

**BARRIERS THAT IMPEDE THE PROGRESS OF CLD FAMILIES ENTERING
AND NAVIGATING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM**

by

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Chapter One

Introduction

The many different paths I have walked in the field of education over the past decade, have brought me to where I am today. I started my journey as a Special Education para in Minneapolis back in 2007, shortly after graduating with my bachelor's degree in Social Work. It was somewhat of a fluke, as I hoped to someday work as a school social worker, and thought this would be a good stepping stone. Little did I know my passion for advocacy would lead me elsewhere. While working as a para, I assisted students from several cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and learned a lot about how the elementary level of special education operated. Shortly after beginning my work in the schools, I learned of the English as a Second Language Department, since some of my students were labeled both. It seems so naive of me today, but back then I had no idea this was an actual career path! I spoke Spanish, had taught English abroad, served as an English teacher for my husband, and loved it. I was thrilled to find out this was actually something I could do for a living- without having to go abroad.

I soon after, enrolled in the English as a Second Language (hereafter referred to as ESL) graduate program at Hamline. I finished my graduate degree while working as a para, and quickly after receiving my license, found a job in a first ring

suburb of Minneapolis working as an English Language Learner (hereafter referred to as ELL) teacher. I was able to bring my experience from my time working as a para, and the plethora of new information I learned in grad school to my new teaching position. After my first year, I had an ELL student in second grade who was also being referred to Special Ed. The student was from Kenya, and parents were not at all on board with him being referred. Conference after conference, their response to the referral was that “their child would outgrow his behaviours, and they would not sign any papers.” The student began his education in Kindergarten in the United States, but was still having difficulty sitting still, and was reading at a beginning Kindergarten grade level. I watched this student struggle through the next few years academically and emotionally. I continued to work with him as his ELL teacher, but his parents never changed their mind on getting him a special education referral. I knew he was not reaching his full potential, but what could I do? I thought about this student a lot, and in the preceding years had similar cases of students who I thought would benefit from special education interventions, but parents refused. This began my wondering. Did parents really understand what the special education label meant in the United States? Were we explaining the process to them in a way that was culturally relevant? Could we be sure their below grade level academic achievements weren’t a result of their second language acquisition?

Students who have a learning disability (LD) and English Language Learners may appear similar and share many of the same characteristics (Ortiz and Yates, 2001).

Communication differences obviously impact ELLs, but culture, acculturation, and socioeconomic variables are also important. Language and cultural background must be considered as part of the special education evaluation process. Similarly, language proficiency and degree of acculturation need to be considered when planning whether a student should be referred for special education. If so, Special Educational interventions should be tailored to fit the student's needs, including the necessity to develop proficiency in their second language, through English Language Learner Programming (Illinois Board of Ed., 2002).

Educators and legal guardians play a key role in the Special Education referral process. Educators have the ability to observe students in their same age peer settings, compare academic and social behaviors, and evaluate formal and informal grade level assessments. Parents and legal guardians have the benefit of speaking to their child in their native language, sharing cultural backgrounds, understanding their medical history, and (typically) seeing their child's growth and development regularly from the time of birth.

In our society today, there is a stigma attached to our Special Education programs. When we sit at Individual Evaluation (hereafter referred to as IEP) meetings, after many months of communication with parents, and classify their child under Special Education, many parents go through stages of grief because they worry about their child being labeled. Parents feel that they must have done something wrong while the child was an infant, or that they did not read to them enough, and that they could

have done something differently to change the outcome of being classified (Dewitt, 2011).

When working with families of ELL students, this stigma can be even stronger. Often times, our English Learner (hereafter referred to as EL) families come from developing countries. In these parts of the world, there are many misconceptions about the cause of disabilities. Disability is often blamed on: they are viewed as misdeeds of ancestors or parents, supernatural forces such as demons/spirits, and/or witchcraft or punishment from God. As a result, it is thought that people with disabilities may be less human, or a source of shame (Rohwerder, 2018).

Our EL families need a resource to help walk them through the Special Education process that includes an outline of the process and key language. In completing this project, I hope to address the issues associated with disability stigmas found with our EL families, coming from underdeveloped countries. I plan to compile a visual that will walk EL families through the referral process, and address key language used by special education professionals. Thus, my burning question is: How do we break the stigma and bridge the language gap for ELL families entering the referral process?

Personal and Professional Significance

The school community where I teach is diverse, servicing 145 ELL students (25% of the student population) in grades Kindergarten through fifth. We have a variety

of native languages, including but not limited to Spanish, Somali, Tibetan, Swahili, Portuguese, and Russian.

Over the past six years, I have sat in on several initial evaluation meetings, serving to address the English acquisition of the student being referred for Special Education. I have come to find many barriers and inequities as I observe the content being addressed during these meetings. This is the typical scenario: There are usually between 8-10 educators at the table, while the parent is being spoken to by an interpreter- if available. Everyone goes around and says their name and job title. Shortly after, a member of the special ed. team will begin by discussing the assessments that were given to the student. While these assessments are being explained to the parent, a variety of acronyms are used to present the information. Following, is an explanation of the student's results. Again, the information presented contains many acronyms, scales, and jargon. Meanwhile, the interpreter is trying to keep up, often not knowing how to interpret the technical jargon being used. I can say that because I am fluent in Spanish, and when we are working with Spanish speaking families, I listen to the interpretation. The parent is sitting at the table, with teary-eyes, and fear notably taking over his/her expression- usually nodding quietly, and almost never interrupting for clarification. After all, this is their child, and the tone of the conversation feels very serious.

When the meeting is over, the parent is asked if he/she has any questions. The parent says no, signs a piece of paper giving consent to evaluate, and leaves the meeting with tears falling down his/her face. My heart sits in this space, wanting to cry with

empathy for the mother or father of this child. The parent is so vulnerable, trying to comply with the many (white) faces at the table who are making recommendations for the child to receive special education services.

I have also sat through parent-teacher conferences where teachers recommend a student be referred for Special Education. When the teacher brings up the student's behavior or academic progress, the parent often tells the teacher that they will work harder at home, and that their child doesn't demonstrate "those" behaviors while at home. What I observe most of the time with my EL families, is a strong reluctance to have their child evaluated. As soon as they hear the word "special education," they shut down.

My goal for this project is to create a visual of the referral process for non-native English-speaking parents in my district. I would also like to bring attention to the stigmas around Special Education that are influencing my family's decision to move forward or decline services.

Summary

In summary, this chapter highlights the challenges educators face when an ELL student is demonstrating a need for a special education evaluation. It also presents the stigma associated with disabilities in varying parts of the world, and how these stigmas impact students' and families during the referral process. Using these issues, and research-based best practice, I have created a plan that can be used by parents and educators to reduce the stigma attached to special education. I will create a visual for

my district that can be used during the evaluation meeting that explains the process of referral. In this way, I will reduce the inequities and barriers my EL families face when presented with critical information regarding their child.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter two, relevant research will be compiled to address the stigmas around disabilities and special education around the world. I will research the barriers for EL families entering the referral process, and share key language required to understand the process. Finally, best practices will be shared to determine *What barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the special education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them?*

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter One described how my personal and professional experiences as a Special Education paraprofessional and English as a Second Language (hereafter referred to as ESL) teacher inspired my interest in the topic of culturally and linguistically diverse families (hereafter referred to as CLD) and English Language Learners (hereafter referred to as ELLs) in the Special Education system. In Chapter Two, I will first identify important terms used throughout the review of literature to support my research question: *what barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the special education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them?* The literature review gathers research from the topics of the Special Education process, obstacles CLD families face navigating the system, cultural misconceptions around disability, and professional strategies for mending those obstacles.

Terms

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD)

This term is used to describe individuals and groups who are not part of the dominant White European American culture. According to Olivos, Gallagher & Aguilar (2010), “the descriptor ‘CLD’ takes the place of the earlier used term ‘minority’ because the latter term helps to perpetuate a view of a cultural group as deficient or

disempowered, that is, a subordinate culture. Moreover, in many school contexts, the term ‘minority’ is simply not an accurate description of the student body or the parent population” (p. 30).

English Language Learners (ELLs)

ELLs are a large, heterogeneous, and complex group of students both young and old who are learning English. They possess diverse talents, educational needs, backgrounds, languages, and goals. Some ELL students come from homes in which no English is spoken, some come from homes where only English is spoken, and others have been exposed to or speak multiple languages. ELL students may have a deep sense of their non-U.S. culture, a strong sense of multiple cultures, or identify only with U.S. culture (National Council of Teachers of English, 2008).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

In 1975, the U.S. Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (hereafter referred to as IDEA) in 1990. This federal act requires all school districts to provide children with disabilities a free and appropriate public education. Congress designed the IDEA to finance state programs and requires states to provide a certain level of educational opportunities in the most least restrictive environment to all disabled children. The idea is to have disabled students in general education classes as much as possible as opposed to being segregated in only special education classrooms all day. The act also includes

procedural protections for parents in the evaluation and placement of their children in Special Education Programming (Shum, 2002).

Referral Process

Today, ELL students are often over or under represented in the Special Education classroom and face more obstacles than their English-speaking peers. The most obvious of these challenges are at the cultural and linguistic level, but ELL students and families also face obstacles in the identification and assessment process, lack of teacher professional development in teaching ELLs, and parental collaboration (Park & Thomas, 2012). It is important for school personnel to take these areas into careful consideration throughout the entire Special Education process.

There are three phases of the Special Education process that all U.S. schools are required to follow. These include: identification/referral, evaluation, and placement (Project IDEAL, 2013). Students who are ELLs are often affected by problems with decision-making within each of these three phases. When a general education teacher notices a student who is not performing at expected levels in the classroom, he/she may refer the child to Special Education services after individualized interventions have shown to be unsuccessful. This is referred to as the “pre-referral process,” or Response to Intervention (RTI). The rationale for RTI is to provide interventions that will help the student achieve success without entering Special Education. (Project IDEAL, 2013). Individualized interventions may include adding additional time in the students schedule to receive ELL services, additional small-group math support, etc. However, if

these interventions do not improve the student's performance, then the student will be referred for an evaluation to determine possible eligibility for Special Education services

This first step in the process is often problematic for ELLs since many teachers lack the proper training in how to distinguish between a language delay and a language disability. It has been found that the number of referrals of CLD students to Special Education is substantially reduced when pre-referral teams including general education teachers and Special Education teachers are trained on culture and language acquisition (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). Before referring an ELL student to determine Special Education eligibility, school staff members should consider culturally competent screening procedures. The content and structure of these procedures will be examined throughout the literature review.

Research has shown that in classrooms with students of both White and Latino ethnicity, teachers tend to ask questions and call on White students more than Latino students, and that the questions they direct toward Latino students tend to be more recall and less cognitively demanding than those asked of White students. From early on, this puts ELL students at a disadvantage. If they are not participating daily in a culturally relevant, language-rich curriculum that is accessible to all students, they are likely to make slower gains than their White, native English-speaking peers (Zetlin, Beltran, Salcido, Gonzalez, & Reyes, 2011).

Evaluation

After the student is referred, they proceed to the next phase: Evaluation. An equitable, culturally and linguistically sensitive assessment plan should include evaluation of background variables such as first and second language proficiency (including receptive and expressive assessment in both languages) and language dominance (Ortiz & Yates, 2002). It should also evaluate educational history including exposure to bilingual and/or ELD models, immigration pattern, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Unfortunately, these considerations are not usually implemented in most schools (Zetlin, et al., 2011).

According to Baca and Cervantes (2004),

The federal Special Education law mandates that assessments be conducted in Language 1 and Language 2 (hereafter referred to L1 and L2) with students whose home language is not English. Litigation such as *Dyrcia S. et al. v. Board of Education of the City of New York* reinforced that school systems must use bilingual resources to identify ELLs who need Special Education and provide evaluations that are in two languages and are nondiscriminatory (Baca & Cervantes, 2004; *Dyrcia v. Board of Education of the City of New York*, 1979).

Although well-intended, there are problems when using standardized assessment measures for students who are ELLs, even when translations are available. First, item

and sampling bias are often a problem with most widely used assessment measures. There are not enough test translations that appropriately modify item difficulty or destroy the applicability of background knowledge to make the assessment measures accurate. Second, translators may sound ideal, but in fact literal translations are inadequate and may change some concepts to be incomprehensible (Ortiz & Yates, 2002) for the ELL student. Third, test administrators often lack the training to understand the connection between disability, and linguistic cultural background. Normalized tests administered in English to a non-native English speaker are, in large part, a language test rather than an intelligence (IQ) or achievement test (Ortiz & Yates, 2002).

Furthermore, using nationally standardized test scores to determine eligibility for Special Education requires an additional caution with ELL students. ELL students are on a spectrum during the language acquisition and acculturation process. Therefore, appropriateness of standardized tests for a given student depends on the similarity of that student's experience to that of the test's standardization population. If the background knowledge required of the ELL or CLD student is significantly different than that of the population being normed by test designers, then the assessment is an inappropriate measure to draw conclusions from of the CLD students' capabilities and Special Education placement (Blatchley & Lau, 2010).

Placement

Once ELL students are evaluated and it is decided he/she is eligible to receive Special Education services, the Individual Education Plan (hereafter referred to as IEP) team will discuss whether the student will be best supported in the general education classroom or solely in a Special Education classroom. IEP team members usually include the Special Education teacher, the general education teacher, a school psychiatrist, the ELL teacher, or other interventionists the student may work with, and the student's parent or guardian. The IEP is a document stating the current academic achievement and functional skills of the student. It includes annual goals and services the student will be receiving during the academic school year, and it is reviewed and renewed every year. The IEP must be completed within 30 days of the student's placement in Special Education. The plan is implemented only after a meeting has been scheduled between school professionals and the student's parents or guardians to go over the plan. All papers must be signed by parents and professionals working with the student before the student will begin special education services. Unfortunately, CLD families are not always completely aware of what they are agreeing to, based on cultural barriers.

The training and professional development provided to Special Education teachers in the area of English language acquisition is lacking. In fact, researchers have documented that significantly fewer Special Education teachers than general education

teachers are prepared to work with ELL students. Special Education professionals are more likely to be monolingual and few have the expertise to differentiate content instruction, while also addressing the student's limited language proficiency (Zetlin, et al., 2011). In order for ELLs to be successful in any school environment, all teachers should have training in the process of second language acquisition.

After a student is placed in Special Education, parent-teacher collaboration is crucial in the ongoing relationship. Inherent cultural beliefs and values of ELL families can differ drastically from those of the schools which can lead to misunderstandings, mistrust and tense relationships between teachers and ELL families (Steeley, 2015). Meaningful family participation depends largely on the cultural comfort zone of families and the cross-cultural skills of school personnel. According to Zhang & Bennett (2003) "for newly arrived Hispanics, Central Americans, and Asians, the entire educational system is different from that in their own countries, and the special education programs, services, and legislation have no parallel" (p. 53).

Under IDEA, the definition of 'parent' is broad. Fortunately, this accommodates our culturally and linguistically diverse family structures. When working with ELL families during all phases of the special education process, teachers should have an understanding that the customary definition of 'parent' may need to be broadened to include extended family members to reflect the family's kinship system (Garcia, 2002). For example, roles of decision making may reflect cultural norms like age, gender or kinship. If one member attends a school meeting, but is not the primary decision maker,

he/she may be reluctant to make any decisions until consulting other family members. Similarly, cultural nonverbals can vary from the U.S. culture. In some cultures, for example, nodding of the head which seems to mean agreement for the mainstream culture, may not mean agreement at all. In some cultures, nodding of the head only signifies understanding, and not consent or approval. This is an important distinction, especially when decisions are being made regarding disability, assessments, or placement in Special Education (Garcia, 2002).

In order to implement a strong, culturally sensitive Special Education program, schools must evaluate what practices have been successful when working with CLD families, and identify areas of growth. In order to do this, schools need to evaluate in depth how CLD families are represented in Special Education in the school and district.

Table 1 (Ford, 2012 p. 401) highlights variables that districts, and schools can explore and critique through specific units of inquiry. This allows researchers to examine the representation of varying groups in a comprehensive way. Race, ELL status, gender, and special education categories need to be explored in depth. Schools who service large numbers of CLD students would benefit from a deep study concerning these variables.

Table 1

Special Education Variables and Areas in Need of Examining:

Factor or variable	Questions	Target Area
Percentages and numbers	How many CLD students are referred for Special Education? How many CLD students are in Special Education?	Over representation (too many false positives) Proportional /balanced presentation (equal) Underrepresentation (too few; false negatives)
Major/overall category	In which of the two major categories of special education are CLD students more likely to be identified?	High incidence (e.g. learning disability, cognitive delay, emotional and behavioral disorder) Low incidence (e.g., visual impairment, physical impairment, hearing impairment, gifted and talented)
Racial and Ethnic Groups	How does representation (and referral, placement, etc.) differ by racial and Ethnic groups? Are there specific countries of origin within the large subgroups being referred to special education more often, or less?	White/Caucasian Hispanic/Latino Black/African-American Asian American/Pacific Islander American Indian/Native Alaskan
Gender	How does representation (and referral, placement, etc.) differ by gender?	Female Male Trans

As a means of dismantling the over and under-representation of ELLs in Special Education, schools can ask the types of questions shown in Table 1 to see if they find any trends. For example, are there a significantly more amount of Spanish speaking boys labeled Learning Disabled in Special Education than their African American boy peers? If schools do in fact find trends, they are more likely to become aware when evaluating this population.

Obstacles CLD Families Face in the Special Education Process

As an educator and native English speaker, navigating the special education system is a challenge. CLD families face an even more daunting challenge when

advocating for their children's Special Education needs. Many studies have shown significantly less participation of CLD families in the Special Education process than that of White, European families (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). This lack of participation has to do with the barriers CLD families encounter. When school staff understand these barriers, it is easier to constructively develop strategies that facilitate CLD family collaboration throughout the Special Education process.

First, school personnel may take a deficit view of CLD students and families, viewing their differences as deficiencies, rather than valuing their addition of linguistic and cultural experiences to the school's diversity overall (Steely, 2015). Also, CLD families beliefs around education are often different from those of the dominant culture. The lack to recognize and respect the others' view can lead to poor parent-school relationships and larger systemic barriers for CLD parents of students with a disability. In a study of 137 CLD families who were surveyed on what they find most important for positive communication with schools, they reported the following:

1. Positive and understandable communication
2. A commitment to the child
3. Equal power in decision making
4. Mutual trust and respect (Steely, 2015).

Positive and understandable communication is essential for CLD families to feel empowered, thus participating in the Special Education process of their child. IDEA emphasizes the importance of family and teacher collaboration throughout the Special

Education process to improve program effectiveness (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Often times, schools do not have the personnel or trained staff familiar with the language of Special Education to interpret for CLD families during IEP meetings. Professional jargon, body language, speech pacing, tone, and timing of silence all influence the interpretation of the meeting for CLD families. These cultural, linguistic patterns can make or break positive communication between school staff and CLD families. There are also several language differences in Special Education that simply do not transfer from one language to the next. For example, school professionals may label a student “learning disabled,” or “emotionally disturbed,” while the family may call this “lazy,” or “stubborn.” In many languages, there are no equivalent terms for what English refers to as ‘disabling conditions’ such as Autism and Learning Disabled (Zhang & Bennett, 2003).

Often CLD families value one’s “word,” over a signature on paper. In this way, effective participation and collaboration with CLD families requires a foundation built upon trust, rather than any law or mandate that calls for attendance and signatures (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). The formal approach of IEP meetings are often characterized by technical discussions with a plethora of academic language and abbreviations that can feel overwhelming and alienating for CLD families. Also, sometimes questioning a professional’s authority is considered disrespectful in a family’s culture. As a result, the family may refrain from asking for clarification or expressing opinions in order to show respect to school personnel. If professionals are not familiar with this cultural value,

they may misinterpret the family's deferential attitude as lack of interest in the conversation (Zhang & Bennett, 2003).

Without family collaboration in Special Education, CLD students can be vulnerable to lesser quality and more segregated education programs as well as inaccurate diagnostic processes. According to Rosetti, Sauer, Bui & Ou (2017), in studies regarding IEP participation, CLD families attended most meetings but were not provided opportunities to contribute due to hierarchical interactions with school professionals and disregarding family's expertise by other members of the IEP team. Also, even though qualified interpreters are federally mandated at IEP meetings, they are often not provided, nor are assessment and other documents translated (Rosetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, 2017).

Cultural Misconceptions around Disability

In order to provide culturally responsive collaboration between educators and CLD families with children being referred to Special Education, we must first understand the beliefs and traditions CLD families value. It is important to note that these values vary largely amongst cultures- there is not a one size fits all. Professionals should ask families to share their beliefs and values around disability, and do their own research as well. Although throughout the world many changes have taken place regarding stigma (an attribute possessed by a person or group that is regarded as undesirable or discrediting) and treatment of persons with disabilities, the traces of traditions and past beliefs still influence present-day decisions that affect CLD families

in Special Education (Munyi, 2012). Issues such as language barriers, religious beliefs, and cultural perceptions continue to affect CLD families in their pursuit of providing stability and access to free and appropriate education for their children with disabilities.

It is crucial for school personnel to take into consideration immigrant families' perceptions and understandings around disabilities based upon their cultural context (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Every culture has its own norms for typical, and non-typical development. If a child's condition does not seem problematic to the family (i.e. it does not affect their ability to work or participate in daily cultural routines), the family may not respond in favor for receiving 'special' support. In a study by Garcia, Perez, and Ortiz (2000), the cultural interpretations of typical child development varied greatly to the perspective of teachers and school psychologists when looking at language development in particular. In their study, Mexican American parents and caregivers perceived what school officials called 'delayed language development' as 'normal.' Therefore, they did not agree with the concerns of their child's teachers about them having limited verbal skills, limited use of nonverbal gestures, or inability to communicate. Rather than realizing that families have their own cultural understandings of language development, their lack of concern was viewed by teachers as denial or resistance to labeling (Garcia, Perez & Ortiz, 2002).

Educators must also consider the possibility that immigrant families have never received support for their disabled child in their country of origin, so they may not realize the services and resources available to them in the United States. Inclusive

education is also a foreign concept in many countries, which affects decisions for CLD families regarding their children (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). The challenge for professionals is to recognize that “the framework of disability and services to disabled students are based on cultural assumptions, rather than universal truths” (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994, p. 145). Research and logic do not always hold true in many developing countries.

Studies have shown that the spectrum of what is “normal” is much broader in countries such as Puerto Rico. Researchers interviewed parents who were in disbelief and shock at the application of labels such as “emotionally disturbed,” or “learning disabled.” The disturbance of these labels was even more pronounced for families of children who could read and write in both Spanish and English (sometimes better than their parents), and were seen by their families as “well-mannered.” When being referred to Special Education, these families did not feel this was an appropriate label (Harry B., 2008).

Across the world people with disabilities face attitudinal challenges and barriers including prejudice, stereotypes, and lowered expectations. According to Brigitte Rowherder (2018), “these negative attitudes and inaccurate beliefs about disability can result in stigma. Stigma arises when elements of labelling, stereotyping (negative evaluation of a label), and prejudice (endorsement of the negative stereotypes) combine to lead to status loss and discrimination for the stigmatized individual or group, and occur in situations where they are disempowered” (p. 4).

Franzen Bjorn (1990) observed that in some communities in Kenya and Zimbabwe, “a child with a disability is a symbol of a curse befalling the whole family. Such a child is a “shame” to the whole family, hence their rejection by the family or the community. Children who are met by those beliefs and attitudes can hardly develop to their full potential: They get less attention, less stimulation, less education, less medical care, less upbringing and sometimes less nourishment than other children.” (Franzen Bjorn 1990, as cited in Munyi, 2012 p. 2).

Other West African countries (and in many developing countries around the world), continue to hold stigmas of people with disabilities. In Nigeria, for example, these misconceptions include people who view disability as punishment to parents for their failings (Uba, & Nwoga, 2016). Disability is also seen as penance on the child for crimes committed in their previous life prior to reincarnation, anger from ancestral spirits for parents’ violation of promises or neglect of duty to these ancestral spirits, and/or wicked acts that originate from wizards or witches (Uba & Nwoga, 2016). Due to these misconceptions, the actual implementation of inclusive education can be rare in many developing countries, even when the law requires it.

According to Munyi (2012), the desire to avoid anything that is associated with evil has affected people's attitudes and decisions towards people with disabilities simply because disability is associated with evil in some cultures. Most of these negative attitudes are historical, cultural misconceptions that stem from lack of proper understanding of disabilities. These misconceptions are originated from the culture or

society's traditional systems of thought, which reflect religious philosophies that can easily be identified as superstition (Munyi, 2012). CLD students from cultures with this mindset, are likely to decline Special Education services due to a lack of understanding. It is the job of the professional, to provide culturally responsive teaching tactics, to ensure CLD families have a full understanding of what Special Education looks like in the United States.

Strategies Educators Can Use to Break Barriers with CLD Families

According to Sanchez (1999), “we form perceptions about the various ethnic communities we work with early in life, often without having any meaningful or personal connection with members of those communities” (p. 351). Many teachers understand the importance of family participation with all cultures, and have professional goals to improve it. Positive outcomes for CLD students can be realized and the hierarchical divide between school personnel and families can be bridged when schools and families engage in culturally responsive collaborative partnerships. Rosetti et al. (2017), explains that in order to bring about change to cultivate culturally responsive partnerships, teachers and other school personnel should start by examining their own cultural beliefs.

As teachers and school professionals increase their own cultural consciousness, they are better equipped to engage in interactions that reflect the construct of cultural humility. Rosetti et al. (2017) refers to cultural humility as “an ongoing orientation toward others rather than oneself in which one is able to overcome the natural tendency to view one's own beliefs, values, and worldview as superior, and instead be open to the

beliefs, values, and worldview of the [CLD parent]” (p. 175). When teachers interact in this way, they avoid assumptions about the family’s capability’s, and rather try to understand the family’s background knowledge. When put into practice, this might mean understanding why parents are having a difficult time committing to a scheduled IEP meeting for example; rather than assuming they ‘don’t care,’ understanding that they may not have child care, or have limited ability to miss work (Rosetti et. al., 2017). Sanchez (1999) points out, “to understand any human action, including a family’s decisions, special educators must develop their awareness of the social history and present reality as experienced by the individual or family” (p. 354).

Educators must also examine what circumstances they value as quality of life, and recognize that those values are not universal. When setting goals for students with disabilities educators should engage in dialogue with families to ensure that those goals are not alien to the student or family being serviced. Professionals may become aware that professional prosperity is a symbol of one’s personal worth in U.S. culture, for example, but is not valued in the culture of the family being serviced. According to Harry, Rueda & Kalyanpur (1999), “this focus is critical in avoiding inappropriate cultural stereotypes and inferences about individuals based on presumed cultural homogeneity (p. 126).

In reference to cultural competency, Sanchez (1999) explains, “teachers should step-out of their comfort zone, both professionally and emotionally to consider formal schooling as only one significant source of education, and to place their work within the context of the distribution of power in the society” (p. 354). Attending a Somali cultural

night at the school, for example, can allow teachers and other school personnel to experience the feeling of not understanding the dominant language, and needing to depend on nonverbals and intonation. Experiences like these push teachers out of their 'comfort-zones' to experience cultural humility.

Delpit (1995, as cited in Sanchez, 1999) interviewed one student intern working with a CLD family who stated:

I have never been a risk taker in personal relationships. I usually wait for invitations instead of extending them myself, and I am very sensitive to what others think about me. It was hard for me to invite myself over to Javier's home. As I spent more and more time with [the family], however, it felt less and less artificial. By the fourth visit, I felt very at home with the family. In fact, I really felt honored when the family invited me to go with them to a carnival. For me, it was the concrete sign of reassurance I needed to feel sure that the family welcomed my involvement. In retrospect, the worst thing that could have happened is that the family could have told me no, but learning their story and forging a collaborative relationship with them was well worth that risk (p. 355).

Home-visits with families are an excellent way of seeing first-hand the lives of students. They not only provide educators with a glimpse into the daily lives of families and students, but they also serve as a way to get to familiarize oneself with the family dynamics, living-situations, culture and values. As Delpit (1995) highlighted in this

interview, the relationship with the family became more authentic after the teacher visited the student's home. When educators have the privilege of working closely with families and sharing in dialogue, they can compare differing beliefs in order to work toward collaboration. Home visits also provide opportunities for teachers to acknowledge the importance that families have in contributing to their child's success in school and in other environments (Conroy, 2012).

Once relationships and trust have been established with the CLD family through informal means, the family may be more comfortable attending formal meetings that are required by the school, such as IEP meetings or teacher conferences at the school (Conroy, 2012). A culturally sensitive formal meeting should always allow time for teachers and families to engage in casual conversation before the meeting begins. In many cultures, "talk-story" is an important part of meetings (Conroy, 2012). This can include for example, asking families about themselves, their children and their home country before the formal meeting begins.

In Table 2 (Rosetti et al. 2017, p. 174) addresses guiding questions for teachers wanting to improve their relationships with CLD families being served by Special Education. This table however, can be beneficial for all educators wanting to establish positive partnerships with CLD students and families.

Table 2*Action Plan for Developing Collaborative Partnerships with CLD Families:*

Guiding Question	Purpose
How culturally responsive am I?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-reflect on cultural beliefs and experiences. - Develop or increase cultural consciousness. - Identify areas of improvement in culturally responsive practices.
Who is this family?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gain knowledge about the family’s language and culture. - Learn about the family’s perceptions of disability and goals for the child. - Convey to the family members that you want to get to know them.
Have we developed a collaborative partnership? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication - Commitment - Equality - Professional competence - Mutual trust - Mutual respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assess current relationship and quality of IEP meetings with the family. - Identify areas of improvement in culturally responsive collaborative partnerships with the family. - Enact practices promoting culturally responsive collaborative partnerships with the family during the IEP process (i.e., IEP meetings and interactions between IEP meetings)

Table 2

Table 2 provides educators with questions that examine their own cultural beliefs, ways to gain information about CLD families’ culture, and guiding questions in developing a collaborative teacher-parent partnership. In forming a democratic and collaborative relationship with families, educators can assume that families will be more likely to participate in the Special Education process for their child. When schools leave

time and space for parents to express their beliefs and concerns, they allow for a shared power in making key decisions for their children (Olivos & Aguilar, 2010).

Summary

This literature review addressed the research in answering the question: what barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the Special Education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them? The research highlighted the Special Education process for ELL and CLD students, obstacles CLD families face while navigating the Special Education process, international misconceptions around disability, and strategies teachers can use to strengthen relationships and break barriers for CLD families. The plethora of research teaches educators that as we get to know our CLD families, we realize that both educators and parents share many of the same goals for children, though they may have different ideas and ways on how to get there. This builds on family's strengths rather than setting goals that are derived from values that may be foreign to the families being serviced (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999).

Chapter Three

Project Description

Introduction

In this capstone, I have investigated the barriers CLD families face in their decision to pursue Special Education for their children, when applicable, in pursuit of answering the research question: *what barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the Special Education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them?* After I analyzed the literature presented in Chapter Two, I concluded that educators need to take intentional steps to create collaborative relationships with CLD families in order to anticipate engagement and participation during the Special Education process.

As a means of addressing the barriers and implementing best practices, I created a pamphlet for CLD families of students who are being referred to Special Education. First, I created a flowchart for CLD families that explains the referral process and the IEP process in U.S. schools, and more specifically in the district where I work. Second, I created a document that highlights commonly used terms in Special Education which will be translated into the two most common second languages spoken in my school; Somali, and Spanish. Third, I introduce families to typical interventions used with Special Education students, so families can create a visual of the types of supports their child might receive. All of these documents will be translated into Spanish and Somali.

In this chapter, I will further explain the brochure, the research framework, setting, audience, and timeline. The literature review identified many barriers for CLD families navigating the Special Education system. These issues include, but are not limited to, professionals lacking an understanding of cultural and linguistic differences, poor collaboration, and systemic problems. The majority of these obstacles can be countered with best practices-above all collaboration. However, collaboration cannot be achieved if there is not a transparent and straightforward framework addressing the Special Education process for CLD families to reference, which is what my flowchart will provide.

Project Summary

There are three main components of my project: a flowchart, a glossary highlighting the most commonly used terms in Special Education, and finally, an explanation of common interventions used in our district for varying student needs. First, I created a flowchart for CLD families who are beginning the Special Education process in my district. This document will also be helpful for parents interested in how the U.S. Special Education system works, without the technical jargon and where necessary, terms will be exclusively defined in the glossary. After several years of attending IEP's and conferences for CLD, and more specifically ELL families being referred to Special Education, I have identified many misconceptions about the entire Special Education process in the United States. I believe a flowchart will be a helpful and supportive visual tool that will clarify these misconceptions.

The flowchart begins when a teacher or caregiver has a concern about a student's academic growth. The chart walks parents through the following processes: pre-referral, evaluation, placement, and continued progress monitoring through the IEP. The language is basic, in the sense that technical jargon will be avoided. The goal is that this project will decrease barriers, and promote collaboration between Special Education professionals and families of CLD students.

Second, I created a glossary of terms that are commonly used in Special Education. In my experiences participating and observing Special Education meetings, I have heard these terms loosely flow throughout the conversations, but little is done to explain to parents what they actually mean for their child. The list is concise, only focusing on the most common jargon parents are exposed to.

Third, I explicitly highlight some of the common interventions used in Special Education. I focus on the areas of communication supports, social supports, academic supports, behavior supports, and organizational supports. Depending on the child's diagnosis, they may only receive services in one of these areas, or several. I believe that through describing the types of supports students may receive, parents and caregivers can get a better understanding of the Special Education system.

In creating this pamphlet, my goal is that parents and caregivers will get a better understanding of what they are giving consent to, or declining when they agree or disagree to have their child placed in Special Education. All documents will be translated into Somali and Spanish, to maintain equitable practices. In conversations I

have had with ELL and CLD families, I have identified a common concern. Parents often believe that their child will be placed with a paraprofessional who will “shadow” their child the entire school day. Parents have expressed concern that this type of intervention will create a stigma around their child, and as a result, the parent declines Special Education. This is problematic because often times the disability may only signify that the student will be pulled out for a small portion of their day with other students to work on areas like social skills. My hope is that this pamphlet will assist CLD families in making the best decision for their child.

Research Framework

According to Vygotsky, “No human activity stands alone, unconnected, or independent of the social, historical, and cultural context (Sanchez, 1999).” The social, historical, and cultural circumstances give way into a person’s view of the world. In order to understand any human action, including a family’s decisions, Special Education teachers must develop their awareness of the cultural context and present reality as it is experienced by the family (Sanchez, 1999).

My projects framework stems from the foundations of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of Cultural Capital. According to Bourdieu, Cultural Capital refers to the skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class and culture(Nice, 1996). Cultural Capital highlights on the notion that when we share similar experiences with others, such as attending college for example, we create a sense of collective identity. However, as

Bourdieu points out, cultural capital is a major source of social inequality. Certain forms of cultural capital are valued over others, and can help or hinder one's social mobility just as much as income or wealth (Nice, 1996).

According to Richard Nice's translation of Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital (1996), "Cultural capital comes in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. One's accent or dialect is an example of embodied cultural capital, while a luxury car or record collection are examples of cultural capital in its objectified state. In its institutionalized form, cultural capital refers to credentials and qualifications such as degrees or titles that symbolize cultural competence and authority (Nice, 1996).

Based on this theory of Cultural Capital, when parents come from a different social system than that of the institution (schools), their ability to impact their child is reduced (Gonzales, 2017). For the purposes of this project, I will be addressing cultural capital in the institutionalized form of the education system, and more specifically Special Education as a means of bridging the gap for CLD families.

Setting and Audience

The audience for my project are CLD families in a school located in a first ring suburb of a major midwestern metropolitan area. The project will also benefit any educator assisting in the Special Education process for CLD students in the district I work for. According to Minnesota Report Card (2018), 54% of the entire school population are students who come from another background other than that of the dominant, White culture. Of those 54%, there are more than 15 native languages spoken and 101 students that are classified as ELLs. Several of these families are from Eastern Africa, and share similar misconceptions around disability and Special Education to those that were highlighted in the literature review. I believe that the simplicity of the flowchart will explain the process of the special education system in the U.S., in a way that does not feel alienating to all CLD families.

I would like to invite CLD families to have access to the brochure that I create as soon as there is an educational or behavioral concern in regards to their child. This would take place at cultural family nights, conferences, initial pre-referral meetings, or on an as-needed basis. The brochure is visually easy to follow, and user-friendly so CLD families can get an overview of the entire Special Education Process, with as little external support as possible. The document will be translated into Somali and Spanish, our two major minority languages in the school. The flowchart will be presented to families orally, by school staff or myself.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the project I created along with the research framework I am using to support it. I outlined the purpose of this project and my desired result of a more culturally and linguistically equitable approach of explaining the Special Education process to CLD families. This chapter also outlined possible implementations of this project. In Chapter Four, I will discuss what I have learned throughout the process of developing my Capstone and future action steps.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I will reflect on my experiences while completing the Capstone Project which strives to answer my research question: *What barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the special education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them?* I will reflect and review on the process as a whole, identify some of the important information presented in my literature review, address how that information helped me create my project, and identify the next steps that would further my research and findings.

Reflecting on the Process

The process for writing my Capstone was accompanied by many feelings. When I registered for the initial course, I had been away from any kind of traditional school-work for several years, so I felt apprehensive to dive back in. I wasn't sure I could balance it all anymore, especially since my other educational experiences did not include children, a husband, or a full time job. However, I was surprised to realize while writing Chapter 1, that I actually felt *inspired*. I had prepared my family members for the time commitment, and it was a huge opportunity to make personal and professional growth. I knew I deserved that time, and I found myself excited to dive into a purpose that was not just professional, but personal, too.

As an ESL teacher in a public, urban, and diverse school setting, I have witnessed the inequities for culturally and linguistically diverse families entering the Special Education process. It is something that has been “gnawing at me” for many years. I attend several IEP meetings annually for my ESL students, and always leave with a pit in my stomach. Writing this capstone has provided me with an intentional purpose to address that feeling. I was able to take some of that heavy weight off from that *feeling*, and put it into *action* through researching this topic. I dug deep into what I wanted to see change, which led to my research question: *What barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the special education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them?*

Revisiting the Literature Review

While researching this topic, I was surprised that finding the right resources really posed a challenge at first. Since I was so passionate about this topic, I thought there had to be a lot of information on it! Oddly, there was not. I really had to dig below the surface level to find what I was looking for. I had to break my “wonderings” down into specific categories to get at the root of my research question. Since I am not a Special Education teacher, and my research fell under this large umbrella of topics, I had to seek external support. I needed to educate myself on the referral, evaluation, and placement process of Special Education. I sought out the Special Education teacher at my school who had 20+ years of experience to offer. I also did a lot of my own research through online journal articles. Having an understanding of the Special Education

process was critical for me to address the barriers that impede CLD families in moving forward with the process.

Next, I looked at the obstacles CLD families have when navigating the Special Education system. The research from authors Zhang, C., & Bennett, T. (2003), in their article titled *Facilitating the Meaningful Participation of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families in the IFSP and IEP Process* was exceptional for my research. They highlighted the importance of creating meaningful relationships between school personnel and CLD families. They also addressed the inconsistencies and lack of translations for Special Education terms found in the English language to those of other languages. In order to break barriers for CLD families entering the Special Education process, educators must understand these differences and meet parents where they are at.

Harry's (2008) research from the journal *Collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families: Ideal versus reality*, shed light on the cultural misconceptions of disability around the world. For example, in Puerto Rico the notion of what is considered "normal" behavior is much more broad than it is in the United States. This was important for my research because when educators are working with CLD families in Special Education, they should ask families about their perceptions around disability before imposing that what we consider "normal" in the US is the only way of thinking. In order for CLD families to have equitable experiences in Special Education, educators must have a global mindset. In this way, educators build rapport

and relationships with CLD families which leads to successful collaboration and decision making for the student.

Finally, I researched strategies that are applicable for educators when working with CLD families. In order to cultivate cultural sensitivity amongst teachers, one must first increase his/her own cultural consciousness. Rosetti et al. (2017) provided research on the concept of “cultural humility.” Rather than defaulting on the natural tendency to look at one’s own beliefs and practices as superior, the educator takes a worldview and inquires about the practices and beliefs of the CLD family in order to come up with the best plan for the student. Their research also included a table of questions that educators can use to increase their cultural consciousness.

Benefits and Limitations

After researching and analyzing the barriers that impact CLD families in Special Education, I identified common problems in the practices of well-intended educators. For example, educators often neglect to prioritize building trust with CLD families through informal means before more formal levels of conversation will be successful. My hope is for my school and district as a whole to benefit from my research and implement best practices to provide an equitable experience for all families entering the Special Education process. My literature review provides a plethora of strategies that educators can use to raise their cultural consciousness. My project provides a hands on tool for CLD families entering the Special Education process, as a means of breaking the barriers they encounter throughout the process. However, in order for best practices

to really be implemented school-wide, all educators need to be willing to feel discomfort when examining their own cultural beliefs in order to truly grow in their cultural consciousness. Although well-intended, not all educators are willing to feel the discomfort that is required to break the barriers with CLD families.

Future Research

In reviewing the research and creating this project, I have realized that more research needs to be done in developing strategic ways to decrease barriers for CLD families entering Special Education. The research around cultural misconceptions of disability was minimal. I would have liked to see more countries studied to understand the conceptions they hold around disability. Only a handful of countries were discussed in the research. Since we are increasingly working with more and more global students, we must understand the perceptions around disability their families hold before imposing our own culture's practices and beliefs. More research in this area would be helpful in developing relevant resources for CLD families.

Recommendation for Implementation

My primary purpose of creating the brochure is to provide CLD families with an overview of the Special Education process. After conducting my research it is evident that CLD families may come from countries where the Special Education system is drastically different. After reflecting on what I would want and need if I were living in another country and was new to the practices and policies, it would first and foremost be some sort of overview in order to feel comfortable participating in conversations

regarding my child. If my language was limited, I would want the information to be as simplified as possible. The brochure I created does this both.

Throughout the process of creating my project, I have collaborated with many educators, and spoken with parents who believe this is a missing piece in our district. I have also been updating the Special Education Lead at my school and the Principal to develop a plan for the fall, when we return to school. Next steps will include reviewing the final product with the Special Education supervisor in my district, making any changes she believes necessary, and then having the brochure translated into Spanish and Somali. We have also discussed the possibility of having the brochure (or information contained within it) on the district website, so it can be even more accessible to families.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reflected on the process of writing my Capstone and finding answers to the research question: *What barriers impede the progress of CLD families entering the special education process and what strategies can be used to overcome them?* After reviewing the research, I learned that many CLD families enter the Special Education process with very little to no understanding of Special Education in the United States. My project aims to bridge that barrier by giving CLD families a tool in their native language that they can use to get an overview of Special Education practices in the US. I believe that this will aid families in feeling more comfortable collaborating with educators about their child. Research claims that collaboration

between families and educators is key for students to receive the most appropriate Special Education services.

This Capstone has encouraged me to educate myself on an issue that directly impacts my ELL students who are identified as having a special need. The process encouraged me to take action steps in the pursuit of advocating for my students and families whenever possible. I believe that sharing the research and my project with colleagues will help shine light on this issue, and we can continue together to improve practices for educators working with CLD students and families.

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