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Do You Have A Learning Disability?: Exploring The Experiences Of Hmong Students With Special Needs In A Public Hmong Charter School

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DO YOU HAVE A LEARNING DISABILITY?: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF

HMONG STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN A PUBLIC HMONG CHARTER

SCHOOL

By

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To my parents for their unconditional love and support. Dad, life has not been easy for you. You grew up without a father. You were expected to be an adult at an early age. Despite the challenges you have faced, you always made sure that I had everything I needed in my life. Thank you. Mom, thank you for raising me. You made sure that I was well-fed, safe and loved. You also made sure that I got up every morning so that I would never miss a day of school. Thank you for your tireless love and your never-ending lectures. To my grandma for her wisdom and guidance. Even though she is not here with me today to witness my triumphant, she still would have been proud of my success. To my siblings and cousins for sharing my struggles in navigating through life as a first-generation Hmong American. You pushed me to do my best. To my friends for believing that I can attain my hopes and dreams. To my people, the Hmong, for shaping me into the vibrant success I am today. To my teachers, students, and every individual who have touched my life in a profound way.

"Once you have found success, you must keep those doors open for others."
- Michelle Obama.

"Happiness, when shared, is doubled."
- Anonymous

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Special education has been criticized for the practice of over-representing culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs. Asian American students appeared to be immune to this problem. However, when the demographics of the Asian racial group are disaggregated into individual Asian ethnic groups, there is evident of disproportionality. The purpose of the study was to explore how a charter school, serving predominantly Hmong students, addresses the issue of disproportionality pertaining to the Hmong population. Through an ethnographic research approach, the researcher engaged in participant-observation, interviewing three tenth-grade, Hmong male students, and five school staff members. The researcher found that the charter school possesses certain qualities that made the school a site where disproportionality was not as evident as what was noted in the literature. These factors included: 1.) Growth Mindset, 2.) The Evaluation Process, 3.) and Culturally Responsive Teaching. These implications are fruitful in opening new dialogues into addressing the issue of disproportionality.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My Story

As the voice of the facilitator came to a stop, I gazed upon the 200-plus people in the ballroom, all of whom were professionals within the field of education. I remember hesitating. I knew that once I share my story, there was no turning back. Even before I attended the 2014 National Partnership for Educational Access Conference that morning, which I was serving as a panelist for the Student Success Stories, internal conflict was arising. Was I really going to expose myself to people who I don't even know? Am I ready? Will I ever be ready? And will I be able to tame the backlash after today? Doubts circulated through my mind, but I reminded myself again that if I don't do this now, then I might never get another chance like this one. In the silence, I spoke to the uncertainty. My story, piece-by-piece, unfolded. This is my story, and I too will share it with you.

When I was in middle school, I was placed in a program called "learning disabilities" (LD). I was labeled as an at-risk student. As I journeyed through my teenage years, I began to fulfill the labels that were attached to me: slow, dumb, poor English, and unmotivated. There was even one time when a classmate called the students who were in the LD program as "Little Dummies." He referred to me specifically. In his words, he said, "LD stands for little dummies, get it?" Believe me, I got it, and I was crushed. I hated my very existence when I heard those words. Despite the best intent that was meant for my success, I was torn down to the point where I shied away from everything, especially when it came to expressing my intellect. I was set up to fail, however, fate worked in mysterious ways. For once in my studies, I met a teacher who actually cared about me and saw the potential that everyone failed to see. This teacher was my

eighth-grade learning disabilities teacher. She challenged me intellectually, treated me like I was an actual student, and most importantly, refueled a fire that was dying. Learning became fun, and it finally made sense for once.

My middle school held a celebration day each year to acknowledge students who were outstanding. I did not know what it was, and to be honest, I didn't need to because there was nothing particularly unique about me that was worth celebrating. To my surprise, I received a letter, stating that I was selected as a recipient. It was a complete shock. "Me, a kid, who was pretty much behind in everything, being celebrated, was this for real?" I pondered to myself. Despite how much I denied it, it was not a trick. My peers and I went on a retreat and met with leaders in our community. During the lunch break, a staff member came up to me and informed me that it was my LD teacher who nominated me. Those uttered words, that particular moment in time, made my heart race like never before. I was filled with joy, and to this day, that moment remains one of the happiest times of my life. By the end of my eighth-grade school year, my LD teacher and I talked about my progress. We agreed that it was time for me to exit the program. With new hope, I left the program. I moved on, and I continued to meet people who believe in me.

Eventually, I believed in myself as well. Now, ten years later, who would have imagined that that kid would one day be a graduate student at Hamline University, pursuing a teaching degree in elementary education K-6, aspiring to become a teacher. I am in a part of my life that I had never imagined to be possible. This was made possible because I met a teacher, and many others, who cared about me and saw through the negative attachments that were placed on me that did not reflect my potential. One day, when I become a teacher, I hope that I will be able to change the lives of others as my LD teacher did for me.

Teachers are truly remarkable. They can spark the life in learning, creating lifelong learners. They can nurture students' potential, creating successful stories. Most importantly, however, teachers have the power to make some lives worth living again. My LD teacher, through her practice, made me realize now how valuable teachers truly are. Using her as a role model, this is where my story continues: the story of devoting my success into creating success for others. I envision an educational shift that is quality, equitable, and sustainable for all. To continue this line of work, I wanted to explore my story more in depth for my capstone studies. I sought out to determine if my experience was a recurring pattern that disadvantages culturally and linguistically diverse students in public schools due to institutional racism. My interest resulted in the following research question:

> *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?*

When I opened up with my story, I was astonished by the vast amounts of stories that were similar to mine—stories that were untold because they were silenced. I was led into believing that I was a failure when, in fact, my school did not fully value my culture and language. Although this pattern is disheartening, it is not uncommon since the school culture is set up in ways that deny, marginalize, and alienate culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students from access to quality and equitable education. To briefly demonstrate this, teachers who are inexperienced in working with English Learners (EL) have a tendency of "watering down" the academic instruction. This replaces high-order thinking with activities that require little critical thinking or reasoning skills (Snow & Fillmore, 2002).

My undergraduate research thesis revealed much of this as well. When I was a senior at Saint Cloud State University, I conducted ethnographic research at a Hmong charter school located within the Twin Cities of Minnesota. There, I studied cultural hegemony, cultural mismatch, and the model minority. Specifically, my research focused on behaviors exhibited by Hmong students in school classrooms. I wanted to find out why Hmong students would not frequently contribute to classroom participation specifically in the area involving the use of oral language. For example, the majority of the Hmong students I worked with would not raise their hands to answer questions nor share their thoughts during classroom discussion time. I discovered that this perceived silence was influenced largely by the Hmong culture. In the Hmong culture, modesty, saving-face, politeness, and respect for figures of authority are expected of children. Students show that they respect their teachers by listening. Questioning the decisions made by someone of a higher status, like an elder, is out of place and highly disrespectful (Moua, 2003). These values work well in maintaining harmony in the Hmong culture, however, they do not necessarily work well in an educational setting with western values. This is because the school culture privileges dominant culture. The school advantages students who are assertive such as in the case of actively attending to questions probed by teachers. When the home culture does not align with the school culture, there is a cultural mismatch. Because of this mismatch, I concluded that Hmong students would face a number of challenges, with the number one challenge being masked by the model minority concept. The model minority concept is a myth that illuminates the illusion that all Asian American students are excelling at school. This is problematic because the Asian racial group is not a homogenous group. Thus, not all Asian American students are successful. Masking Hmong students with the model minority erases the challenges that Hmong students face at school.

Through my ethnographic fieldwork, I became aware of some of the hidden inequities of the educational system that give rise to educational disparities. I became motivated to learn more about the ways in which the educational system advantages certain groups over others. After writing my undergraduate thesis, I took it as a responsibility to share my work with others. I found myself presenting my research studies at various professional developments, which included presenting my work at the Minnesota Undergraduate Scholars Poster Presentations that was held at the state capitol of Minnesota. I shared my findings to state officials, colleagues, faculties, and students, which took place in the spring of 2014. I also shared my work at the Central States Anthropological Society Conference both in 2014 and 2015 to the anthropological community. While these were all exceptional opportunities, the most profound places where I found my work being valued the most were in the very schools that serve Hmong students. My studies gave teachers the opportunity to exchange in dialogues and ideas about ways that can address the obstacles that Hmong student face at school. My experience encouraged me to continue, learning more about the forms of injustice that work against students of color. With this, I can better my practice as a teacher and become an advocate for multicultural education.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

To reiterate, my research question was: *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?* The goal of this literature review is to build a foundation on the research surrounding the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs. The first section of this literature review focuses primarily on the history of special education and what special education entails. Next, some of the problems centering on disproportionality issues are discussed. Three leading factors, which are highlighted by the work of Waitoller, Artiles, and Cheney (2010), are explored in details. These factors are: socio-demographic factors, professional practices, and institutional racism. Although all of these practices are interconnected, the direction of this research focuses much in large part on institutional racism and how that connects with the research question proposed. The work surrounding the challenges that culturally and linguistically diverse students face in schools makes up the foundation of this overarching concern. Next, this chapter looks at some of the ways in which students are affected by their misplacement in special education programs. Finally, the last portion of this chapter focuses on the model minority concept and the Hmong population, and their relation to disproportionality issues. These themes make up the structure of this chapter.

What is Special Education?

Walk into a school classroom and one is bound to see the various facets that a school has to offer. In the present day, schools come in many varieties, offering many programs to meet the

ever-growing diversity. Some schools specialize in STEM education where students are taught in a curriculum of sciences and math rigor. Other schools offer performing arts where artistic intelligence is explored. Some schools dedicate their services into serving a particular demographic. For instance, there are schools that serve only English Learners while other schools may tailor their curriculum to meet the needs of students who are gifted and talented. Regardless of the practice, schools seem to have come a long way in meeting the needs of its changing population, or has it?

In the past, however, schools have not always been like this. The history of special education reveals a much darker truth. According to Sakwer and Zittleman (2010), the inclusion of students with disabilities in the public educational systems has not always been a commonplace. As a matter of fact, these authors pointed out that, before World War II, students with disabilities were not permitted in school grounds altogether. Believing that students with disabilities were unworthy of being taught or that they will create a disturbance within the general education classrooms, these students were disenfranchised (Esteves and Rao, 2008; Sakwer and Zittleman 2010). Instead, individuals with disabilities were placed in facilities. These institutions housed nearly 200,000 cases, providing minimal care and support to individuals with special needs (United States Department of Education, 2010).

It was not until the court case of *Brown V. Board of Education* in 1954 that the dominant narrative of individuals with disabilities shifted (Esteves & Rao, 2008). The outcome of this case empowered the vision that school should indeed be a space for all learners regardless of one's race, sex, disability, etc. The *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, *Section 504* of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), to list some among the many, mandated that public schools serve individuals with disabilities. The

IDEA has a list of standards in which schools must comply to. To list some, the Zero Reject provision asserts that students with disabilities cannot be denied a free public education. The Non-Discriminatory provision mandates that students must be assessed, identified, and placed in special education programs without biases. This means that cultural and linguistic difference must be omitted from the referral process. Welner (2006) explained some of these guidelines: 1) students are to be assessed in their native language; 2) assessments should be conducted by someone who is a certified professional such as a school psychologist. Furthermore, the IDEA mandates that students with disabilities are taught in the least-restrictive environment. This means that students with disabilities are not to be removed from the general education classroom for more than stated in their individual educational plans (IEP). An IEP is a plan created by school personnel, the child, and the parents to provide tailored instruction to meet the child's needs. In addition, the space in which students with disabilities are taught in should mirror that of a general education classroom (Esteves and Rao, 2008). According to Sakwer and Zittleman (2010), parents even have the right to file lawsuit if they believe that their child is not being adequately served. Welner (2006) added that parents must be included in the educational process, whether that is during the initial referral process or during the review of a child's IEP. The IDEA along with other federal laws revolutionized the playing field, protecting education for a group who was once denied of these rights.

To sketch what special education entails in the present day, the United States Department of Education's website provides some insightful data (2010). The department defines special education as educational practices in which teachers and special education teachers implement instructional interventions that meet the needs of students with disabilities. Some examples of such strategies include: early childhood interventions such as reading programs, progress

monitoring and, assessment and evaluation methods. These interventions have greatly improved the educational experiences for students with disabilities. For example, the Department of Education asserted that more young children are identified for special education services now than ever before. This screening provides early interventions, which enhances the capacity for students to be successful in school. The Department of Education also reported that students with disabilities have made considerable gains. They noted that the percentage of students with disabilities who are proficient in basic skills, such as reading and math skills, has risen up by more than 20 percent from the year 2000 to 2009. These gains are also evident in the areas of high school graduation, post-secondary enrollment, and workforce participation. As the Department of Education reported, graduation rate for students with disabilities has risen more than 16 percent since 1996. Thirty-nine percent of students with disabilities are now enrolled in colleges and university throughout the United States. This has doubled since 1987.

Special Education is an umbrella term that encompasses tailored services to meet the needs of students with disabilities. According to the United States Department of Defense, a disability is an impairment that affects a student's educational performance to the degree in which instructional interventions are needed. These disabilities include physical, communicative, emotional, and learning impairments; and developmental delay. Each state has its own standards of determining what constitutes a disability, and how students are assessed, identified, and placed in special education services. The Minnesota Department of Education recognizes 13 areas of disability categories. Emotional or behavioral disorders is one of them, which is a disability that affects the emotional or behavioral condition of a person. This includes: being withdrawn, having anxieties and having disordered thought process, and being aggressive and hyperactive. Speech or language impairment is another category. This disability affects the way in which

language and speech are used and articulated. Some examples of this condition include: stuttering, impaired articulation, and language and voice impairments that drastically affect a student's ability to perform academically at school. Speech-language pathologists work closely with students who have these needs. Last to be noted is developmental cognitive disability (DCD). According to the Minnesota Department of Education's website, "[DCD] is a condition that results in intellectual functioning significantly below average and is associated with concurrent deficits in adaptive behavior." Some common indicators of students who have this disability are: difficulty in remembering, poor problem-solving skills, and inability to accomplish complex tasks. Teachers who specialized in the area of DCD work closely with these students. Some instructional strategies that are used include explaining instructions in steps, using visuals and simplified language, and providing extra time and opportunity to for students with DCD to practice skills.

Disproportionality in Special Education

The public educational system has come a long way in granting the rights to those who have once been disenfranchised in the past. Special education is one of those rights. Discrimination that worked against students with disabilities has been lifted. Educational rights are now protected as schools are mandated to provide instruction and services that are catered towards the needs of students with disabilities. Although this is a great victory compared to where it once began, there are still a number of challenges yet to be addressed, let alone, resolved. One of the most prominent concerns is the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Waitoller, Artiles & Cheney, 2010; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju & Robert, 2012; Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Patton, 1998; Kitano & DiJiosia; Brosana, 1983). Waitoller, Artiles and Cheney (2010) noted that this issue dated back

to as early as the 1960s. For example, Dunn (1968) wrote that 60 to 80 percent of students who were taught in special education classes during this time were children from low-status backgrounds. This included African Americans, Native Americans, Latino Americans, and English Learners. Wright and Cruz (1983) analyzed sample data in the state of California in the early 1980s, twenty years after Dunn's report, and found that African American and Hispanic students were still overrepresented in Mentally Retarded and Specific Learning Disability programs. Horner, Maddux, and Green (1986) looked at the ethnic makeup of children labeled with disabilities in Texas during the 1980s and found similar findings as well. In the present day, the overrepresentation of minority students in special education continues to persist (Waitoller, Artiles & Cheney, 2010).

According to Coutinho and Oswald (2000), using data drawn from the Department of Education, African Americans are disproportionately represented in every disability category, with particular overrepresentation in Mildly Mentally Retarded (MMR) and Seriously Emotionally Disturbed (SED) programs. They compared these findings to white students and found that black students were 2.4 times more likely to be identified for MMR services than their white counterparts. The National Alliance of Black School Educators (2017) commented that black students make up 14.8 percent of the general student population, yet, they represent 20 percent of the special education population. In contrast, Sullivan (2011) commented that English Learners are overrepresented in special education as well. She pointed out that certain districts can show no representation, while in others, overrepresentation can range up to 17 percent. She commented on one school district and claimed that ELs were twice as likely to be placed in specific learning disabilities programs and other restrictive areas compared to the general

population. Similarly, the National Education Association wrote that Native Americans are 1.5 times more likely to be placed in learning disabilities programs compared to white students.

African, Hispanic, Native Americans, and English Learners are documented being overrepresented in special education, but on the contrary, Asian Americans are underrepresented in special education altogether. Instead, they are overrepresented in gifted and talented programs (National Education Association; Yoon & Gentry, 2009; Warne, Anderson & Johnson, 2013). Yoon and Gentry (2009) showed that Asian Americans were overrepresented in 41 of the 50 states in the United States. In comparison, white students were overrepresented in 26 states. Yoon and Gentry also claimed that, while Asian and white students were overrepresented in gifted and talented programs, Hispanic, African and American Indian students were underrepresented in these programs. Their findings revealed that Hispanic students were underrepresented in 43 out of 50 states and Black students were underrepresented in 42 out of 50 states. Warne's, Anderson's, and Johnson's (2013) finding is in agreement with these data as they revealed that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were overrepresented both at the local and state level; however, their findings also shed light on another matter. Analyzing the data collected from nearly 15, 000 students in various school districts within the state of Utah, they found that when factors such as race, language, gender, grade, etc., were isolated into individual variables, surprisingly, Hispanic, Native American, and Black students were just as likely to be identified for gifted and talented programs as any other group. This, however, was only the case when the variable, "academic achievement," was considered alone. In other words, if academic achievement is the only variable used to refer students for gifted and talented programs, the minority groups listed would not be underrepresented at all. Warner, Anderson and Johnson even claimed that, "Indeed, for Hispanics, the odds of being identified as gifted were almost triple the

odds of a White student who had equal math and language arts test scores" (p. 409). Warne, Anderson, and Johnson, however, gave a word of cautioned. They stated that that biases, a shortage of teachers of color, and racism are interconnected and contributes to students' placement in gifted and talented programs. Although isolated variables such as academic performance provide a new perspective on this issue, the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted and talented programs is still evident and still very much a problem. This is because factors affecting students' performances and success at school do not work in isolation.

Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju and Robert (2012) provided great insights into the current whereabouts of this issue. Using the data, they gathered from IDEA-related mandated reporting, these scholars examined a five-year (2004-2008) longitudinal trend of minority students' placement in special education. Their findings revealed that African Americans and Native Americans were the top two groups to be overrepresented across the special education program spectrum. Zhang and his colleagues even went in depth by exploring three specific disabilities, which were learning disabilities, intellectual disability, and emotional disabilities, and where each racial group fell in these areas. Their analysis showed that Native Americans were the most likely to be placed in learning disabilities programs. Following were African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and then white students. In the area of Intellectual Disability, however, African American showed the greatest overrepresentation, with even a bigger gap in-between compared to all other racial groups. For instance, in 2004, African American students ranked at 2.3 percent, whereas white students, the second highest group, were under 1.30 percent. This difference is concerning; however, the study did show promising news. As the years progressed, the rate of the placement of African Americans in Intellectual Disabilities programs steadily declined. The authors saw this as a sign of hope, but cautioned that, even though there is a

positive trajectory, the statistics presented in this research mirrored the statistics documented ten years prior. They concluded that not much has changed since the past. They concluded that the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs is still a concern and will still need to be addressed.

What is Disproportionality?

Zhang and his colleagues provided a baseline of the problem, but to even begin to understand the issue of the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of minority students in the field of special education, what enforces them, and how they impact the learning and teaching community, a general understanding of the concept of "disproportionality" must be discussed. According to the National Education Association, disproportionality is defined as "the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of a particular population or demographic in special or gifted education programs relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population" (p. 6). In other words, when the percentage of the school enrollment of a certain group exceeds or falls short to the percentage of their enrollment in special education programs, there is a disproportionality. To simplify, take the following scenario as an example. If Native Americans represented 12 percent of the student population, yet represented 45 percent of all the students who receive special education services, it can be said that Native Americans are overrepresented.

Overrepresentation and underrepresentation inform whether there is a disproportionality in special education, however, disproportionality can be a messy concept because each state has its own definition of constituting what a disproportionate is (Coutinho and Oswald, 2000). As Coutinho and Oswald wrote, one state may use a difference of eight percent, which is the difference between a given racial group in the school population to its representation in special

education programs, while another may use a difference of five percent. This creates
inconsistencies. The federal government, however, does review each state's data, and then
determines if states are addressing disproportionality issues (National Education Association,
2007). Disproportionality varies at the state and local level as well. Statistics may indicate that
there is no disproportionality within the state level, however, there may still be certain school
districts within that state (local level) that show overrepresentation and underrepresentation of
minority students in special education programs (Waitoller, Artiles & Cheney, 2010). Likewise,
Coutinho and Oswald (2000) noted that disproportionality varies within specific disabilities in
relation to race as well. For example, they wrote that African Americans are overrepresented in
Mentally Retarded programs, but Asian and Hispanic students, are underrepresented in this
category. To sum all of this, disproportionality is an inconsistent concept, but it is evident in
schools nonetheless (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

Factors Contributing to Disproportionality in Special Education

Having defined what disproportionality entails and what the current trends around this
issue are, the next big question is: What contributes to the disproportionality of minority students
in special education programs? Kappan (1995), highlighting the viewpoint of inclusionists,
asserted that special education has been used and historically used as "dumping ground" for
students who are too challenging or unworthy to be taught. Horner, Maddux, and Green (1986)
argued similarly and wrote that learning disabilities programs are used far too often for students
who are not proficient in English or for students who have underachieving academic skills due to
factors such as cultural and linguistic mismatch. Skiba (2006) added on by noting that the
districts he and his colleagues studied view special education as the only resource available to
address students who are struggling with social and academic skills. Patton (1998) stated that

students who fail in the general educational classroom are viewed as having a learning defect. The problem is "solved" when these students are removed from the general school classroom and put in special education classes. These narratives are problematic, yet they are commonplace. The message that is being sent is that the problem is not because of schools, but the very students attending those schools (Patton, 1998). In other words, if students would just come prepared and ready to learn, there wouldn't be any problems to begin with. This ideology, however, is one of the very vehicles that contributes to the disproportionality of minority students in special education program (Patton, 1998).

Waitoller, Artiles, and Cheney (2010) compiled and reviewed 42 scholarly articles pertaining to overrepresentation studies. Their findings revealed that there are three major concepts that the issue of disproportionality has been framed in. These umbrella concepts are: sociohistorical issues related to race and racism, sociodemographic issues; and professional practices. Sociohistorical issues in relation to race and racism look at the way in which race and politics contribute to inequities. Sociodemographic factors focus on the characteristics of individuals and the contexts in which the problem plays out. This includes variables such as poverty, parents' income, educational level, etc. To illustrate an example of sociodemographic factors, it has been documented that the culture of poverty can have a negative impact on the schooling experience of students who live in poverty. This is because the skills that they learn in their household do not align with the skills used at school. This mismatch disadvantages these students (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006). Waitoller's and his colleagues' review, however, showed that poverty is a weak predictor of students' referral for special education services as it is inconsistent among the studies they looked at. Lastly,

professional practice is the third factor, which refers to the practices implemented by teachers and schools. This includes the teaching and learning community and teachers' beliefs and biases.

All of these three framework shapes and contribute to the discourse of the controversies of disproportionality in special education, however, the main focus of this research focused much in large on the sociohistorical relation of racism and political power, and professional practices. Following is a detailed review of the literature pertaining to how race, power, and professional practices contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs.

Sociohistorical Relation of Racism and Political Power

Skiba and his peers (2006) suggested a fruitful insight into the discussion of the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. Commenting on the Cultural Reproduction Theory, they pointed out that racial and class inequities are constructed and reconstructed through institutional and individual actions, which maintain the political, social and economic ruling and interests of the dominant class. Arce's (1998) argument expanded this even further by suggesting that schools, through its practices, structures, and curriculum, do not allow minority students to flourish socially and academically. He claimed that schools privilege the dominant culture (white, middle-class background), while, on the other hand, disempower students from non-mainstream backgrounds. Cole (2017) even noted that since the dominant group controls the major institutions in society, such as the media, schools, politics, economic, hospitals, government, etc., they control all other groups. Special education exemplifies the continuation of this systematic construct. This is because the knowledge base in special education is a production of the dominant culture, which is a mismatch to the backgrounds and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Patton, 1998). An analysis of this overarching matter is discussed.

Schools are serving a more diverse population now than they did before; however, the teaching population remains relatively unchanged—85 percent of the teaching population are White and 75 percent are females (Ford, 2012). Thus, Ford argued that cultural mismatch is one prolonging reason why there is a disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs. He explained that too often are teachers oblivious to cultural differences. Teachers can treat students as a homogenous group, which overshadows the fact that students bring, with them into school classrooms, different experiences and cultural and linguistic values that are different from the forms that are privileged at school. When the school culture does not align with a student's culture, this is known as a cultural mismatch or cultural discontinuity. When this happens, teachers can misinterpret behaviors, which in turn, lead to an over referral of minority students for special education services (Ford, 2012; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006). Ford illustrated this by detailing some cultural values and how they can be misinterpreted. For example: 1.) African American culture values movements; this, however, can be perceived as being hyperactive; 2.) African American students are taught to express individualism. This may not conform to school norms, which can be perceived by teachers as being unfocused. 3.) Verbal communication is the preferred mode of communication within African American culture. This, however, can be perceived as being rude, talking out of turn, and being disrespectful. Ford concluded that when cultural mismatches such as these arise and are misinterpreted, minority students are disempowered.

Skiba and his colleagues also highlighted the effect of cultural mismatch and power relation. They interviewed teachers and school personnel across seven districts to understand their thoughts pertaining to the issue of the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. The authors shared the educators' perspectives in the following. The

educators in the study saw special education as a resource. Teachers in these districts strongly urged that there are not enough resources to help address students who are disruptive at school. The high-stake testing culture, the disproportionate ratio of teacher to students, and addressing individual student's learning needs have left teachers with heavy responsibilities. Due to this, there was a reliance for the teachers to seek special education for additional support. This perspective revealed an insider's perspective. Teaching is a tough profession as teachers are expected to juggle among various roles and responsibilities. Although these comments generated a day-to-day experience of what these educators go through, Skiba and his colleagues, however, reminded that these issues are complex and multi-faceted in nature. Skiba and his colleagues argued that school is a difficult space for minority students to navigate through and within. In addition, these scholars also pointed out that schools have not been successful in helping these students in navigating through this process either. Skiba and his colleagues even speculated that poverty, a factor that is often used to conclude why certain students end up in special education, might be used as a scapegoat by certain teachers to avoid root causes such as institutional racism. For example, Skiba and his peers insisted that behavior management plans that teachers implement in their classroom reflect the nature of students' behaviors, not so much on the deficits of the behavior management system itself. Using one of their interviewees' responses as an example, the interviewee shared that a quiet student who has a low IQ is less likely to be referred for special education services than someone who acts out in class. Skiba and his peers cautioned that behaviors are socially constructed, having different meanings in different cultural settings. What is considered rude and talking out of turn in one culture may not be perceived as that in another. Cultural practices must not be misinterpreted.

School is a space where minority students have been historically alienated from. Despite this, as an educator, one has the potential to break through these barriers for students of color. Diller (1999), who have spent many years, teaching African American students, provided some insights on how to be more culturally inclusive in school classrooms. She suggested that one step in moving towards equity begins with culturally responsive pedagogy. She shared that she was oblivious to cultural difference in her early years of teaching. She thought that she was doing the right thing by treating every student the same. This was problematic because it color blinded her. Students come from a diverse background. This means that many students, especially students of color, do not have the experience that a child who was raised in a white, middle-class background, would have. By expecting the same behaviors of children found in the dominant culture, Diller created a cultural mismatch between her practice and the culture of her students. Once she began to incorporate instructional materials and teaching strategies that reflected the heritage of her African American students, she was able to make the school process relevant for her African American students. To illustrate an example, the performer/audience teaching style mirrors the mode of communication found in the African American culture. This teaching style embraces calls and responses. Diller found much success, using this approach in engaging her African American students.

Cultural mismatch can lead to an over referral of minority students in special education programs, however, it is not the only factor. Linguistic mismatch can have an equally lasting effect (Ford, 2012; Sullivan, 2011; Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Olvera & Cerillo, 2011; Allison & Young, 2016). Sullivan (2011) conducted an eight-year study where she analyzed data from a state in the southwest. Her findings revealed that English learners are being placed in special education programs, specifically in the areas of speech and language impairments; specific

learning disabilities; Emotionally Disturbed; and MIMR, at an increasing rate. She pointed out that factors such as race and poverty have been explored much in details in relation to these disproportional issues, however, bilingual education and the needs of English learners have not been given much attention to. Sullivan (2011) even commented that federal laws addressing disproportionality in special education do not adequately address the needs of English learners. Klingner (2017) responded with a similarly answer. He asserted that ELs are misidentified not because they actually have a learning disability, but because of inadequate learning opportunities and a lack of effective classroom instruction. For example, in a study conducted by him and Orosco in 2010, they found that the teachers they were working with did not take notice or differentiate their lessons to meet the linguistic needs of their students. These teachers did not build on the home language and culture of their students as well. Instead, instruction was taught out of context, which made learning inaccessible to their students. Alvarez (2010) surveyed 27 special education programs directors and coordinators and found that a lack of teacher training in addressing the needs of English learners contribute to an overrepresentation of language minority students in special education as well.

Klingner's work highlighted a deeper root cause, which is the politics of bilingual education. Like special education, Arce (1998) wrote that bilingual education has been controversial ever since its implementation. The debate whether students should learn English as quickly as they can or are provided with adequate English as a Second Language instruction (ESL) has shaped the ways how educators work with students whose primary language is not English (Arce, 1998). Adams and Jones (2006) noted that in certain districts, ESL teachers no longer have a role in schools because of the hegemonic claim that school is a place for students to learn English only. These scholars even went to show that some school districts in

Massachusetts have cut down professional trainings to just 10 hours of training for certification in working with English learners. Allison and Young (2016) added on by saying that professional development pertaining to bilingual education is already insufficient to begin with. Adams and Jones urged that this is a disservice because licensure in ESL Education is a field of expertise in its own rights, requiring graduate-level course work. They also asserted that limiting the minimal qualification for certification does not adequately prepare general education teachers to work with EL students. For instance, they commented that, although it might take students only one to two years to learn the social language, it takes up to ten years for students to learn the academic language. This system sets minority language students up for failure, forcing them to sink or swim (Adam & Jones, 2006).

One negative outcome of the political debate of where bilingual education should stand is classroom segregation (Rueda & Windmueller, 2006). Rueda and Windmueller compared the difference between classrooms where there is no modified English instruction (Straight English Immersion) and classrooms where students' home languages are valued (bilingual classrooms). They found that students in the Straight English Immersion classrooms were almost three times more likely to be placed in resourced programs compared to those who were in bilingual programs. Sullivan (2011) commented that practices such as these are ineffective, especially when students are dumped into special education programs, because special education teachers do not have the professional training to work with English learners to help them acquire the English language, which may have been the root of the concern to begin with. Similarly to linguistic segregation, the National Education Association commented that racial segregation occurs, too. They wrote, "while nearly 55 percent of White students with disabilities spend 80 percent their school day in the general education classrooms; only one-third Black students with

disabilities spend the same amount of time in the general education classroom" (p. 9). Fradd (1997) suggested that, even if students have genuine learning disabilities, the most effective place for instruction can still be in the general education classroom with support from other sources such as the special education teacher. In short, however, political decisions that are meant to remedy the educational needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students may backfire in ways that were not intended.

As briefly mentioned, one possible explanation that has been noted in the literature that contributes to the overrepresentation of linguistically diverse students in special education program is the misinterpretation. Educators can misinterpret the language acquisition process as having learning disabilities (Olvera & Fomez-Cerillo, 2011; Allison & Young, 2016; Sullivan, 2011; Klinger, 2015). Referring to the work of Abedi (2006), Sullivan wrote that students who are in the process of learning English as a second language, often times, exhibit similar challenges to those who have learning disabilities. For example, both students have a difficult time performing well on academic tasks that require higher use of English skills. Klinger (2015) urged that educators must understand the language acquisition process to be able to differentiate it from a learning need. He illustrated this by contrasting some of the differences between the needs of ELs and the needs of students with disabilities:

1. Students with learning disabilities have a difficult time following direction. ELs also have a difficult time, following directions, too, but not because they have a LD, but because they may not understand the task assigned to them fully.

2. Students with learning disabilities have a difficult time learning sound-symbol correspondence and sight words. ELs also have this challenge, too, because they can confuse the sound-symbol correspondence from the English language to their home

language. ELS also have a harder time pronouncing words when the home language and the school language rely on different sound system.

3. Students with learning disabilities may find it hard to focus or may get easily frustrated.

ELs have this challenge as well because learning a second language is a challenge task. Klinger concluded that behaviors are complex. When students exhibit behaviors that do not align with the expectations found at school, Klinger suggested that teachers should consider the possibility that the challenges might stem from the language acquisition process, and not necessary because a student has a learning disability. In addition, Olvera and Fomez-Cerillo (2011) commented that for a bilingual student to have a learning disability, a learning disability must be presented in both languages. Thus, they argued that English learners should not only be assessed in both languages when possible (English and the home language of the student being identified), but are also assessed in multiple ways so that a variety of information can be used to assess and address students' needs.

Fradd (1997) wrote about a case study, detailing the experience of an English learner who was identified as having learning needs because the student's background was not taken into consideration. The student in this case study was given the name, Alejandro. Alejandro came to the United States when he was 11 years old. Prior to this, he grew up in El Salvador where his education was interrupted numerous times due to military and political conflicts. As a student, attending fourth grade in the United States, Alejandro exhibited disruptive behaviors, which were noted by his general education teacher. Alejandro was reluctant to complete schoolwork assigned to him and had a pattern of being defiant. This led Alejandro's teacher into concluding that Alejandro might have a behavior disorder or a learning disability. A team of professional investigated this matter, however, and revealed that the behaviors Alejandro exhibited did not

stem from having a learning need, but rather, from the difficulty of adjusting to a new school and learning a new culture and language. This posed many challenges for Alejandro. For example, Fradd explained that the language barrier and the expectation to perform like other students made Alejandro frustrated. Alejandro's dad even explained in an interview, stating that Alejandro can become embarrassed if he cannot complete tasks that can easily be performed by other students. This frustration gave rise to the disruptive behaviors pointed out by the teacher. The story of Alejandro's school experience reiterates the point that educators need to know their students, know their stories, and understand some of their challenges outside of school in order to better serve their students.

Another factor that contributes to the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education are the assessments used to assess them for special education programs (National Education Association, 2007; Allison & Young, 2016). The National Education Association wrote that assessments reflect the racial and cultural background of the dominant group, which are white middle-class families. Again, this mismatch is inequitable as minority students do not have the same kind of experience to draw upon when taking these tests. Allison and Young (2016) argued that the Intelligence Quotient Assessment (IQ) highly put English learners at a disadvantage. For instance, they commented that these tests are culturally and proficiency bias as up to 50% of any given IQ test requires the participants to be familiar with the English language. The National Education Association also reported other issues with inappropriate assessments. One of these issues was data misinterpretation, which can stem from cross language misinterpretation. When interpreters are used to translate assessments, they can translate data that are inaccurate. Another issue with bias assessments involved the

implementation of English-only assessments. This too can yield inaccurate results as ELs may not have the language skill necessary to comprehend what is assessed of them.

Furthermore, Waitoller and his colleagues (2010), referring to the work of Naligery and Rojahn, commented that the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition, which is an intelligence scale assessment, disproportionately identified black students more than white students for special education services. This work contrasts with what Warner, Dede, Garvan, and Conway (2002) indicated earlier as Waitoller and his colleagues pointed out that, through the use of the IQ test, one third of African Americans would be excluded from further evaluation compared to White students for the areas of learning disabilities. The African Americans are underrepresented in the spectrum of learning disabilities. Because of this exclusion, African Americans can be denied of this service when they may actually need it. Warner and his colleagues concluded that a one-size fits all assessment should be rethought.

Biases in tests contribute to overrepresentation issues; however, it is not the only factor. Ford (2012) suggested that teachers' beliefs about students who do not speak English proficiently or students who do not use the academic language can have a negative impact on the learning and teaching community as well. For instance, she pointed out that some teachers' attitude towards African American English has resulted in African American students being referred for speech and hearing evaluation. Fillmore and Snow (2002) wrote about what teachers need to know about language, pointing out that negative assumptions can be made when teachers misinterpret and disempower students' home language. For instance, they provided an interaction between a student and a teacher. The student wanted to express his excitement to the teacher, but was quickly shut down when the teacher started correcting the use of this student's

language instead. The conversation came to an end; however, this situation damaged the student's confidence.

Lovelace and Wheeler (2006) also highlighted the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. They wrote that when educators misinterpret cultural and linguistic difference as deficits, it validates and reinforces their held prophecy that these students are indeed academically behind. Allison and Young (2016) claimed that the expectation for English learners tend to be low already. When teachers trap themselves into these thinking, they fulfil their own prophecy. Learning opportunities diminishes for language minority students as a result.

Why is Disproportionality a Concern?

Disproportionate placement of minority in special education programs is a concern because it is harmful and it leaves long-lasting negative effects (National Education Association, 2007; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju & Robert, 2012). Zhang and his colleagues commented that special education is a trap for students. Students who are enrolled in special education services are unlikely to exit these programs. This narrowed their path away from high-order thinking settings such as college readiness track to prevocational and trade skill classes (National Education Association). Waitoller and his colleague wrote that CLD students are already thought of as lacking the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed. This tracking system adds another layer, putting them at an even greater disadvantage. Additionally, Waitoller and his peers (2010) also pointed out that teachers are more likely to penalize student with disabilities for acting out in class than their peers even when the behaviors addressed are exhibited by both sets of students.

The National Education Association claimed that students with disabilities are stigmatized in society. Hale (2015) unearthed much of this matter by exploring the experiences

of high school students in schools in the state of New York. The work of Hale revealed that students have negative perceptions regarding to special education services. As Hale put it, "Special education represents the attachment of disability to children's identities" (p. 1076). Students see special education as a space for those who are different and for those who are not smart enough. This results in equating the notion of intelligence with one's placement in these programs. To save one's face from being the "others," students discussed in the research requested to be removed from special education classes to render them free from the negative stigma. The students in Hale's research commented that their peers would make fun of them by calling them names and teasing them. Despite this, however, the students in this study also saw special education as a space where they can get help. They, however, just do not want to be the students who are getting the help from special education services.

The Hmong

The Hmong is an ethnic group from Southeast Asia. During the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the Hmong were recruited by the United States Central Intelligence Agency. Hmong men were trained as soldiers and spies. They engaged in guerrilla warfare where they fought against the Viet Cong, the communist regime of Vietnam; and the Pathe Laos, the communist party of Laos. Hmong men aided the United States by destroying conveys and war supplies. They also recused the lives of many United States pilots. These events would later be known as the Secret War, a war fought within the Vietnam War. In 1973, power fell into the hands of North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao when the United States withdrew from the Vietnam War. This left South Vietnam and the Royal Laotian Party politically and militarily vulnerable. North Vietnam seized control over South Vietnam. The Pathet Lao shortly gained control over Laos as well. Following these victories, the Hmong were victimized for having sided with the United States. To escape

the violence, many Hmong fled to Thailand where they resided in war refugee camps (Thao,

2003). Later, those who helped the United States were granted permission to resettle to the

United States where the majority settled in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California

Asian Americans and the Model Minority Concept

When race relation is discussed, the Asian racial group is often excluded from the

discussion (Wing, 2007). Asian Americans are perceived to be overachievers, who face

relatively few problems in society. They are self-sufficient, hard-working, determined, problem-

free, and have strong family ties and support. They have attained relatively high level of

education and socioeconomic success compared to other racial groups (Yu, 2006). As Wing

phrased it, Asian Americans are the minority who "has made it." They are the model in which

everyone should emulate to become. With a narrative as propelling as this one, one must wonder

why it is necessary to include the Asian racial group into the dialogue of the achievement gap or

the conversation of institutional racism at all when it is clearly a black and white issue.

Even though these praises are flattering, there lies a troubling reality. The positive

narrative that describes the experiences of Asian Americans is not only a myth known as the

Model Minority Concept (Wallitt, 2008; Wing, 2007; Yang, 2004; Yu, 2006;), but also a

political tool used to reinforce the domination of the dominant group, White elites (Yu, 2008).

Yu argued that the model minority concept came into existence during the 1960s as a tool to

discredit the Civil Rights Movement. The success of Asian Americans was praised on while the

failure of African Americans and other minority groups became a form of blaming the victim.

The discourse became, "If the Asians are able to do the impossible, why it is that other groups

are unable to do so, too?" This narrative pitted Asian Americans against other racial and ethnic

groups, which ultimately scapegoated white supremacy, institutional racism, and discrimination (Heng, 2010; Wing, 2007).

Although the Model Minority Myth accurately depicts the reality of the experience of some Asian Americans within the United States, it does not, however, represent the full array of experiences of the Asian racial group. As Yu pointed out, the Asian population diversifies in many areas, including: language, history, acculturation, culture, religion, different experiences, nationalities, etc. Hmong, Korean, Japanese, Karen, Cambodian, and Chinese are some of the many various ethnic groups within the Asian racial group. Despite this diversity, however, the Asian racial group is portrayed as a homogenous group (Wing, 2007).

The generalization of the Asian racial group as a homogenous group is not only misleading, but it also creates many negative implications for Asian Americans, especially within the area of education (Wallitt, 2008; Wing, 2007; Yang, 2004) According to Yu, the model minority concept erases educational challenges that Asian students face at school, rendering them invisible. Wing's (2007) work showed that because Asian students are all viewed as model minority, their educational needs were addressed inadequately. In her work with various schools in California, she found that, although the overall grade point averages (GPA) for Asian students were relatively high compared to other racial groups, once the data was disaggregated, however, there were disproportions. For instance, there was a gap in GPA, ranging from a 0.83 all the way to a perfect 4.0 GPA difference among the ninth graders she worked with. Wing also commented that, despite having these impressive grades, the Asian American students she interviewed did not attain these grades so easily. The students had to study long, rigorous hours, all the while, having to attend to family and cultural obligations such as in the case of taking care of their younger siblings and getting married at a young age.

Following Wing's work, Wallitt's (2008) work also show this concern. In her work with Southeast Asian students, she found that the Cambodian students with whom she worked were alienated from schools. School personnel did not see these students' unique needs nor understood their cultural values. For instance, in the Cambodian culture, listening to the teachers is considered a form of respect. This, however, was perceived as an unwillingness to participate in class. Teachers also perceived this quietness as being self-sufficient (Wallitt, 2008). Because of this, teachers interacted with these students on far fewer occasions than did with students from other racial groups, which contributed to their invisibility. In Xiong's (2014) work with Hmong students, he highlighted similar findings, showing that Hmong students can become invisible within the classroom when they do not participate in alignment to the forms of participation that are valued within the mainstream culture. His findings revealed that the school culture values being attentive, specially attending to questions posed by teachers. In the Hmong culture, however, this kind of participation is absent. Instead, Hmong students perceive participation as staying out of trouble and listening to their teachers. The cultural mismatch reinforces the invisibility noted above as well.

In addition, Yang's (2004) work with the Hmong population also revealed that not all Asian ethnic groups fit into the Model Minority Concept. Yang listed some factors that contradicted this notion. They were: having limited English language skills, miscommunication between school and home, and discrimination and alienation. She noted that many Southeast Asian students, despite being born in the United States, were not proficient in using the English language. This worked against successful participation in schools. For instance, Yang noted that a high degree of English proficiency is needed to do well in passing state standardized tests. Additionally, both Yang (2014) and Wallitt (2008) asserted that Asian students, particularly Southeast Asian students, faced a

unique set of challenges. Since Asians are perceived as overachievers, their needs are masked at the systemic level; however, within their day-to-day classroom experience, Southeast Asian students are also treated with the complete opposite treatment. Wallitt's informants shared that because their teachers view them as unworthy to be taught, their teachers did not invest much time and effort into teaching them. Wallitt term this as the "other side of the model minority coin," where Asian students are labeled as Model Minority and are held with exceedingly unrealistic high expectations; yet, at the same time, treated discriminatorily.

The perception that Asian students are high achievers affects the ways special education discourse is played out for this group. Minority students such as African, Indian, and Latino Americans students are overrepresented in special education programs. Asian Americans, however, seemed to be immune to this problem as they are underrepresented (Yoon & Gentry, 2009; Warne, Anderson, & Johnson; 2013; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju & Robert, 2012). As a matter fact, they are vastly overrepresented in gifted and talented programs as stated earlier (Yoon and Gentry, 2009). This matter, however, is much more complicated than it is depicted. Kitano and DiJiosia (2000) asserted that when demographics and statistics of the Asian racial group are disaggregated into individual ethnic groups, there are a number of disparities that exist. This includes the overrepresentation of certain Asian ethnic groups in special education programs. Zhang and his colleagues (2014) suggested that the model minority myth might be one of the factors contributing to this disproportion as the educational needs of Asian students are often overlooked. Since Hmong students enter schools with a number of challenges, it can be speculated that Hmong students may face discriminatory actions such as being placed in special education.

Conclusion

Special education is a right that has long been fought for. It has given students with disabilities, who were once marginalized, equally access to education. This is an astonishing accomplishment indeed compared to where it once began. However, education is not perfect, and there are a number of problems that exist within special education. One of these problems is the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. Students are misidentified as having learning needs due to discrimination such as institutional racism, professional practice, and cultural and linguistic mismatch. These factors have greatly impacted the ways culturally and linguistically diverse students are served in the public educational system.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

My research question was: *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?* This chapter discusses the plan for undertaking the research project and why the plan is sought out. These elements include: what the researcher hopes to gain from the capstone study, what research methods are employed and why they are employed. Who the participants are, where and when did the research take place, and how data are gathered and analyzed are also discussed. In addition, this chapter addresses the IRB process and how ethical decisions are made to fulfil this research project.

Research Paradigm, Methodology, and Methods

Qualitative research is the paradigm that was used in this project. According to Mills (2014), qualitative research is a way of approaching inquiries in order to understand the nature of a phenomenon. This means that the researcher is interested in what is happening and why it is happening. Mills also wrote that the nature of a research question influences which research paradigm a researcher should embark on. With my research interest, grounded in exploring how a charter school addresses disproportionality and misidentification due to cultural and linguistic mismatch, qualitative research was chosen to capture these inquiries in this study. Qualitative research provides a different perspective to the problems of overrepresentation. Additionally, Waitoller, Artiles, and Cheney (2010) stated that the issue of disproportionality in special education has been studied using mostly qualitative methodologies. Qualitative research would then provide a different perspective onto the concern of disproportionality.

To investigate my research question, I implemented a number of qualitative research methods. Participant-observation was the primary research method I employed. Participant-observation involves the researcher, immersing him or herself in the everyday practice of the people whom he or she intends to work with (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). This means that the researcher could be attending a wedding to understand how social interaction plays out to simply having an informal conversation on a Sunday afternoon to discuss what the latest gossip was. These are some examples of participant-observation that happened during my research project: I observed classroom interaction; I helped students with classwork; I socialized with students during break time; and I provided comments on students' writing. These activities allowed me to slowly transform myself as an outsider into a member of the classroom.

The Dewalts asserted that participant-observation is a way of collecting and understanding cultural phenomena in its natural setting. Through this, the researcher is able to gather data that are both explicit (the visible aspects of a culture such as language, religion, etc.) and tactic (the invisible parts, which includes unstated rules such as personal space or tolerance towards pain). Since the majority of my time was spent, working directly with my informants in the Language Arts classroom, I was able to capture the daily experience of the students I worked with within a natural context. The Dewalts also noted that participant-observation is holistic in nature. Through social interaction and participation, a researcher becomes integrated in the daily flow of life. This allows the researcher to gain an insider's perspective, which then can foster a better understanding of the research question that the researcher is exploring. This was especially critical in my research for two reasons: By being a part of the classroom community, I was able to build some rapport with the students and the staff. This established trust. Although there were

limitations in my study, the students became more willingly to interact and share their experiences with me as I spent more time with them.

Participant-observation was my main research method; however, it was not the only research method implemented. Taking field notes and interviewing students and staff were also implemented. What happened each day was recorded in a journal, which became field notes. The field notes included the observations that I made. Some examples included: verbal and non-verbal behaviors that were exhibited by the students; and the things that people within the classroom said, whether that was overhearing two students talking to each other or a student having an informal conversation with the teacher. Additionally, field notes were also used to record the interviews that I conducted, drawings that I made, and artifacts that I gathered. According to the Dewalts, field notes accompanies participant-observation because field note is a form of data. As they explained, "If you didn't write it down in your field notes, then it didn't happen" (p. 157). Thus, field notes and interviews became my primary source of information.

Structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews were used in this study. All these forms of interviews fall on a spectrum. Structured interviews do not give much wiggle room for the informants to deviate from the list of questions that the researcher prepared. Unstructured interviews involve having a conversation that is focused, but no particular direction is used to dictate how the interview should play out. Each type of interview methods played a role in establishing rapport and gathering data. For example, the Dewalts noted that structured interviews allow the researcher to focus in on the essential information pertaining to the goal of the research question. This allows the researcher to compare and contrast responses among individuals. This then can be used to make patterns and conclusions. On the other hand, unstructured interviews can be used as an initial way to build rapport with informants.

In this study, the students and staff members were interviewed multiple times. Some were interviewed once, while others were interviewed two to three times. The rationale behind this practice was to ensure that the participant would provide reflective responses. Some students may feel wary if they are not comfortable or have no rapport with the researcher. To ease this drawback, I interviewed the students and then re-interviewed them again using similar questions or questions that continued the conversation where the interview last left. The staff members were interviewed once only. Each interview session was recorded using an audio recorder and field notes. Each interviewee was asked to sign a consent form before they were interviewed. Additionally, the students were interviewed allowed to speak in the language they would feel most comfortable. Students code-switched between Hmong and English.

Setting and Participants

Palm Academy (pseudonym) is a K-12 public charter school, located in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. It was founded in 2004 by two Hmong educators for the purpose of creating an educational space for Hmong students. During its first year, Palm Academy served only 100 students. Now, this urban school serves 770 students, of which, Asian American students make up 65 percent of the student population. The second largest racial group is African Americans, which comprises of 22 percent. The third largest group is Hispanic Americans, which numbers at 13 percent. The remainder of the student population consists of other racial and ethnic groups. Of the Asian American students that attend Palm Academy, Hmong students make up the dominant ethnic group, comprising of over 80 percent. According to the school's website, Laotian and Cambodian students also study at this school.

The following information was retrieved from the Minnesota Report Card website (2016). During the year of 2016, Palm Academy employed 44 licensed teachers. Eighty percent

of the teacher population had a four-year college degree while 20 percent had their master's degree. Fifty seven percent of the teacher population had taught between three to 10 years, 16 percent had taught over 10 years, and 27 percent had taught less than three years. The student-teacher ratio was 18 students to one licensed teacher. The Report Card did not indicate the demographic and racial profile of the teachers at Palm Academy, however, through a quick count of the teachers on the school website, it would appear that that only seven percent of the teaching population (or three teachers) are Hmong teachers during the school year of 2017 and 2018. The rest of the teaching population consisted of European Americans. Even though the teaching population does not reflect the student population, Palm Academy integrates culturally responsive teaching that helps it alleviate cultural mismatch. This is discussed more in the following chapters.

According to the Minnesota Report Card, 10 percent of the student population at Palm Academy receives special education services during the school year of 2017 and 2018. The report card disaggregated the data even further by showing the special education population for each schooling phase. Six percent of the elementary education population receives special education services. This ratio is similar to the middle school percentage with nine percent receiving services; however, for high school, up to 18 percent of the high school student population receives special education. The overall percentage of the special education population at Palm Academy, however, is indeed relatively lower compared to the state average and other surrounding school districts. For instance, the state average is 16 percent. Minneapolis Public School district averages at 17 percent and Saint Paul Public School district averages at 16 percent. Surprisingly, neighboring charter schools that serve predominantly Hmong students also

show a lower percentage of students in special education. Hmong College Prep Academy averages at 11 percent while Nobel Academy averages at only five percent.

The study of this research took place during the summer school program of 2017. Summer school ran for five weeks. Classes were in session for four hours each day, with no school on Friday. The summer school program offered two courses for high school students. They were math and language arts. Each class ran for one hour and 30 minutes, with a 10-minute break in between each class. In the math class, students worked on algebra and geometry. In the language arts class, literacy was taught and reinforced. Student who failed a course during the academic school year were enrolled in these classes to earn for loss credits. Since my study was focused on students with disabilities, I spent most of my time in the language arts class. In total, I observed

The teacher of the language arts class was a white male teacher in his mid-thirties. This class included students ranging from grade nine to eleven. In the class, there were a total of eleven students: five Hmong boys, three Hispanic girls, one Hispanic boy, and two African American girls. There was also an educational assistant in the classroom, helping the students with disabilities. For this study, three Hmong, tenth-grade male students were selected for interview. All three students receive special education services in the area of specific learning needs. Additionally, the language arts teacher, two special education teachers, the cultural and parent liaison, and a school administrator were selected for interview.

Ethics

Consent forms were given to students, staff, and parents. All students were given a consent form to take home to their parents, which informs parents about the study. Parents who gave permission for their child to be included in the study signed and returned the consent form.

This practice, however, was a challenge as the students often failed to show it to their parents to have them look at it. With the approval of the principal, phone calls were made, and verbal consents were obtained from the parents instead. Each student and staff were also given a consent form to sign prior to the study. This acknowledges that they give permission for the researcher to work with them. Only students who gave their consent were used in this study. Furthermore, the researcher had discussed data collection methods with his committee members, and had undergone IRB approval from Hamline University and at the research site before the study was pursued. The researcher also underwent a criminal background check. The researcher consistently kept the principal, the general education classroom teacher, and his committee members updated on the research study. In addition, when students were interviewed, interviews took place in an open area where the presence of the researcher and the interviewees were known and seen by others. This was to ensure the legal protection of the researcher. Students who did not feel comfortable, participating in any of the research methods implemented, had the option to leave the study whenever they please without any penalty. Lastly, the researcher upheld the utmost professional practice by keeping data confidential. The researcher dressed and behaved appropriately according to school guidelines as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reason why a qualitative research approach was chosen for this study was to gain a different perspective on the issue of disproportionality. This approach includes participation-observation, taking field notes, and interviews. The hope of this research is to give a voice to students who may have been misclassified in special education programs due to cultural and linguistic mismatch. The next chapter explores the data that was gathered in learning more about overrepresentation matters.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis

Introduction

In society, the dominant narrative portrays Asian Americans as a group who possesses few problems, whether that is in the realm of education or economic mobility. Asian Americans are praised for being successful in the United States. A review of the literature, however, noted otherwise. Individual Asian ethnic groups such as the Hmong and other Southeast Asian groups do not necessarily follow this dominant narrative. This is evident in the area of education. Educational disparities exist and they have been shown to have a negative impact on the success of Hmong students at school. One disparity that has not been explored much in detail is the disproportional placement of Hmong students in special education programs This became my point of interest. My research question was: *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?* This chapter provides insights of this question by looking at the experiences of three Hmong students with learning disabilities at Palm Academy.

The summer school session passed by as quickly as it arrived. Data was successfully collected and it is discussed thoroughly in this chapter. This chapter consists of three components. The first component highlights the raw data. The data was gathered from three main sources: participant-observation, field notes and interviews. In addition, information retrieved from students' individual education plans was another source where data was collected from. The results are then set up in a case-by-case scenario where there is a small section that details each participant. The second component of this chapter highlights an analysis of the raw data.

Interpretation are made and discussed. Furthermore, this section highlights some patterns and themes that thrive. Other trends and interesting remarks are highlighted, too. Finally, this chapter ends with a conclusion.

Results

In this section, the results are presented. Each participant in the study has a section where a detailed discussion of their experience is highlighted. The first three participants are tenth-grade Hmong boys with whom the researcher worked. For each student participant, data are drawn from three sources: field notes and participant observation, interviews, and a review of the student's IEP. The interview questions and the rationales behind each set of questions can be found in Appendix A. The next five participants are staff members that worked during the summer school session. They are: the language arts teacher, two special education teachers, the cultural and parent liaison, and an administrator. For these participants, data are drawn only from the interviews that the researcher conducted with them. Each participant was given a pseudonym.

Yee. This following paragraph details the perception of Yee as a student through the lens of the researcher. Yee was in grade ten during the time of the study. He laughed and smiled often. He was an extrovert student, who would often engage in classroom talk. He enjoyed interacting with the classroom teacher, of which, he would share jokes. Even when the other students were hard at work, he would distract himself by engaging in small talks with the classroom teacher. Because of this, he fell behind on his course work in the Language Arts class. By the fourth week of school, he had only finished one of the five required reading packets necessary to earn a credit for the course. Writing was a challenge for him as his writing assignments contained numerous grammatical errors. He had perfect attendance during the

summer school program. He informed the researcher that he would want work for a few years first after high school before attending college.

      Yee's IEP. The following information was retrieved from his individual educational plan. When Yee was in second grade, he was referred for a special education evaluation and was found eligible for special education services in the area of Specific learning disabilities in reading comprehension. This was his primary disability. He also received secondary services in the area of Speech and Language Impairment. His language, cultural, social, and economic background did not indicate a need for adaptations in the assessment process. In 2017, the Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT) was administered by a licensed school psychologist to determine the working memory and reasoning skills of Yee. The results revealed that Yee's working memory skills were slightly less developed than his peers. This indicates that he has challenges in the areas of following written and verbal directions. Information retention was also noted to be a challenge. Additionally, the UNIT test revealed that Yee possesses all the necessary skills to perform at a higher-level thinking, reasoning, and critical thinking. Overall, the test indicated that Yee has the capacity to be a successful student in his general education classrooms. Yee's academic record indicated that he mostly earned the grade letter, "C's," during the academic school year of his tenth-grade year. The IEP of Yee also indicated that Hmong-American-English (HAE) features were not taken into account when analyzing his speech-language needs. The HAE concept refers to the linguistic differences that exist between the Hmong language and the English language, and the transfers that occur between these two languages. To explain, one difference includes omitting the suffix "s" or "es" in plural words. As opposed to saying, "There were three dogs," individuals may say, "There were three dog." The Hmong language does not use tenses or plurality. These features were excluded.

Yee's Interview. The following information was retrieved from two 20-minute interviews that the researcher conducted with Yee. Yee speaks both Hmong and English. He speaks mostly Hmong when he is at home while speaking mostly English when he is at school. Yee indicated that his dad wants him to attend a two-year college after high school graduation. When Yee was asked to think about how the past school year was like for him, he responded with a negative tone, saying that it was awful. He clarified this by stating that he failed some of his classes. When he was asked to explain this further, he said that he would often get distracted, which resulted in him, not finishing his homework on time. He added that when he is finished with his homework and is caught up in one class, he falls behind in another because he can only focus on one course work at a time. He indicated that his teachers gave him a hard time for this.

The researcher then asked Yee to think about his relationships with his teachers. Yee shared that it is hard for him to communicate his needs to his teachers because he doesn't want to argue with them. He said that it was out of place for him to assert his needs or to get into arguments with others. In his words, he responded, "I don't talk back [to my teachers] because it is not appropriate. It is like, when the elders say something, you have to listen. If you talk, something bad is going to happen. Like my older brother, he will punch me if I talk back." What Yee is referring to is the notion of respect for figures of authority. In the Hmong culture, freely asserting one's own opinions is highly discouraged as it is considered rude. Children show respect by listening and not challenging the authority of others. This save faces and preserves harmony.

Yee also commented that when teachers do not know him well, they do not know his needs. He emphasized this in his learning style. He shared that his teachers do not know him like the way his dad knows him or like how his family knows him. He pointed out that he is "a little

slow at learning." He believes that if his teachers knew him better, they would be able teach him at a pace that meets his needs. He also indicated that he needs a lot of hands-on examples to fully grasp a concept. Yee even commented, "Even in this class [the Language Arts class], I would have to think about the questions and re-read certain parts a couple of times to understand what the questions mean." Yee concluded that when his teachers do not know him, they may neglect his needs.

The researcher then asked Yee to talk about teachers who he does enjoy working with. Yee shared his experience with Mrs. RR, the special education teacher. He shared:

> The closest teacher that knows me is Mrs. RR. When I need help, she knows what I need help with. That is the only class that I did well in and got an A. She teaches really well and makes me understand the task thoroughly. She goes easy on me. She makes the tasks shorter. For example, she gives us reading packets, and they are no longer than two pages. It is just one page, which allows me to finish it on time. She will let us use our phone to find the answers, too. I like everything about her class. It is a small class and I learn better in small classes. If there are too many people, I find it hard. For example, when I am presenting, I do not want to present in front of the class because I get scared. I like to do it in a small group instead. Two, three, or four people. I get nervous in big groups.

Yee even pointed out that he enjoys interacting with Mrs. RR more than other teachers. He shared, "I usually just talk to her instead of other teachers. If I talk to other teacher such as Hmong people going fishing, like for the whole day, they wouldn't believe me, but Mrs. RR would. She knows that we like to go fishing and hunting." Yee pointed out that he has a great relationship with Mrs. RR.

The researcher then asked Yee to share his feelings about his placement in special education. He shared that he doesn't mind special education because he thinks it is "okay." He was asked to explain what he meant by, "okay." He said that special education is helpful. He also doesn't know if he needed special education or not. Yee elaborated by saying the following, "I won't say exactly like I belong there because, for me, belong means everything. I feel like some of the work I can do it by myself, but there are some things I need help on. Not just all of it." Yee seems to be in agreement with the idea that special education is beneficial in helping him out in areas that he struggles in.

The researcher then asked Yee to talk a little bit about his own and other people's perception of students who are placed in special education programs. Yee shared that his friends don't really care if he is in special education or not. They are fine with it. He also asserted that people and society in general are accepting of students with disabilities. In his words, he shared, "I think it [special education] is very normal. Nothing good, nothing bad, just normal." He even claimed that no one has said anything mean or unkind to him. Next, the researcher asked Yee to think about the notion of intelligence, and whether students with disabilities are intelligent or not. Yee pointed out that it depends on the students. Every student has things they are good at and things they are not good at. Yee then was asked to determine if he would consider himself a smart student. He said, "I would say normal because I am able to do some things and I cannot do others. I can get confused here and there. When I get confused, I try to figure it out, then I might ask a friend for help." Yee believes he still has areas where he can improve in.

Finally, Yee was asked to give one final reflection on his experience in special education. He explained that the reason why he is placed in special education is because he has a harder time learning at school. This challenge mostly stems from taking tests and getting good grades.

He doesn't believe that racism or discrimination resulted his placement in special education as he noted that everyone is treated the same in his classes. In his final remark, he stated that he is neutral about his placement in special education as long as he graduates from high school on time.

Avery. This following paragraph details the perception of Avery as a student through the lens of the researcher. Avery was in grade ten during the time of the study. Avery was a soft-spoken student whose English oral skills do not appear to be proficient. He spoke mostly Hmong. When he spoke in English, he had trouble combining words to form complete and grammatical sentences. For example, he would use single-word or incomplete responses. His writings also indicated that writing was a challenge. His writings contained numerous grammatical errors. In class, he did not exhibit an extrovert demeanor and tended to keep more to himself. He listened to the interaction that took place in the class and responded to them with non-verbal gestures when he agreed or disagreed with a statement. Additionally, he interacted mostly with the other Hmong boys. Avery, however, did not attend class often. He would show up every other day or two to three times in a given week only. Because of this, the researcher was not able to build a rapport with him. Despite, the researcher was able to interview him twice.

Avery's IEP. The following information was retrieved from Avery's individual educational plan. Avery is receiving primary service for the area of specific learning disability with a secondary service for speech. No special considerations were made to accommodate Avery during the evaluation and assessment process. In 2017, the UNIT Test was administered by a licensed school psychologist to determine the working memory and reasoning skills of Avery. The results indicated that Avery possesses all the necessary skills to succeed in a classroom with his peers. Avery was given the WIDA-Access Placement Test, an assessment

given to English language learners to assists educators' decisions in placing Avery in the right classes. The test indicated that Avery fell below the average for reading, writing and math. The teachers of Avery commented that Avery is becoming more independent in his ability to work through the tasks assigned to him. They indicated that he does a great job of writing the summary of an article when someone reads it to him. He tries his best in class and is often found focused. In summary, however, the report shows that Avery is not meeting grade level standards. He is performing in the high-risk range. Some of the goals in his IEP included: 1.) A need to improve his reading fluency and reading comprehension skills, 2.) and a need to improve math problem solving skills.

Avery's Interview. The following information was retrieved from two 20-minute interviews that the researcher conducted with Avery. Avery's plan after high school is to get a job and attend college. He doesn't know what field of studies he wants to pursue yet. He speaks both English and Hmong, however, he stated that he only likes to speak English occasionally. When the researcher asked him why, he said that there are certain words that are hard for him to pronounce. This hinders him from using English often. The researcher then asked Avery if his peers tease him about his use of oral English. He indicated that they do not. His parents want him to become a doctor. He feels pressured, however, because this is a high ambition. He said that being a doctor is not easy attainable because it requires a lot of education. He feels like he is not ready for college. He wants to take a break from school and focus on getting a job first.

School went well for Avery this past year. He indicated that he attained good grades. Avery also mentioned that math is one of his weaknesses. At school, Avery does not believe that kids treat him differently. He feels like he belongs in his classes. He also believes that all of his teachers treat him the same. When the researcher asked him to think about what constitutes being

a smart student, Avery responded with getting good grades and attaining a high-grade point average. He was then asked if he would consider himself a smart student. He said that he does not consider himself to be one. He explained that his grades do not reflect it. Along these lines, Avery mentioned that when his teachers give instructions, sometimes, he would not fully understand what is being taught or asked of him. He explained that there are words and concepts that he does not know. When Avery doesn't understand directions, he asks for help from his friends. He finds it easier to talk to his peers than he does to his teachers.

Next, Avery was asked to reflect on his experience in special education. Avery was first asked if he knew what special education was. He said that he has heard of the term before, but does not know what it is. The researcher then asked him if he had worked in a small room with a small group of students before. He nodded. The researcher then asked him to express how he feels about working in the small room. Avery said that he gets a lot of help in that class. He gets help mostly in the areas of math and reading. Avery was asked whether his friends think negatively of him, working in the small classroom. He asserted that his friends do not judge him when he goes there. He also claimed that he has never been teased before at school. He has a good relationship with his peers.

The researcher then asked Avery about what he thinks other people might think of the students who go into the small room. In his words, he said, "That they are stupid." When the researcher asked him why other students would think like that, Avery said that he doesn't know. The researcher then asked him to think about what his teachers might think of students who work in the small room. He responded, "that these students just need more help, that they don't really know." Finally, Avery was asked to share what he likes about going into the small room. He indicated that he gets more help in the small room compared to his other classes. He also

believes that Mrs. RR, the special education teacher, teaches better than the other teachers. Avery clarified this by saying, "Mrs. RR gives us good examples. She demonstrates the problems on the board and slowly take her time." Avery also noted that he speaks more in a small learning environment than he does in his general classes. He believes this is due to the individualized attention.

Ieon. The following paragraph details the perception of Ieon as a student through the lens of the researcher. Ieon was in grade ten during the time of the study. Ieon was a very quiet student. He did not engage much with the teacher or with the other students. The only person he mostly interacted with was Yee, who sat next to him. Leon was often seen smiling despite not being an outspoken person. He worked well with other students when he was asked to do peer editing. Similarly to Yee and Avery, his writing skills are behind grade level. Grammar and punctuation were often absent is his writings. Leon had a tendency of not coming to class. He attended less than half of the summer school program.

Ieon's IEP. The following information was retrieved from Ieon's individual educational plan. Ieon is receiving primary service for specific learning disability with no secondary services. Prior to coming to Palm Academy, he was on an IEP through a large urban public-school district in the surrounding area in which Palm Academy was located. His current IEP indicated that his strengths lied in: working memory, reading and writing skills, following directions and asking questions in class. Ieon noted that he loves reading chapter books and comics. Areas of improvements included: visual-spatial reasoning, reading comprehension and mathematical problem solving, organization, and independent work. One of the goals in his IEP included increasing his ability to solve mathematical problems by himself. He intends to attend a two-year college where he will study nursing or landscape. The Full-Scale Unit Test, of which he took in

2017, indicated that he has the same capacity to be successful in a classroom with his peers. Teachers' commentaries indicated that Ieon fell within the average performing range.

   Ieon's Interview. The following information was retrieved from two 20-minute interviews that the researcher conducted with Leon. Leon speaks both Hmong and English. When he is at home, he is expected to do chores, but this doesn't affect his schooling experience. His parents want him to go to college and so that he can become a doctor. School has been well for Leon this past school year. He has been keeping up his homework, getting good grades, and studying. He plays flag football for fun and loves video games. He indicated that he is really good at reading. He enjoys fishing, too. He indicated that he struggles the most in math, specifically in algebra. He finds the work complicated. He also mentioned that when he doesn't understand what his teachers are saying, it makes it even harder for him to learn. For example, he noted that, "It can be hard to understand what the teachers say, like vocabularies, a lot of numbers." He also finds that his teachers are teaching concepts too quickly, which makes it hard for him to follow.

   Leon mentioned that his peers can be very loud in his classes, which not only annoys him, but makes it hard for him to learn sometimes. He commented that students would argue with the teachers. He doesn't, however. The researcher asked him why he doesn't, and he responded that he doesn't want to get in trouble. In his words, he said, "My parents would yell at me. When I was younger, they would spank me if I get in trouble at school. When my parents yell at me, I just listen. I don't yell or talk back to them." He concluded that talking back to his parents is not "worth it" as it is out of place.

   Next, Leon was asked to share his experience of special education. He has heard of special education before, but does not know what it entails. So, the researcher informed him that

it was the help he was getting when he worked in a small room with Mrs. RR. The researcher asked Leon how he feels about receiving special education services. He commented that he likes working in the small room. Leon explained that he likes it there because he doesn't get to do a lot of school work. He commented, "the students work on short assignments and then they get free time afterward." He said that he learns better because of the small environment. It is less noisy compared to the general education classes. Leon said, "There isn't a lot of arguments because there is not a lot of people." Leon also feels more involved with his classmates in the small classroom. He enjoys working with the special education teacher because the special education teacher always helps him with his school work.

Leon then was asked to think about what other people think of him when he goes into the small classroom. He said that people don't think much of him. He also commented that no one has really said anything mean or unkind to him when he goes into that room. His friends are supportive. Leon finds the small room beneficial. He likes the smaller class size, the fact that he gets to spend more time working on school work, and the individual attention he gets. Leon particularly enjoys the special education classroom because of the reading packets that he gets there. He said that the reading packets help him improve on his reading skills, which then help him get better test scores. He also said that the special education teacher helps break down course work for him, making it easier for him to understand what he is learning. Finally, Leon was asked to identify what constitutes a smart student. Leon noted that a smart student is someone who studies, gets good grades, and finishes high school. He considered himself to be getting there. He sees himself, being successful in the next ten years.

Mr. K. The following paragraph details the perception of Mr. K as a teacher through the lens of the researcher. Mr. K is an European American and was the Language Arts teacher of the

classroom that the researcher observed in. Mr. K had open conversations with his students, which created a stress-free and casual classroom environment. Students did not raise their hands when they wanted to engage in classroom participation. They just spoke and conversed freely with Mr. K whenever they please. Mr. K also has good rapport with the students. He noted that he has worked with the students before. Mr. K has a good sense of humor that the students seem to enjoy. For instance, during a writing lesson, he asked his students to type in the letter "R" as though they were pirates. The students found pleasure in this. Mr. K also shared a lot of his life experiences with the students. The students did not seem hesitant to ask him for help when they needed it.

Mr. K's Interview. The following information was retrieved from a 20-minute interview that the researcher conducted with Mr. K. Mr. K believes that the purpose of special education is to identify and address academic needs in students. These needs may include cognitive and organizational problems, and processing issues. He believes that special education doesn't have to be long-term. It could be used as a temporary tool to help students make better decisions about their school choice. This can include giving them strategies to organize their thoughts and class materials. Next, Mr. K was asked to think of why students might get referred for special education evaluation. He indicated that behaviors and academics are the main factors. Mr. K shared the evaluation process briefly. He pointed out that there is a student success team at Palm Academy. When a student has shown a consistent pattern of negative behaviors or poor performance, whether academically or cognitively, the success team discusses interventions and strategies that can be used to address that student's needs. Students are placed into interventional tiers that help them succeed.

Mr. K agreed with the statement that cultural mismatch and language barriers can be factors in over diagnosing students of color into special education programs. He used his experience, teaching in Japan to exemplify. When he was in Japan, he taught English classes. He asserted that because the Japanese language is structured very differently from the English language, he had to examine and explain things to his students more carefully specifically. He found that his students would often get confused if they did not have the background knowledge. He believes that taking this into consideration made him more aware of his students' needs. He also shared an example of when he took a writing test that was written in English, but in an English that he was not used to. He couldn't understand the questions and failed the written test. He used this lesson to empathize with what it must be like for his non-native English-speaking students.

Mr. K was asked to think about the challenges that students with disabilities might face at school. He claimed that labels are embarrassing in nature, but he believes that Palm Academy does a great job of creating an inclusive culture for their students. He noted that there are push-ins and pull-outs. These are terms used in special education that indicate the types of services students receive. Push-ins include the special education teacher, working closely with students in their general education classes while push-outs involve the special education teachers, working with students outside of their general education classrooms. There are benefits and drawbacks for each method. According to Morin (2014), push-ins allow students to gain more instructional time through the general curriculum, while push-outs give students more individualized instruction. Regardless of the method, Mr. K, however, stated that he tries his best to handle as much of the needs of his students in his own room as he can. He appreciates when the special education teachers come in and help out in his classroom during inclusion though. Mr. K also added that

since Palm Academy serves predominantly English learners, he believes that English instruction is vital for all students. He asserted that instructional strategies that help ELs help every student in general as language instruction is for everyone.

Mr. K also commented that Palm Academy does a great job of appreciating the cultures of their students; however, he noted one obstacle. He explained, "One difficulty is getting [Hmong] students to speak and to express and debate their opinions. I am not sure about the cultural dynamics, especially about females correcting males. I have seen females holding back, not wanting to say something when they really wanted to, but that can just be general cultural shyness. When you give them the language and the tools and the practice, they start to jump in." He explained that cultural values can be a hindrance in certain lessons, but it can be bypassed when students are given the support.

Next, Mr. K was asked to think about overrepresentation issues pertaining to Asian American students in special education program. He said, "It is skewed at this school because this school has a lot of Hmong students. At other schools, I would say no, [there is not an overrepresentation.]" Mr. K then commented, again, that if language support is given to Hmong students, there would not be a likely chance that Hmong students will be overidentified. Finally, Mr. K was asked to comment on what Hmong parents' perception of special education was. He claimed that some Hmong parents are reluctant. He explained, "As a group, [in the Hmong culture,] everyone should be the same, everyone should belong, which is hard when parents do not support even when there are documentations. Like any parents, they want their child to be normal, because special needs indicate that there is a difficulty. It requires more time and resources. Sometimes, there is a resistance, or refusal to acknowledge." He concluded that this resistance does not happen at Palm Academy often though as far as he knows.

Mrs. RR. The following information was retrieved from a 20-minute interview that the researcher conducted with Mrs. RR, one of the special education teachers at Palm Academy. She is an European American. Mrs. RR sees special education services as resources given to students who have different abilities so that they can obtain the same opportunities to learn at school as their peers. She explained that even before a student is considered for special education services, there need to be a lot of interventions set in place first. She commented that, "Teachers do them [research-based interventions] for a certain number of weeks. If there is no progress, special education may be considered, but students are not automatically evaluated. We meet and discuss the information we have, what we do not have, and what we still need." She also commented that information is gathered from multiple sources, such as from teachers, home visits, interviews with parents and the student, questionnaires, test scores, etc. She noted that special education then becomes a part of the discussion once the student has shown a consistent pattern of not being successful. Mrs. RR believes that it is this intensive process that ensures that students are not misidentified.

Mrs. RR was asked to share her thoughts on the overrepresentation of ELs in special education and whether some of the issues noted in the literature was present at Palm Academy. Mrs. RR commented that the posed concern is alleviated because the school's speech team does a great job of screening and ensuring that language needs are met first before special education is considered. Mrs. RR then was asked to share her thoughts on cultural practices and how that might give rise to overrepresentation issues. She shared that Hmong girls tend to be quieter, which may make them less known in the classroom. This silence can be misinterpreted. She claimed, however, that most teachers understand that Hmong students are generally quieter, so they don't assume that students have learning needs.

Next, Mrs. RR was asked to share some challenges that students with disability might face at school. She pointed out that the challenges differ, depending on the age and the type of students. For example, some students might have challenges, processing materials, and others might have short attention span. Mrs. RR claimed that, at Palm Academy, there isn't much of a stigma for students with disability though. She clarified this by stating that she tries her best to integrate special education into the general education as much as she can. In her words, she said, "This is why I teach after school and during summer school. So, it won't be, "Oh! You are going to go see Mrs. RR, the special education teacher." Mrs. RR is a teacher of all things. I work really hard to make sure that it is not seen, as "oh! That is special education! That is Mrs. RR" I don't want the kids to feel like that." She concluded that most of the students at Palm Academy are happy. Students have a lot of friends, even the students who have social needs.

Mrs. RR left the interview with some final words. She believes that in order for overrepresentation issues to be addressed, there needs to be quality staff. She said, "You get referrals mostly from teachers." Teachers who are aware of it [students' needs] would not send you as many students to evaluate as teachers who are not aware of it. For behaviors, it is more about taking your time with the students." Building relationship and not resorting to special education are Mrs. RR's suggestions for alleviating some of the concerns of overrepresentation issues.

Mrs. RJ. The following information was retrieved from a 20-minute interview that the researcher conducted with Mrs. RJ, one of the special education teachers at Palm Academy. She is an European American. Mrs. RJ sees the purpose of special education as tools, resources, and support for students that have a difficulty with learning, whether that is behavioral or educational. Mrs. RJ believes that Palm Academy does a well job of taking the culture of their

students into the consideration when evaluating students. As she explained, "We use culturally fair tests. Our school psychologist looks for best tests when considering these [cultural and language differences.] Parents understand the questions we send home. Our cultural and parent liaison does a good job of keeping our parents informed." Mrs. RJ also explained that evaluation tests can be given in the primary language of the students. In addition, she pointed out that the UNIT test is used because it is more inclusive to all students, especially to ELs. This test gives students from a non-white, middle class background a better chance to score well.

Mrs. RJ was asked to share how language needs and special education needs are separated so that misidentification does not arise. She pointed out that students are screened for ESL services first. ESL teachers provide the necessary instruction, making sure that English learners get language support. If students do not show improvements despite receiving extensive ESL services, then interventions are used. Mrs. RJ even pointed out that reevaluation takes place because there is a large number of transfer students. The reevaluation is used to ensure that the goals of the IEPs meets the needs of the students. In conclusion, she noted that a collaboration with the ESL department takes place when diagnosing students for special education services.

Mrs. RJ doesn't believe that cultural bias influences the special education process at Palm Academy. She said, "As a SPED Department, even before we considered a student, we would look at other factors such as their MCA test score and the Fast Testing score." She did point out, however, that one thing she has noticed is that Hmong girls are quieter compared to other students. She can see this behavior getting misrepresented as students not understanding the materials when it is just that these students are quiet or shy. At a bigger district, Mrs. RJ thinks otherwise. She shared, "From my experience in bigger districts, special education teachers are mainly the white, middle-class people who do not understand much about cultural differences. I

personally did not understand it that well too until I started working here. I can see how district programs may cause an overidentification of minority students in special education program." Despite this, Mrs. RJ claimed that Palm Academy does try its best to be culturally inclusive.

Mrs. RJ was asked to share the dilemma that students with disability face, which is choosing between getting special education services or having a label. Mrs. RJ asserted that the struggles are real for the students, but she believes that by using a more inclusive approach such as push-ins, the stigma of special education becomes lessened. She shared, "[I work in general education classrooms] so students see me as another teacher and not just as the special education teacher. I give them the help and support that way so that all the students know who I am. All students will greet me, and ask me for help." This approach, as Mrs. RJ believes, creates a positive and accepting culture.

Mrs. RJ commented that students at Palm Academy are accepting of students with disability. She even went so far as to say that it is usually the teachers who are the ones who have the negative perception of special education. She said, "It is more with the adults and getting to know the students. You may get a teacher here and there who may have preconceived notions. Preconceived ideas can affect the way teachers develop their relationship with their students, which can result in more write ups." In conclusion, Mrs. RJ believes that two ways to alleviate overrepresentation issues are to provide more cultural training for teachers and to use culturally sensitive and fair assessments. She concludes that schools should empower the population they serve.

Mr. C. The following information was retrieved from a 15-minute interview that the researcher conducted with Mr. C, the cultural and parent liaison at Palm Academy. Mr. C is a Hmong staff member who has worked in various Hmong schools throughout the Twin Cities for

the past ten years. He was asked to share his experience, working with Hmong parents. He commented that Hmong parents, often times, are reluctant to have their children placed in special education. In his words, he said, "Most Hmong parents do not wish to diagnosis their child as have a disability or go through the process. Parents believe that kids with disability will grow out of it as an adult. Another belief is that there are supernatural forces at work. Some Hmong parents believe that shamanic rituals and herbal treatments will cure the cause." Mr. C noted that there is a conflict between western views and Hmong views. He commented that in western practice, behavior is seen more in terms of the mental and physical state of a person, but in the Hmong culture, spiritual attributes are included. This difference in thinking can discourage Hmong parents from seeking out special education services for their child.

Mr. C also shared his own experience, working with English language learners. He noted that Hmong students are often placed in ESL education without much consideration, even when they do not need it. He mentioned that this practice stemmed from culturally unfair tests. He commented:

> I remember a while back, that there was a talk for Hmong students to be tested for ESL services and what the tests are for. For example, when you talk about rice, it will be easier for them [Hmong students] to understand. But if you talk about cheese, then they will not understand the concept. It is easier for Hmong students to understand test questions if the tests are culturally relevant. If questions are not framed in a context that makes sense to them, the answer that is provided might not be what is expected. I can see this contributing to a diagnosis of Hmong students as having learning needs. In Hmong, there are many definitions for one single word, whereas in English, there may just be one, and vice versa.

Mr. C believes that assessments that do not take students' culture and language into consideration can result in misidentifications.

Mrs. C. Mrs. C is an administrator at Palm Academy. Mrs. C is Hmong and has been the principal of Palm Academy since 2008. Prior to that, she taught Hmong literacy at a public school. She has also served as a principal at two different schools. Mrs. C also received a leadership award through the Hmong National Development for her contribution to the Hmong community.

Mrs. C's Interview. The following information was retrieved from a 35-minute interview that the researcher conducted with Mrs. C. Mrs. C asserted that she has seen the problem of disproportionality happening when she was working with bigger school districts, resulting in either the under or overidentification of students in special education programs. She explained that in bigger districts, placing students into the correct track is harder because there are a lot of students. She noted, "When there are more factors in the registration process, there is less care for where each kid goes. If that process is not clear, students can be misled into certain tracks." For Palm Academy, however, Mrs. C said that the problem is lessened. She explained that before students are considered for special education services, there would have been many conversations and interventions implemented already. These interventions can take up to a few weeks to a couple of months. She said, "The percentage [of students with disability at Palm Academy] is lower than the state average. We wonder if we are under identifying."

Mrs. C was asked to share what she thinks about the biases and the problems that stem from cultural and linguistic mismatch pertaining to special education. She pointed out that the identification process is a lengthy process. As she shared:

It is just not that you observe a student and you identified him or her. There has to be

something, whether a delay in reading, math, writing, or speaking. It has to be something

academic skills, or a behavior that is observable that is not the norm. We don't diagnosis.

When we see a concern, we communicate it to the right people. We have the school

psychologist come in and observe. Then we have the special education teachers go in and

casually observe and record. Then we make a recommendation to the parents to have

them take their child to see a doctor. Two students are not alike. They may exhibit similar

behaviors, but may have completely different needs. There is a reason to start the process

and it is not a bias process. Teachers fill out a form and document behaviors overtime.

Then there is a student study team, and the Special Education department is a part of that

team, and they think about strategies to help the students. And use the strategies for a

certain amount of time, maybe up to six weeks. Then they talk about the strategies and

how effective they were. Parents are involved during the beginning. For example, every

kid can name all the alphabets but your child can only name ten. There is a gap. We don't

want it to be the language, but a lack of skills. So, we intervene and talk with them in

Hmong. For example, let say that if that there is a speech issue. We will see if it is in

Hmong as well."

In summary, Mrs. C asserted that when students are identified for special education services, it is

likely that there is a need for it when the process if done extensively and in the best interest for

the student.

Mrs. C was then asked to share how students with disability would balance between the

conflict of being labelled and the actual need for special education. She shared that it starts with

a genuine, open conversation. She shared:

Students might feel bad if they read at a fifth-grade level while being in tenth grade, but they must know that the support they get from special education and their [IEP] goals are meant to help them. Special education should be framed in a growth mindset, and you must be able to show it to the students and the parents that that is the goal. Students should be able to look at what they have grown and celebrate their achievements. When parents and students know about this, it is not about the label anymore, it is about the growth.

Mrs. C also brought up an insightful perspective on the benefits of special education. She shared:

Special education helps both sides [students and teachers], because when students are not successful, they go into their classrooms and act out so that they can leave. It creates more problems if they are do not get the support. Empowering students by saying that reading well is important for their future and having heart-to-heart discussions. It is not usually a problem when you do it right, kids get excited. The biggest problem is when teachers do not see the potential in kids. Educators must be patient and willingly to empower students with disabilities. You must have the right team.

Mrs. C believes that sincerity, patience, and having a growth-mindset are the ways to handle students with disabilities.

Mrs. C concluded the conversation with the remark that there will never be a perfect way to do things. She exemplified that, sometimes, when Hmong students speaks English better than Hmong, using the first language to assess students would not work because the students would not know enough Hmong to take the test. She believes that there will never be a perfect solution. It is just a matter of having the best intention for each student as teaching and learning are complex.

Discussion

The goal of the research was to address the question: *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?* After a synthesis of the data, the researcher came to the conclusion that Palm Academy possesses certain characteristics that made the school a site where the problem of mismatch was not as evident as what was noted in the literature. There were three factors that stood out and they were: 1.) Growth mindset, 2.) The evaluation process, 3.) Culturally responsive teaching. Each of these components are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Growth Mindset

The literature stated that special education can have negative implications for students with disabilities (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002; National Education Association, 2007; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju & Robert, 2012). One claim asserted that students with disabilities can be enrolled in learning tracks that do not empower them. Another claim pointed out that special education stigmatizes students, leaving them with labels that would affect their overall schooling process. In this study, however, all three student participants indicated that they had positive experiences. Surprisingly, all three students were not aware of what special education entails until the researcher explained it to them. They seemed happy and found special education to be beneficial for their learning. For example, all three participants commented that learning in an environment where the class size is small allowed them to learn more effectively and grow as individuals. Participant Ieon shared that the special education classroom was quiet, which was conducive for learning compared to his general education classes, which were loud and distracting. The three students also benefited from

having a stronger relationship with their special education teachers, gaining more individualized attention, and receiving more time to practice the skills they needed help with. The students also appreciated that their special education teachers knew them and were able to modify instructional lessons to meet their learning needs. Along these lines, all three student participants commented that their teachers and friends were accepting of them despite them, having learning needs. They did not feel like they were being treated differently by anyone. All three participants also appeared to have a growth mindset, believing that intelligence is not fixed. For example, Ieon considered himself to be getting smarter while Avery commented that intelligence is something that is dependent on a person's strengths and weaknesses. Overall, all three student participants felt like they were becoming more successful at school.

These positives narratives highlight the intention of what special education should encompasses, which is to provide learning opportunities for students with disability to be successful. These positive remarks, however, do not match up with what was noted in the literature review. It is the complete opposite actually. This is a surprising discovery because, for me, special education has always been framed in a negative outlook. Thus, I went into this study, believing that special education labels were detrimental. My beliefs stem from my own negative experience of being placed in special education. Despite my initial notions, this was not the case with these students. The three students had positive outlooks for their participation in special education. Perhaps, the secret to these successes could be best explained by Mrs. C's notion of building a special education culture on the concept of growth mindset. Growth mindset claims that intelligence and abilities are not fixed (Dweck, 2006). Rather, intelligences and abilities are fluid, and they expand as individuals learn and grow. Dweck's work also shows that students with growth mindset are more likely to prevail and triumphant than students who have a fixed

mindset. This is because students with growth mindset see their success as a byproduct of their effort. Students who have a fixed mindset equate their success to their abilities. They tremble when they do not meet their goals or expectations.

Growth mindset is widely discussed in the field of education. It is to no surprise then that growth mindset was brought up by Mrs. C as she commented that special education should be framed in this paradigm. Mrs. C emphasized the importance of celebrating every accomplishment that students achieve as it reinforces the value of effort. Mrs. C also believed that growth mindset can be particularly helpful for establishing parent support and collaboration. The staff members indicated that Hmong parents often choose not to enroll their children in special education services. As the liaison commented, Hmong parents have a different understanding of disability. What is considered out of the norm by western perception can be seen as a spiritual disturbance in the Hmong culture. This difference in belief can possibly result in Hmong parents, refusing the service of special education for their child. Mrs. C, however, commented that when parents are informed about the services of special education, they tend to be more receptive of the benefits that special education can offer to their children.

Growth mindset also plays out in the special education department at Palm Academy. The special education teachers practice both push-ins and pull-outs. This means that students are pulled out from their general education classroom and into a separate learning space where they work closely with the special education teacher. Other times, the special education teachers go into the general education classrooms to provide support. The concept of push-in or inclusion is based on the notion that all students should have access to the general curriculum regardless of their learning needs. The special education teachers noted that they want the students at Palm Academy to see them as a teacher of all things, and not just the special education teacher.

Because of this, they participate in various settings throughout the school, immersing themselves in the learning process of all students. This seems to removes the stigma that is attached to special education.

The nature of a growth mindset in itself could possibly be an explanation why the staff members consider disproportionality issues to be lessened at Palm Academy. In the literature, one major factor that contributes to disproportionality issues is cultural and linguistic mismatch (Ford, 2012). Ford pointed out that behaviors are understood differently in different cultures. Misidentification happens when cultural differences are not taken into consideration. Allison and Young (2016) claimed that the expectations for English learners tend to be low already and Kappan (1995) commented that students with low abilities has been to be historically dumped into special education programs. Growth mindset moves away from these factors because it looks at students' effort as opposed to the end results. The staff at Palm Academy uses a growth mindset culture where it celebrates the achievements of their students, and believes that individuals can learn and become better. Perhaps it is this shift that has lessened the practice of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students for special education services at Palm Academy.

The Evaluation Process

The following information was retrieved from the 2017 Special Education Compliance Review document. This document details how Palm Academy is addressing special education services in accordance to state guidelines. According to the document, Palm Academy has a Student Success Team that comprises of general education teachers, mentor teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. This team meets once a month to discuss about individual students that can benefit from pre-referral interventions. These interventions are

research-based strategies that are carried out in the general education classrooms for a number of weeks in the hope to improve the academics or behaviors of students. The team then meet again after the time of the interventions has ended. They review the progress of the students, and from there, determine whether new interventions should be used or whether special education should be considered.

From the data gathered during the study, the staff indicated that the evaluation process is a lengthy process, which helps alleviate any gaps that might occur. For instance, even before a student is considered for special education services, there must have been numerous discussions and weeks of research-based interventions set beforehand. When a student has shown a consistent pattern of not being successful after these implementations, then the discussion of special education is considered. During the evaluation process, the team meets and discusses what information they have of the student, what they do not have, and what is still needed. The team gathers information from multiple sources to depict an accurate image of a student's current capabilities. These sources may come from tests results, both academic and skills-based; home surveys and questionnaires, home visits, interviews of the student, documents from formal and informal observations, teachers' commentaries, etc. The nature of this holistic and lengthy approach may help prevent the possibility of misidentifications. One staff participant even said that once a student is referred, it is very likely that the student does have a learning need.

Statistically, Palm Academy has a relatively small special education population. Only 10 percent of the student population at Palm Academy receives special education services during the school year of 2017 and 2018. The state average is 16 percent. This can be an indication that Palm Academy is indeed doing what it is supposed to be doing, which is using special education services for its true purpose rather than just dumping every challenging student into special

education programs. However, a counter claim can argue that the small percentage is a reflection of the bigger issue of race and power relation that was mentioned in the literature review. Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju and Robert (2012) pointed out that across the disability spectrum, Asian Americans have been shown to be consistently underrepresented in all areas of disabilities. They suggested that this is because of the model minority concept. The model minority concept generalizes the Asian racial group as a homogenous group. Asian students are portrayed to be smart, self-sufficient students. This erases the challenges that Asian students face at school, rendering them invisible (Wallitt, 2008; Wing, 2007; Yang, 2004). Could it be that Palm Academy is reinforcing the model minority concept unintentionally, which may explain a lower special education population? This is a possibility, but it might not be the case. The staff members indicated that Palm Academy practice culturally responsive teaching, which takes cultural differences into consideration. In addition, the Special Education Compliance Review document indicated that Palm Academy is meeting the Child Find obligation. The Child Find is a guideline under the Disabilities Education Act that obligates school to identify all children with disabilities.

In conclusion, when considerations are made, and when information are gathered from multiple sources, it is perhaps unlikely that the referral process would stem from mismatches. One staff member, however, commented that for bigger school districts, individualized attention is harder to give to each student. Thus, there is less attention for where each kid goes. This is a possible explanation why disproportionality issues exist in bigger school districts.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Some of the main factors that contributes to the issue of disproportionality in special education are political and racial inequities. As mentioned in the literature review, Skiba and his

peers (2006) noted that school reinforces the dominant culture. This disadvantages culturally and linguistically diverse students. In this study, all the staff participants acknowledged that cultural and linguistic mismatch is a problem in general, but they believe that Palm Academy tries its best to lessen this concern by engaging in culturally responsive teaching. According to Hoover and Erickson (2015), culturally responsive teaching refers to a teaching practice that is built on the cultural assets of the students. This means that teachers are teaching lessons that parallel with the cultural values, interests, and strengths of the community they work with. This also includes: quality instruction, language development, and unbiased classroom assessments (Hoover & Erickson, 2015).

All the staff participants noted that they are aware of the Hmong culture. They believe that being informed of the culture of their student is not only beneficial for making the schooling process relevant to students, but it also ensures that students are not misidentified for special education services due to any mismatch reasons. The staff even commented that during the evaluation process, students are given culturally fair tests. One staff member noted that the UNIT test, which is a skill assessment, is more culturally fair because it takes differences into consideration as opposed to privileging cultural values from the white, middle-class background. For example, features such as Hmong-American-Features were omitted from the testing process. On another note, one staff indicated that by having a Hmong liaison, who can effectively communicate and mediate information between the school setting and the home setting, empowers Hmong parents in regard to special education services.

Another factor that contributes to the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs is the practice of misidentifying a language need as a disability (Klinger, 2015). Klinger (2015) pointed out that students with disability and

students with language needs exhibit similar behaviors, but they have different learning needs. To alleviate this problem, one staff noted that language needs are addressed before special education is utilized. Students are screened for English as a Second Language (ESL) services. If there is a need for a student to be referred for special education, a collaboration with the ESL team and Student Success team would take place. One staff also noted that a disability must be present in both languages, which follows what Olvera and Fomez-Cerillo (2011) suggested.

The student participants, however, commented that they feel like their general education teachers do not know them that well. They pointed out that language barriers such as not understanding what their teachers say; and cultural values, such as the notion of respect, can hinder their class participation. One staff commented that in bigger school districts, this can become a problem. The perceived silence that Hmong students exhibit can be interpreted as being self-sufficient. This staff member's comment reflects the danger of the model minority, which was discussed in the literature review. When Hmong students are masked with the dominant narrative that all Asian American students are successful, they may not get the support they need. At Palm Academy, however, one staff shared that this can be solved by appreciating and understanding the Hmong culture. He believes that by providing adequate language instruction for every student and by giving them learning tools, they will eventually overcome these barriers.

This teacher's comment about teaching English or the academic language to all students is worth noting because it is vital for school success (Adams & Jones, 2006). Adams and Jones pointed out that there are two types of languages: social language and academic language. Social language is a form that is used in everyday social settings. This form only takes one to two years to learn. Academic language, however, is more complex and can take up to ten years to learn

(Adams & Jones, 2006). According to Kinsella (2010), academic language is essential for successful participation at school because school is built on the academic language. Academic language allows students to perform the tasks that are assigned to them, read a textbook, write for a prompt, understand vocabularies and abstract ideas, and take tests. Adams and Jones even claimed that the academic language is closely connected with literacy and all content area of learning. Hence, academic language is essential in order to be successful at school. Teaching all students the academic language can be considered culturally responsive because it is a form of equity. It contributes to the success of English learners as it ensures that they are equipped with the skills needed to participate successfully at school (Adams & Jones, 2006).

Furthermore, re-evaluating a student's IEP can be considered a form of culturally responsive teaching as well. A staff participant indicated that Palm Academy views and revises students' IEPs because there is a large number of transfer students who had their IEPS created elsewhere. According to the Special Education Compliance Review document, when a transfer student with an IEP enrolls at Palm Academy, the Student Success Team reviews the student's current IEP and plans for comparable services. The team continues to gather more data on the student to assess what learning support will be a best fit for the student. The compliance review document also indicated that, since push-ins are used at the school, special education teachers and paraprofessionals are able to gather first-hand data of transfer students as they are able to see these students interacting in the general education classroom. Once the data has been gathered, possible revisions are made. This revision ensures that the goals of the IEPs are actually aligning with the needs of the students. Revision can help ensure that students are not misidentified for biases reasons.

In conclusion, being culturally responsive can alleviate the issue of disproportionality at Palm Academy. This means that teachers must be aware of cultural differences and the language needs in their classroom. This also means that cultural and linguistic differences must be taken into consideration during the special education process. From the study, Palm Academy seems to exhibit these characteristics when they work with their students.

Conclusion

The disproportional representation of students of color is a major problem in special education. The literature shows a consistent pattern of culturally and linguistically diverse students being over-represented in special education programs. Asian American students appeared to be immune to this problem. Yet, when the demographics of the Asian racial group are disaggregated into individual ethnic groups, there is evidence of disproportionality. The purpose of the study was to explore how Palm Academy, a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students, addresses the issue of disproportionality pertaining to the Hmong population. Through an ethnographic research approach, the researcher identified some characteristics at Palm Academy that have been put in place to address the concern of disproportionality in special education. These characteristics include: growth mindset, the evaluation process, and culturally responsive teaching. The researcher found that a growth-mindset-oriented culture allows educators and students to build positive narratives of what special education should entail. Students commented that they appreciate the support they get from special education services. The evaluation process was noted to be lengthy in nature, which seemed to help alleviate errors such as misidentification that might have occurred. Finally, understanding a student's culture and language, and building a teaching culture around culturally responsive teaching seems to empower the learning and teaching community. This is especially the case when it comes to the

special education department. Teachers are less likely to presume that a student has a learning need when they are aware of the behaviors of the student through a cross cultural lens.

The special education population at Palm Academy is indeed lower than the state average. This could be the work of the three qualities mentioned. Even if this was the case, the finding in this study, however, is not sufficient enough to fully explain why and how each of the listed qualities work. In one counterargument, it can be said that perhaps the low percentage of students in special education at Palm Academy stemmed from other factors. One such factor could be parents' refusal to enroll their child in services due to a different interpretation of what constitutes a need. Some Hmong parents perceived special needs as spiritual needs. This interpretation can discourage parents' participation in special education services. Another counterargument could be made that Palm Academy is unintentionally reinforcing the model minority concept. The model minority concept generates a false image of the lived experience of Asian Americans, claiming that all Asian students are successful. Whether these factors play a role or not, it would seem that their influence is small. Palm Academy seems to have good rapport with parents and they are aware of the Hmong culture. In conclusion, the problem of disproportionality does not seem to be as evident at Palm Academy as it was stated in the literature.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

One of the main reasons why I even embarked on this research project was to provide insights on educational issues that affect Asian American students, particularly Hmong students. Educational disparities that affect Asian students often go unnoticed and undocumented because of the way Asian Americans are depicted through the model minority concept. Asian students are perceived to be high achievers. This misleading narrative makes them invisible. Even a review of the literature did not provide much insights of the struggles that Asian students face at school, let alone overrepresentation issues that affect the Asian racial group. This project was unique because it looked at these gaps. It explored the lived experience of Hmong students with special needs and raise awareness of some of the challenges that Hmong students face at school.

My research question was: *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?* In this chapter, I shared some final remarks of my study. The first section revisits the literature review. The second section explores the limitations that occurred during the study. The third section highlights the benefits that the researcher gained through this study. The fourth section highlights some possible avenues that this thesis project can be used for. Finally, a conclusion of the learning process of the research project is shared.

The Literature Review Revisited

When I reviewed the literature, I built a chapter that focused on the problems of special education as opposed to the successes of special education. I wrote in depth about the factors that

contributed to disproportionality, citing racism, culture mismatch theories, language discrimination, and professional practice. Although all of these factors are critical in understanding and acknowledging the danger of disproportionality, I did not go into detail of the solutions that can help alleviate the problem. With this incomplete narrative and with my own personal experience of being placed in special education, I went into my research project, thinking that schools, regardless of whether they are culturally responsive or not, are just reproducing racial inequities that advantage the dominant culture over other cultures. To my surprise, I was amazed that the data I sought out to capture was different from my preconceived notions. For examples, the students I worked with all indicated that they had a positive experience with their placement in special education. Initially, I thought otherwise. I was also surprised to learn about the concept of growth mindset, being used in special education. It was a concept that I would have never thought to be paired with special education. These unexpected turns gave me a more complete picture of my understanding of where special education is heading.

Limitations

Ideally, a classroom ethnography would be conducted during the academic school year, but because my research project was limited to the summer of 2017, I was fortunate to be permitted to carry out my study at Palm Academy. Compared to the regular academic school year, the summer school program presented a number of limitations. The first obstacle was the time-frame. School was in session for only a few weeks and class only ran for one hour and thirty minutes each day. Because of this, I was not able to build a strong rapport with the students I worked with in order to yield an insider's perspective. Despite this, I was able to gather enough

data for this study to begin to sketch a preliminary understanding of the issue of disproportionality that affects Hmong students.

Another limitation of the research occurred during data collection. There were certain words and concepts used during the interview that the students did not fully understand. For example, all three student participants did not know what the term "special education" meant. This threw me off guard. Could this be that special education is a jargon term that is not used often or could it be that the terms in special education are slowly changing from what they once were to words that are more humane and acceptable? Special education, particularly in the past, conjures negative ideas. For instance, the term mental retardation was changed into intellectual disability because of the negative connotations it implies. Even in my course work at Hamline University, the term "special education" has been replaced with the term "exceptionality." Regardless, the statement, "working in a small room," was a sufficient substitute for the term "special education." This switch allowed the participants and I to meet on mutual grounds. Additionally, the students would stumble when they were asked to respond to a question that they did not fully understand or have an answer for. The students would either say that they do not have an answer or they would go off on a tangent. I found myself, intervening when this happened. I would provide some examples. This allowed the students to reflect on their own experiences.

Overall, there were numerous factors that limited the study. Because of this and the nature of the study, I do not intend to make any generalizations. Despite this, this study does provide some insightful characteristics that Palm Academy has implements that can be useful to begin to understand the directions that can be taken by other school sites when it comes to working with Hmong students.

Benefits of the Research

Professionally, there are a lot of benefits that can stem from this research study. As I have mentioned earlier, the literature on the Hmong population is still a relatively new area of study. As far as I know, this research project might be one of the first studies to look at how overrepresentation issues affect Hmong students. With that in mind, the findings in this study can be used in leading professional developments and teacher training. Schools that serve predominantly Hmong students can gain first-hand insights into the lived experience of Hmong students with disabilities. Additionally, the features that were pointed out, which included: growth mindset, the evaluation process, and culturally responsive teaching, can be used as guidelines for other schools to enact on. As the Hmong population continues to grow in Minnesota and other parts of the United States, it becomes even more important that educators are aware of the unique needs of the Hmong culture so that they can better serve the Hmong community.

As a learner, I have benefited personally from this study. Conducting this capstone project felt like a visitation of my past self. In Chapter One, I shared my educational journey of being placed in special education. As I journeyed with the students I worked with throughout the summer school program, I cannot help but saw so much of me in them. The students were walking the very path that I had walked. Their struggles and success of navigating between special education and general education reminded me of my own experience. Our shared story allowed me connect with them on a personal level. There were multiple times when I shared my own narrative with them, telling them that I was disabled as a learner. I informed them that their placement in special education does not define who they are or what they can become. It was working with these students that I was able to let go of my bitter past and focused more on what I

can do now to create a future so that other students would not have to go through what I went through.

Future Research

This research study is only the beginning of a long line of research goals I see myself working towards. First, growth mindset is a powerful tool that can have the potential to restructure, and perhaps, remedy the problems of disproportionality in special education systematically. Creating a positive school culture where educational disparities are not seen as fixed obstacles, but rather, challenges that can be solved through innovated solutions is what schools should strive for. This can be achieved through the philosophy of growth mindset. Growth mindset seems to be working at Palm academy. With that, it would be useful to explore growth mindset as a systematic change for alleviating educational disparities. Next, I believe it would be useful to explore whether the features of growth mindset, the evaluation process, and culturally responsive teaching are being used at other schools and whether these features contribute to the success of those schools or not. If school sites are successful because of these factors, the integration of these features in school is strengthened. Finally, I would like to find out exactly if there is an overrepresentation of certain Asian ethnic groups in special education or not. The literature provides signs of this problem, but there is still no solid research on it. Having quantitative data on this issue will be important in challenging the dominant narrative of the model minority concept as this concept has far too long left Asian students invisible in the educational system.

Conclusion

In my ending note, I want to share a statement from the former First Lady, Michelle Obama. She said, "Once you have found success, you must keep those doors open for others."

This phrase captures my philosophy in life. Because people opened doors for me, I was able to get where I am today. This research has allowed me to explore an issue that has affected me for nearly a decade. I am glad that I was able to revisit my eighth-grade self. Now, as a teacher, it is my modest intention to keep doors opened so that those to come will find success as well. This is my story and my commitment to education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview and Focused Groups Questions

Students:
1. What is the purpose of special education?
2. How do you feel about being placed in the special education program?
3. What do think your peers think of you, being in special education?
4. Do your classroom teachers treat you different because of your placement in special education, and if so, how?
5. If teachers treat you differently, why do you think teachers respond to you the way they do?
6. What kind of expectations do teachers have for you?
7. What do teachers need to know about you and your needs?
8. How can teachers best address your needs or help you at school?
9. Where do you see yourself in ten years? What is the purpose of school? How do you feel about your educational performance and journey so far?
10. Do you think racism and language discrimination contributed to your placement in special education programs?
11. What does is the purpose of learning English?
12. What is considered being smart?
13. Are you smart? Would you consider students in special education smart?
14. Do your classroom teachers value your home language?
15. Do you feel like your classroom teacher is knowledgeable enough to help you learn English (Academic language/ESL education)?
16. How do your parents feel about you being placed in special education?
17. How do your friends feel about you being placed in special education?
18. What are your thoughts on students who are placed in special education?
19. Are your teachers informed about your culture and home life? What are some examples
20. Do your classroom teachers connect school life to home life?

General Classroom Teachers and Staff
1. What is the purpose of special education?
2. Is there an overrepresentation of minority students (Hmong, Asian, ELs students) in special education programs?
3. What are some factors that may contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs?
4. What are some factors that would influence you or another teacher to refer students for special education services? What services are students most likely to be referred for?
5. What kinds of interventions can or have been implemented to help students other than special education services?
6. What interventions have you found useful?
7. What are your expectations for students with disabilities?
8. What is your role in addressing the needs of students with disabilities?
9. What are the stigmas for students who are placed in special education?

10. How can the issue of overrepresentation be addressed?
11. What makes a student smart? What constitutes intelligence in a mainstream school classroom?
12. How does professional practice and teacher biases contribute to the overrepresentation of Hmong students in special education?
13. Do you think there is a connection between not understanding the language acquisition process and the over-referral of English Learners in special education programs? What are some examples?
14. What kinds of educational practices differ this school from other schools?
15. What kinds of culturally responsive teaching do you implement?
16. How are students with disabilities treated different from other students among the staff, other students, and the community?

Special Education and ESL Teacher, and Screening and Administration Team
1. How does this school address the unique learning needs (culture and language) of the Hmong population?
2. How are learning disabilities and language needs separated in the identification process?
3. How are students assessed for special needs? What is the process and what kind of models are used?
4. Do students come to this school already having an IEP or are the IEPs created here? If students came with IEPs, does the school check and recheck to see if the IEPs adequately address the students' genuine learning needs or whether the IEPs stemmed from practices that are culturally unresponsive?
5. How does this school ensure that cultural and linguistic differences do not contribute to an overrepresentation of Hmong students in special education programs?
6. What kinds of trainings are provided to teachers and staff pertaining to ESL and Special education, specifically in the areas of overrepresentation issue?
7. How many students have IEPS? How many students receive both special education and ESL education?
8. Does poverty and school readiness influence special education referral? If so, in what ways?
9. What kind of collaboration exists among general education teachers, special education teachers, and ESL teachers to ensure that students are approximately serve?

Appendix B: Parent Consent Form

Parent Consent Form

Dear Parents and/or Guardians:

My name is Vang Mong Xiong. I am a student at Hamline University in the Master of Education program.

I am conducting a study to fulfil my capstone course and am asking for your permission to work with your child. My research focused on the assigning of English Language Learners in Special Education programs. Specifically, my research question is as follows: *How is the mismatch identified in the literature of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services reflected in a charter school serving predominantly Hmong students?* This study will take place during the 2017 summer school program.

I will be work closely with your child and their teachers in the general education classroom. I will take on the role of a volunteer, helping your child with his or her course work, while at the same time, observe and interact with him or her to learn more about the issue of overrepresentation. Your child's participation will include being surveyed, interviewed, and pulled out of the classroom for short periods of time.

My research has been granted permission by the principal of the school to be sought out. In addition, my research has undergone approval from my research committee and from Hamline's Institutional Review Board. I will connect with the school personnel at Prairie Seeds Academy throughout the summer school program to ensure that they are informed about my research. Your child's identity will not be used in the findings of this research.

Benefits: Data yield from your child's participation in this study will shine light on the ways in which teachers and school personnel can better work with students whose home culture and language are different from the school culture. Your child will also receive additional help with classwork as the researcher is a licensed K-6 teacher and will be providing classroom support while collecting data.

Risks: Being interviewed means that your child will be out of the classroom for a 10- to 20-minute period for a few times. The researcher will plan accordingly so that students will not miss content-related instruction, however, they will miss something.

If you or your child chooses not to participate in this study, there will be no penalty. This will not affect your child's grade, treatment, services, etc. that you or your child will otherwise be entitled to. Your child's participation is voluntary and if he/she is free to withdraw from participation at any time.

If you have any questions concerning this study or your child's participation in this study, please call me at (612) 479-1233 or send me an email at vangmongxiong@gmail.com

Sincerely,

Vang M. Xiong

By singing below, I give consent for my child to participate in the above-referenced study.

Child Name: Date:_____

Parent Name:_____

Parent Signature:_____

Appendix C: Student Consent Form

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in a research study during your time at Prairie Seeds Academy's 2017 summer school program. This research is being conducted to better understand how cultural and linguistic mismatch give rise an overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs.

Your participation will include being surveyed, interviewed, and pulled out of the classroom for short periods of time. In addition, the researcher will observe your interaction and the behaviors you exhibit both in the general education classroom and in other spaces within the school environment. These spaces may include the lunchroom, playground, and hallways. Furthermore, the researcher will interact with you, and help you out with schoolwork. Your participation will be recorded through the use of field notes and on an audio recorder for the purpose of data analysis. Some of your work will also be collected and studied.

In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no one reading it will be able to tell who you, your teacher, your school, or the district are. Your privacy will be protected.

Your participation in this study is voluntarily. Your decision to participate in this study will not affect your grade, treatment, services, etc. that you will otherwise be entitled to. During the study, you are free to withdraw from participation at anytime

This study is being done by Vang Mong Xiong, a graduate student at Hamline University. You will see him in the classroom. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may send him an email message at vxiong04@hamline.edu or talk to him when he comes to the classroom.

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.

I understand the content of this document.   _____
                                                          (Write yes on the line)

I understand that I am giving consent to participate in this study.   _____
(Your parents will have to agree, too.)   *(Write yes or no on the line)*

Student Signature
_____Date_____

Appendix D: Staff Consent Form

STAFF CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in a research study during your time at Prairie Seeds Academy's 2017 summer school program. This research is being conducted to better understand how cultural and linguistic mismatch give rise an overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs.

Your participation will include being interviewed and conversing in informal conversation. Your responses will be recorded either in field notes or on an audio recorder for the purpose of data analysis.

In any sort of report the researcher might publish, no one reading it will be able to tell who you, your school, or the district are. Your privacy will be protected.

Your participation in this study is voluntarily. During the study, you are free to withdraw from participation at any time.

This study is being conducted by Vang Mong Xiong, a graduate student at Hamline University. If you have any questions, you may ask him now or send him an email message at vxiong04@hamline.edu later.

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.

I understand the content of this document.   _____

(Write yes on the line)

I understand that I am giving consent to participate in this study.   _____

(Write yes or no on the line)

Staff Name (print) _____   Date

Staff Signature:

Appendix E: Research Proposal

Vang Mong Xiong
Research Proposal

Research Questions:
How can I implement professional trainings to help teachers become more aware of the problems of the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs, specifically students from the Hmong culture?

Intention:
The public educational system has come quite the way in addressing the disparities that culturally and linguistically diverse students face in schools; however, as schools continue to serve the ever-growing needs of a diverse population, many educational disparities still go unchecked. One of these problems involves the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. Sullivan (2011) commented that English Learners (Els) are overrepresented in special education at an increasing rate. Some factors that contribute to this issue include: a lack of teacher training in the areas of teaching English learners; teachers and school personnel misinterpreting the language acquisition process with learning disabilities; and cultural and linguistic mismatch between school and home life.

A lot of research have been conducted to dismantle much of the problems surrounding the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs, however, not much emphasis has been placed on the overrepresentation of ELs in special education programs, especially on the Hmong population.

The purpose of this study is to explore how cultural and linguistic mismatch give rise to an overrepresentation/ or misidentification of Hmong students in Special Education Programs. My goal is to work closely with students who are identified or have been misidentified as having learning needs, and to capture their stories. By doing this, I would observe and participate in the general education classroom, conduct surveys and interviews, and implement focused groups. The hope of this research is to gain insights on overrepresentation issues, particularly on the Hmong population, and to use these insights to shed new lights on teacher training.

Plan of Work and Methods:
This research question will be explored during the duration of summer school session of 2017. Participant-observation is the key method in this research. This qualitative research method involves the researcher living side-by-side with the informants. In other words, I would be in the classroom with the students (students who have IEPS), interacting with them to build rapport and then gather data. Interviews and surveys will also be implemented as well. Consent forms will be sent home and only students who have returned a consent form will be include in the research.

The other methods I plan on implementing are:
1. Structured, Semi-Structured, and Unstructured Interviews,
2. Questionnaires, Survey, and Focused Groups.

Appendix F: Permission

To: Choua.Yang@psak12.org

[Quoted text hidden]

📄 **Master Thesis Proposal.docx**
14K

Choua Yang <choua.yang@psak12.org>   Sat, Mar 4, 2017 at 5:15 PM
To: "Xiong, Vang" <vxiong04@hamline.edu>
Cc: Jeanene Miller <jeanene.miller@psak12.org>

Hi Vang,

We are open to having you do your thesis at PSA, please work with Jeanene to get this started for you. We will need to get parent permission to have students involved and student names cannot be used.

Thanks,

Choua

From: Xiong, Vang [mailto:vxiong04@hamline.edu]
Sent: Thursday, March 2, 2017 7:03 PM
To: Choua.Yang@psak12.org
Subject: Re: Master Thesis Research Proposal

[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix G: IRB Form

TO: VANG MONG XIONG

FROM: HAMLINE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

RE: IRB APPROVAL (6/25/2017)

Your proposal entitled "Exploring the Narratives of Hmong Students in Special Education Programs" is approved and requires no further review or revision.

Good Luck with the project.