Reframing Deficit Narratives to Honor the Community Cultural Wealth of Immigrant Families of Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Existing research suggests that immigrant families navigating the special education process are rarely positioned as powerful partners working alongside educators. This is a manifestation of the racism and ableism endemic to the United States schooling system that leads to educators viewing immigrant families from a deficit-based lens. Do these perceptions, however, match the ways that immigrant families view themselves? This qualitative participant-observation study addresses this question by exploring educators' and families' perceptions and positionings of immigrant families who are navigating special education. I unpack discrepant views among educators and families of 16 children labeled "English Learner" with or suspected of having disabilities. The findings indicate that the immigrant families see themselves as possessing tremendous community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), which counters the deficit-oriented view the educators have of them. I argue for a reframing of the common narratives surrounding immigrant families in special education away from deficit-based conceptions towards ones that honor the strengths, knowledge, and assets of the families.

Keywords*: Immigrant families, disabilities, community cultural wealth*

Introduction

Families' involvement in the special education process is not only recommended (Burke, 2013; Haley et al., 2013; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015), but it is also required by federal law (IDEA, 2004). However, the prevailing notions regarding what it means for families to be involved in children's schooling are dominated by White, Western perspectives (Boutte & Johnson, 2013; Lim, 2012; Miller, 2019; Park et al., 2001; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Loch, 2020). According to this perspective, the ideal "involved" parent has a "regular and visible presence at the school" (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Loch, 2020, p. 673). Therefore, families of color, immigrant families, and low-income families are frequently framed as "uninvolved" in their children's education (Cooper, 2009; Salas, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). For immigrant families in particular, this purported lack of involvement is attributed to cultural values around education, as well as deficiencies in the families' knowledge about U.S. schools (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Pettit & McLaughlin, 2013). Moreover, for immigrant families also navigating the unique complexities of special education, research has presented a series of barriers prohibiting sufficient involvement, such as language barriers, limited time availability, and

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cultural dissonance (Tamzarian et al., 2012; Whitford & Addis, 2017; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). This body of literature has presented immigrant families of children with disabilities as uninvolved, unknowing, passive actors in their children's special education processes and schooling.

This prevailing perspective of immigrant families is deficit-based. Consequently, problems with family-school partnership are attributed to perceived deficits within the families—they do not speak English, do not understand IEPs, are in denial, do not know how to advocate, and so on (Cioè-Peña, 2021)—rather than to systemic power differentials that deny immigrant families opportunities for meaningful participation in their children's special education processes (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). These narratives ignore the tremendous strengths, assets, and knowledge that immigrant families of children with disabilities bring into their interaction with the special education system (Cioè-Peña, 2021).

To move toward a more asset-based approach to working with immigrant families of children with disabilities, the discrepancies between how educators view the families and how the families view themselves must be identified. This paper is guided by the following research questions: 1) What are educators' perceptions of immigrant families of children with disabilities? 2) What are immigrant families' perceptions of themselves? How do these perceptions align (or not) with educators' views of the families? To answer these questions, I applied DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) to a qualitative inquiry into whether and how immigrant families are placed "outside of the Western cultural norms" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11) in ways that may not honor the families' views of themselves as advocates for their children. The findings from this inquiry show how deficit-oriented views of immigrant families of children with disabilities perpetuate a racist, ableist, and xenophobic system of schooling that prevents genuine collaboration between families and schools.

Parent Engagement in Special Education: (Un)Equal Partnership

The positioning of immigrant families of children with disabilities as deficient is rooted in unequal distributions of power endemic to special education. The structure and enactment of special education processes make it challenging for families' assets to be made known. In federal special education law, parents are identified as critical actors who must be involved in and agree to their child's identification for special education services and the subsequent development of the student's individualized education programs (IEPs; IDEA, 2004). For example, IDEA 2004 lists parents first among the required members of the IEP team, and they are afforded the right to accept or decline any aspect of a child's IEP. Schools are thus required to regard families as equal partners in identifying students with disabilities, developing their IEPs, and implementing special education services (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Burke, 2013; Haley et al., 2013; Knight & Wadsworth, 1999; Lechtenberger & Mullins, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Valle, 2011).

Despite these legal mandates, special education processes are often enacted in ways that limit parent participation (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008; Spann et al., 2003). Research has indicated that families do not feel as though they are equal partners with schools when participating in IEP teams, as they struggle to advocate for their children due to feelings of inadequacy that emerge from power differentials between school personnel and families (Burke, 2013; Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Because families do not feel comfortable using their voice in special education processes, the power dynamic is perpetually reinforced.

The literature has identified many ways in which inequities between educators and families are established in special education. One is through the inaccessibility of special education documentation. Mandic et al. (2012) examined the readability of procedural safeguard documents—legal mandates issued by state departments of education to guarantee parents' rights to decision-making regarding special education identification and services for their children. The authors found that the average reading grade level of these documents was 16, with a majority of the procedural safeguards being in

the college or graduate/professional school reading level range. They argued that the lack of accessibility to legal documents detailing their rights in the special education process limits parent involvement. As parents may not have full awareness of their rights, educators can also ignore parental rights without parents realizing it. Thus, power differentials are established because educators become the primary holders of technical expertise.

In addition to structural limitations that perpetuate unequal distributions of power, school personnel may also contribute to the development of power differentials between themselves and families. For example, studies have found that educators will write students' IEPs before the IEP meetings are held, meaning that parents do not actively participate in the development of IEPs (Haley et al., 2013; Valle, 2011). This occurs despite the fact that IDEA 2004 explicates that parents must participate in determining special education eligibility and that the IEP team, of which parents are critical members, must collectively develop the educational program for each child (IDEA 2004). An underlying message in this approach to IEP development is that educators are professionals who understand how to write IEPs, whereas families are unknowing participants.

Similarly, schools also send parents mixed messages about families' involvement in special education. Although families are told that federal legislation supports their active engagement in school-family partnerships, they are also told that they are not professional experts and should therefore not do or request too much (Murray & Mereoiu, 2016). In Bezdek et al. (2016), special education professionals and other related service providers reported that, while they supported partnerships and a family-centered approach to special education service provision, they also had specific ideas about the "just right" amount of involvement. The educators did not want too little involvement from parents, but they also did not want too much involvement. They desired parents to support the practitioners' ideas of how best to work with the child and to conduct the recommended follow-through at home. In other words, the educators wanted parents to follow their lead. When families tried to offer suggestions for supporting the student, it was regarded as too much involvement.

Additionally, families have reported experiencing tension and dissonance when working with school personnel to support their child with disabilities. Angell et al. (2009) interviewed 16 mothers of children with disabilities about their experiences working with schools. These parents reported challenges in the following areas: lack of communication with school staff; general and special education teachers' not having deep knowledge about their child's disabilities; school personnel's judgment or unwillingness to understand parent perspectives; and feelings of being ostracized, unwelcome, or excluded during IEP or other team meetings. The difficulties these parents experienced impacted their feelings of trust toward the school personnel, creating further distance between families and educators. All these factors contribute to parents' feeling as though they cannot advocate for their children (Burke & Goldman, 2017).

As family involvement in special education is systemically rooted in unequal power distribution, viewing families of children with disabilities from a deficit-based lens is natural. Parents are regarded as uninvolved or unknowing when, in reality, their participation is controlled and limited by educators working within an unjust system. The literature reviewed here shows that family involvement is often treated as a box to check off the list to ensure compliance with federal law. Little evidence has indicated that families of children with disabilities are treated with genuine respect, as though they are truly primary actors in special education processes.

Added Systemic Injustices for Immigrant Families of Children with Disabilities

Against this backdrop, immigrant families of children with disabilities must navigate the complexities of the special education system. As immigrants who are often otherized by society at large, these families experience additional challenges to being seen as equal partners in important decision-making for their children. Across studies involving surveys, interviews, and focus groups with

immigrant parents of children with disabilities, a prominent theme is the presence of language barriers that impede meaningful communication with school personnel (Baker et al., 2010; Lee & Park, 2016; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Lo, 2008; Park et al., 2001; Salas, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). The technical jargon commonly used in special education is an especially significant obstacle for immigrant parents to fully engage in the special education process (Salas, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Furthermore, research has suggested that even if language interpretation is available, it is often inadequate for families in special education (Cheatham, 2011; Mori et al., 2013). Parents have reported difficulties in working with interpreters who did not translate verbatim or could not be trusted to maintain confidentiality in the community (Lo, 2008; Park et al., 2001; Wolfe & Durán, 2013).

In addition to language barriers, immigrant families have reported that unfamiliarity with the U.S. school system and the complex nature of special education make them feel as though they do not fully understand their child's disability, services, or program options (Baker et al., 2010; Kozleski et al., 2008; Lee & Park, 2016; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Subsequently, families feel disempowered and unable to advocate for their child (Burke, 2017; Kozleski et al., 2008; Lo, 2008; Park et al., 2001). At times, families do not advocate because of cultural norms that denounce challenging or questioning authority (Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Other studies have suggested that families feel disempowered because they perceive a lack of respect from school personnel toward them, their perspectives, and their cultures (Lo, 2008; Park et al., 2001; Salas, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Immigrant parents have reported experiencing racial discrimination from school staff and perceiving school personnel as having a deficit view of their child with disabilities (Park et al., 2001; Wolfe & Durán, 2013).

When undergoing the special education referral and identification process specifically, immigrant families report the following challenges: a) experiencing language barriers, b) feeling confused about the process, c) experiencing long time lags between the referral and the actual evaluation, d) not always understanding what the assessments were for, e) not understanding why their child did not qualify for special education services, f) feeling as though the qualification was not explained fully or that the emphasis was solely on the child's deficits, g) feeling like students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds were not considered in testing, and h) feeling coerced to accept the assessments and professionals' advice (Hardin et al., 2009; Kozleski et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2017; Park et al., 2001). A couple studies involving observations of referral and placement meetings for immigrant students found that school staff marginalized parents in these meetings by overusing jargon, not providing translators (or providing inadequate translators), dominating the discourse in meetings, failing to communicate key aspects of the referral and identification process to families (e.g., that their child was in pre-referral interventions, what their progress was in the interventions, etc.), writing the IEPs and determining the child's eligibility prior to IEP meetings, and being insensitive and disrespectful to families (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Schoorman et al., 2011).

The literature on family-school partnerships in special education has described the many structural and interpersonal obstacles experienced by parents of children with disabilities, particularly immigrant parents, when engaging in special education processes. These obstacles collaboratively create a system of exclusion in which immigrant families lack access to meaningful partnerships and subsequent agency when navigating the special education system. Thus, these power differentials must be transformed. To do so, I believe educators' view of immigrant families of children with disabilities must be shifted; the families' strengths and assets must be illuminated to reach creative solutions for upending unequal partnerships and reimagining family involvement in special education. To move in this direction, the following must first be addressed: 1) What are educators' perceptions of immigrant families of children with disabilities? 2) What are immigrant families' perceptions of themselves? How do these perceptions align or not align with educators' views of families? I explored these questions

through a qualitative inquiry following 16 immigrant families of children with disabilities and the school staff working with their children.

Viewing Immigrant Families Through a Lens of DisCrit and Community Cultural Wealth

This inquiry draws from two primary theoretical concepts: disability critical race theory (DisCrit) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). At the heart of DisCrit is the understanding that race and disability are socially co-constructed and interdependent, as racism and ableism work together to limit equity for children of color with disabilities and their families (Annamma et al., 2013). The third tenet of DisCrit states that individuals are set "outside of the Western norm" when raced and disabled (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11), which has significant implications for their daily lives. Annamma and colleagues (2013) explained that essentializing disability as a biological fact instead of a social construct is used to justify the continued segregation of children of color. While such segregation would be illegal if based on race, it is allowed for disabled children of color because "disability is seen as 'real' rather than a constructed difference" (Annamma et al., 2013). Thus, racism and ableism work in interconnected and collusive ways.

From this DisCrit perspective, immigrant families of children with disabilities are similarly positioned outside of the mainstream; their segregation and isolation from important decision-making about their children are justified by the essentialization of perceived deficits. Educators operating within a racist, ableist education system position immigrant families as inherently unable to make "appropriate" decisions for their children due to their cultural backgrounds. Yosso (2005) described this positioning as a result of traditional views of cultural capital that are "narrowly defined by White, middle class values, and [are] more limited than wealth—one's accumulated assets and resources" (p. 77). Drawing from critical race theory, Yosso offered an expansive view of communities of color through her concept of community cultural wealth, which she defined as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro- and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). The six forms of capital that Yosso included in community cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital.

In this paper, I argue that educators and families in the special education system hold discrepant views of immigrant communities' cultural wealth. The failure of educators to recognize the cultural wealth possessed by immigrant families of children with disabilities perpetuates deficit views and continues power differentials between the educators and families. Nonetheless, these families engage in acts of resistance, viewing themselves as capable advocates for their children. By analyzing interviews with and observations of immigrant families navigating the special education identification process, I demonstrate how families leverage this resistant capital to maintain their positionality as knowledgeable, intentional experts on their children, even as educators position them as deficient. The guiding questions for this qualitative inquiry are as follows: 1) What are educators' perceptions of immigrant families of children with disabilities? 2) What are the families' perceptions of themselves? How do these perceptions align or not align with educators' views of families?

Methods

This paper utilizes data collected during a multi-site, participant-observation qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of the project was to explore special education processes—from referral to evaluation through the receipt of special education services—for

immigrant children at two elementary schools. The study included multiple levels: 1) the level of district policy, 2) the school level, and 3) the individual child level. The present paper primarily used the data collected to generate the school- and child-level case studies. For these studies, I performed participant observation (Erikson, 1986); document analysis (Bowen, 2009); and triangulation among documents, field notes, and interview data (Patton, 1990). I followed 16 children from immigrant families who were suspected of or identified as having disabilities to explore their experiences in special education processes during one academic year. The children's families participated in semi-structured interviews and field observations at various points throughout the year.

Participants

For the purposes of the larger study, I applied, according to Marshall (1996), a purposeful sampling approach to select the district, schools, and participants. Shavelson and Towne (2002) described this approach as necessary "to illuminate phenomena in depth," particularly "when good information about the group or setting is nonexistent or scant" (p. 105). Participants were strategically selected to form the most productive sample to answer my questions regarding the experiences of immigrant children and families in special education. The children, families, and educators who participated in this project were recruited from two elementary schools. The schools were selected in partnership with the district—a large urban district in a western U.S. state with a high percentage of immigrant and multilingual children enrolled in its schools (a little over one quarter of the student population). The district helped me identify the two schools with the largest numbers of immigrant or multilingual children who were identified for special education.

One school housed an English-only program and a Spanish-English dual immersion program for grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade; the other housed an English-only program and a Cantonese-English dual immersion program for grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Potential child participants were identified through consultation with social workers, general education teachers, and special education teachers at the schools. Because I was hoping to understand immigrant children's experiences with special education processes from referral through service provision, I specifically recruited children who met the following criteria: a) they were from families who had recently immigrated to the U.S. (in the last five years), and b) they were being considered for special education eligibility. Once the children were identified, I reached out to their parents and all educators who worked with the participating children. All parents of the recruited children provided informed consent for their children and for themselves to participate in the project. The educators also provided informed consent.

Sixteen children were recruited to participate in the study. Nine were predominantly Spanish-speaking, and seven were predominantly Cantonese-speaking. The children ranged in age (three kindergartners, three first graders, four second graders, two fourth graders, and two fifth graders) and disability category (autism, speech or language impairment, specific learning disability, and other health impairment—ADHD). The recruited adults included 17 parents (16 mothers and one father; 10 parents were Spanish dominant, and seven parents were Cantonese dominant) and 59 educators from the two schools that participated in the project. The educators comprised six administrators, 18 English-only teachers, 24 dual immersion teachers, three English-only special education teachers, one Cantonese-English bilingual special education teacher, two bilingual school psychologists (one was Cantonese- and English-speaking and one was Spanish- and English-speaking), one Spanish-English bilingual social worker, one English-only social worker, two bilingual literacy specialists, and one English-only literacy specialist. With the exception of two teachers, the bilingual educators at the Spanish-English dual immersion school were born and raised in the U.S. Six teachers, the social worker, and the school psychologist identified as Latinx, while the remainder of the staff identified as White or Asian. With the exception of one general education teacher, a special education teacher, and the

school psychologist, all bilingual staff at the Cantonese-English dual immersion school had immigrated from China but had been in the U.S. for over 20 years.

Data Collection
Field Observations

I spent about two days per week at each school across the school year, totaling 157 days of data collection. I gathered fieldnotes through participant observation methods while observing multiple contexts relevant to each child's special education identification process. These contexts included the general education classroom, interventions, psychoeducational evaluations, informal and formal staff meetings, informal and formal meetings between school personnel and families, IEP meetings, and special education services. A translator was present for all meetings involving parents. While observing in these contexts, I sat to the side with a small notebook and pen, describing in shorthand all that was occurring among stakeholders. I then took these notes and turned them into typed, thick descriptions of the scenes I observed. I also regularly wrote memos, in which I expressed my questions and initial hypotheses that emerged from each observation.

Across the contexts in which I observed, staff members often engaged in informal conversations about immigrant families of children with disabilities. Educators often spoke with each other and/or with me openly about their perspectives on and experiences with families. I wrote down direct quotes from these conversations to capture the language that educators used to describe the families. These were incorporated into the thick descriptions I later developed.

Interviews

In addition to the field observations and data collection, I interviewed all adult participants in the study. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes and was transcribed for analysis. As I am proficient in Spanish and do not speak Cantonese, translators were present for all interviews with families. The translators signed consent forms as well as confidentiality agreements. The transcripts were also submitted for translation so that the parents' responses were not solely reflected by the interpreter present during the meeting, ensuring the families' words would be included in my analysis.

Documents

During the participant observation, I also collected documents related to the various steps in the special education process. This included student work samples, correspondences between families and schools, intervention progress reports, evaluation reports, and IEPs.

Analysis

Using a combination of deductive and inductive coding, I applied an iterative, qualitative coding process to the collected data to create multiple case studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) at the student and school levels. The deductive codes were based on the processes for identifying children for special education eligibility as outlined by district policy. As I prepared for my data collection, I reviewed publicly available documents from the district that detailed its special education processes. I then created a flowchart that helped me identify what phases were included in these processes so I could observe each phase during data collection. I incorporated this chart into my interviews with participants as well. The phases of the special education identification process that I pulled from district data acted as the deductive codes I applied in my analysis. Included in these codes were categories such as *Student Assistant Program Team Meeting, Student Study Team Meeting, Interventions, Comprehensive Evaluation,* and *IEP Meeting.*

I also coded the data by each child participant's name. This allowed me to pull all of the deductively coded data for each individual child, one at a time. I then began inductive coding to

identify emergent categories and themes across the data organized by child and special education process phases. The inductive coding process first involved the open coding of field notes, interview transcripts, and documents relevant to each individual child in the study. Next, I performed an axial coding process to narrow the codes further, combining and refining the categories. I re-coded the data using these revised codes and subsequently narrowed and refined the categories further. These final codes were then applied to the data. Included in these inductive codes were categories such as *conversation with parent, teacher perception of child, teacher perception of family, classroom-based support for child, child's interaction with peer, child's interaction with educator,* and so on.

I used the coded data to create narrative case studies for each of the 16 participating children that detailed what the process for special education identification entailed for each child. The deductive codes served as subheadings for each case study, while the inductive codes helped me tell the story of each phase in the child's special education process. For example, when reviewing the data related to the Student Study Team meeting, *classroom-based support for the child* was a prevalent inductive code. I examined the fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and documents to paint a robust narrative picture of what that support for the child entailed and how it was discussed in the Student Study Team meeting. This process of drawing from multiple coded data sources to create detailed descriptions of each child's journey was applied to every phase of the special education identification process.

Subsequently, I open-coded the narratives to identify themes running across the 16 cases. The themes were used to support the school-level case studies, in which I detailed general trends in the identification of children labeled "English learner" for special education eligibility at each school. As I was examining the 16 case studies, one of the themes that emerged was *discrepancies in teachers' perceptions of the families and families' perceptions of themselves.* I decided to investigate this theme further by revisiting the data specifically pertaining to families. I accessed all coded excerpts falling under any category involving parents or families: *teachers' perceptions of parents, parents' perceptions of teachers, parents' perceptions of their children, meetings with parents, IEP meetings,* and so on. I also re-read all 75 interview transcripts and field notes for any interactions or meetings with families to ensure I did not miss pertinent coding categories. After examining all of the coded data once more, I wrote a thematic narrative (Creswell, 2014) related to *teachers' perceptions of families* and *families' perceptions of themselves.* Many of the perceptions described in this narrative came from the interview data, which is when educators and family members tended to speak most directly about this topic. The field notes also provided relevant data, as interactions between educators and families as well as among educators often revealed dynamics that corroborated the perceptions shared during the interviews. These data helped me to write narrative descriptions of how educators viewed families and how families viewed themselves.

For member-checking, I presented these themes to the special education teams and administrators at each school to gather their input and feedback. They were in general agreement with the themes and decided to use them to inform their professional development sessions with teachers at the beginning of the following school year. However, I was not able to connect with the families again after my analysis was complete to review the results with them.

Positionality of the Researcher
As an Asian American cis-gender woman situated in an institute of higher education, I entered this work from a place of power and privilege. The educators and families who welcomed me into their classrooms, schools, and lives were incredibly gracious. While my racial identity aligned with the teachers, children, and families at the Cantonese-English dual immersion school, I did not speak their native language and relied heavily on translators to support me in this work. Although I was not alike in race to the immigrant families at the Spanish-English dual immersion school, I was able to communicate with the families there in their native tongue. I recognize that my positionality as an individual with power who did not belong to the racial and cultural communities of the families or

educators played a role in my research and likely influenced every aspect of the data collection and analysis process (Milner, 2007).

While I know I cannot rid myself of biases, I attempted to at least illuminate any potential biases in my analysis process by using reflexive journaling (Meyer & Willis, 2018). As I coded data, developed categories, and created thematic narratives, I journaled about the personal values, beliefs, and prior experiences that arose. I reflected on the questions I asked in the interviews as well, considering how my phrasing of particular questions and my positionality could have impacted the responses provided. While engaging in this reflexive journaling, I revisited my thematic narratives several times, revising phrases and statements that I felt reflected my biases more than the data were illuminating. Despite these practices, I know that I am imperfect and vulnerable to bias. I, therefore, present the results as one interpretive account, not an absolute narrative.

Results

My analysis revealed that educators and parent participants positioned immigrant families of children with disabilities in divergent ways that reflected differential understandings of community cultural wealth. Educators' perspectives of immigrant families undergoing the special education process with their children were deficit-oriented. The educators had two dominant conceptualizations of the immigrant families: 1) as helpless and compliant recipients and 2) as defiant and in denial. Meanwhile, the immigrant parents viewed themselves as advocates for their children who had to navigate a complex, broken special education system. They described their behavior as being the best way to support their children. In their view, the system was deficient and unable to care for their children in the ways they deemed best. Their behavior was therefore an act of resistance, a way to engage the community cultural wealth they possessed to support their children.

School Staff Perceptions of Immigrant Families of Children with Disabilities

The staff at both schools tended to see immigrant families of children experiencing the special education identification process as falling under two characterizations. One characterization was the "helpless, compliant recipient." These families were perceived as agreeing with everything that educators said, despite maybe not fully understanding with what they were agreeing. The second characterization was "defiant and in denial." These families were perceived as unable to accept their children's disabilities and need for special education services. Across both themes, educators often attributed the immigrant families' behaviors to cultural norms or deficiencies in families' knowledge. The themes, which are addressed in detail below, were consistent across educators, regardless of their immigration status or positionality as English-only or dual immersion practitioners. I describe in further detail the school staff's perceptions of each type of family below.

The helpless, compliant recipient

From the perspective of the educators, a compliant recipient was a parent who received information from school personnel throughout the special education identification process, agreed to everything without asking questions or offering their own ideas, signed any documents placed in front of them, and followed the school personnel's lead. The compliant recipient attended any meetings that school personnel called but did not initiate communication with the school. During these meetings, they nodded along, answered questions asked of them, and agreed to whatever the school staff decided (such as interventions to try, referrals to evaluation, and special education services). These parents' involvement in the special education identification process was considered by the educators to be

minimal: they 1) attended meetings, 2) answered questions, 3) signed forms, and 4) filled out questionnaires.

During interviews and informal conversations, school staff described the compliant recipient parents as "supportive," "respectful," and "receptive." Some staff members attributed this type of behavior to families' gratitude. Regarding the special education process, they viewed these families as a demonstration of how much school personnel cared about and wanted to help their children. One school psychologist said of such immigrant parents,

> No one appreciates you working with their kid as much as a parent of a second language learner. They're like, "We're so glad you did all this work. Look at all these papers with my kid's name on it. On top of that you worked so hard to translate it." All that stuff. They are so appreciative. You always feel good leaving those meetings. I mean, they know they might be getting a service here or a support here that they wouldn't be getting in their home country. (Interview)

Along similar lines, several teachers stated that immigrant parents were often "pretty cooperative . . . because they know they cannot help their children," "receptive of whatever we tell them," "want the best for their kids . . . and respect the professionals," and "want their child to do well, so they support whatever recommendations that the IEP team has" (Interviews). One teacher said of a particular parent in this study, "She says, 'Whatever you guys think is right, I'll do.' She's very supportive, but doesn't give much information" (Interview).

The educators also often characterized immigrant families as compliant recipients because they were presumably confused about how special education worked. Staff members frequently commented on immigrant parents' not fully understanding the identification process. One teacher said of immigrant parents' participation in IEP meetings,

> Some of them are just sitting there like, "Okay, yes. I understand." Even though you kind of wonder if they really understand what's going on. And they're just there because they have to be there, but they're not really participating as much. . . . "I'll just sit here, and I'll listen. If you ask me any questions, everything is ok." (Interview)

Other teachers similarly commented on this passive participation among immigrant parents of children with disabilities. One teacher attributed passiveness to immigrant parents' not fully understanding their role in the IEP process: "I think they feel a little disempowered. Sometimes I think they don't know exactly what their role is. I think they're very respectful and they just listen to what's being said and what's being asked of them. They don't often have a lot of questions" (Interview). One teacher felt that the education level and culture of the immigrant families influenced their passivity in the IEP process: "We got a lot of working parents that are maybe not always college educated, and I know that in Latino culture there's a lot of respect for the teacher. Like the teacher knows what they're doing. They don't think to take on the role of going in and demanding things" (Interview). Another teacher said of immigrant families in IEP meetings, "I wish that they would open up more and give more input because I feel like the whole time, we're talking and they're just kind of like, uh-huh, you know?" (Interview).

Several interviewees spoke about the challenges of technical jargon in special education for immigrant families who lacked the understanding to participate actively in important decision-making processes. As one literacy specialist stated,

> My biggest frustration at IEP meetings is just jargon and look at this graph and look at these results and these things here and blah, blah, blah, and we did this blah, blah, blah test and the end results are—and I just don't think they're clear. I don't think, in my experience, that the parents really understand that this is a law-abiding document that they could check on to make sure that their child was receiving the service. . . . I would say that would be like the biggest

thing that is just heart breaking to watch, that they don't really [understand and] they really do just accept whatever you say. (Interview)

Another structural challenge that educators identified was families' limited access to information about their rights in the special education process. One teacher related,

And especially with, you know, English language learners, most of the parents have had a negative experience with the school district. They don't know their rights. They're intimidated, you know, they're never—they've never come across anything like this, so most of the time they don't advocate as much as they should for their child because they don't know, they don't know how to work the system. (Interview)

An inability to work the system was described as a disadvantage for immigrant families who do not advocate for themselves and their children in the way that non-immigrant, upper-, or middle-class families do. As one teacher stated,

I find that it's only the students whose parents are native English speakers, who are socioeconomically advantaged, who know how to work the system, and who know how to demand that all their rights be met and that the IEP goals be met. If those parents make demands on the district, they get the services, but the immigrant families who can't advocate for themselves are often the ones who are being shortchanged in terms of the services they receive. (Interview)

The concern that these educators raised about immigrant families who took on the helpless, compliant recipient role not only emphasized problems in the special education system but also positioned the families as deficient. Families were framed as disempowered and unable to understand or do more than "accept whatever [educators] say," as the literacy specialist quoted above said (Interview). In other words, the immigrant families of children with disabilities were regarded as lacking the knowledge and capital needed to engage meaningfully in their children's education. In this way, the educators unknowingly perpetuated the systemic White, ableist, xenophobic gaze that dictates what appropriate involvement in special education should entail for families. Further, while acknowledging these systemic inequities, the educators did little to disrupt the injustices they observed. Perhaps they did not know how best to support immigrant families to take back power in broken systems, or they may have internalized the narrative that immigrant families of children with disabilities are helpless and incapable of supporting their children in the ways educators deem fit.

Defiant and in denial

In contrast with the "helpless, compliant families," the educators also frequently described stories of immigrant families whom they considered defiant and in denial of their children's disabilities. These stories were shared across educators regardless of their immigrant, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Conceptualizations of a "defiant and in denial family" often looked similar to this educator's description:

I've had parents who are in denial; they don't see anything wrong with their child. . . . I've had a few situations where I tell my parents, this is what's going on, this is what we see in the classroom, this is what his work is. We need to get your consent, there may be a slight chance of a disability, we need your permission to test him or test her. Many times they're like, "No, no, they're fine. They don't need it, they're just being spunky, they're just being silly." (Interview)

The school staff typically attributed these patterns to immigrant families' cultural backgrounds. For example, one educator stated,

Chinese parents don't like to be labeled as special. That's why sometimes it's hard to get these parents to agree to these accommodations or this help when they do qualify. . . . some parents I remember trying to get through, by the end they qualified, but their parents didn't sign on

> because they'd have that stigma, like "special." They don't understand that it's not—because Chinese have this stigma, like, if you're special, and everyone talking about your kid is not normal. (Interview)

Another educator speaking specifically about Chinese immigrant families said that Chinese families of children with disabilities are in denial "to save face. It's a reflection on the parents. Basically, it's a reflection, and they don't want to be embarrassed among their friends" (Interview). Others similarly stated that "it's culture," or "it's a culture thing" (Interview). As one teacher said,

> Culture, culture, I really think it's culture. Especially a lot of Asian parents, they don't want their children to be identified for anything unless it's something like [gifted and talented]—they'll say okay to that right away. But if their child is being identified for special ed, they say, "Oh no, no, no, my child cannot be identified with that. They're not dumb." That's the first thing they always think about. They don't want their child to be identified for something that is a disability. I definitely think it's a cultural thing. (Interview)

These characterizations were applied to both Asian and Latinx cultures. "Asian families, they don't want to admit there's, like, a problem, you know," said one educator, while yet another staff member explained,

> Specifically in the Latino culture, there's certain stigmas. And they're in denial, and they don't want their child to be labeled, like, special need; they don't want their child to try to get on the small yellow bus, you know. It's a huge disservice to their child because they need that extra support, but they're, you know, in shame, or they feel like it's going to be a reflection of them as having poor parenting skills and all that. And so sometimes they're in denial. (Interview)

According to these school staff members, the immigrant families' cultural beliefs led to their denial and even defiance of the special education process. Educators viewed such beliefs as a "disservice" to children. In other words, educators positioned immigrant families' cultures as deficient and a hindrance to ensuring children with disabilities receive the support they need.

One educator in the Spanish-English dual immersion school also connected their assumptions about families' education levels with their denial of children's disabilities. This teacher said about a particular Latinx family, "I'm thinking to myself, how can you not notice that your daughter can barely talk in an intelligible way? But the education level of the parents might be extremely low too. If you haven't really been taught, then how can you teach others?" (Interview). This comment aligned with many other statements that educators at this school made about Latinx immigrant families' education levels: "They are often not college educated," "they value education for their children because they don't have it for themselves," "there's a lack of education among the parents" (Interviews), and other similar comments were made among educators at the school. The portrayal of Latinx immigrant families as being in denial was thus tied to a common sentiment among the educators that the families were lacking in knowledge and skills needed for them to understand their children's development and accept their disabilities.

Immigrant Families' Perceptions of Themselves

The immigrant families' perceptions of themselves countered the deficit-oriented portrait painted by educators. Through their comments during interviews and their behaviors while interfacing with the special education system, families demonstrated their community's cultural wealth. Specifically, they drew on three forms of capital described by Yosso (2005): navigational, resistant, and aspirational capital.

Navigational capital

While the educators often characterized immigrant families of children with disabilities as helpless, compliant recipients who agreed with whatever educators said because they lacked understanding, the

families who participated in the study described their behaviors as intentional choices to navigate a complex special education system. Their understanding of the special education system, as well as their understanding of the limitations of their agency within this system, reflected an ability to "maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). A few parents positioned themselves as advocates who could not trust the system to provide their children the support they needed. One parent who struggled to get services for her child explained,

> It is taking too long. . . . [The district] told me that some lady will call me probably in the summer. They said that they are going to do it next year, maybe in the middle, three or four months later. . . . this is a city job. They take their time. That's how they make money. . . . They probably have plenty of time to do it, but they just still want to have a job. . . . You know your son. How he works, how he do in the house everywhere, and they're trying to tell you, "Oh no, probably we have to wait because he's still learning the language," you know? And you tell them already, "No, he's having a problem," and they want to wait too much time, and "Oh, we have to wait, we have to wait," and you already know, I mean, you're the parent. You are the one who knows more. . . . I will go to the district and tell them, "Hey, no." If I have to do it, I will. If they come up with that thing. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm going to do something. . . . I don't know if the district just don't want to help or not, but it doesn't feel like they want to help. . . . They talk to you, and you explain to them how your son works and the disability that they have, and they still don't want to do it. They are still, "We should wait." That's not the job that they're supposed to do. Probably they don't want to spend money sending somebody out. (Interview)

This parent showed her knowledge of the district's tendency to wait to identify immigrant children for special education. She saw herself as needing to fight for services because the district was going to "take their time," as she put it. Others who struggled to obtain services for their children spoke similarly about what they perceived as deficiencies in the district systems. While the parent quoted above saw the district as waiting too long, another saw the district as rushing through evaluations and not gathering enough data to truly understand her child's needs. She spoke about how important it was that she have a meeting with the school to "see how the exam is done," and "if I don't have this meeting, maybe my voice won't be heard" (Interview). Yet another parent addressed the need to write letters to the district to ensure their child was evaluated. None of these parents saw themselves as helpless or compliant. Rather, each identified deficiencies within the system and the need for them to fight for their children's access to services.

Other families believed that supporting teachers in their decisions was the best way to ensure their children thrived in school. They navigated the special education system by "putting [their] trust in the school's hand" (Interview). One parent told me, "I think [parents] should trust the teachers here and the [special education] experts. . . . Listen to the teachers, to the experts, and there won't be any harm. . . . We all want to help our kids" (Interview). Another parent stated, "I accept anything as long as it helps [my daughter]" (Interview). These parents deferred to the school staff because they thought doing so was in the best interest of their children, regarding school personnel as the "experts" who could help their children. These parents viewed their role as trusting the educators who "know how things work here" (Interview). One mother responded, "We don't know much about the education method here. It is different from China, so I'd let the teachers use their own methods here" (Interview). Therefore, what the educators might have called helpless compliance was, to the families, an intentional choice. They supported and trusted the educators working with their children because they felt this was the best way to navigate the special education system. The parents did not view themselves as clueless but rather as thoughtful actors making measured decisions to support their children.

Resistant capital

From the families' perspectives, those who did not go along with educators' decisions about their children were not defiant and in denial because of fears of saving face or a lack of understanding of special education. Rather, they were taking back power by engaging in acts of resistance. One of the most common forms of resistance was simply not following requests or recommendations made by school personnel. For example, one parent did not agree with the direction of IEP meetings for determining the most appropriate learning context for her child. The school had begun presenting the possibility of moving her kindergarten child to a different school with a self-contained special day class for children with autism. This parent related, "I wouldn't really like that, because I feel happy here, and I'm also doing my best to help my son" (Interview). As the educators began to push harder for a change of placement for the child, the mother began not attending the IEP meetings. When the school followed up with this parent, she would say that she never received any meeting notices. While school staff characterized this mother's behavior as deficient and evidence of her lack of understanding of the special education system, her refusal to attend the meetings can also be viewed as an act of subversion. Perhaps she was not lacking in her understanding of the system; rather, her understanding is exactly what propelled her to resist a system that was pushing her to accept changes to her child's services with which she did not agree.

Other parents similarly did not agree with one or more recommendations that the school made and chose not to follow through with them. For example, one parent was advised to take her child to a counselor to address his social-emotional variations related to his autism diagnosis. When I asked why she did not take her child to counseling, this parent told me, "It is not that serious. In the classroom, he cuts things, he cuts pants, he picks up things to smell; he smells them, but he likes to smell them; it is not that serious. Normal people like to smell the smell; my son does too. . . . When they talked about that, they made it too serious; I don't think that my son is that particularly serious" (Interview). This parent did not seem to want to avoid the stigma associated with counseling. She acknowledged her child's behavior but genuinely did not agree that these behaviors should cause concern.

Further, two parents were uncomfortable with the recommendation to give ADHD medication to their children, and one parent did not give her child the prescribed medication. She told me, "Right now, they prescribe the kind to take in the afternoon for two hours. I'm supposed to bring it to the office for him. I just don't bring it. I don't let him take it. . . . I'm afraid that he cannot sleep at night after taking it. The effect of this medicine is that it will affect his sleep; he can't eat meat. Not good" (Interview). The other parent initially did give her child the medication but sought out additional opinions about whether doing so was safe for a five-year-old. She eventually stopped giving her child the medication. As she explained in her interview,

> He didn't, he wasn't on [the medication] for very long. I felt like he didn't react to it very much but I couldn't tell. . . . When they told me, "Well, he might need to be on medication because he cannot focus. This might help him for a few hours, and then we'll see what happens." I'm like, "But his class is really high energy, can we also change the environment and see if that would help?" . . . As you know, that teacher changed, and then I don't want to say he grew up. I don't want to say that because I don't think it's that, I think it was more or less it just became a better controlled class, and that helped him settle down a little. (Interview)

This parent resisted giving her child medication for ADHD because she felt that the environment was at the root of his behaviors, not a chemical imbalance within her child. She seemed to have a strong understanding of her child as well as his classroom context. In her dissatisfaction with her child's learning environment, this parent took back power by refusing to follow a recommendation she did not see as valid.

All the parents described here engaged in what Yosso (2005) identified as "resistance to subordination" (p. 80), or refusing to follow educators' orders blindly. Their resistant acts were quiet, as they did not outwardly push back against educators. In this way, they maintained positions of deference and respect toward the teachers in public but drew on their resistant capital to subvert quietly a system that did not genuinely consider the families' perspectives on their child's disabilities.

Aspirational capital

The navigational and resistant capital were manifestations of the families' "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). All the participating families drew on their community's cultural wealth because they firmly believed that their children could and should thrive, and they saw strengths in their children that educators often neglected to see. As one mother stated, "I am very happy with my son. He learns slowly; I am not impatient. I don't need him to be really good right away. A lot of teachers say they can't understand him. For me, I can understand him 100%" (Interview). Speaking about the efforts he and his wife had made to create a comfortable home for his children, a father said, "Because the children are capable of doing everything. They absorb everything. If there's a good atmosphere, there's good relationships at home, and they can do well at school" (Interview). Another mother said of her child, "I feel that he is going to improve, and I have faith in God, because I don't think in his case it's that bad. In a short time, I've noticed a lot of changes. I feel that in a year or so, he will improve" (Interview). All these parents held a firm belief that their children would be able to thrive. They saw strengths in their children and within themselves that helped them to maintain hope in the face of challenges they experienced in special education.

Wary of educators' suggestions and the special education system, the parents I spoke with took responsibility for acting in ways they felt would ensure their children thrived. Whether pushing for special education services they believed their children needed or quietly refusing educators' recommendations they felt were inappropriate, the families did what they could to support their children. None of the parents fit educators' depictions of immigrant families of children with disabilities as helplessly compliant or defiant due to cultural stigmas. Rather, the parents made pointed, intentional decisions rooted in deep knowledge of their children and wariness of troubling systems that were not designed to help their children.

Discussion

The findings from this exploratory, qualitative inquiry reveal how immigrant families' views of themselves do not fit educators' perceptions of them as the families work through the special education system. While educators view immigrant families of children with disabilities as passive, unable to understand, or defiant due to cultural norms, the families see themselves as intentional actors who draw on their knowledge, strengths, and powers of resistance to support their children in ways they feel are best. For the participating families, what appeared to be denial or lack of understanding was actually quiet acts of subversion or deference. Families leveraged the information they did have about special education and their children to take back power in the unequal partnerships that existed between the educators and families.

The view that immigrant families of children with disabilities are helplessly compliant or defiantly in denial is often attributed to families' cultures. The racialized stereotypes that the educators applied to immigrant families positioned the families as "outside of the Western cultural norms" (Annamma et al., 2013). Thus, the educators perpetuated expectations about parents' involvement in school that were rooted in Whiteness (Boutte & Johnson, 2013; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020).

Based on the participating school staff's perceptions, the ideal immigrant family of a child with disabilities is one that actively participates in IEP team meetings, asks informed questions, and provides suggestions for the child's services. This family should also agree with the educators' suggestions and not question their expertise, which would stem from the families' possessing the same knowledge about the special education system as the educators. They should demonstrate this understanding through active verbal participation in special education processes.

However, because, in the participating educators' experiences, immigrant families of children with disabilities did not fit this mold, school staff believed that there must be something deficient with families' comprehension, agency, or cultural beliefs. Their narrow vision of what family involvement in special education might entail inhibited their ability to see the families' cultural wealth in the community. From a DisCrit stance, the intersection of racism and ableism contributed to the educators' deficit-based perspective of immigrant families of children with disabilities; the families were otherized in ways that justified their continued isolation, prohibiting genuine collaboration between families and educators.

The educators' deficit views contrasted with the views the immigrant families held of themselves and their children. The families drew on their community cultural wealth to navigate problematic systems and engage in acts of resistance in service of their deeply held belief that their children with disabilities could and should thrive in school. Through their actions—or, at times, nonactions—the families took back power that was denied them through a system that permits unequal power distribution. When educators pushed for services and approaches the families agreed with, they quietly and respectfully deferred to the teachers. However, when the families disagreed with the recommendations, they drew on their resistant capital to engage in acts of subversion. The immigrant families showed that they could use their navigational capital to determine what they needed to do to ensure their children's education proceeded in the ways they desired. Their intentional acts were driven by an aspirational capital that allowed the families to maintain hope that their children with disabilities would be able to thrive in school.

To address this discrepancy between educators' and families' perceptions, educators must learn to see families through a lens of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) rather than a deficit-oriented one. A critical step toward this shift in perspective is transforming dominant conceptions of parent engagement. Posey-Maddox and Haley-Lock (2020) explained that educators often regard "school-centric" parent engagement as the only legitimate way that families can meaningfully be involved in the educational lives of their children. In other words, families who are present at school events and demonstrate understanding of school policies and procedures are the ones regarded as "involved," while parents who participate in their children's education in ways that are less visible to the educators are seen as "uninvolved." Therefore, professional development that widens the scope of what counts as parent engagement is an important step toward seeing families' community cultural wealth.

Another way to achieve better convergences of educators' and families' views of immigrant families of children with disabilities is reconceptualizing the general role of families in the special education process. Immigrant families of children with disabilities are not the only ones who are positioned as deficient by educators; challenges in family-school relationships in special education are pervasive across race, class, language, and immigration status (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenberg, 2020; Miller, 2019). The results from the present study show that, for immigrant families specifically, culture and language were the primary reasons used to explain the deficit views held by educators; for other families, alternative factors may be used to rationalize educators' deficit-based views. Ultimately, these perspectives emerge from tensions that educators and families collectively feel as they struggle to work meaningfully as a team to navigate the special education system (Francis et al., 2016; Murray & Mereoiu, 2016; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). The field of special education, therefore, should determine how

the system is designed in ways that do not allow for genuine collaboration between families and schools. Reimagining parent-school connections in special education should center on relationship-building that enables families to be valued as important contributors to their children's education.

If educators were able to see the immigrant families as they see themselves—full of strengths and an array of capital resources—perhaps more genuine and equitable collaboration in special education would be possible. Acknowledging the cultural wealth of families might lead to transformations in how parent engagement in special education is conceptualized. If the partnership between families and schools began with attempting to understand the different forms of capital possessed by an immigrant family, then schools might be able to individualize their approaches to family-school engagement and center them around the families' cultural wealth. Such an approach to partnership would also dispel stereotypical judgments of immigrant families. The families' strengths, knowledges, and assets would be honored as deficit narratives are reframed and families' full selves are seen and respected in equitable relationships with schools.

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