Parent-Educator Partnerships in Special Education Services Provision: A Thematic Exploration of Challenges Faced by Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

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ABSTRACT:

Among its many provisions, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stipulates that educators and parents work together to improve the quality of education for children with disabilities. This study explores the cultural understandings of disability and special education concepts among ten culturally and linguistically diverse families. It is essential and relevant to examine these families' experiences to gain insight into what influences their involvement in the education of their children with disabilities. Data was collected through interviews, field notes, and document reviews. Grounded theory techniques were used to conduct an inductive analysis of the qualitative data. The findings reflected an array of families' cultural perspectives when working with educators and service providers navigating the special education system. Further, families raised concerns about the *red tape* in accessing special education services and the *lack of humanity* when interacting with service providers.

Keywords: special education, CLD families, IDEA, partnership

INTRODUCTION

Parents' unique roles in the decision-making process related to their children's special education services are well-documented in both Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) and the literature. Across IDEA revisions (1997, 2004), parental involvement is central to two of its six core principles (i.e., procedural safeguards and parental rights). The law mandates that school and state education agencies (SEAs) consider parents' rights to information and their participation in decisions on the design and implementation of their child's individual education plan (IEP). Additionally, IDEA specifies that school personnel must make every effort to facilitate parents' attendance at decision-making meetings by considering their schedules. Furthermore, school personnel must ensure that all essential information, including the child's IEP, must be given to parents in the home language (IDEA, 2004). The driving force associated with the IDEA law is also emphasized in the recent supreme court case Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017). The court held that "the Act guarantees a substantively adequate program of education to all eligible children, and that this requirement is satisfied if the child's IEP sets out an educational program that is "reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits" (p. 1).

Although these guidelines call for intensive efforts to inform and engage parents in the placement process and specify several steps that educators must take to ensure opportunities for such involvement, policymakers overlook some implicit ideals rooted in the law that may pose challenges for all families, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, whose values may lie outside traditional American culture and thinking. In the writing and passing of IDEA, consideration of these added layers through which CLD families must operate was overlooked. In addition to the challenges many low-income families face with a child with disabilities, CLD families must also navigate a system that does not share their unique cultural views, beliefs, and parenting styles. Essentially, these cultural perspectives impact their involvement in the special education processes (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; McLeod, 2013). Further, even though schools encourage families to be involved in their children's education, they view family and school partnerships through a single lens leading to assumptions about how families are ineffective. Hence, this leads to superficial opportunities for involvement leaving families feeling underappreciated and unwelcome (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). The superficial chances are happening in an educational landscape where the number of CLD students continues to increase and the number of students at various stages of English acquisition (Tran et. al., 2018).

Since the laws and policies governing public education in the United States (US) mirror the existing cultural structure, it is difficult for CLD families and their children to obtain equitable benefits from the education system. For example, IDEA assumes that families have the assertiveness needed to know and, if necessary, enforce their rights regarding their children's education (Harry, 2008). IDEA is implemented by a rigid system that calls on parents to be advocates for their children. Meaning educators may assume that because the law provides rights to parents through due process, parents fully understand the translation of these rights. However, such participation calls upon reliance on social and cultural capital. Since CLD families may be uncertain or unable to advocate for themselves, such an inability is often construed as disinterest because of a lack of cultural and social competence. In addition, many CLD parents might not be taken seriously because of "hierarchical power relations in which professional expertise is valued over their own expertise" (Gonzles & Gabel, 2017; Rossetti et al., 2017, p. 181).

Kalyanpur and Harry noted in their 2012 analysis that IDEA's core components reflect the predominant US cultural values of individualism, independence, personal choice, and equity. These scholars pointed out that the US values (i.e., individualism, independence, personal choice, and equity) focus on the individual self. In contrast, in other cultures, the emphasis is placed on group identity, inter-dependence, and communal groups rather than the self and personal choice. In essence, community values, ideals, and social hierarchies may be more critical than individual values for CLD families.

The value of individualism reflects in IDEA. Every child is entitled to free and appropriate public education, which means that the individual comes first rather than the group (family). Similarly, the value of independence focuses on each child's education services and due process. The assumption is that all children will develop skills that will help them become independent, productive citizens. IDEA emphasizes personal choice by expecting parents to have a say in placement and services decisions. The implicit belief is that CLD parents know how the decision-making process works and therefore know how they can make an input into the process in the best interest of their children (Rossetti et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the value of equity is also reflected in the law, where the focus is on zero reject, nondiscriminatory assessment, and strengthening parent participation in the education of their children with disabilities (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Harry & Klingner, 2006; McLeod, 2012). However, because CLD families often rely on educators to make educated decisions on behalf of their children, they may not be aware of the potential for discriminatory decisions affecting their children's rights under the law. Educators should be mindful that if CLD families do not understand the expectations related to the law (which is rooted in American values), they might find it challenging to participate in the special education process in a meaningful way.

A few scholars have noted challenges that make the goal of parent/educator collaboration difficult to attain. Some factors negatively affecting parent/educator partnerships include 1) parents' lack of information and understanding of their rights under the law (McLeod, 2012; Turnbull et al., 2011); 2) deficit views of cultural differences held by service providers (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Knotek, 2003; Steely & Lukacs, 2015); 3) parents' differing cultural interpretations of the meanings of disability diagnoses and special education services (Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Lynch & Hanson, 2011; McLeod, 2013). In addition, another challenge is the long history of cultural and linguistic misunderstandings between US teachers and CLD parents because, historically, the teaching population is mostly middle-class white teachers (Steely & Lukacs, 2015). However, in general, CLD families' reactions to their child's disability diagnosis are influenced by how they make sense of the disability construct (Lo, 2005; McLeod, 2012).

It is important to note that cultural misunderstandings might partly be responsible for CLD students being overrepresented in special education and assigned to more restrictive environments than White students within special education settings (Steely & Lukacs, 2015).

With continuous change in the US demographic landscape, educators need to appreciate and respect various cultural views, beliefs, and traditions. Therefore, this qualitative study focuses on the perspectives of 10 CLD families who have children with disabilities attending K-12 schools in two South Florida counties. This inquiry was guided by the following questions: 1) how do CLD families understand the meaning and intent of special education? 2) what factors contributed to families' interpretations of disability and special education? 3) What role do culturally-based understandings of the concepts of disability and special education plays in immigrant families' participation in special education? And 4) what other factors influence their participation? The families' experiences and interactions with school personnel and service providers are discussed.

METHODS

This researcher selected the setting and participants for this study based on convenience sampling (Creswell, 2006, Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019) from two South Florida counties. As indicated in the name, a convenience sample is selected based on how easy or convenient it is to access a participant based on their availability (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). The researcher lived in one of the counties under consideration, and the other was nearby. Both counties were appropriate because many culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and families were residents. Children speaking over 118 different languages and representing over 200 countries were enrolled in public schools in two of the largest school districts in South Florida (Districts, n.d.). Therefore, conducting this study was an excellent opportunity to understand how CLD families' culturally-based perceptions influenced their participation in the special education process. Also, examine the families' perceptions of interactions with their child's educators and learn what other factors affected their participation.

After gaining approval from the University of Miami IRB, the researcher distributed electronically and posted hard copies of the study's recruitment flyer in several K-12 schools and community-based agencies in both school counties. The flyer invited CLD families with a child receiving special education services to participate in the study. Several families reached out to the researcher after seeing the flyer. During the initial encounter with families, the researcher determined if they met the study criteria: (a) are self-identified as a family of CLD background (i.e., immigrants) to the US, (b) have a child who is eligible for special education services in a K-12 setting in either of these counties and (c) can provide informed consent and interview in English. Of the many families who responded during the recruitment phase of the study, ten met the criteria for participation. They were willing to share their perspectives and experiences with the researcher.

Participating Families and their Children

The term *family* represents a unit, including two parents and single parents. Ten families (all mothers) participated in this study. Although invitations were extended to

both parents, only mothers decided to represent their families. This tendency of CLD mothers to be more involved with special education services has been well-documented (Harry, 1992; Skinner et al., 1999; Lo, 2005). Five of the mothers were married, and the others were single. Six were working outside of the home, while four were stay-at-home mothers. The children included two

girls and eight boys ranging in age from three and half years to twenty years old. Parents' ages ranged from 34 to 48, and education levels varied (see Table 1). Four of the children were on the autism spectrum. Three had profound cerebral palsy, two had mild speech and language impairments, and one was recently identified as having a specific learning disability.

Table 1. **Descriptive Data on Families and Children by Disability**

	Families	Age	Country of Origin	# of yrs. in the US.	Education	# of Children and birth order	Child's disability
Jin	Chen-Chen (mother)	46	Korea	21	Post-high school	3 (2 daughters, one son)	
	Han (father)	48			Ph.D.		
	Kyung-Soon (daughter)	21		20	High school	Oldest	CP & Profound MR
Ross	Kathleen (mother)	35	Angola	14	Post-high school	5 (1 daughter, 4 sons)	
	James (father)	37					
	Nathan (son)	14	US.	14	High school	Oldest	Autism
Howard	Cheryl (mother)	36	Jamaica	14	Associate Degree	4 (1 daughter, 3 sons)	
	Donald (father)	-					
	Moses (son)	9	US.	9	Elementary	Second	LD
Sanders	Sarah (mother)	48	Dominican Republic	20	Bachelor's Degree	1	
	Mark (father)	48	US.	48	Masters		
	Matthew (son)	4		4	Pre-K	Only child	Autism
Watson	Sharon (mother)	43	Antigua	19	Bachelor's Degree	1	
	Charles (father)	37		20			
	Calvin (son)	3.5	US.	3.5	Pre-K	Only child	Speech and language
Gray	Claudette (mother)	34	Jamaica	18	Bachelor's Degree	1	
	Aaron (son)	11	US.	11	6th grade	Only child	Speech and Language
Bennett	Carroll (mother)	38	Haiti	30	Masters	1	
	Nathaniel (son)	12	US.	12	7th grade	Only child	Autism
Coleman	Dorothy (mother)		Bahamas	26	Bachelor's Degree	3 (1 daughter, 2 sons	
	Colin (son)	15		12	9th grade	Third	Profound CP
Long	Faith (mother)	42	Bahamas	15	Post-high school	4 (3 daughters, 1 son)	
	Peter (son)	13	US.	5	7th grade	Fourth	Autism
Cooper	Kathryn	48	Cuba	43	Masters	2 (1 daughter, 1 son)	
	Karen	17	US.	17	11th grade	Only child	CP & MR

Study Design

Qualitative methods (Patton, 2002) were used to examine the families' perspectives of special education, their involvement in their child's education, and their experiences and interactions with school personnel and service providers. Specifically, conducting two interviews with each family, reviewing documents (e.g., school records, IEPs), transcribing interviews and field notes verbatim, and then coding, analyzing, and interpreting the data. The timeframe for conducting the study was roughly ten months.

Data Collection:

A semi-structured interview protocol was used during each set of interviews. Meaning that rather than following a formalized list of questions, the protocol included open-ended questions designed to allow the families to candidly express their views concerning their child and their education through special education services. In addition, room was left to ask questions emerging during the interview and add or replace pre-established questions (Glesne, 2016). The protocol covered four broad areas: 1) the families' background/demographics information, 2) their knowledge of and experiences with special education, 3) their perceived barriers and challenges to family-educator partnership, and 4) their knowledge and understanding of documents (e.g., IEP, school records).

The researcher conducted 19 individual interviews with the families. The first set of interviews included all ten families. It focused on each family's understanding of the concept of disability and special education and the family's experiences and interactions with educators regarding the education of their children with disabilities. The second set of follow-up interviews included nine families as one mother voluntarily ended her participation due to time constraints and other family matters. This round of interviews also addressed each family's knowledge and understanding of all written communications from educators regarding their children's disabilities. It also included the families' perceptions of the purpose and process of IEP meetings and their rights and responsibilities within the process. Additionally, families reviewed the cumulative files of their children with the researcher and discussed their understanding of the files.

All interviews were audio-taped, and each lasted approximately one hour. Each family decided the location they were comfortable meeting for the discussion – either at their home or a neighborhood coffee shop. At the end of each interview, the researcher completed an audio re-cording of field notes and detailed anything unique while conducting the interviews.

Data Analysis:

Pseudonyms were assigned to each family for confidentiality purposes. All interviews and field notes were transcribed verbatim. After the researcher reviewed and entered all transcripts into ATLAS.ti.7, a qualitative software program (Muhr, 1991-2012). For the analysis, the researcher relied on strategies recommended by Strauss and Corbin (2008) and Charmaz (2006). Specifically, inductively created initial codes that closely reflected the data. During the initial coding process, the researcher stayed very close to the data and used small phrases or single words that best captured the core ideas in each data segment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As described by Charmaz (2006), initial codes „are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data" (p. 48). They are provisional because they help the researcher remain open to other analytic possibilities and create codes that best fit the data gathered.

Additionally, initial codes also prompt the researcher to see where there are gaps in the data and how to attend to them. The researcher found that some statements directly reflected a research question that it seemed logical to assign a code based on the question. Subsequent steps included grouping these codes into families (the term used by ATLAS.ti.7)(Muhr, 1999-2012) or conceptual categories (the term used by Strauss & Corbin, 2008) and then finding themes that cut across the data.

The researcher analyzed all nineteen in-depth semi-structured interviews, field notes, and reviews of special education documents, resulting in 110 initial codes, 14 conceptual categories, and four themes. The results of the analytic process were a set of statements explaining the families' views of disability and their experiences and interactions with school personnel and other service providers within an unresponsive system. The four themes that emerged were as follows: 1) Families' experience reshapes the disability construct; 2) Families reconciling the disconnect between feelings and reality; 3) The professional-family disconnect: *the humanity was missing*; and 4) Eligibility, IEP, and services: a flawed system. However, in keeping with the focus and scope of this paper, only two of these four themes will be presented: 1) The professional-family disconnect: *the humanity was missing* and 2), Eligibility, IEP, and services: a flawed system.

Trustworthiness:

The researcher used several approaches to establish rigor and the trustworthiness of the data collection and anal-

ysis process as the themes emerged (Guba, 1981; Merriam, 2009; Glesne, 2016). First, since this researcher was the sole and primary instrument in the data collection process, the researcher engaged in ongoing and frequent debriefings with the research team. Periodic debriefing also occurred with peers who were not involved in the study's data collection but were knowledgeable of the topic under investigation and the research methods employed. Second, member checks were done on the spot while conducting an interview.

Furthermore, during the second set of interviews with each of the families, the researcher also systematically sought to clarify concerns raised after preliminary reviews of interview one transcripts. The researcher also provided transcriptions of aspects of the interviews to some parents to read and determine if the material reflected the information shared. Third, thick description (Geertz, 1973) was evident in the significant amount of data generated from the interviews, field notes, and document reviews. Fourth is data triangulation using information obtained from each interview, field note, and document review. Triangulation of methods and sources (i.e., two sets of interviews, field notes, and document reviews) examines and explores the same phenomenon differently. The different ways of collecting data allow for greater credibility and subsequent findings as they emerge because the researcher can check for any inconsistencies. Finally, during the analysis, the researcher reflected upon their biases or preconceived cultural understandings, which could influence the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

FINDINGS

The primary focus of this study was to find out how culturally based perceptions of CLD families influenced their participation in the special education process. The researcher also wanted to learn what other factors affected their participation. Two of the four major themes from the analysis in this discussion are 1) the professional–family disconnect: *the humanity was missing* and 2) the flawed system of the IEP eligibility process and services after approval. One criterion that guided the selection of these themes was supported by quotes that had clarity and relevance and added vital information to the story.

Families believe that there are ways in which educators and families can better work together. In general, families shared their ways of attending and participating in IEP meetings, making phone calls to share with the teachers, and taking their children to doctors' appointments and other related service appointments. However, some families also stated that factors such as their work schedule and commitments and school personnel's attitudes often prevented them from being involved in the way they would like. Even though this was the case, most families though at times they were cautious, still forged ahead in their attempts to work with educators for the benefit of their children. The section that follows discusses this broad first theme of family disconnects and then ends with a few recommendations suggested by the families to bring more meaningful connections between families and education professionals.

The Professional – Family Disconnect: "The Humanity was Missing"

In this first theme, parents' responses provided insight into factors influencing collaboration between themselves and service providers. The following data demonstrates that the disconnect was very pronounced for the most part. There was also the constant battle by parents to be involved in their children's education and their perception of teachers as usurping parental rights. On the other hand, in other instances, parents did have positive interactions with teachers where they thought that the educators were indeed helpful and helped reduce their stress levels.

For example, Claudette, who serves in the military, spoke of the times she would have to leave her son with extended family because of her work schedule and commitments. Some families like Dorothy and Kathryn did not consider it necessary to participate in additional ways beyond what they were already doing (i.e., primarily home-based activities and annual IEP meetings) unless educators made a special request.

As far as the disconnect was concerned, parents in the study reported experiencing cold and abrasive interactions that lacked compassion. For example, Carroll, one participant, said, „At first I thought he was language delayed until we moved to Georgia. In Georgia, they did the autism checklist, and they laid that straight on me". Another participant, Sarah, remembered how service providers delivered the disability diagnosis about her child, stating that "the humanity was missing." She further explained: "He just said it [the diagnosis] like the sky is blue or it is raining outside, what the big deal is, get over it." Another participant Faith, recounted how she heard the news that her child had a disability:

His caretaker [teacher] at school called me and said she needed to speak to me. So, after work, I went to pick him up from school, and she took me into this little room and

said, „Your son is showing signs of autism… Here are a few places you can call to get him checked… At that time, I just thought she was picking on my son even though I knew something was wrong…He was diagnosed at the Dream Center…it was a lot of intervention that had to be done for me to get him the help… I took what they said, but I didn't act on it. I just took him back home and just treated him like a normal child… I started keeping him home from the population…

Dorothy shared similar views when asked how they learned about their child's disability:

I knew something was wrong, so I took him over here [the United States] to get the professional opinions about him; then the neurologist said very bluntly, 'Has anyone told you about cerebral palsy?'… at the time to me, it was a professional talking craziness…

Some families felt frustrated and powerless in what they described as a „fight" with educators to become involved in their child's education. Others found that when they tried to be better advocates, educators often used their authority to control and dictate parents' roles in their children's education. A common sentiment in this study was that educators used their knowledge and authority to intimidate families in their advocacy role. Claudette deemed educators' mannerisms as „victimizing the victim," and Sarah stated, „I've got to trust the experts, but now you [educators] are doing his goals at your discretion."

The analysis also showed how educators continuously usurped parental rights and seemed more concerned with what was convenient for them. On transportation to school, Chen-Chen's and Faith's children were thought of „as a safety concern" by educators. The only solution they saw to this issue was using a harness while the children rode the school bus. Both mothers believed that their children did not need to be harnessed and recommended more humane ways to address the issue. The educators refused to implement any of the recommendations and insisted on the continued use of a harness. Neither child had the use of a harness on their IEP, which prompted educators to call a meeting with the families and insist that they agree to the use of a harness. At the meeting, the parents' recommended solutions were not implemented, and instead, the use of a harness was added to both children's IEPs. The result was not pleasant for either mother. Faith decided to let educators' authority prevail, but Chen-Chen refused to sign her daughter's IEP. She recounts the story:

Ever since she went to high school, they put her with the regular high school kids., before the bus was for special kids, so when she went with regular kids, I don't know if it was her or the other kids, the safety issue occurred because she doesn't sit still…. So, they wanted to harness her and put her into a chair all the time in a harness. The problem was she didn't want to wear it. They said unless she wore the harness, she could not get into the bus… we were fighting with the school system that wearing a harness is not required; it is not on the IEP….so this lady, the administrator for special education…. she put it on the IEP, so there is a reason they could refuse her ride...

In some other cases, some parents reported some positive interactions with teachers. While this was the case, parents lamented that even these occasional positive interactions were punctuated with communication that left them uncomfortable. To illustrate this point, some mothers found educators helpful and sometimes relied on them to help bridge the gap between their feelings and reality. Educators were especially helpful in providing direction on acquiring appropriate services for the child. Participants offered comments such as, "Teachers are doing a fantastic job," "They know how to handle my child," "They will call me if they have any questions or concerns," or "They listen to what I have to say, and we take it from there." "However, as very special people because of their dedication to working with their children with disabilities, on the other hand, the same participants felt that those same educators often did not fully communicate with them about their children. They said that some of their interactions with educators moved from being easy-going to being very tense to a point where parents felt they had to yield to the educator. For example, Sarah pointed out, "Sometimes I have to back off because I don't want to be perceived as 'here she comes again." Another participant, Carroll, confessed that "I also try to stay out of the teacher's hair because I was beginning to feel like she felt like I was saying she was not doing what she is supposed to be doing, which is not what my intentions are." Kathleen perhaps best illustrated this notion of yielding to educators:

I feel like he won't even be in school because he starts acting up as soon as he gets to school, and they call us, "come pick him up." We used to pick him up three to four times a week… most times, I would go to pick him up, and they had school police holding him like a criminal… they threatened us, saying if you don't come to pick him up, we are going to call the police and have them take him to North Campus…. So, the only thing I could do was go and get him and bring him back home.

On the other hand, some families indicated that these positive interactions helped reduce their stress levels, increase their confidence, and make them more relaxed in collaborating with their child's educators. Dorothy underscored this point by stating, "I have gotten a lot of support from [my son's] teachers, aides, and nurses; I can't say anything negative about them." Other parents, however, said that it took significant effort and trust for their interactions with educators to get to the place where they could voice such positive views.

As far as recommendations are concerned, on being asked what recommendations they would make to service providers to improve family-school partnership, they responded that service providers should be sensitive to how overwhelming the news of a disability diagnosis is to the family. Further, they recommended that service providers with specialized skills work with non-specialized ones instead of working against each other. In addition, they recommended creating inviting environments that would welcome parents to interact with service providers.

Eligibility, IEP, and Services:
A Flawed System that is all Red Tape, Tedious, with Uncomfortable Outcomes

The second theme that emerged from the analysis is that special needs services for the participants were flawed, seeing this process as 'red tape' because of the bureaucracy and lengthy-time involved when parents were seeking answers about their children's issues. In addition to parents feeling the IEP meeting environment was intimidating, they also felt unsure of the outcomes of the IEP process and strongly agreed that parents should be the primary decision-makers for their children's education. Sadly, parents had mixed feelings about whether the instruction their child was receiving matched their IEP goals—this theme is described in the following paragraphs.

Many mothers in the study characterized getting special needs services for their child as *"all this red tape, all this tedious process."* This 'red tape' was about the numerous problems and hurdled the families experienced in receiving and managing services for their children.

Families painfully learned that regardless of how much experience they had working with services providers, there were no quick solutions or results to the queries they had about their children. Some families noted that educators/service providers did not rely on logic and realities of the situation to make informed decisions but instead relied on the bureaucratic process. Sarah described some of the bureaucratic challenges that she experienced:

It was another struggle to fit the best therapist possible with him…the fact that there is a total disconnect between providers. Doctors are here; the therapist is here; the school is here; even if he goes to speech therapy somewhere, that is another entity, and they are not talking to each other… there is a disconnect and a lack of willingness to work together, and to me, that is not hard…

A follow-up question asked the families to speak about the documentation such as the IEP and school reports they have received about their child. On many occasions, families would share their experiences or ones they witnessed, where in general, families were frustrated with the bureaucratic process. All the families talked about how the process diminished their hope and heightened their stress and frustration levels. For example, several mothers believed that implementing the process was done to either fault parents or protect service providers and other relevant stakeholders. Kathleen thought educators were more concerned about the legality than the aid required to support the child. She said: „For us, we struggle… what if we didn't go out and look for help and begging… why do we have to beg for him just to get that help and he is an American citizen…it is not easy..."

Claudette had a similar take on the process:

To me, it was clear that all these documents that I had to fill out, like any other parent, were to satisfy the red tape, to say, „oh, we did what we were supposed to do, and if you don't as a parent do your end then you can't come back and try to blame us… the whole thing to me is set up to make parents feel bad about their child's shortcomings.

Many families described the process as painful, frustrating, or a hope-snatcher. Although she was new to the special education process, Sharon had several experiences similar to those of the veteran families. She recalled:

All I wanted for him was speech therapy because I did my research and found out that with the help of a speech therapist, he could improve, but since then, it has been a very long process, much longer than I had thought. It is exhausting just trying to get speech therapy for him.

Sharon's response shows that navigating the special education system can be a challenge for anyone, regardless of years of experience with the system or the severity of the child's disability. Although her son's disability was one of the least severe compared to the other children in this study, she quickly found that it would not be easy to get services for him.

In addition to feeling the process of getting special needs services for their child as 'all this red tape, all this tedious process,' families' further f*elt unsure of what to expect regarding the service outcomes* explicitly discussed in the IEP process. Within the IEP analysis process, the mannerisms of school personnel and the approach they used in the deliberations played a role in whether or not families felt comfortable and confident to speak up during the IEP meetings and share their disagreements with educators.

The mothers were well aware of the intent of their child's IEP when asked about it. Seven families in the two sets of interviews defined the IEP as a set of directions that guides education and evaluation of the child's progress. For example, Chen-Chen said, "The IEP is supposed to make them [educators] do what they have to do for the child; it is to make their [child's] education best." Claudette said that the IEP is to track the child's progress over time in the program. She said, "It is also a record that will become a part of that child's education history." Both Chen-Chen and Claudette noted that the IEP assesses the child's progress and mandates the services needed to help that child's progress.

Further analysis of this theme revealed families' perceptions of children's role in their education. More than half the families believed that the child does not play a role in their education and that parents are responsible for making educational decisions and being the voice for their child. However, a few families described their role in IEP meetings as listeners or bystanders. They only interjected when they thought educators were making decisions that would not benefit their children. On being asked why she saw herself as a bystander in meetings, Claudette said:

Pretty much, they talked; the principal, the homeroom teacher, the speech therapist, and the pathologist would go back and forth and have conversations about strategies. They would ask the homeroom teacher about how he was in class. She would say, „He is very intelligent, and he is very caring…" the principal asked different questions to assess him… all they did was talk about and talk around everything, and then they say, sign these papers, and we are going to do these things.

Many parents experienced the settings for IEP meetings as intimidating. Some families saw the meetings as a scary experience dominated by intimidating officials. Kathryn said:

From the legal procedure or perspective, I observe that everybody looks like they are afraid; everybody is tense. Now that I have been going for so many years… it is like a conference room, and there are many people in there, and everybody is serious, and you are like…I find the whole setup extremely cold, intimidating, and frightening. I am just thinking to myself as an educated person, but I think if I weren't educated, damn it! It would be scary. I would be like, am I going to get sued? Am I getting fired? What is going on?

All parents thought they should be welcomed at these meetings as they are the most prominent advocate for their children.

Besides the process and service outcomes, parents had *mixed views about the educational settings of their child*ren. All parents agreed that educational settings were where services and educational goals for their children were implemented. They are a critical factor in their child's academic success, regardless of whether the educational purposes in the child's IEP are met. On being asked if the instruction their child was receiving matched their IEP goals and objectives, a few families said they believed so, a few thought there was a partial match, and a few others felt there was no match. Sarah disagreed with both the instruction and the setting where her son received his education. A section of the transcript demonstrating this disagreement is below:

Sarah: He was always thought of as being in the wrong setting for the entire school year… reverse mainstream was the wrong setting for him… but now he is in a self-contained classroom… which I don't necessarily agree with either there are no role models. That worries me a little bit that he doesn't have your typical kids to model after.

Interviewer: Why self-contained?

Sarah: That is what the team decided was best for him, but it also started with a strong recommendation by the teacher…

Interviewer: Do you envision him staying self-contained as he moves forward?

Sarah: No. He could very well be in that setting next school year and maybe for first and second grade; I don't know how long he would need it [supports and services]. I wouldn't oppose that, primarily because of the ratio of teachers to students. But I didn't like the fact that there are no role models, that all the children are children of special needs… I am a little worried about Matthew copying behaviors from children with more behavior problems than he does.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that all families believed that how and who delivers instruction in addition to the actual educational settings is essential.

Their discussion on expectations of service outcomes highlighted challenges they faced in navigating the special education system and forging valuable partnerships with educators. Further, the most crucial issue for these families was reconciling their cultural views and their personal experience of the construct of disability within an unresponsive system.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to explore CLD families' perspectives of disability and their experiences during their interactions with service providers. This study revealed two things. The interaction with school personnel was often negatively affected by the lack of *humanity* in how service providers communicate with families. There was a severe professional–family disconnect. Moreover, the eligibility for special education services was tedious, with very uncomfortable outcomes during the educational process. In addition, the results of this study reveal that this lack of humanity perceived by parents was entangled and marred the eligibility and IEP process and, subsequently, the provision of services. Since these findings entangle one another, the researcher discusses them to demonstrate how they align with the special education literature on parental involvement and advocacy for culturally and linguistically diverse families.

The data demonstrated how the professional–family disconnect resulted in the families sensing a lack of humanity during their interactions with education professionals. The parents' discomfort with their experience denoted the lack of humanity. Specifically, the parents illustrate the structure of special education as a *machine bureaucracy* heavily influenced by technocratic practices. A path designed and intended to ensure accountability and efficiency rather than reciprocity with families (Skrtic, 1991; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). The families' discomfort was also further exemplified by education professionals' expectation for parents to be advocates for their children because of the assumption that parents understand their rights through due process (Rosetti et al., 2017; Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). Unfortunately, since the parents do not understand the process, they view educators as 'experts' in their work on one hand (Lee & Park, 2016), and teachers disregard for parents' views on the other (Valle & Aponte, 2002).

Considerable research evidence has long supported the need for parent-educator partnerships (Turnbull et al., 2011; Wilder, 2014; Willemsea et al., 2017; Mortier et al., 2021). However, this has been an unattainable ide-al for many families, including the families in this study (Mortier et al., 2021). Literature suggests that educators often see CLD families as uncaring and uninvolved in their children's education (Harry, 2008; Zionts et al., 2003; Gichiru, 2012). This perspective of uncaring and uninvolved is due to the deficit thinking model that has long blamed the victim for school failure instead of probing how schools are structured to prevent poor students and students of color from learning (Valencia, 2010).

Contrary to this deficit model, in this study, it was evident that the families were very involved in their child's education and well-being through ways they sought services for their children. However, this study found other factors masked their effort toward school involvement and commitment to their child's needs, particularly from the perspective of the educators.

The lack of humanity, especially in the delivery of the diagnoses, was another predominant factor that influenced the families' reaction to the disability of their children hence exacerbating the professional–family disconnect. The families felt educators and service providers showed no sensitivity in presenting the disability diagnosis to the parents. For the parents, the child was first and mainly perceived through a label, but this child was "the *beloved* child for the families." This lack of sensitivity on the part of educators and service providers often left families dealing with overwhelming emotions of shock, dismay, and anger. Villegas-Gutiérrez (2015) recommends the use of a *cultural humility framework*. Within this framework, educators are encouraged to engage in an ongoing continual process of self-reflection and self-critique of their world views for such educators to understand their belief systems and how they can influence professional interactions with CLD families. With cultural humility, both educators and parents can learn from each other's cultures. In addition, educators will be sensitive to the power imbalance between themselves and CLD families and continuously seek professional development in this area.

The literature that examines CLD families' involvement in the special education process points to service providers' deficit views of CLD families, often based on culturally different assumptions (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Villegas-Gutiérrez, 2015). The literature also indicates that educators are yet to learn how to partner effectively with CLD families (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). There are instances when service providers and families do not recognize each other's culture, resulting in providers often judging parents as irrational because they assume disability is incongru-

ent with those service providers (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999). This ineffective partnership has resulted in what Valle and Aponte (2002) termed as "reciprocity in an asymmetrical relationship" - Asymmetrical because parents were in a disadvantaged position when the 'all-knowing educators' communicated to parents whom they assumed to know as much but unfortunately that was not the case.

Another factor worsening the professional–family disconnect resulting in the families keenly sensing the lack of humanity was the bureaucracy that made the goal of well-intended and meaningful progress very exhausting for them as they tried to navigate the special education maze (Anderson et al., 1997; Mortier et al., 2021). In this study, families cared deeply about their children's educational progress and overall well-being. Despite the challenges, they still expressed their hopes, concerns, and experiences with the service delivery process in the best way they could. Often, they saw themselves as powerless and afraid to challenge educators' and service providers' authority in critical decisions about their children. This fear and powerlessness led to parents' involvement being perceived by educational professionals as minimal or not even acknowledged. On the other, this same powerlessness led parents to elevate the status or role of the education professionals. This perception by parents, coupled with a lack of special education awareness, led to long-term relationships with parents perceived by educators from a deficit lens, as discussed prior (Cobb, 2014). One way to mitigate this is through cultural brokers to help families navigate the educational process. Mortier, Brown, and Amburo (2021) demonstrate in their study that cultural brokers positively inform, encourage, assist and provide emotional support to families as they navigate a white Eurocentric complex system.

Even though the bureaucracy made meaningful progress a daunting task, it still left parents feeling like education professionals were unsympathetic to their plight. And although the participating families were still intricately involved in the education and well-being of their children, their involvement did not come easily because many service providers ignored their initial concerns about signs that something was wrong with their children. Given that their initial concerns were ignored, families always wondered if the educational outcomes for their child would have been different had they not been ignored initially. For example, Ms. Kathleen talked about how she initially sought help for her son when he was pretty young but was told that her concerns about his awkward behaviors and lack of speech were unfound-

ed. His behavior was normal for boys his age. Such denial on the part of service providers not only led to a delay in diagnosis but also postponed early intervention and services for him. Research has demonstrated that this may propel some parents to look for alternative schools for their children where the parents may feel heard by educational professionals (Mawene & Bal, 2018).

For parents who stay, although trends in previous research highlight the importance of parental involvement in the service delivery process for children with disabilities (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; McLeod, 2012; McLeod, 2013; Gerzel-Short et al., 2019), attempts by the families to be involved are not fostered or nurtured. For example, families in this study desired that educators and service providers be compassionate and proactive in acknowledging parents' concerns for their children. They deemed this an essential element in setting the tone for a meaningful partnership rather than just delivering the news in a manner and tone like the "sky is blue or it is raining outside, so get over it." Essentially, the families in this study perceived that the process was designed to challenge their parenting abilities rather than promote any involvement they have in their child's treatment and education.

The evaluation process was also problematic for the families, becoming yet another factor worsening the professional–family disconnect. The professional-family disconnect varied in intensity depending on the child's age, the severity of the disability, and the type of educational setting where service would be delivered. The body of work points to the evaluation of students where educational practitioners have to use interpreters they felt were not well trained to make interpretations during the evaluation process (Vega et al. 2016). The limited training and use of interpreters ultimately make the whole process problematic for parents because much meaning is often lost in translation which, of course, has implications on the evaluation itself and services afterward.

After the evaluation, the child's age and severity of disability played an essential part in how the families adjusted to the special education processes. The children at the elementary age were just beginning the special education process, and their families shared much frustration concerning their interactions with educators and service providers. Often these families and their child's educators were not on the same page regarding what constitutes the appropriate services warranted to meet their child's needs. For example, the families and educators disagreed on the child's special education placement - be it complete instruction in the general education classroom

rather than self-contained or reversed mainstream. The families with older children had an established history of engaging with the special education process by interacting with the system much longer and recalled much of their initial frustrations and unwarranted stress caused by educators trying to deal with their child's disability. They still expressed a fair deal of concerns and unnecessary stress in their encounters with educators; however, they have all claimed to have since learned how to *straddle the fence* for the greater good of their child's education. So, while the parents recognized that their child's difficulties in acquiring specific academic knowledge and social skills were challenging for educators, they still wanted their child to participate in activities that help them „even just to be 'there.'„. Tran and colleagues point to the IEP being the cornerstone for documenting the appropriate education provided to students after they qualify for special education and related services under IDEA. In addition, they assert the need for increased attention to the development of culturally and linguistically responsive IEPs for diverse learners (Tran et al., 2018).

Adjustment to the special education process was further complicated by educators' efforts to get parents to take over discipline problems which were bewildering to some parents. Ms. Kathleen's reported that her son's school „drove her to hell" because they would constantly call her to come and pick him up. This issue was uncannily similar to a report by Alvarez-McHatton and Shaunessy (2006), citing a mother as saying, "They were driving me crazy, they would call my work, come and pick him up" (p. 3). A strong family partnership is critical, especially for students with extensive support needs such as behavioral issues. Students' risks of being placed in a restrictive environment coupled with a comprehensive educational team require strong communication and advocacy. Such a relationship will directly affect the "students placement options, service, services, and academic and social outcomes, and it also reduces parents' stress" (Mortier et al., 2021, p. 46).

Overall, while the families did note some positive experiences with educators, such as caring about their child's education and well-being and dedication to working with students with disabilities, the analysis showed strong support for mostly negative interactions with educators and service providers. Even though special education services have seen significant improvements since the passage of IDEA in 1975, families in this study are still facing substantial challenges when advocating for their children (Steeley & Lukacs, 2015). This resulted in families saying they often felt like 'bystanders' because

they were ignored when they made some alternative solutions for working with their child. Thus, they did not feel like they were equal partners in the educational decision-making process for their children.

Cultures play a dominant role in interactions with others. In this study, culture did play an important role in families' views of disability; however, far more significant was how their lives changed due to having a child with a disability. These families were engaging with educators from a place where a tremendous shift in their life experiences occurred. In contrast, research evidence suggests the significant impact of parental involvement on children's education and well-being (Vogel, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Turnbull et al., 2011; Mortier et al., 2021). Further, it is vital to consider the role culture plays in families and their engagements with the educational process (Harry, 2008; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; McLeod, 2012). These scholars denote gaps regarding how consideration should be given to families' actual experiences. At the same time, they examine the construct of disability or caring for a child with a disability. This study highlights the need to consider families' prior experiences with disability. Considering families' experiences before having a child with a disability (in their native culture or current abode) is the essence of forging meaningful parent-educator partnerships.

Given the diversity within our nation's public schools (Tran et al., 2018), educators need to respond to CLD families more humanely and listen to their concerns to understand the parents' perspectives on disability special education. These concerns are intertwined with the families' cultures and experiences. This intertwining of parents' concerns with cultures and backgrounds is what Cobb refers to as critical entanglement, a term she coined to capture the relational and multidimensional nature of parent-school interactions regardless of what they might involve. Thus, educators should respond to CLD families' recommendations for working with their children. They keep this entanglement in mind and respect the cultural capital CLD families bring to the decision-making table for the well-being of their children with disabilities. Such might help the educational professionals better recognize and respond to forces that impede or hinder parental involvement (Cobb, 2014).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In this study, the researcher interviewed parents and reviewed documents to highlight the perspectives presented by the families. These perspectives were likely subject

to personal bias, frustration, anger, anxiety, or lack of awareness. A study including educators' and service providers' views for triangulation would give a more rounded picture. The absence of their views left open whether their practices might have been influenced by a deficit perspective on parents, such as reported in some of the literature, or were influenced by entirely different factors. In this study, the analysis did not indicate that parents thought educators and service providers viewed them in a deficit light. Instead, educators failed to consider their limited experiences with disability. The families were yet to transition into the reality of having a child with a disability. In essence, what contributed to the negative interactions was more along the path of the families' lack of experiences with disability in general. Despite this limitation, the researcher believes that since this study was about CLD families' perspectives regarding disability and their interactions with service providers in delivering services, the research focus is justifiable.

Another limitation of this study is that the researcher was the sole instrument of the data collection. The researcher continuously monitored the researcher's identity (i.e., cultural and educational positionality) to examine her own preconceived beliefs that might have influenced the interpretation of the data. As the researcher listened and read the interview data, she realized that these families were experiencing the reality of disability as it unfolded while describing their interactions with educators and service providers. These families were relying more on the experiences they were gaining and the life lessons they were learning from their child with a disability. Often the families attributed personal character development to caring for their child. Due to caring for their child with a disability, the families have come to view themselves better and more robust. Future development of this study could include the impact of acculturation on families' perspectives and experiences with disability and special education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study confirmed much of what is already known in the literature (e.g., limited involvement and cultural impact/influences on disability). However, it also provided new insight into how CLD families' experiences and encounters with disability impact interactions with their children's special education service providers. Analysis of the findings indicated significant ways in which service providers and CLD families can develop more meaningful partnerships. Previous research, along

with the results of this study, suggests that disability is a social construct. Thus, when the term 'disability' is used in discussions with CLD families, it often creates an immediate divide between the families and their children's educators and service providers. Consequently, Lynch and Hanson's (2011) concept of cross-cultural competence can help to create opportunities for families and service providers to work together.

For educators and service providers, disability is grounded in scientific explanations, and services are based on a technical approach to identifying and serving children. However, for many CLD families, disability goes beyond scientific definitions to include spiritual explanations. While this perspective was not explored in this study, the researcher believes that special education's culture of technocratic and bureaucratic practices at least in part contributed to parents' view that service providers lacked humanity.

Although it is difficult to isolate the role that cultural beliefs play in CLD families' involvement in their children's treatment, openness and willingness by families, educators, and other service providers to others' cultural traditions are warranted. Educators and service providers need to be aware of both the obvious and subtle elements associated with the cultural perspectives of CLD families.

This is where the concept of *cultural reciprocity, cultural humility framework*, and *engaging cultural brokers) becomes* most relevant. Service providers should not only become aware of their own beliefs and biases and seek information on families' beliefs and preferences to create an authentic dialogue with parents. Service providers should engage in continual self-reflection and self-critique of their world views for such educators to understand their belief systems and how they can influence professional interactions with CLD families. Finally, helping families navigate the educational process through cultural brokers positively inform, encourage, assist, and provide emotional support to families navigating a white Eurocentric complex system (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Mortier et al., 2021; Villegas-Gutiérrez, 2015).

Reciprocal dialogue with the parents in this study might have allowed them to appreciate the reasons for the 'red tape.' In contrast, the service providers might have learned that sensitivity to parents' feelings could have allowed them to participate in the system rather than become alienated from it. Further implications for practice suggest that CLD families need support such as therapy and guidance on their roles in delivering services at the initial diagnosis stage. The success of a meaningful partnership will depend on service providers' abilities to

see that CLD families are willing to participate and become assets in their child's education and service delivery team.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings in this study provide a basis for engaging educators and other professionals in meaningful discussions on how families from culturally diverse backgrounds navigate the US special education system. A topic for future research would be examining empathy and compassion in delivering the disability diagnosis. Service providers could benefit from counseling on how to give parents a disability diagnosis and how to share information on the delivery of services. The majority of the current literature on CLD families focuses on mothers' and other female caregivers' perspectives. Future research should aim to shed light on fathers' perspectives to understand their point of view and to involve them fully in the parent-educator collaboration process. Finally, future research should include more extensive interviews with families and educators and observations of family-school interactions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study yield timely, informative, and helpful insight into a topic generating much discussion in education circles. As this study and the literature demonstrate, CLD families' experiences with educators and other service providers are multilayered and complicate the development of meaningful partnerships. This study is unique in exploring how families' experiences reshaped their construct of disability. The most important implication of this study is the need for personnel in the special education system to be sensitive to the diverse cultural and personal experiences that affect familial involvement in special education.

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