether the service fell under a 504 Plan or an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).

DISCUSSION

It is common practice for school districts to evaluate CLD students for special education services due to their lack of English-speaking skills; however, Spinelli (2007) recommended an informal assessment of CLD students and described it as an authentic solution to the need for formative evaluation that is adjustable to language and cultural differences, individual learning styles, and personal challenges. In this study, Hajar also indicated that she does not believe her child should receive special education services. Similarly, Faten also selected on the questionnaire that she does not think that her child should have an IEP. The screenings performed on CLD students neglect to take into consideration their linguistic differences. The fact that students' previous academic record showed no need for special education services when instruction was given in their native language is proof that language is the main obstacle to their academic success in their new host countries as opposed to learning/intellectual disabilities.

As in the case with Omar's child, who was retained in preschool, schools may often duplicate an entire year of schooling for CLD students falling behind in academics. Research also found that minority students and ELs, including first-generation immigrants, are significantly overrepresented in schools' decisions regarding grade retention (Warren, Hoffman, & Andrew 2014; Tillman & Harris 2006; Willson & Hughes 2006) furthers their overrepresentation in special education. Many studies discussed the negative impact of grade retention on students' social and emotional well-being. For example, Jimerson & Ferguson (2007) argued that retained students displayed more aggression compared to matched peers. Similarly, Martin (2011) reported that retention was a negative predictor of academic self-concept and homework completion, a positive predictor of maladaptive motivation and weeks absent from school, and a negative predictor of self-esteem. In this study, we saw how Omar's son developed low self-esteem and wanted to stay at home not to face his peers' interrogations. Jimerson et al. (2002) argue that early grade retention is one of the strongest predictors

of dropping out of high school, which could have been the ultimate consequence for Omar's son who wanted to stay home to avoid his peers. As David (2008) states, students should have multiple media of support, including summer school and after-school support throughout the year to help them catch up and avoid grade retention. In fact, struggling students should be promoted and provided with the needed support among their peers.

In an article by the Policy Insights from Behavioral and Brain Sciences, researchers Robinson-Cimpian, Thompson, and Umansky (2016) determined that current education policies limit English Learners' access to equitable educational opportunities and puts them at a disadvantage compared to their monolingual peers. Nesmah reported that she was invited to an evaluation meeting for her daughter in junior high school. There was no interpretation of what was being evaluated during the meetings, and she assumed that they were talking about her daughter's learning goals.

Similarly, Zetlin, Padron, and Wilson (1996) investigated the experiences of five low-income Latin American families with regard to their children who receive special education services under learning disabilities through semi-structured interviews. They reported the families' unawareness of their children's level of functioning and were more critical of the services being received. This was echoed by Hajar, who did not understand what it meant for her child to be evaluated for special education services.

Lo (2009) recommended that CLD parents, whose children receive special education services, should be provided with information about their child's disability in their native language. Professionals, who neglect to provide sufficient information about services and rights and do not meet parents' need for increased communication and cultural sensitivity, create even more barriers to a successful partnership (Connery, 1987; Harry, 2002; Matuszny, 2004; Sullivan, 2011). Parents' lack of knowledge also enables CLD students' overrepresentation in special education because it eliminated parents' ability to advocate for their children and their abilities. Providing a qualified interpreter who speaks the same dialect as the families and has expertise in special education is preferable because it will allow the parents to feel comfortable and valued by the school district.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study conclude that CLD families continue to experience disappointing interactions with special education professionals. The existing services do not specifically address the needs of CLD parents

of students receiving special education services. Special education professionals should provide culturally responsive services and apply careful identification of CLD students in their native languages to avoid their misidentification due to inaccurate screenings, grade retention, and parental lack of knowledge about special education services – the three major factors that contribute to CLD students’ overrepresentation in special education. As outlined by IDEA (2004), to comply with providing free appropriate public education to English Learners, the disability determination of an English Learner is based on criteria that measure and evaluate the student’s abilities and not the student’s English language skills.

Additionally, educating CLD parents about special education services is the district’s responsibility; information often exists on the district website in English, so it is important to provide the same information for other CLD parents in their native language, not to exclude them from the learning process.

There were several limiting features of this study that may have influenced the overall interpretation of its results. Most notable was the challenge of the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007). Another limitation of the study was the limited number of participants who met the research criteria. Participants were also recruited from the same metropolitan area where their children were educated. All parents’ national origins were from Arabic-speaking countries, and they arrived in the United States through different means within two years. Further research is necessary to address the needs of families with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds from multiple school districts and states.

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