

Slide 1

NOTES: Good morning and thank you for joining me today. I'm Huda Swelam, and I feel privileged to share my dissertation titled "Building Collaborative Partnerships to Empower Families and Advance Advocacy in Special Education." This work emphasizes the importance of centering family voices, especially those of marginalized families.

Slide 2

NOTES: Special education systems continue to reflect longstanding inequities, particularly for Native and marginalized families. These systems are often rooted in deficit-based and colonial frameworks that fail to recognize the strengths, knowledge, and lived experiences of the communities they serve.

The problem is that families are too often excluded from meaningful decision-making processes. Their voices are undervalued, and trauma-informed practices are inconsistently applied resulting in systems that do not fully support students or their families.

This study is significant because it addresses an urgent need for transformation. It centers family voice as expertise and calls for systems that are both culturally grounded and trauma-informed.

At its core, this research examines how these approaches can reshape special education systems by centering the voices, experiences, and leadership of marginalized families.

Slide 3:

NOTES: On this slide, I'm highlighting the central problem that motivates this study. First, there is a well-documented issue of disproportionality in special education. Native American students make up a relatively small percentage of the U.S. student population, yet they are identified for special education services at disproportionately higher rates. This raises important questions about whether these identifications are always appropriate.

A key gap contributing to this issue is the lack of culturally and linguistically relevant support. When students' cultural identities and languages are not reflected or valued in school systems, they are at greater risk of being misidentified, underserved, or placed in inappropriate programs.

In addition, systemic barriers play a major role. These include implicit bias, inequitable assessment and referral practices, and a lack of culturally responsive approaches. Together, these factors often lead to exclusionary discipline and more restrictive educational placements.

The impact of these issues is significant. Students may experience lower academic success, families may feel disconnected from the school system, and students' overall sense of belonging can be diminished.

Despite existing research on disproportionality, there is a clear gap in studies that center culturally responsive and family-centered approaches—particularly within Native American communities.

This study aims to address that gap by exploring how these approaches can reduce inequities, empower families, and ultimately improve outcomes in special education. To explore this gap, I developed the following research questions.

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NOTES: As a direct response to the problem outlined in the previous slide, these research questions are designed to address the identified gaps in culturally responsive and family-centered practices.

First, given the disproportionality and misidentification of Native American students, this study asks how collaborative partnerships can empower families and strengthen their advocacy within the special education process. This connects to the need for more inclusive, family-centered approaches.

Second, in response to the gap in culturally relevant support, I examine what conditions support educator commitment to both academic and social-emotional success, particularly through culturally responsive practices.

Third, addressing systemic barriers such as inequitable discipline and restrictive placements, this study explores how positive behavior supports can be effectively implemented and reinforced in ways that are proactive and culturally responsive.

Another key question focuses on family experiences specifically, whether families feel respected, included, and heard in the IEP process. This directly relates to the issues of exclusion and limited family engagement highlighted earlier.

Finally, to address the broader research gap, I investigate which culturally responsive and restorative practices are most effective in improving family engagement and empowerment.

Together, these questions are grounded in the hypothesis that implementing culturally responsive, family-centered, and restorative approaches will reduce inequities, strengthen family-school partnerships, and ultimately improve student outcomes in special education

Slide 5:

NOTES: This slide highlights the key theoretical foundations and major trends in the literature that frames this study, while also pointing to the gap identified earlier.

First, this research is grounded in several important theoretical frameworks. It draws on Michel Foucault's genealogical analysis, which helps us examine how historical power structures and institutional practices shape current educational inequities. It also builds on culturally responsive

pedagogy, particularly the work of Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, which emphasizes the importance of centering students' cultural identities in teaching and learning. In addition, disability justice frameworks are used to foreground issues of equity, access, and inclusion, especially for historically marginalized communities.

Looking at the broader literature, several consistent trends emerge. First, there is ongoing evidence of disproportionality and inequities in special education placement and discipline, reinforcing the problem discussed earlier.

Second, research highlights the importance of family engagement, particularly within the framework of IDEA and the IEP process, as a key factor in improving student outcomes.

Third, there has been growing attention to culturally responsive, restorative, and trauma-informed practices as ways to better support students holistically.

Finally, there is increasing recognition of systemic bias, deficit thinking, and exclusionary practices that continue to shape educational experiences for marginalized students.

However, a major issue remains despite legal protections and a strong body of research on best practices, students of color—especially Indigenous students—continue to experience misidentification, exclusion, and unequal access to appropriate supports.

This leads to a critical gap in literature. While these areas are often studied separately, there is limited research that integrates culturally responsive, restorative, and family-centered approaches into a unified model—one that both addresses systemic inequities and positions families as equal partners in decision-making.

These frameworks and gaps guided the methodological approach of this study.

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NOTES: For this study, I used a mixed-methods design to better understand both the broader trends and the lived experiences of participants. This approach allowed me to combine quantitative data from surveys with qualitative insights from interviews and outreach.

Surveys helped identify common patterns, needs, and challenges across families and educators in special education. Interviews provided a deeper understanding of individual experiences, particularly around cultural responsiveness and barriers within the system. Outreach efforts were also important in building trust and ensuring that family and community voices were centered in the research.

This approach was intentionally culturally responsive and equity-focused, aligning with the purpose of the study. Overall, these methods worked together to inform the development of a more inclusive, family-centered support model that addresses systemic barriers and promotes stronger partnerships.

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NOTES: This slide outlines how the data was analyzed in alignment with the study's focus on equity and family-centered approaches.

This study uses a mixed-methods design within a Community-Based Participatory Research framework, which intentionally centers family voices throughout the research process. This approach is important given the gap identified earlier around elevating and empowering family perspectives.

Data was collected through multiple sources, including Google Forms surveys, social media outreach, focus groups, and phone interviews. Using multiple methods allows both breadth and depth of understanding.

For the quantitative data, I used descriptive statistics to identify overall trends and patterns. This helped highlight common experiences and general themes across participants.

For the qualitative data, I applied reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. This involved inductive coding, meaning that themes were derived directly from the data rather than imposed in advance.

This analytic approach allowed me to capture not only patterns in the data, but also the lived experiences and perspectives of families, which are central to addressing the inequities discussed in earlier slides. Using this approach, I was able to analyze both patterns and lived experiences.

Slide 8-9:

NOTES: The findings from this study highlight several important patterns and themes rather than just isolated data points.

First, there is a clear gap in families' understanding of special education processes and their legal rights. Many families reported feeling under-informed or overwhelmed when navigating the system.

Second, the data showed that cultural and linguistic differences are often not adequately reflected in services and supports. This disconnect can impact how effectively students are served and how included families feel in the process.

Another key finding is that student outcomes and family engagement improve significantly when schools actively build strong, collaborative partnerships with families. Trust and communication emerged as critical components.

Additionally, many families expressed challenges with self-advocacy, often due to limited access to information, resources, or support networks.

Overall, the thematic analysis points to ongoing systemic barriers, particularly around equity and access. However, it also shows that culturally responsive, family-centered approaches can make a meaningful difference.

These findings directly informed the development of the support model proposed in this study, which focuses on increasing equity, strengthening partnerships, and empowering families.

Slide 10-11:

NOTES: This slide brings together the findings and connects them back to the literature and theoretical frameworks discussed earlier.

Overall, this study examined how culturally responsive and restorative practices can better support Native American students with disabilities while also strengthening family–school partnerships. This directly addresses the gap identified in the literature around integrating these approaches.

The findings reinforce what prior research has shown—there is still persistent disproportionality in special education identification, placement, and discipline. This aligns with recent work, such as Brewer (2024), and confirms that these inequities remain a significant issue.

Consistent with culturally responsive pedagogy, including the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay, the study found that when students’ cultural identities are not reflected in school systems, they are more likely to be misidentified, experience exclusionary discipline, and have limited access to equitable supports.

These inequities have meaningful consequences. They negatively affect student engagement, academic outcomes, and trust between families and schools—further reinforcing the systemic barriers discussed earlier.

The qualitative findings, including interviews and document analysis, suggest that many current practices still reflect punitive systems rather than restorative or culturally responsive approaches. This aligns with existing literature, such as Lodi et al. (2022), which critiques exclusionary and deficit-based practices.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the need to examine power, systems, and historical context—consistent with Michel Foucault’s framework and disability justice perspectives.

Practically, the implications are clear: there is a need to move beyond compliance-based models of special education toward culturally responsive and restorative frameworks. These approaches can help reduce disparities, strengthen family partnerships, and create more equitable, inclusive systems that better support student success.

In short, this study not only confirms existing concerns in literature, but also emphasizes the urgency of implementing integrated, family-centered solutions. The following section interprets these findings in relation to existing literature.

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NOTES: this study set out to address persistent inequities in special education by examining how culturally responsive and restorative practices can better support Native American students with disabilities and strengthen family–school partnerships.

The findings confirm that disproportionality, misidentification, and exclusionary practices continue to impact students, particularly when their cultural identities are not reflected or valued within school systems. These challenges not only affect academic outcomes but also limit family engagement and students’ sense of belonging.

At the same time, this study highlights a clear path forward.

First, schools must adopt culturally responsive practices that intentionally reflect and honor students’ identities, languages, and lived experiences.

Second, there is a need to implement restorative approaches in place of punitive systems, particularly in discipline and behavioral support, to reduce exclusion and build stronger relationships.

Third, and most importantly, schools must move toward authentic, family-centered partnerships—where families are not just included but empowered as equal decision-makers in the special education process.

In terms of recommendations, this means investing in educator training, revising policies and practices that contribute to inequities, and creating structures that support ongoing collaboration with families and communities.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the field by bridging a critical gap—bringing together culturally responsive, restorative, and family-centered approaches into a more integrated framework for equitable special education.

The goal is not just to identify inequities, but to transform systems so that all students—and their families—are supported, respected, and able to thrive.

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NOTES: This slide briefly acknowledges the limitations of the study, which are important for interpreting the findings appropriately.

First, the study involved a small sample size of 10 caregivers. While this allowed for deeper, more detailed insights into family experiences, it does limit the generalizability of the findings to larger populations.

Second, the data is based on self-reported experiences. This means the findings reflect participants' perceptions, which are valuable, but may also introduce some degree of response bias.

Another limitation is the study's limited geographic scope. The experiences captured here may not fully represent those of families in other regions or contexts.

In addition, the data collection period was relatively short, which may not capture changes over time or longer-term experiences within the special education system.

The use of online and social media recruitment is also important to note. While it helped reach participants efficiently, it may have unintentionally excluded families with limited access to technology or digital platforms.

It's also important to recognize that the findings may be influenced by external factors, such as evolving laws, political pressures, and differences in school or district leadership, including administrative practices.

For these reasons, the results should be understood as exploratory and context-specific, rather than broadly generalized.

At the same time, these limitations highlight important directions for future research, particularly the need for larger, more diverse, and longitudinal studies.

Slide 14: References

Slide 15: Q&A

That concludes my presentation.

This study aimed to highlight ongoing inequities in special education while also identifying more culturally responsive, restorative, and family-centered approaches to better support families navigating special education.

I hope these findings contribute to ongoing conversations about creating more equitable and inclusive educational systems.

Thank you for your time and attention. I sincerely appreciate the committee's support and consideration of this work.

I welcome any questions, comments, or suggestions you may have.