

Building Collaborative Partnerships to Empower Families and Advance Advocacy in  
Special Education

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## **Abstract**

My research seeks to develop creative solutions that advance equity and social justice by centering and valuing students' cultures and identities in the implementation of culturally relevant accommodations and modifications in special education. Such services not only support student learning but also foster cooperative and trusting relationships among students, families, educators, and schools. The objective is to inform and empower families by increasing their knowledge and understanding of educational processes, assessments, resources, and their legal rights and responsibilities within the special education system. In this study, I used a mixed methods approach, combining surveys, interviews, and outreach. The goal was to develop an all-inclusive, innovative support model that outlines a responsive framework to address systemic barriers in special education, empower families, strengthen partnerships with schools and families, while increasing self-advocacy.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Statement of Problem .....	3
Research Question .....	5
Justification/Rationale .....	5
Significance of this Study .....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Researcher Positionality Statement .....	11
Summary.....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review	15
Special Education .....	15
Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).....	16
Disparities .....	17
Historical Barriers and Inequities in Special Education .....	18
Disciplining Students with Disabilities .....	19
Social and Emotional Learning .....	19
Parent and Family Engagement in Special Education .....	21
Parent and Family Rights in the Special Education Process .....	23
The Importance of Partnering with Parents and Families .....	25
Frameworks for Empowerment and Partnership.....	26

Lack of Culturally Responsive Education/Special Education.....	26
Obstacles to Culturally Responsive Teaching.....	29
Restorative Practices in Education .....	29
Conclusion.....	31
Chapter 3: Methodology	33
Research Question and Participants .....	34
Protection of Human Subjects .....	37
Research Design/Methods .....	38
Data Collection and Analysis .....	41
Conclusion.....	44
Chapter 4: Findings	44
Review of Research Methods .....	46
Participants .....	46
Data Collection Instruments .....	47
Social Media Survey .....	47
Survey Research Questionnaire .....	48
Interview Research Questionnaire .....	48
Data Analysis Process .....	48
Overview of Data Sources.....	48
Qualitative Thematic Analysis .....	49

Thematic Development.....	49
Caregiver Interviews.....	50
Theme 1: Families’ Experiences Navigating the Special Education System.....	50
Social Media Survey.....	53
Survey Research Questionnaire.....	54
Theme 2: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Support .....	57
Theme 3: The Importance of Relationships and Trust Between Schools and Families.....	58
Theme 4: Opportunities for Culturally Responsive and Restorative Practices .....	59
Summary of Findings .....	61
Chapter 5: Discussion	67
Overview .....	67
Summary of Key Findings.....	67
Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research.....	68
Conclusion.....	70
References	75
Appendices	94
Appendix A — Informed Consent .....	95
Appendix B – Initial Contact Script .....	97
Appendix C – Call for Participant Flyer.....	99
Appendix D - Social Media Survey.....	100
Appendix E - Questionnaire for Families Navigating Special Education.....	101

Appendix F - Culturally Responsive Listening Sessions and Family Focus Group

Interview.....104

## **List of Tables**

Table 1 Social Media Survey Results: Caregiver Perspectives on Special Education (N = 30)	53
Table 2 Survey Research Questionnaire: Participant Demographics (Questionnaire Respondents, N =10)	54
Table 3 Joint Display of Integrated Findings Across Interviews, Questionnaire, and Social Media Survey	61
Table 4 Implications of Findings for Practice, Policy, and Future Research	69

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1 Average Caregiver Perceptions of Special Education Experiences Across Three Interviews	51
Figure 2 Comparison of Caregiver Responses Across Three Interview Participants	52
Figure 3 Pedagogy Honoring Francophone and Indigenous Learners	59
Figure 4 Holistic Model of an Indigenous Quality Learning Environment	74

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This study is rooted in the long and painful history of colonization in what is now the United States. The need to decolonize educational systems, including special education, cannot be separated from the occupation of Indigenous lands, the forced assimilation of Native peoples, and the erasure of language, culture, and traditional knowledge systems. These injustices have shaped every aspect of life for Indigenous peoples, including education, which was used as a tool of assimilation, control, and cultural genocide. From boarding schools to exclusionary disciplinary practices, Indigenous learners have historically been subjected to systems designed not to support, but to silence and assimilate. Gaps in research and the diversity of perspectives underscore the urgency of this work and the need to build knowledge that uplifts Indigenous narratives, disrupts colonial frameworks, and reimagines special education through a restorative and community-driven lens.

According to the Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Corrections (1892), beginning in 1887, the federal government attempted to "Americanize" Native Americans, largely through the education of youth. From the early 1800s through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of American Indian and Alaskan Native children were forcefully removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools run by religious and federal institutions as part of broader assimilation policies that aimed to strip Indigenous cultures and identities (United States Department of the Interior, 2022).

By 1900, thousands of Native Americans were attending almost 150 boarding schools across the United States. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879 at Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was the model for many of these schools. Boarding schools like Carlisle provided vocational and manual training and sought to systematically strip away

tribal culture. They insisted that students drop their Indian names, forbade the speaking of Native languages, and cut off their long hair. The goal was the systematic destruction of Native cultures and communities. The mantra was "Kill the Indian and Save the Man" (Churchill, 2004, p. 88)

Given the historical trauma resulting from the occupation of Indigenous lands and the federal government's forced assimilation policies most notably through the Indian boarding school system, Native American communities continue to experience enduring social and educational impacts. The United States Department of the Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report (2022) documents how the systemic removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities caused profound intergenerational trauma, disrupted cultural continuity, and weakened trust in educational institutions. These historical harms continue to shape the experiences of Native families, many of whom encounter school systems that lack cultural understanding, meaningful support, and opportunities for empowerment (United States Department of the Interior, 2022). According to Duran (2020, as cited in Halcomb, 2023), "When a wound is not healed, it stays and is passed onto the next generation" (p. 19). This takes my breath away.

Teshia et al. (2022) argue that "structural racism toward American Indians and Alaska Natives is found in nearly every policy regarding and action taken toward ..." (p. 281) Indigenous peoples since non-Natives made first contact with the Indigenous peoples of the United States.

Generations of American Indians and Alaska Natives have suffered from policies that called for their genocide as well as policies intended to acculturate and dominate them—such as the sentiment from Richard Henry Pratt to "kill the Indian ... , save the man" (Teshia et al., p. 281).

The intergenerational effect is one that has left American Indians and Alaska Natives at the margins of health and the health care system. According to Teshia et al., “The effect is devastating psychologically, eroding a value system that is based on community and the sanctity of all creation” (p. 281).

### **Statement of Problem**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2024), Native Americans represent roughly 2.6 percent of the total population in the United States, yet they represent the highest percentage (19%) of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Brewer, 2024). Coller (2012) also found that American Indian and Alaska Native students are more likely than students of other racial and ethnic groups to receive special education services.

Many students with disabilities, particularly those whose cultural identities and languages are not reflected in their schools, are not receiving the support they need to thrive. As a result, they are often misidentified or inappropriately placed in special education programs due to bias and systemic barriers, resulting in unmet needs (National Education Association, 2008; Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2025), mislabeling, disproportionate or exclusionary discipline, and restrictive placements (National Education Association, 2024).

Research has shown that students who have disabilities are more likely than students in general education to be suspended from school (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018). Exclusionary, punitive discipline does not get to the heart of misbehavior; therefore, it is not the most productive way to change problematic behavior. For students with disabilities, being suspended often results in a "domino effect" leading to increased exclusionary consequences for behavior (Shirley, 2023).

In my experience, the school administration determines the climate and culture, as well as how behaviors are addressed and the types of discipline implemented; however, this varies based on a number of factors, including race and ethnicity. Levenson et al. (2016) define an effective school environment as one that helps the vast majority of students to be successful. Establishing a positive school culture includes setting up the school's social environment (either intentionally or unintentionally) to reflect a shared vision of common values, beliefs, and behavior expectations. However, for students who are not from the dominant culture, the school environment can expose them to unintentional slights, which devalue their backgrounds and diminish their sense of connectedness to school.

This research project was born out of a commitment to change the educational system in ways that create community-rooted, culturally relevant solutions to support students with disabilities and honor their identities, families, as well as lived experience and stories. I want to build a model of education that not only helps students learn but also strengthens relationships between families and schools, educators and students, systems and communities and advances equity and social justice while centering and valuing students' cultures and identities.

This system would use culturally relevant special education accommodations and modifications that promote cooperative relationships. The goal in working with families of students with disabilities is to increase their knowledge and understanding of legal rights and responsibilities. It is also important to understand how we can build restorative relationships that are culturally responsive and supportive, and that empower families of children in special education, while decolonizing, dismantling and disrupting institutional frameworks. This requires challenging power structures; addressing inequities; calling out injustices by working with families to increase their knowledge; allowing healing space; and empowering them in advocating

for their children's special educational needs.

### **Research Question**

In this study, I asked: In what ways can we build collaborative partnerships to empower families and advance advocacy in special education? Secondary questions include:

1. What factors motivate school administrators and staff to demonstrate an authentic commitment to students' academic and social-emotional success?
2. How can positively reinforced replacement behaviors be effectively implemented to promote desired target behaviors among students?
3. What reinforcement strategies will be used to support replacement behaviors, and how are they consistently applied across school settings?
4. How do teachers perceive their role in reinforcing replacement behaviors, and what instructional and behavioral strategies will they use?
5. To what extent do families feel safe, respected, heard, and meaningfully included by school staff and the IEP team?
6. How do families perceive their roles, influence, and treatment within the IEP development and implementation process?
7. What restorative and culturally responsive practices do families believe would improve their engagement, participation, and sense of empowerment within the school community?

### **Justification/Rationale**

Students with disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds continue to face disproportionate challenges in accessing equitable, individualized, and inclusive education, including higher rates of restrictive placements and exclusionary practices compared to their

peers (Alvarez, 2024; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 2022). Data consistently reveal racial disparities in special education placement and disciplinary actions, with Black and Indigenous students with disabilities more likely to be placed in restrictive settings and suspended than White students (NAACP, 2022; WestEd, 2023). These disparities reflect a deep-rooted systemic inequity and underscore the need for culturally responsive practices and meaningful community voice in educational decision-making (Learning Disabilities Association of America [LDA], 2024; WestEd, 2023).

This research addresses long-standing inequities in special education that disproportionately impact families from marginalized communities, particularly Native American and other families of color. Families play a vital role in advocating for their children, yet they are often excluded or disempowered within the special education process. Whether due to limited access to information, cultural barriers, histories of trauma within school systems, or a lack of culturally competent engagement, families find themselves navigating these confusing systems with little support. This further erodes trust, reinforces power imbalances, and impacts students' services and ultimately outcomes.

The federal IDEA was intended to ensure that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate public education that meets their individual needs, and to codify processes districts must adhere to in determining whether students are eligible for special education services (WestEd, 2023). Despite this guidance, many districts and schools have difficulty determining whether a student who experiences academic, behavioral, or social difficulties is struggling due to a disability or, instead, may be struggling due to unaddressed cultural, linguistic, or environmental issues (e.g., difficulties at home, bullying in school). As a result, many culturally and linguistically diverse students experience an educational system marked by exclusion,

oppression, intimidation, and continued systemic harm.

According to Collier (2012), educators are particularly challenged in serving the special education and transition needs of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Hawaiian Native students. Three primary concerns include: 1) ongoing disproportionality in identification and placement in special education services; 2) limited access to culturally and linguistically responsive instruction within special education; and 3) limited numbers of Indigenous bilingual special education professionals. By better equipping families with knowledge of their educational rights, assessments, systems, and services and by providing information on special educational programs through a cultural lens, we can begin to dismantle barriers and reduce bias. This will promote more just, inclusive, and responsive educational practices, improved family-school partnerships, and improved outcomes for students who are too often left behind, misunderstood, or mislabeled.

### **Significance of this Study**

It is impossible to separate today's educational inequities from their historical roots. Understanding this context is essential for transformative change. In response, this research aimed to influence both systems and hearts, making space for families to be heard, respected, and empowered. In response, this study aimed to create a framework/toolkit for equitable family-school collaboration, including community-informed recommendations for schools, and actionable insights into how culturally relevant accommodations can better support students with disabilities. This resource can serve as a guide for educators, families, and advocates by outlining effective strategies for building trust, improving communication, and implementing responsive practices within special education systems. It is my hope that this model will help to pave the way for the development of strong, reciprocal partnerships and relationships between

schools and families.

Too often, families, especially those from historically marginalized communities, are left out of meaningful conversations about their children's education, especially when it comes to special education. The education system can feel confusing, unwelcoming, sterile, and overwhelming. Families are expected to navigate complex processes without the tools, support, or partnerships. Research (e.g., Cheatham et al., 2018; Harry, 2008; Urban Institute, 2023) indicates that families from historically marginalized backgrounds, including Native, Black, Brown, and immigrant communities, are frequently excluded from meaningful decision-making in special education and broader educational processes, in part because of systemic barriers, cultural insensitivity, and communication challenges. These families often must navigate complex and intimidating procedures, assessments, and legal jargon with limited linguistic or culturally responsive support, leading to mistrust, exclusion, and diminished participation in their children's education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework is a logically connected set of concepts and premises, developed from one or more theories that a researcher creates to scaffold a study. To create a theoretical framework, the researcher must define the concepts and theories that ground the research, integrate them through logical connections, and relate them to the study that is being carried out (Varpio et al., 2020). According to Varpio et al. (2020), researchers hold many theories in mind when designing a study and engaging in data collection. However, it is not until data analysis is underway that the researcher is able to determine which theory or theories will shape the study's interpretations and conclusions.

Epstein's (1987, 1992) theory of overlapping spheres of influence combines

psychological, educational, and sociological perspectives on social institutions to describe and explain the relations among parents, schools, and local environments. These three spheres include family, school, and local community. These overlapping spheres represent the partnership between the three entities, with the child at the center as the focal point. According to Epstein, the extent to which the spheres overlap is influenced by time, accounting for the age and grade level of the child and historical influences. The degree of overlap is also influenced by the experiences, philosophies, and practices of families, schools, and communities, and the spheres can be purposely pushed to overlap more or less (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from Decolonial Theory, Restorative Justice in Education (RJE), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Behavioral Intervention Supports (BIS), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), providing a lens through which to examine how power, race, culture, and systemic inequities shape special education practices for marginalized communities and students. Decolonial theory challenges western-dominated education systems and centers culturally diverse ways of knowing (Battiste, 2019; Velásquez Atehortúa, 2020). RJE focuses on repairing harm, and restoring relationships through inclusive, community centered processes (Lodi et al., 2022; Reimer & Parker-Shandal, 2023). In special education, colonization manifests through deficit-based language, standardized assessments, punitive discipline, and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems and relational worldviews, reflecting how Western education systems privilege dominant epistemologies and marginalize Indigenous voices (Jacob et al., 2025; Simpson, 2017). Decolonial theory challenges these colonial structures and provides a foundation for disrupting these practices by centering community knowledge, cultural ways of knowing, and educational sovereignty (Battiste, 2019;

Smith, 1999; Velásquez Atehortúa, 2020). Decolonizing special education requires reframing student behavior, learning differences, and family engagement in ways that are culturally rooted and trauma-informed, and aligned with Indigenous epistemologies rather than deficit-based Western paradigms (Simpson, 2017; Velásquez Atehortúa, 2020).

RJE offers a transformative framework for addressing behavior, conflict, and harm in schools through a focus on relationships, accountability, and healing (Lodi et al., 2022; Reimer & Parker-Shandal, 2023). For students who have been disproportionately disciplined, particularly Indigenous and Black youth, restorative practices provide a pathway to address behavioral concerns without resorting to criminalization or exclusion (Reimer & Parker-Shandal, 2023; Zehr, 2002). In special education, RJE supports alternatives to exclusionary discipline by prioritizing proactive, culturally responsive, and community-driven supports that center student needs and relational accountability (Lodi et al., 2022; National Center for School Safety, 2023).

Together, decolonial theory and RJE create a powerful foundation for reimagining special education as a decolonial, inclusive, and relational system. This framework guides this study's examination of how power operates in the implementation of special education services, how families can be truly empowered through equitable partnerships, and how restorative and culturally responsive practices can transform outcomes for Indigenous learners and other marginalized students.

Through use of a theoretical framework, data that might initially seem unimportant or unrelated may be identified, explained, or related to other data in meaningful ways (e.g., Maxwell, 2012). At the same time, theory helps define the phenomenon being studied. It illuminates the data set and helps focus attention on specific events or activities relevant for the research. When researchers do not use theory to inform their research, they risk the possibility of

failing to raise and examine theoretically grounded questions and may generate findings of a narrow or limited value (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

### **Researcher Positionality Statement**

Through my lived experiences, values, and commitment to equity all have played a significant role in how I shaped many of my approaches, especially my background and work in racial, social equity, and justice. I am an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe in the Pacific Northwest. I have over 30 years of professional experience working in Indian Country and have a passion for strengthening marginalized Communities of color. In 2004, my passion led me to formalize and launch a Tribal Development Program, formally known as Career Advancement Training (CAT), geared toward creating on-the-job opportunities for tribal members to advance in their careers while attaining personal growth and professional success. I also have an innate love for education, with over two decades of experience creating challenging but supportive environments for learning, developing and supporting staff, allocating resources effectively, and constructing organizational policies and systems.

In my work, I have argued about the need to center relationality with respect to place and land. This means working intentionally to build relationships of reciprocity and care with the places in which we live and work, and particularly our field sites. Unfortunately, researchers too often approach their field sites solely as places from which to extract data.

I believe that it is important to engage in decolonized practices that are reciprocal, center place-based relationships, promote intergenerational healing, and are family focused, holistic and inclusive. It is recognizing the history of our colonial traumas and using our Indigenous knowledges of tribal protocols and ceremonies that connect us to our tribal traditions while also working to dismantle colonial structures. Similarly, Cruz et al. (2018) describe the importance of

relationality, inclusion, humility, respect, accessibility, responsiveness, collaboration, equity, and self-determination.

I have navigated many complex and challenging experiences as an Indigenous woman, professional, mother, and doctoral student. My commitment to disrupting prejudice and dismantling systems of oppression and racism have remained at the center of my work. These experiences have shaped my perspectives and work towards change, whether in my community or beyond. As such, I support the use of Restorative Justice, or more broadly, Restorative Practice (RP), which responds to wrongdoing and harm by focusing on how the harm might be repaired rather than how the wrongdoer should be punished. Restorative justice and practices emphasize repairing harm and restoring relationships through inclusive, community-centered dialogue and accountability rather than punitive discipline (Lodi et al., 2022; Zehr, 2002). Restorative practices also aim to involve all parties affected by harm to understand needs and obligations and to collaborate in making things right, supporting healing and equity in educational contexts (National Center for School Safety, 2023).

Understanding the importance of community, respect for diverse traditions, and the impact of generational trauma has influenced how I create inclusive environments. This has taught me strategies for building trust, navigating power dynamics, and advocating for marginalized groups that prioritize culturally relevant practices in training, collaboration, and advocacy and consider the unique needs of others from marginalized and diverse backgrounds.

According to Halcomb (2023), inequality is often framed in politically correct verbiage, such as "the underrepresented," "disenfranchised," or "at-risk." Experiences of marginalization, prejudice, and oppression inform my commitment to dismantling systems of inequality. This personal experience contributes to my desire to create an environment where all, especially those

from historically disadvantaged communities, feel safe, respected, and empowered. As a mother of children in special education, I've also witnessed firsthand challenges faced by individuals who are marginalized due to their disabilities. This experience has influenced how I work to create inclusive space for students with disabilities and other marginalized groups. My commitment to ensuring accessibility and inclusion within the school setting leads me to advocate for students who might face barriers, or disadvantages. My lived experiences within settings in equality-focused roles have helped me contribute toward navigating the balance between learning goals and the needs of marginalized learners, ensuring that both family and students' needs are heard and respected.

As a mother with elementary children who are in special education, I know firsthand how scary, overwhelming and stressful it can be when the news or diagnosis is delivered, navigating a special educational system, trying to advocate for your child all while seeing them struggle, feeling helpless, feeling lost or alone. I also understand the impact school relationships can have. In response, I want to be able to support other parents so that students have more opportunities for positive outcomes.

### **Summary**

In summary, Chapter 1 highlighted persistent inequities in special education for Indigenous and marginalized students and framed this study through Decolonial Theory, RJE, SEL, BIS, CRT, and IDEA. These frameworks, among others emphasize culturally responsive, relational, and equity-orientated approaches that center around lived experiences, family engagement, and the school community-driven supports. By addressing systemic barriers through restorative and decolonial practices, this study aims to explore strategies that promote collaborative partnerships, family empowerment and advancing advocacy through positive

academic outcomes. In the following chapters, it will detail the literature review, research methodology, and analysis.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Special Education**

Utilizing genealogical analysis, Rover and Chang (2020) examined how racial discrimination in education shifted focus in different periods of time. This persistent, yet covert, form of discrimination, is important to address barriers to full equity in education for minoritized ethnic and racial groups, particularly Black learners. These barriers have been described in a number of different ways including disproportionate outcomes/minority presence in remedial education. When drawing on Foucault's genealogical approach history is understood not as the recovery of a singular origin or truth, but as an examination of discontinuities, contingencies, and practices that are often ignored or left unacknowledged in dominant historical narratives (Foucault, 1977)

Research in special education has consistently highlighted the critical role of family involvement and individualized support in promoting positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Studies demonstrate that active family engagement in the IEP process is associated with improved academic achievement, social-emotional development, and positive behavioral outcomes (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). However, research highlights persistent challenges that expose inequities, particularly for students of color and students with disabilities whose disabilities and cultures are misunderstood or marginalized in schools. Research further highlights limited communication, cultural misunderstandings, and systemic barriers that reduce family influence in educational decision-making, particularly for Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized communities (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Special education has been shaped by certain procedural mandates, and institutionalized models of learning, often resulting in the education system failing students and families losing

their voice and being unable to participate. In response, this literature review explores connections between family engagement and restorative practices. Culturally responsive approaches to family engagement are essential for empowering families, respecting lived experiences, and promoting equitable learning outcomes (Gay, 2018).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that students with disabilities receive special education services as described in the student's IEP, or individualized education plan. School districts are legally obligated to provide the services listed in each IEP (e.g., a certain number of minutes of specialized math instruction each week; specialized instruction, escalation matrix; a 1:1 paraprofessional, sometimes referred to as a Behavioral Registered Technician (BRT)). If it is determined that a student has been deemed eligible for special education services and is receiving these services but is absent from school for more than 10 school days, even for discipline reasons, the district must take steps to address this issue.

### **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)**

Before 1970, it was common practice in many school districts nationwide to deny students with disabilities opportunities to learn. In fact, lawmakers passed legislation that specifically excluded children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or had an intellectual disability. Before the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (Public Law 94-142), public schools educated only about one in five children with disabilities and many states had laws that excluded or severely limited educational opportunities for these students (United States Department of Education, n.d.). When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was enacted, it established the federal requirement that eligible students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and that each student have an individualized education plan (IEP) based on a comprehensive special education

evaluation (Public Law 94-142). This plan is to be based on the unique strengths and needs of the student.

After the 1990 reauthorization of EAHCA, this law became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA requires that a behavior intervention plan based on a functional behavioral assessment be considered when developing an IEP if a student's behavior interferes with his or her learning or the learning of classmates. In developing, reviewing, and revising each student's IEP, the special education team must consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports and other strategies to address the student's behavior (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(2)(i), as amended). In most cases in which a student's behavior impedes his or her learning or that of others, and can be readily anticipated to be repetitive, proper development of the student's IEP will include positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports to address that behavior (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)).

### **Disparities**

Krishnamoorthy et al. (2024) explains that educational disparities are related to the lack of culturally safe educational practices, punitive disciplinary actions, and the lack of culturally responsive trauma-informed practices. When schools are unable to provide specialized services, or if the student is sent home and suspended, they may become eligible for "compensatory services," a concept not spelled out in IDEA but often recognized by courts as a legal option.

In my own experience, having identical twin daughters with disabilities, the special education process can be exhausting and emotionally draining. Since our daughters began school, we have endured countless suspensions; hundreds, if not thousands, of emails and phone calls; over 20 police encounters; four home visits; reports to Child Protective Services and Indian

Child Welfare; interrogations; risk assessments; physical restraints; and ultimately an expulsion that required a transfer to a new school). Administration has spoken to me in a demeaning, threatening, condescending, and disrespectful manner and has limited me from being an active member of the team.

Waitolle et al. (2022) argues for disability solidarity that grows coalitions amid social struggles to understand and address different kinds of "isms" (e.g., racism, ableism, classism) as interlocking forms of oppression rather than as separate issues. Thus, research must foreground the voices of the most affected: families and students, particularly those experiencing intersecting forms of injustice. Families and students possess a unique and critical expertise on how histories, geographies, and policies are experienced on the ground, an expertise that no quantification can capture.

### **Historical Barriers and Inequities in Special Education**

Despite legal mandates under IDEA, students of color and those from marginalized communities continue to face disproportionate placement in special education, overrepresentation in restrictive environments, and exclusionary discipline (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Turnbull et al., 2015). To provide more appropriate services to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, clinicians should consider a variety of reasons why the child may be struggling academically or lagging behind in their cognitive or linguistic development, including cultural and linguistic factors that are unrelated to a disability (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Vega et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the common view of children in special education as having an intrinsic disorder has not proven beneficial for most students. As a result, children have been misidentified as having learning disabilities or language impairments and placed in special education due to low scores on standardized assessments (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Leaders Project, 2013).

Research has demonstrated that traditional measures, including standardized testing, can be invalid or biased for children from diverse backgrounds because these testing tools reflect dominant cultural and linguistic norms that then students' true abilities, contributing to disproportionate identification in special education (Leaders Project, 2013; Leung et al., 2025; Valencia, 2010;). Harry and Klingner (2006) argue that some children would receive greater benefits from intensive general education, rather than from the less rigorous curriculum often provided by special education. The authors also recommend that special education services be provided to children who need them, but without the "disability label." Finally, they argue that eligibility criteria used to qualify for special education services (i.e., the IQ discrepancy formula) be reconsidered. Federal law also requires clinicians working with CLD children to use appropriate, unbiased, valid, and reliable procedures whenever a child is being evaluated for special education and related services.

### **Disciplining Students with Disabilities**

A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and behavioral intervention plan (BIP) must be used proactively, if an IEP team determines them to be useful. For a child with a disability whose behavior impedes his or her learning or that of others, and for whom the IEP team has determined that a BIP is appropriate, the IEP team must include a BIP in the child's IEP (OSPI CC 23-172). An FBA, which assesses and responds to student behavior, should be completed as often as needed. If it is determined through a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) that the student's behavior is due to their disability, a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) must be used, reviewed, and modified.

### ***Social and Emotional Learning***

As a part of this study, it is important to consider SEL, as well as Behavioral

Interventions and Supports (BIS). These approaches emphasize proactive behavioral support, equity, and cultural responsiveness, as well as legal mandates requiring collaboration with families in the IEP process.

Five core competencies are defined in the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework: self-awareness (e.g., understanding emotions and thoughts as well as their impact on behavior), self-management (e.g., goal achievement through managing emotions, thoughts, and behavior), social awareness (e.g., empathy, recognizing social norms), relationship skills (e.g., effective communication, development of healthy relationships, helping others), and responsible decision-making (e.g., individual and social problem solving, reasoned judgment, critical thinking skills). In recent decades, several SEL intervention programs have been developed and implemented in schools. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) closely aligns to IDEA by supporting the requirement that IEP teams consider positive behavioral interventions and supports when a student's behavior interferes with learning. IDEA mandates that these strategies be addressed during IEP reviews to ensure students can adequately access their education and make progress in a general educational setting (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004; 34 C.F.R. § 300.324(a)(2)(i)). SEL provides a framework for teaching skills such as self-regulation, emotional awareness, relationship skills, and navigating decision-making, which can all be incorporated within the IEP goals, and implemented through a BIP that is developed from the Functional Behavioral Assessments (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2020). By emphasizing proactive skill development, SEL supports IDEA's intent to address behavioral challenges through instructional and positive approaches rather than punitive measures. Research has shown that social and emotional learning programs, such as CASEL, and SEL have positive impacts on academic success as well

as non-cognitive skills (Hassani & Schwab, 2021).

### ***Parent and Family Engagement in Special Education***

Special education requires schools, families, communities, and service providers to come together as partners to provide tailored services, support, and instruction for children with disabilities. Research indicates that partnerships develop relationships and supports that create an appropriate environment for children to learn and grow. In these partnerships, families are the most enduring and expert supporters of their children (Walker et al., 2022). However, families often report feelings of mistrust, disempowerment, and exclusion during IEP meetings, where professional language, power imbalances, and institutional biases can create barriers to authentic participation (Fish, 2008). These challenges are particularly problematic for families who do not see their cultural values, lived experiences, or communities reflected or acknowledged within the school setting. According to Fish (p. 6), parents'/families' understanding of the IEP process provides better IEP meeting outcomes needed to effectively serve their children who receive special education services. Although parents/families may take the initiative to educate themselves, school district personnel should also educate families on special education services and the IEP process through initiatives such as periodic workshops and seminars.

Collaborative relationships are particularly difficult to establish for parents and families of children and youth with disabilities, especially those from low socioeconomic and culturally diverse backgrounds (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Fish et al. (2008, as cited in Turnbull &

Turnbull, 1997; Vaughn et al., 1988) argue that despite federal law (i.e., IDEA), many parents feel alienated because educators dominate the decision-making process. According to Harry et al. (1995, as cited in Kalyanpur et al., 2000), decision-making during an IEP meeting is more heavily influenced by educational assessments than by parents' anecdotal reports. In many cases, parents are not actively involved in the IEP process. Instead, they are limited to receiving information (Garriott et al., 2000; Vaughn et al., 1988) and to signing documents.

Unfortunately, perceptions of education are often shaped by stereotypes that assume families lack education and the ability to communicate effectively (Walker et al. (2022)). Such perceptions create barriers to family engagement. Consequently, it is important to engage in open communication that fosters mutual respect between parents and educators. The Dual-Capacity Framework and related family-school partnership models emphasize that parents of color benefit from reciprocal information sharing, shared decision-making, and open lines of communication to build trust with their students' teachers and educators (Ishimaru, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Taking cultural perspectives into consideration can improve engagement outcomes, such as active participation during IEP meetings. This framework highlights the importance of valuing families' cultural knowledge and lived experiences rather than positioning parents as passive recipients of information. Research suggests that when cultural perspectives are intentionally centered, family engagement outcomes improve, including increased confidence, collaboration, and active participation during IEP meetings (Ishimaru, 2014; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Fostering collaborative partnerships is not only a best practice, it is a necessary foundation for equity, accountability, and the realization of educational rights for students with disabilities (Turnbull et al., 2015). Advancing advocacy through family empowerment

strengthens shared decision-making and ensures that special education functions as more than a procedural process or requirement, but a truly supportive and inclusive pathway for every learner. Meaningful family-school partnerships support inclusive, student-centered practices that honor family voice and promote equitable educational outcomes for all learners (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

### ***Parent and Family Rights in the Special Education Process***

Families are central stakeholders in their children's education, yet they are often marginalized in decision-making processes despite legal protections intended to ensure their participation (Harry & Klinger, 2014; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). In many cases, school districts and personnel hold the informational and procedural power, which can result in unequal dynamics and reduced accountability when IEPs are not implemented with fidelity. Although the IDEA (2004) requires parents to be active participants in the IEP team, school districts and personnel frequently hold greater informational and procedural power, which result in unequal dynamics and reduced accountability when IEPs are not implemented with fidelity (Turnbull et al., 2015). Building collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and communities is critical to addressing these inequities and strengthening shared responsibility for student outcomes (National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), 2019). Meaningful collaboration supports compliance with IDEA by fostering shared ownership of the student's educational program rather than limiting engagement to minimum legal compliance or requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). When collaborative partnerships center the child's strengths and needs, educational teams are more likely to work with families as equal partners rather than around them, resulting in more effective and inclusive educational planning (Haines et al., 2015).

According to Washington State law, a due process hearing is a formal, legal proceeding conducted by an administrative law judge (ALJ). Parents, students, and school districts may make a written request for a hearing related to the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to a student with a disability. Additional information about due process hearings can be found on the OSPI (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction) website (<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/special-education/family-engagement-and-guidance/parent-and-student-rights-procedural-safeguards>, see: Procedural Safeguards, and WAC 392-172A-05080 through 392-172A-05125). While due process is intended to serve as a neutral mechanism for resolving disputes, experience suggests a significant imbalance in power between school districts and parents. Schools enter these proceedings with access to extensive resources, including:

- Teams of educational experts and specialists
- Legal representation and institutional knowledge
- Comprehensive records and data
- Financial backing and time to prepare.

Meanwhile, parents are often left navigating the legal terrain without comparable access to such information, representation, or procedural support. In many cases, parents are trying to understand their basic rights while simultaneously advocating for their child. This disparity makes the due process system feel less like a protective legal remedy and more like a technical formality that favors schools and schools' districts. In this environment, the student the school system was meant to protect is often left behind. When families are not adequately informed, supported, or empowered, the procedural safeguards intended to ensure fairness and compliance fall short in practice.

### ***The Importance of Partnering with Parents and Families***

Unfortunately, it is possible to follow special education laws while missing the opportunity to engage families authentically and meaningfully. Educators are busy attending to countless, complicated, and often high stakes demands. Building partnerships with families may seem like one more thing on a lengthy list of to-dos. However, partnerships with families are critically important. Unfortunately, the promise of IDEA often falls short in practice due to the lack of family engagement. For example, an individualized education program, or IEP, is a necessary component in special education services that addresses the specific educational needs of a student with disabilities. Although parents may be interested in playing an active role in developing IEPs, they often face barriers to engagement that lead them to believe their input is not valued. While parental participation is integral to the IEP process, families have often described this process as "educator-driven", with little room for their input. Families also report receiving testing results and other data from educators, administrators, and professionals, yet not being granted substantial time to respond to what has been shared or to offer their own input (Walker et al., 2022).

Since differences in perspectives regarding education may be misinterpreted as disinterest or passivity, it is essential to highlight the value of the parent's role in a student's achievement. Parental input from diverse families allows for a student's needs to be explained and understood from a cultural lens that school personnel may not have. In sum, it is important that educators be able to answer parents' questions regarding their child and that they have a strong understanding of federal special education laws as well as local and state guidelines (Weir, 2023).

### ***Frameworks for Empowerment and Partnership***

Family empowerment involves more than participation, it includes voice, influence, and shared decision-making. The literature suggests that when families are empowered to advocate for their children and are seen as equal partners, the quality and relevance of special education services improve (Trainer, 2010; Turnbull et al., 2011).

Family-centered approaches emphasize the importance of respect for family knowledge, open communication, creating culturally relevant spaces, and establishing a relationship in trust. Within literature it clearly supports a call to action to advance equity in special education, schools must be willing to implement culturally responsive accommodations, create meaningful engagement with families, and disrupt harmful, deficit-based practices. This research aims to build upon that body of work combining the research and community voice to develop a supportive framework that is informed, inclusive, and rooted in cultural understanding. One of the goals is not only to improve services and support, but to also shift relationships between schools, students and families toward healing, trust and shared power.

### **Lack of Culturally Responsive Education/Special Education**

Culturally responsive education, as defined by scholars such as Gay (2010) and Ladson-Billings (1995), emphasizes the need to honor and incorporate students' and families' cultural identities into teaching and learning. Gay (2002) shares that the best quality education for ethnically diverse students is as much culturally responsive as it is developmentally appropriate, which means using their cultural orientations, background experiences, and ethnic identities as conduits to facilitate their teaching and learning. This applies to students in both regular and special education. However, before culturally responsive teaching can be implemented effectively, existing beliefs and practices that are obstacles to it need to be identified and

eliminated. This requires teachers to use students' cultures, experiences, and ethnic identities as conduits to facilitate teaching and learning.

Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that many studies locate the source of student failure and subsequent achievement within the nexus of speech and language interaction patterns between teachers and the students. In doing so, dominant culture and linguistic norms are positioned as neutral or superior, while the communicative practices of culturally and linguistically diverse students are framed as deficits. Each suggests that student "success" is consequently defined as conformity to school-based norms of language, behavior, and interaction, and by achievement in school, thus, the goal of education becomes how to "fit" students, viewed as "other" by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class, into a hierarchical system defined as a meritocracy. Within special education, these deficit-oriented assumptions contribute to patterns of disproportional identification, particularly for students of color and multilingual learners, whose differences are more likely to be interpreted as indicators of a disability rather than as manifestations of a cultural or linguistic variation. By locating educational failure within students rather than examining systemic inequities in schooling practices, these frameworks legitimize referral, evaluation, and placement decisions that reproduce racialized and class-based inequities in special education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Pak and Parsons (2020) argue that educators tasked with including students whose racial and class backgrounds differ from their own must critically examine the role of implicit bias in instructional decision-making. Students of color frequently encounter lowered academic expectations in the classroom contexts, which can negatively shape both teacher perceptions and student outcomes (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gillborn et al., 2012; Samuels & Harwin, 2018). In addition, Fergus (2016) surveyed teachers and found that those with limited knowledge of their

students' cultural backgrounds, or diminished sense of responsibility to develop cultural awareness, demonstrated higher rates of deficit thinking about their students. Similarly, teachers who expressed deficit-based beliefs were more likely to endorse color-blind ideologies or report discomfort discussing issues of race, culture, and inequality, reinforcing patterns that contribute to inequitable educational experiences for students of color. These findings suggest that students with disabilities whose racial identities differ from their teachers' will likely face problematic mindsets if these teachers gravitate towards color-blind instructional approaches. This is critically important given that in 2015-16, 80% of the teacher workforce identified as White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a).

Weinstein et al. (2004) point out that schools often attempt to coerce CLD learners to behave through the fear of punishment or the offer of reward, but simply communicating care and concern for the students is often more effective. Gadd and Butler (2018) argue that the integration of culturally responsive/sustaining practices is intended to cultivate and sustain an equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students; especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds and students with and at risk of disabilities. They provide insight regarding methods that may aid and support the teaching of culturally diverse students who are at risk of or have a disability. They suggest that attempts to incorporate culturally responsive/sustaining practices within the classroom are a result of continuous efforts to address educational inequities that have historically limited access to a high-quality education for marginalized students and students with disabilities. Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with and at risk for disabilities benefit academically when a balance between engaging in culturally responsive/sustaining practices and teaching within a climate of accountability is achieved.

### ***Obstacles to Culturally Responsive Teaching***

Two critical obstacles to culturally responsive teaching are negative teacher attitudes and expectations for students of color and the confusion of disability with diversity within special education, culturally responsive family engagement means actively seeking, respecting, and responding to the knowledge and experiences of diverse families (Lo, 2008). Pak and Parsons (2020) found cultural barriers and biases within teaching based on race and background. They illustrate the racism and underlying discrimination that exists today within our educational programs. In many instances, schools treat family engagement as a one-way communication approach rather than a mutual partnership. Culturally responsive accommodations, such as incorporating family values and home language practices, using community relevant examples in instruction, and adapting sensory and behavioral supports can increase both academic engagement and students' emotional well-being (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). However, the implementation of these practices is often inconsistent due to limited professional training, policy constraints, and institutional resistance, particularly within accountability driven and compliance focused educational systems (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013)

### **Restorative Practices in Education**

Trauma informed practices that intersect with cultural responsiveness can aid in mitigating harm and promote healing. Families who understand their rights, feel included, and respected are more likely to participate meaningfully and to ensure their children receive appropriate services and support. Wachtel (2016) explained that restorative practices, originally rooted in Indigenous traditions and community justice models, have emerged as powerful tools in education for building relationships, repairing harm, and cultivating inclusive school cultures. In special education, restorative practices can help transform the IEP process toward collaborative dialogue. This can

increase cultural awareness, responsiveness, and serve as a bridge of rebuilding trust with families.

Weir (2023) questions whether parents are being treated as partners in their child's educational development or as the problem. Section 300.322 of IDEA, titled Parent Participation, only addresses a parent's right to be involved and informed during the IEP ("Sec. 300.322 parent participation," 2017). This raises questions regarding their role in their children's education. The role of the parent in special education has long been shaped by assumptions about compliance, cooperation, and institutional trust. Weir (2022) questions whether it is best for parents to be supportive of the school and trust that the school has their children's best interests in mind, or if parents should serve as agents of change? While collaborative relationships are essential, this question exposes the power dynamics inherent in many school-family interactions. Too often, marginalized families are expected to demonstrate support and deference to educational institutions that may not fully recognize or respect their child's cultural, behavioral, or academic needs. In this context, the parent must be viewed and supported as an agent of change, not in opposition to the school, but as a co-leader in shaping equitable outcomes. This shift requires moving beyond passive partnership models and embracing empowered advocacy, where families are equipped with the knowledge, voice, and authority to challenge systemic barriers and co-create solutions. A partnered, empowered approach recognizes that trusting relationships must be built through transparency, accountability, and shared power not assumed based on institutional role.

In their work with teacher educators, Traynor (2016) observed a lack of awareness of theories about family school partnerships among teachers and teacher educators. Yamauchi et al. (2017) share that the lack of theoretical grounding in the field of family school partnerships not only affects the quality of current and future research but also has consequences for teacher education. One important and under researched area in the quest to improve family school

partnerships is how teachers are prepared to become partners.

Although students are increasingly members of ethnic groups of color, poor, urban residents, and multilingual, the teaching profession is overwhelmingly European American, female, middle class, suburban, and monolingual (Gay, 2000, 2001). Teacher education programs have yet to incorporate multicultural education adequately enough to make a significant difference. These social gaps and cultural divides are major issues that must be confronted directly and critically if both regular and special education for ethnically diverse students is to be improved significantly. The lack of mutual partnerships, families' lack of familiarity with the special education system, low level of family participation, and lack of teacher training may result in lower levels of meaningful participation in educational planning, which cause certain detrimental impacts on the student's learning.

Gay (2022) recommends that professional preparation programs for regular and special education teachers, as well as in-service staff development, be much more aggressive and diligent about including knowledge and skills for teaching ethnically and culturally different students and hold teachers accountable for implementing these changes in classroom practice. All children deserve to be in a learning environment that serves their needs and families deserve a supportive partnership with their child's school and teaching team.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the literature addressing family-school partnerships, culturally responsive practices, implicit bias, and patterns of disproportionality in special education. Collectively, the research underscores how deficit-oriented perspectives, unequal power dynamics, and limited cultural responsiveness contribute to inequitable educational experiences and outcomes for students from historically marginalized backgrounds. While federal policy,

including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, mandates inclusive and collaborative practices, the literature reveals persistent gaps between policy intent and implementation. Studies further demonstrate that culturally responsive accommodations and meaningful family engagement can enhance both academic engagement and student well-being; however, systemic barriers such as insufficient professional preparation, institutional resistance, and accountability-driven structures continue to constrain their consistent use. Together, these findings highlight the need for educational approaches that move beyond procedural compliance toward equity-centered practices that affirm students' cultural identities and promote shared responsibility among educators, families, and communities.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Engaging in restorative dialogue builds positive and lasting relationships that can withstand occasional disagreement and prevent escalation into conflict. Should conflict occur, restorative conversations and informal conferences or circles can be used to understand what went wrong and find a way to move forward together (Cruz et al., 2018). It is important to have an increased awareness of each learner's positionalities and power dynamics because with that awareness you have the better opportunity to successfully serve while understanding the complexities of their unique experiences. Through this cultural lens, we honor our traditions and our ancestral lineage. This awareness allows us to empower one another, embrace diversity, uplift race, and humanity. On a larger scale, this provides a deeper level of connectedness to the learner's home base, and family belief systems, etc. all of which have a huge influence on the overall way they engage and experience learning (Swelam, 2025).

A mixed-methods approach grounded in community-based participatory (CBPR) research was used to investigate and address systemic barriers within the special education system. Mixed methods design allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex educational inequities (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Grounded in CBPR principles, this methodology is intentionally designed to center the voices and lived experiences of families, particularly those from historically marginalized, Indigenous, and culturally diverse communities whose children are navigating special education by positioning them as active partners in this research process rather than as a passive subject (Israel et al., 2010; Minkler & Wallerstiend, 2008). Such an approach is especially well suited for examining special educational systems, as it promotes shared power, cultural relevance, and the co-construction of knowledge aimed at meaningful and sustainable

change.

This study aimed to develop an inclusive, culturally responsive support model by combining qualitative and quantitative data collection with direct community engagement. This approach acknowledges the lived experiences of families, explores how culturally responsive and restorative frameworks can empower families of children in special education with knowledge, advocacy tools, and trusting partnerships with schools. Centered around social justice, equity, and participatory lived experiences, the research sought to develop a platform to elevate family voices in creating a framework for advocacy and systemic change.

The quantitative component of this study employed a nonexperimental design to examine patterns and relationships related to systemic barriers within the special education system. Quantitative data were collected using surveys, questionnaires, and virtual community meetings, which allowed for the systematic measurement of family engagement, perceptions of equity, and access to services. This approach enabled the identification of trends and disparities across participant groups while providing a broad contextual understanding of the issues under investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative methods were selected to complement the qualitative and community-based participatory components of the study by providing empirical evidence of systemic patterns that contextualize families' lived experiences within special education.

### **Research Question and Participants**

This study focused on the decolonization of special education by disrupting power structures and addressing social injustices that impact Indigenous and marginalized students, particularly those with behavioral needs who often receive inconsistent and culturally unresponsive supports. The goal was to build collaborative partnerships that empower families

and advance advocacy through restorative practices that challenge and reshape the current colonized framework of special education. The guiding question was: How can we build collaborative partnerships to empower families and advance advocacy in special education?

Participants were recruited through local forums, community-based programs, word of mouth, and social media outreach (Appendix B). Participants' identities will remain anonymous. Participants included families and other stakeholders connected to special education services. Eligibility criteria included being a parent or caregiver of a student receiving special education services, and age 18 or older. Recruitment occurred through community networks, social media platforms, and partner organizations to maximize accessibility and participation. Participation was voluntary, and all procedures were designed to minimize burden while respecting participants' time, access needs, and cultural contexts. Demographic characteristics collected included gender, age, grade level of student, race/ethnicity, and date of participation.

### **Call for Participation Flyer**

The flyer provided a brief description of the study purpose and invited eligible individuals to participate voluntarily. It outlined basic eligibility criteria and included contact information (e.g., email, QR code, or website link) for accessing the survey or obtaining additional study information. No specific participant names or phone numbers were included.

### **Informed Consent Process**

Participants were able to ask questions and had the option to proceed, pause, stop, or withdraw at any time during the verbal presentation of informed consent. Participants completing the electronic consent form were able to navigate freely, moving forward or backward between sections to review information at their own pace. They could also pause or stop the process at any time and return later to complete the consent. This flexible navigation

ensured that participants could fully understand the study details before providing consent.

## **Procedures**

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were conducted according to standardized procedures to ensure consistency across participants. Participants were first screened for eligibility and then provided informed consent. Surveys were administered online, via telephone, or in person, and interviews and focus groups were conducted either virtually or in community-based settings at convenient times. Participants could pause, stop, or withdraw at any point during data collection. Optional follow-up sessions were offered to provide additional opportunities for participants to share insights.

## **Data Overview**

The study collected demographic information, including age, role, ethnicity, and grade, as well as details about participants' experiences with special education, such as children's services, participant knowledge, and satisfaction. More sensitive data was gathered regarding personal barriers, trust, and cultural challenges. Interviews and focus groups captured detailed narratives and suggestions from participants. All data were collected directly from parents, caregivers, and educators through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. No external records or secondary data sources were used.

To protect participant privacy, all data was de-identified. Personal names and contact information were removed and replaced with subject codes that did not reveal participants' identities. Only de-identified data were shared with approved researchers or stored for future special education research. Any shared data was coded to maintain confidentiality, and no direct identifiers were ever shared outside the research team. Participants were informed that they could withdraw their data from any future use, sharing, or storage at any time. Withdrawn data

were removed from the research database and excluded from subsequent analyses. However, data that had already been shared or included in published findings could not be retrieved.

Participants were made aware of this right during the consent process.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Ethical standards for the study were followed in accordance with the University of Washington's guidelines for human subject's research (University of Washington, Office of Research, Human Subjects Division, n.d.). Originally, written informed consent forms were prepared for face-to-face meetings; however, all data collection including surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups were conducted virtually or via telephone. Consequently, the informed consent process was delivered verbally or electronically to accommodate all modes of participation. All participants were provided with information describing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (American Psychological Association, 2020). For surveys and questionnaires, consent was obtained electronically prior to participation. Participants were presented with the following prompt:

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time. Please indicate your consent to participate in this study by selecting or stating one of the options below:

Yes, I agree to participate (Please continue).

No, I do not agree to participate (Please exit).

For telephone and virtual interviews, as well as virtual focus groups, the same consent prompt was provided verbally or electronically prior to participation. Participants explicitly indicated their agreement to participate before any data collection commenced. This approach

ensured that all participants had the opportunity to provide informed consent regardless of the method of participation and aligned with ethical standards for online and community-based research (American Psychological Association, 2020; University of Washington, Office of Research, Human Subjects Division, n.d.).

### **Research Design/Methods**

A convergent mixed-methods design was used to collect, analyze, and interpret both qualitative and quantitative data in parallel (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this approach, both data types are given equal priority, collected simultaneously, and analyzed independently before being merged for interpretation. The design allowed for a nuanced understanding of the systemic barriers, advocacy gaps, and culturally disconnected practices affecting students receiving special education services, particularly those with behavioral challenges (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). The convergent mixed-methods design is particularly appropriate for this study because it centers and advances family voices while allowing for the collection of structured closed responses

This study adopted a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework that integrates with a mixed-methods approach to explore and address systemic challenges faced by families navigating special education. CBPR emphasizes collaboration with community members as equal partners in the research process, ensuring that the questions, methods, and outcomes are culturally relevant and directly responsive to community needs (Isreal et al., 2010; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). This design not only sought to gather data but also to challenge systemic inequities by shaping and building actionable community-informed solutions that reflect the lived experience and priorities of historically marginalized families.

This mixed-methods design is grounded in a whole child approach, with the goal of building an adaptable and culturally responsive support model that centers the lived experiences

of Indigenous students and other historically marginalized learners. The whole child framework recognizes that students' learning, behavior, and well-being are shaped by a complex interplay of academic, social, emotional, cultural, and environmental factors, emphasizing that the student should not be viewed in isolation but as deeply embedded within their family, school, and community (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Griffith & Slade, 2018). Therefore, this research approach centered the school, family, and student as interconnected participants in the special education process, each contributing vital knowledge to the development of effective and equitable supports (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Zins et al., 2004).

The methods used in this study were aligned with the goal of guiding values within the research process and empowering families of students in special education through restorative, culturally responsive, and collaborative practices (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach reflects a qualitative tradition that centers participant voice, lived experiences, and social context (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

This study employed qualitative design that incorporated closed-response surveys and focus groups. Utilizing closed-ended questions provided space for families to share their experiences, reflections, stories, and recommendations. These insights are critically important to understand what restorative and cultural change needs to happen. The survey ensured accessibility, as surveys can reach a vast audience while still engaging in a reflective narrative that acknowledges lived experiences. This method is respectful and considerate of the participants' time, allowing for a self-paced private setting of their preference, is easily accessible and user-friendly. The survey was anonymous; this allowed participants to feel more comfortable in expressing their experiences and concerns about school staff, IEP team, and special education in general.

The virtual focus group format allowed families to socially construct meaning by building upon one another's experiences, offering alternative explanations, and engaging in collaborative dialogue (Krueger and Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). Focus groups were rooted in Indigenous methodologies that provided a relational, community-centered approach that promoted shared voices, reflection, and collective meaning-making (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). In research contexts, semi-structured focus groups function similarly to focus groups that emphasize relational accountability, equity of voice, and culturally responsive facilitation.

Online focus groups are particularly useful for increasing accessibility and reducing participation barriers for geographically dispersed or historically marginalized communities, are heard, empowered, informed, and centered around this process of educational transformation.

The five-session virtual focus group services included:

- **Session #1:** Centering Your Voice: Families Navigating Special Education
- **Session #2:** Understanding Your Rights in Special Education
- **Session #3:** Navigating the IEP Process with Confidence
- **Session #4:** Engaged & Restorative Communication
- **Session #5:** A Culturally Responsive Framework for Empowering Families in Special Education

These sessions were designed to increase family knowledge regarding Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), and district, state, and federal policies under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The content provided informational tools such as PowerPoint presentations, state and federal law summaries, special education procedural safeguards, and educational planning documents. This framework

reflects principles of family–school partnership and collaborative decision-making in special education (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Using social media to post, share, and collect survey responses, I hoped to reach a diverse pool of participants throughout the state of Washington. The closed-response survey was quantitative with multiple-choice questions administered to gather participant feedback. Surveys consisted of pre-developed response options that allowed for structured comparison across participants (Dillman et al., 2014). Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify common trends, themes, or patterns. Closed-response were analyzed using coding through a restorative and culturally responsive lens. Themes that emerged included relationships with family and school staff, systemic barriers, and opportunities for restorative relationship building.

Quantitative data was collected using two online survey instruments designed to gather demographic information and assess participant perceptions and experiences. The primary survey instrument (Appendix C) was administered through Google Forms and accessed via a QR code. This survey included demographic questions followed by informed consent information and 10 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always.

A secondary, shorter six-item online questionnaire with yes/no responses (Appendix A) was distributed through social media platforms to increase reach and accessibility. This instrument included an initial consent statement and allowed participants to voluntarily indicate their willingness to participate before responding. Both surveys were developed in accordance with best practices in online survey methodology to ensure clarity, ease of use, and ethical data

collection procedures (Dillman et al., 2014; Sue & Ritter, 2012), in addition to adhering to the University of Washington research standards.

Qualitative data were gathered through culturally responsive weekly focus group sessions conducted virtually (with optional in-person support gatherings), facilitated to increase family understanding of IEPs, BIPS, and procedural safeguards while fostering engaged and restorative communication between families and schools. Virtual formats were selected to align with participant preferences and to reduce barriers related to transportation, scheduling, and accessibility. These sessions provided structured opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences, respond to preliminary findings, and offer feedback on emerging themes.

Consistent with CBPR principles, qualitative sessions emphasized respectful listening, shared meaning-making, and participant validation of interpretations. This approach ensured that findings were grounded in the local context and reflected participants' lived experiences rather than solely the researcher's interpretation (Israel et al., 2010; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

The goal of the analysis was to identify patterns, amplify lived experiences, and translate findings into strategies for equitable, culturally grounded family engagement and student support. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize participant demographics and response patterns. Likert-scale items were analyzed to identify trends and overall perceptions across participants.

Data was collected through two primary methods: Surveys and Questionnaires, and Telephone Interviews. The questionnaire was distributed electronically using Google Forms. Participant responses were automatically recorded in written form and compiled into a dataset for analysis. Because responses were submitted electronically, no transcription was required. Three participants engaged in telephone interviews using the same questions included in the

survey instrument. Interviews were not audio recorded. Instead, the researcher documented detailed written notes during each call. Notes were reviewed immediately following each interview to ensure completeness and accuracy before being incorporated into the overall dataset. All qualitative responses from surveys, questionnaires, and telephone interviews were combined into a single dataset for analysis.

Qualitative data from closed-ended survey responses and telephone interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The analysis followed a six-phase process:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

As the principal investigator, I reviewed all responses multiple times to support immersion in the data. Initial codes were generated inductively from participant responses. Codes were then organized into broader categories and refined into themes that reflected shared patterns across participants' experiences. Closed-response survey items were analyzed descriptively to supplement qualitative findings and provide contextual understanding of participant perspectives.

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to provide a holistic understanding of participant experiences. Survey results informed the focus of qualitative discussions, while qualitative findings provided depth and context to quantitative trends. This

integration strengthened the overall rigor of the study and supported the use of participant-centered interpretations.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies employed in the study. Guided by a mixed-methods, community-based participatory research framework, the methodology integrated quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focus groups and listening sessions to center the perspectives of families and other stakeholders in special education. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality protections, were addressed to ensure responsible and respectful engagement with participants. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for a comprehensive examination of participants' experiences while supporting triangulation and credibility of the findings. The procedures outlined in this chapter provided a systematic and rigorous approach to data collection and analysis.



## Chapter 4: Findings

This study examined how culturally responsive and restorative approaches within special education can better support Native American students with disabilities while strengthening relationships between schools and families. Native American students remain disproportionately represented in special education programs across the United States. While Native Americans represent approximately 2.6% of the U.S. population, they account for nearly 19% of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Brewer, 2024). This disparity raises concerns about inequities in identification, placement, disciplinary practices, and access to culturally responsive supports.

Collins (2024) believes that students whose cultural identities and experiences are not reflected in dominant school structures may face systemic barriers within the special education system, including misidentification, restrictive placements, and exclusionary discipline practices. These inequities can negatively affect student engagement, academic outcomes, and relationships between schools and families. This study explored the experiences and perspectives of families, educators, and school leaders to better understand how culturally responsive and restorative approaches may improve support systems for Native American students with disabilities.

Data for this study were collected using qualitative methods to capture participants' experiences and perspectives regarding special education processes, disciplinary practices, and family-school partnerships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with families of Native American students receiving special education services, special education teachers, and school administrators. These interviews explored participants' experiences navigating special education systems, their perceptions of culturally responsive practices, and their perspectives on family

engagement.

Additional data sources included document analysis of relevant materials such as individualized education programs (IEPs), school or district policies related to special education and discipline, and other institutional documents that influence decision-making processes. These data sources provided contextual insight into how students are identified, supported, and disciplined within the school system. As Lodi et al. (2022) mentioned, current zero-tolerance policies represent systems that use punitive and exclusionary practices (e.g., suspensions) to control and manage student behavior. These policies very often aggravate disciplinary problems and exacerbate racial, gender, and socioeconomic status disparities, underlining the need for alternative approaches to the management of school discipline, as well as approaches that aim at promoting well-being in the whole school community.

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes across participant responses and supporting documents.

## **Review of Research Methods**

### **Participants**

The study included a total of 43 participants, comprising 30 online questionnaires, 10 online surveys, and 3 telephone interviews. All participants were parents or caregivers of a child with a disability who was receiving special education services.

Participants were recruited through social media, local schools, community organizations, parent advocacy groups, and special education support networks. Recruitment strategies included flyers, emails, school newsletters, social media posts, and direct outreach at school and community events. Recruitment occurred over a 2–3-month period in both in-person and virtual settings. In-person recruitment took place at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, parent nights, and school resource fairs, while virtual recruitment was conducted via

email lists and social media platforms. As a doctoral student, I was solely responsible for recruitment, participant screening, and obtaining informed consent. Recruitment materials included a flyer (see Appendix C), an initial contact script for email or verbal outreach (see Appendix B), and an interest and screening process that incorporated verbally informed consent (see Appendix A). These materials were used to identify, screen, and enroll eligible participants.

Individuals who expressed interest first provided verbal or electronic consent to complete eligibility screening questions, which were administered via telephone or virtual platforms prior to participation. Eligible participants were then invited to complete a survey (see Appendix D), which took approximately 15–20 minutes, and/or a questionnaire (see Appendix E). Participants also had the option to engage in an interview or focus group (see Appendix F), lasting approximately 30–60 minutes, to share their experiences with special education services.

All study activities were conducted online, via telephone, or in community-based settings at times convenient for participants. A subset of participants was invited to participate in an optional follow-up session to provide additional insights. Participation was voluntary, and all data was kept confidential.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

### ***Social Media Survey***

The social media survey collected participants' experiences and perspectives related to culturally responsive and restorative practices in special education. It included demographic questions, such as role (e.g., caregiver, educator), relationship to the student, and race. Participants were asked about their awareness of culturally responsive practices, perceptions of equity and inclusion, and suggestions for improvement. Personal experiences and challenges were shared, but participants were not asked to provide identifying information unless

voluntarily disclosed.

### ***Survey Research Questionnaire***

The survey instrument contained questions aligned with the study's objectives, including participant background, observations of culturally responsive practices, perceived strengths and gaps in special education, and recommendations for enhancing family engagement.

### ***Interview Research Questionnaire***

Participants were invited to complete an interview (Appendix F) designed to center and honor their lived experiences. The interview focused on gathering insights to inform culturally responsive, restorative, and empowering practices that support families and students across communities. Participation was anonymous, and responses were used to inform the study's objectives.

## **Data Analysis Process**

### **Overview of Data Sources**

This study utilized a mixed-methods design to center caregiver voices in special education, drawing from three complementary data sources:

- Three in-depth interviews (n = 3) capturing rich, lived experiences of caregivers navigating special education systems
- A structured questionnaire (n = 10) providing descriptive insights into caregiver perceptions across key domains such as communication, cultural responsiveness, and decision-making
- A social media-based survey (n = 30) offering broader trend data related to caregiver knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of school engagement

All participants across the three data sources identified as caregivers of children receiving

special education services and consented to participate in the study.

The inclusion of the social media survey expanded the dataset by providing broader community-level perspectives, particularly related to understanding of rights, communication experiences, and perceptions of respect and cultural responsiveness. While the questionnaire and interviews offer more detailed, and context-rich responses, the social media survey contributes quantitative breadth, allowing for comparison and validation of emerging patterns.

Together, these three data sources provide a comprehensive understanding of caregiver experiences by combining:

- Depth (interviews)
- Structured perception data (questionnaire)
- Broad community trends (social media survey)

This triangulated approach strengthens the credibility of the findings by identifying consistent patterns across multiple forms of data, while also highlighting areas of variation in caregiver experiences.

### **Qualitative Thematic Analysis**

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and closed-ended survey responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method was selected because it allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes across participants' narratives, highlighting both shared experiences and unique perspectives, while also emphasizing the researcher's active role in meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

### **Thematic Development**

Recurring patterns were analyzed and synthesized into overarching themes that represented participants' experiences with culturally responsive and restorative practices in

special education. Themes were developed inductively from the data, remaining grounded in participants' narratives.

## **Caregiver Interviews**

### ***Theme 1: Families' Experiences Navigating the Special Education System***

To examine caregiver experiences in special education systems, Likert-scale responses from three interviews were analyzed across 10 key indicators related to communication, collaboration, cultural responsiveness, and disciplinary practices. Overall, findings reveal consistently low perceptions of caregiver inclusion and partnership. As shown in Figure 1, the lowest average ratings were observed in:

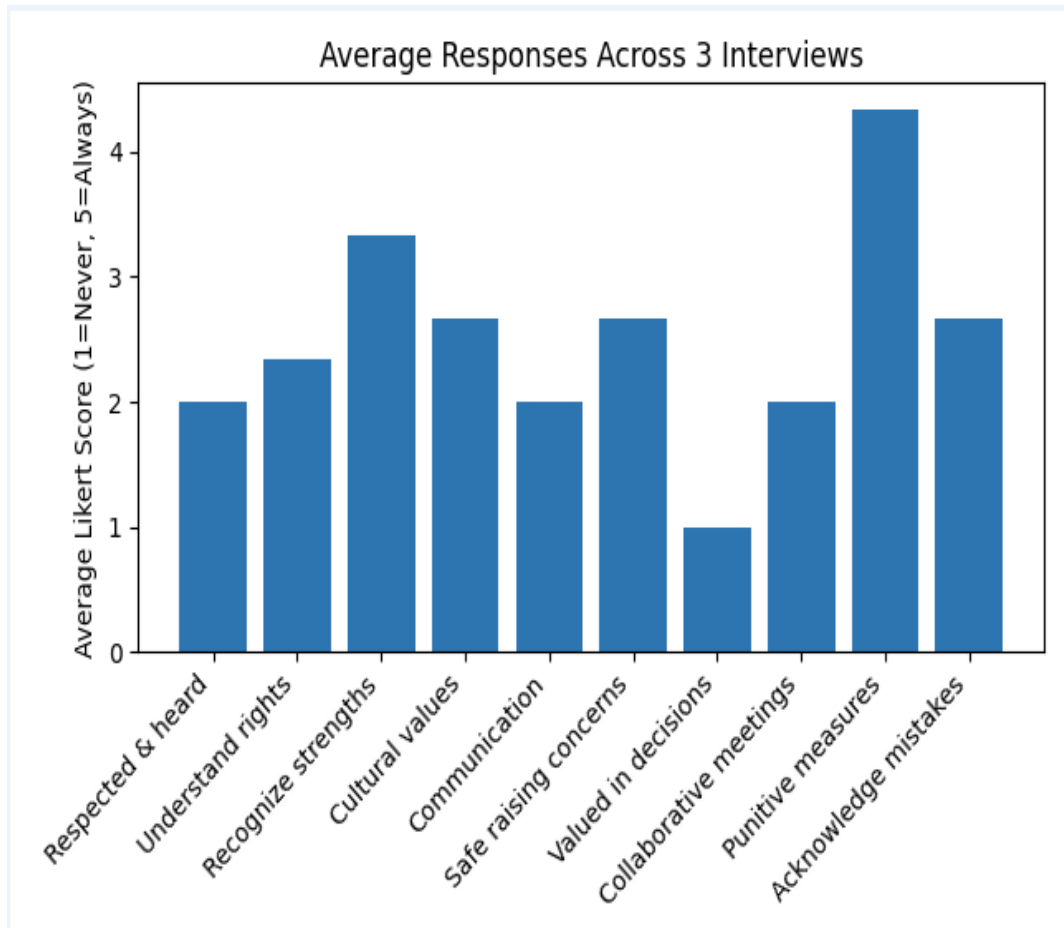
- Feeling valued in decision-making (M = 1.0)
- Communication with school staff (M = 2.0)
- Collaboration in meetings (M = 2.0)

These findings suggest that caregivers across all three interviews experienced limited engagement as equitable partners in their child's education. Similarly, caregivers reported low levels of trust and relational safety. Ratings for feeling respected and heard (M = 2.0) and feeling safe raising concerns (M = 2.67) indicate inconsistent and often negative interactions with school personnel.

In contrast, the highest average score was observed for punitive disciplinary measures (M = 4.33), indicating that caregivers frequently experienced or observed exclusionary or punitive responses to disability-related behaviors. This pattern is especially significant given the study's focus on restorative and trauma-informed practices.

**Figure 1**

*Average Caregiver Perceptions of Special Education Experiences Across Three Interviews*



*Note.* Figure 1 displays the average Likert-scale responses across three caregiver interviews (N = 3). Response options ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Lower scores indicate more negative experiences. Items related to communication, collaboration, and inclusion in decision-making showed consistently low ratings, while reports of punitive measures were notably high.

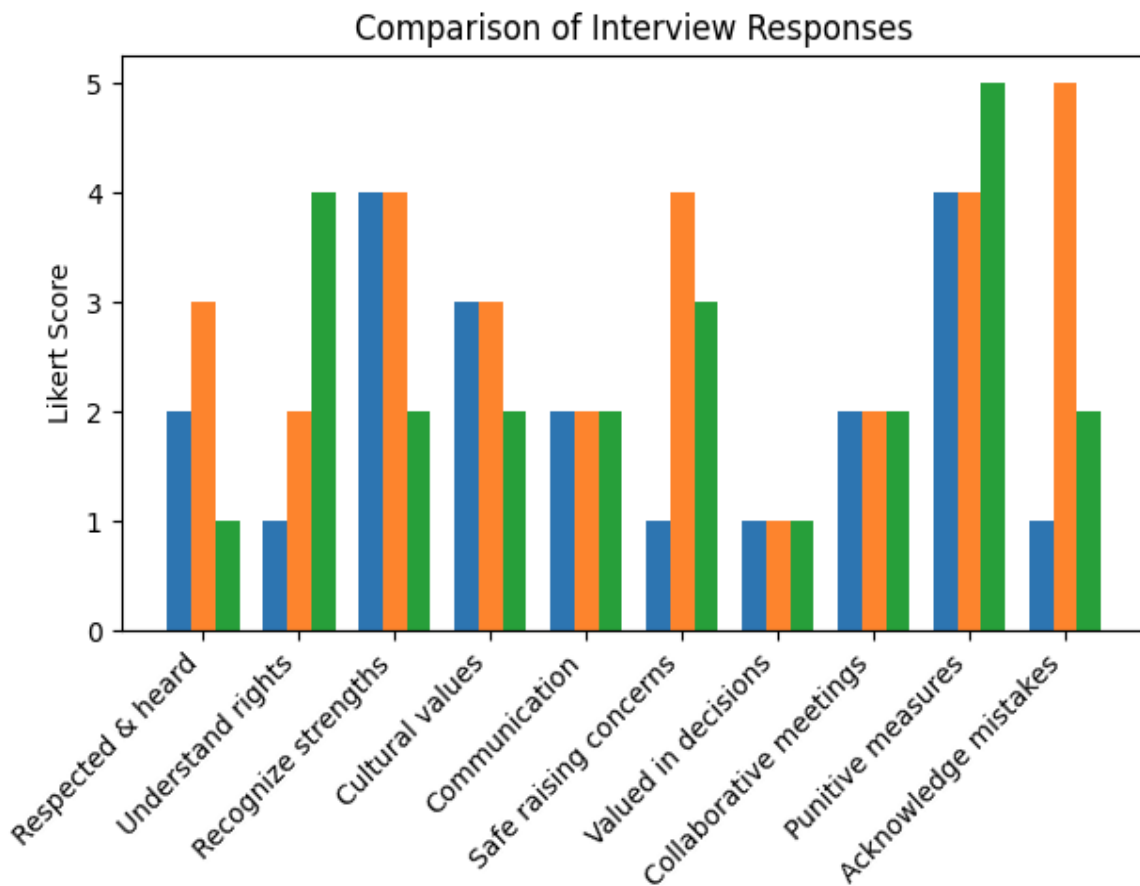
Figure 2 further illustrates cross-case consistency and variation among participants. While some variability was noted in understanding of special education rights (ranging from Never to Often) and feelings of safety (Never to Often), several patterns were consistent across all three interviews:

- All caregivers reported never feeling like valued partners in decision-making
- All reported rarely experiencing collaborative meetings
- All reported frequent use of punitive measures

These findings point to systemic, rather than individual, challenges in fostering inclusive, culturally responsive, and family-centered special education environments.

**Figure 2**

*Comparison of Caregiver Responses Across Three Interview Participants*



*Note.* Figure 2 presents individual Likert-scale responses for each caregiver across 10 interview questions. Variation is evident in areas such as understanding of rights and feelings of safety when raising concerns; however, consistent patterns emerge in low perceptions of collaboration and inclusion in decision-making, as well as high reports of punitive disciplinary practices.

## Social Media Survey

Survey data collected from 30 respondents (Table 1) indicate that all participants identified as adults, consented to participate, and were caregivers of children receiving special education services. Notably, 100% of respondents reported understanding their rights under FAPE and IDEA, suggesting a high level of procedural awareness among participants.

**Table 1**

*Social Media Survey Results: Caregiver Perspectives on Special Education (N = 30)*

Survey Question	Total Responses (n)	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Are you 18 years of age or older?	30	30 (100%)	0 (0%)
Consent to participate in study	30	30 (100%)	0 (0%)
Parent/caregiver of child in special education	30	30 (100%)	0 (0%)
Understand FAPE, IDEA, and rights/responsibilities	30	30 (100%)	0 (0%)
Feel respected by school staff	27	18 (66.7%)	9 (33.3%)
Communication is encouraged and welcomed (IEP)	27	18 (66.7%)	9 (33.3%)
Cultural perspectives respected and acknowledged	28	20 (71.4%)	8 (28.6%)

*Note.* Percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents for each individual question. Not all participants responded to every item.

Despite this reported understanding, findings reveal inconsistencies in relational experiences with school systems. Approximately one-third of respondents (33.3%) reported not feeling respected by school staff, and an equal proportion indicated that communication regarding their child's IEP was neither consistently encouraged nor well received.

While most participants (71.4%) reported that their cultural perspectives were respected, nearly one-third (28.6%) indicated that their cultural identities were not adequately acknowledged, pointing to ongoing gaps in culturally responsive practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that knowledge of rights does not necessarily translate into equitable or affirming experiences, reinforcing the need for systemic shifts toward relational, culturally grounded, and restorative approaches in special education.

### Survey Research Questionnaire

A total of 10 caregivers (Table 2) participated in the questionnaire. All respondents were adults, consented to participate, and identified as caregivers of children receiving special education services. The sample included a balanced gender distribution among students and representation across grade levels, with the largest group in high school (40%). Notably, 40% of participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, aligning with the study’s focus on elevating Indigenous family voices.

**Table 2**

*Survey Research Questionnaire: Participant Demographics (Questionnaire Respondents, N = 10)*

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age (18+)	Yes	10	100%
Consent Provided	Yes	10	100%
Caregiver Status	Yes	10	100%
Student Gender	Male	5	50%
	Female	5	50%
Student Grade Level	Preschool/Pre-K	1	10%
	K–2 (Early Elementary)	1	10%
	3–5 (Upper Elementary)	2	20%
	6–8 (Middle School)	2	20%
	9–12 (High School)	4	40%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/Alaska Native	4	40%
	White	5	50%
	Prefer not to say	1	10%

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Survey Question	Response Option	n	%
Feel respected and heard	Sometimes	8	80%
	Always	2	20%
Understand rights (IEP, IDEA, etc.)	Yes	1	10%
	Somewhat	6	60%
	No	3	30%
Recognized as a partner	Yes	5	50%
	Sometimes	4	40%
	No	1	10%
Cultural values recognized	Not at all	2	20%
	Slightly	2	20%
	Somewhat	4	40%
	Completely	2	20%
Communication (IEP process)	Rarely	1	10%
	Sometimes	4	40%
	Often	3	30%
	Always	2	20%
Feel safe raising concerns	Yes	4	40%
	Sometimes	6	60%
Valued in decision-making	Yes	3	30%
	Sometimes	6	60%
	No	1	10%
Survey Question	Response Option	n	%
Meetings are collaborative	Yes	1	10%
	Sometimes	1	10%
	No/Not reported	8	80%
Punitive measures observed	Yes	1	10%
	No	1	10%
	Not reported	8	80%
Staff acknowledge mistakes	Often	1	10%
	Sometimes	1	10%
	Rarely	1	10%
	Not reported	7	70%
Area of Need	Category	n	%
Eligibility Determination		1	10%
All Areas of Special Education		1	10%

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100% in some cases due to rounding or missing responses.

Findings indicate moderate but inconsistent levels of relational trust and engagement

within special education systems. While 80% of participants reported *sometimes* feeling respected and heard, only 20% reported *always* having this experience, suggesting that positive interactions are not consistently sustained.

Understanding of procedural rights emerged as a key area of concern. Only 10% of participants reported fully understanding their rights under IDEA, while 60% indicated only partial understanding, and 30% reported no understanding. This highlights a critical gap between access to services and access to meaningful, informed participation.

Caregiver inclusion in decision-making processes also reflected limitations. Although 30% of participants reported feeling valued, the majority (60%) indicated only *sometimes*, and 10% reported not feeling valued at all. Similarly, only 10% of participants described meetings as collaborative, suggesting that shared decision-making remains limited in practice.

Cultural responsiveness findings further reflect partial inclusion. While 60% of participants reported that their cultural values were at least somewhat recognized, 40% indicated minimal or no recognition, underscoring ongoing gaps in culturally responsive practice. Communication patterns showed moderate variability, with most participants reporting experiences ranging from *sometimes* to *often*, yet very few indicating consistently strong communication. Additionally, only 40% of participants reported feeling fully safe when raising concerns, while 60% reported only partial safety, suggesting potential barriers related to trust and power dynamics.

Overall, these findings point to systemic inconsistencies in relational, cultural, and collaborative practices, reinforcing the need for restorative, family-centered, and culturally grounded approaches within special education systems.

## ***Theme 2: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Support***

Swelam (2020) noted that ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are White, and most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities. Additionally, many received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay et al., 2003). As a result, many White educators have not acquired the experiential or educational background necessary to effectively serve the growing diversity of their students.

Adopting a communal responsibility approach is essential for educators to learn first-hand from students and families about community traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices. Learning and teaching occur as a mutual process, organically developing through the relationships that are built. By listening to community stories and integrating them as fundamental teaching values, educators can foster a culture in which more stories are shared and respected.

Change must begin with educators before it can realistically take place with students. Building educators' cultural competence, the ability to form authentic and effective relationships across differences is critical. Young people, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, are highly sensitive to authenticity. Educators must transform instructional practices to become more responsive to diversity, which includes examining pedagogy, curriculum, expectations, and interaction patterns with students. It also requires analyzing outcome data and developing new strategies to reach students who are not benefiting from current instructional approaches. For school leaders, this often entails recognizing the limits of their own knowledge and skills and collaborating with teachers as co-learners to transform classroom practices.

Understanding the history of Indian education and how programs are positioned within the district is essential for contextualizing educational practices. Such awareness illuminates the

pressures faced by Indigenous educators, students, and families and highlights the ways Indigenous educational communities continually contest marginalization and assert their own priorities (Jacob & RunningHawk Johnson, 2019).

### ***Theme 3: The Importance of Relationships and Trust Between Schools and Families***

Swelam (2021) emphasized that what matters to Indigenous peoples in education is that children, youth, adults, and Elders have the opportunity to develop their gifts in a respectful space. This includes ensuring that all community members—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—can contribute to society while maintaining physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual balance. The ability to give and to be well comes from integration of the sacred and the secular. Education in this context involves fostering identity, facilitating well-being, connecting to land, honoring language, incorporating teachings, and recognizing the inherent right to self-determination (Toulouse, 2016).

Ismail and Cazden (as cited in Toulouse, 2016) summarized key concepts that reflect the educational interconnections between Francophone and Indigenous communities. These include sharing influence, interpersonal relationships, raising awareness and taking action, mobilizing, creating meaning, and making learning real and relevant to the present moment. These components are vital to Indigenous learner success. The classroom experience for students should begin with a shared vision of what counts as learning. This approach ensures that the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains of holistic education (Figure 3) are respected and realized.

Children and youth require safe spaces that affirm their diversity and identity, where cultural, linguistic, and affirming models support them. Self-realization and being valued for knowledge and skills are key tenets of Francophone communities, and this principle is also

central to Indigenous education. Additionally, self-determination and understanding the historical and systemic forces shaping their communities are essential determinants of student success in Indigenous contexts.

**Figure 3**

*Pedagogy Honoring Francophone and Indigenous Learners*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Sharing Influence</b>	Decisions about learning must reflect the full range of diverse points of view.
<b>Interpersonal Relationships</b>	A healthy environment allows students to make suggestions and express feelings about language and culture.
<b>Raising Awareness and Taking Action</b>	Understand the issues that shape our lives and become engaged to claim our rightful place in society.
<b>Mobilizing</b>	Mobilizing is a process that triggers a person’s self-determination and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.
<b>Creating Meaning</b>	To bring balance to the experiences of young people, we need to offer strong cultural models.
<b>Making Learning Real &amp; Relevant to the Present Moment</b>	Value the prior knowledge and skills of students and educators to assist them on the path to self-realization.

*Note.* Adapted from Ismail and Cazden (as cited in Toulouse, 2016). This table summarizes key

concepts reflecting the interconnections between Francophone and Indigenous communities and highlights pedagogical approaches that honor diversity, self-determination, and holistic learning.

***Theme 4: Opportunities for Culturally Responsive and Restorative Practices***

Indigenous conceptions of education emphasize the needs of the whole student as the foundational consideration and guiding principle for student achievement. What matters to

Indigenous peoples is that each community member is nurtured and challenged in respectful ways. Teaching and learning occur through the honoring of culture, teachings, languages, and the gifts of each Nation (Toulouse, 2016; Zitzer-Comfort, 2008).

It is critical to recognize that this vision is influenced by interconnected forces within the current school system, including the classroom environment, the school as an institution, the broader community (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), and the state of the earth (global context). Each of these areas must be considered to align aspects of the Indigenous worldview with inclusive definitions of quality learning environments (Toulouse, 2016).

The conditions in classrooms that support Indigenous learners are varied, but the following factors, adapted from the *Draft Competencies and Skills* (n.d., as cited in Toulouse, 2016), capture essential elements for creating inclusive spaces:

- Classrooms are welcoming, and student voice and experiences are recognized as integral to the construction of active knowledge.
- Expectations for students are high, realistic, flexible, and supported by teachers, peers, and other critical collaborators.
- Classroom activities are culturally relevant, differentiated, and promote exploration, imagination, and creative action.
- Student learning is expressed in multiple forms that honor diversity and encourage students to experiment with a variety of methods.

In conclusion, student achievement should be reconceptualized to include the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of the whole person. This holistic view is supported by examining respectful classroom conditions and competencies while considering the broader influences of the school, community, and global context.

## Summary of Findings

To integrate findings across data sources, a joint display was developed to examine points of convergence, divergence, and expansion between interview data, questionnaire responses, and social media survey results. As shown in Table 3, several themes emerged across datasets, particularly related to communication, decision-making, and caregiver inclusion, while areas such as understanding of rights and cultural responsiveness revealed important variation depending on the depth and format of data collection.

**Table 3**

*Joint Display of Integrated Findings Across Interviews, Questionnaire, and Social Media Survey*

Theme	Interviews (n = 3)	Questionnaire (n = 10)	Social Media Survey (n = 30)	Integrated Interpretation
Feeling Respected & Heard	Rarely to Never reported by most participants	80% <i>Sometimes</i> , 20% <i>Always</i>	66.7% Yes, 33.3% No	Caregivers report inconsistent experiences of respect; while some positive interactions exist, many feel unheard or only occasionally valued.
Understanding Rights (IEP, IDEA, FAPE)	Ranged from <i>Never</i> to <i>Often</i> (high variability)	10% Yes, 60% Somewhat, 30% No	100% Yes	Awareness appears high at the surface level (survey), but deeper data (questionnaire/interviews) reveal gaps in true understanding and application.
Recognition as a Partner	Often not recognized; decision-making rated <i>Never</i> across all	50% Yes, 40% <i>Sometimes</i> , 10% No	Not directly measured	Caregivers are inconsistently treated as partners; structural inclusion does not equate to authentic engagement.

Theme	Interviews (n = 3)	Questionnaire (n = 10)	Social Media Survey (n = 30)	Integrated Interpretation
Cultural Responsiveness	Rarely to Sometimes recognized	40% minimal, 40% somewhat, 20% completely	71.4% Yes, 28.6% No	Cultural inclusion is uneven; broader survey responses suggest more positive perceptions, but deeper data highlight gaps and inconsistencies.
Communication with School Staff	Consistently <i>Rarely</i> across all interviews	Majority <i>Sometimes–Often</i>	66.7% Yes, 33.3% No	Communication exists but is not consistently experienced as transparent, respectful, or meaningful.
Safety in Raising Concerns	Never to Sometimes	40% Yes, 60% Sometimes	Not directly measured	Many caregivers do not feel fully safe engaging with schools, indicating relational trust barriers.
Decision-Making Inclusion	100% reported <i>Never</i> feeling valued	30% Yes, 60% Sometimes, 10% No	Not directly measured	Strong convergence showing limited shared decision-making power across systems.
Collaboration in Meetings	Consistently <i>Rarely</i>	Only 10% Yes	Not directly measured	Meetings may be procedural rather than collaborative, limiting caregiver voice and influence.
Punitive Practices	Often to Always across all interviews	Limited reporting	Present but limited data	Interviews reveal strong evidence of punitive approaches, suggesting deeper systemic issues not fully captured in surveys.

Theme	Interviews (n = 3)	Questionnaire (n = 10)	Social Media Survey (n = 30)	Integrated Interpretation
System Accountability (Acknowledging Mistakes)	Rarely to Never	Mixed but limited responses	Not directly measured	Systems are inconsistently accountable, contributing to mistrust and disengagement.

Note. This joint display integrates qualitative interview data (n = 3) with quantitative questionnaire (n = 10) and social media survey (n = 30) results. Themes were developed through cross-data analysis to identify convergence, divergence, and expansion across datasets.

Pak and Parsons (2020) share that students who face intersectional systems of oppression, such as being labeled as having “specific learning disabilities” as well as being labeled “Black,” “low-income,” etc., will face differential obstacles to learning in standards-based classrooms. For one, they may find the interventions, accommodations, or modifications that comprise the limited menu of differentiation options to be irrelevant to their lives. Moreover, teachers’ perceptions of these students likely impact the extent to which they believe students can master the academic content in inclusive classrooms. Educators faced with the task of including students with different racial and class backgrounds than their own must consider the ways in which implicit biases influence how differentiation occurs.

The findings of this study highlight the critical importance of culturally responsive and restorative practices in supporting diverse learners, particularly Indigenous students. Four overarching themes emerged from the data:

1. Barriers to Culturally Responsive Support – Educators often lack the experiential and educational background necessary to meet the needs of diverse students, emphasizing

- the need for intentional development of cultural competence and authentic relationships with students and families.
2. The Importance of Relationships and Trust Between Schools and Families – Holistic, respectful engagement between schools and communities is essential. When students, families, and educators collaborate within safe and affirming spaces, learning is enriched across physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains.
  3. Opportunities for Culturally Responsive and Restorative Practices – Effective teaching requires honoring culture, language, and community knowledge. Inclusive classrooms recognize student voice, foster high and flexible expectations, and allow learning to occur through culturally relevant, differentiated, and creative experiences.
  4. Pedagogical Principles Supporting Indigenous Learners. Educational practices that emphasize sharing influence, mobilizing, raising awareness, creating meaning, and making learning relevant contribute to self-realization and student empowerment, reinforcing holistic and community-centered approaches.

Collectively, these findings underscore the necessity of a relational, culturally grounded approach to education, one that centers the whole student and the broader community context. These themes demonstrate both the challenges faced in implementing culturally responsive practices and the potential pathways for fostering more equitable and empowering educational experiences. Kalyanpur et al. (2000) explain that “... realisation of this vision of collaborative relationships and family-centered practice continues to remain elusive, particularly for low-income and culturally diverse families” (p. 119). “Attempting to explain this failure, many scholars have suggested that much of the fault lies in the implementation of the mandate” (Kalyanpur et al., 2000, p. 19).

The statement by Kalyanpur et al. (2000) that “much of the fault lies in the implementation of the mandate” refers to the implementation of federal special education law, particularly the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its requirements for equitable parent participation, nondiscriminatory evaluation, and appropriate educational placement for students with disabilities. These mandates were designed to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and that families are included as equal partners in decision-making processes.

However, scholars argue that although the mandate is grounded in principles of equity and inclusion, its implementation is often filtered through dominant Western, middle-class assumptions about communication, advocacy, and educational decision-making. For example, Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) highlight that IDEA’s emphasis on “equity” and “parent participation” assumes that all families have equal access to advocacy behaviors and share the same cultural expectations of individual rights, self-advocacy, and institutional engagement. This creates a disconnect for culturally and linguistically diverse families, whose ways of interacting with schools may not align with these assumptions.

This implementation gap has been widely discussed in special education scholarship. Researchers such as Harry (2008) and Klingner et al. (2005) argue that disproportionality and inequitable placement practices are not primarily failures of intent, but rather failures in how policies are enacted within culturally unresponsive systems. Similarly, Alfredo J. Artiles emphasizes that special education systems often reproduce inequities when policy implementation does not account for cultural and structural differences in families’ access to power, language, and institutional knowledge.

For instance, perceived barriers to collaboration include (a) little effort on the part of

professionals to seek families' input when making decisions about their child's education (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995); (b) scheduling meetings at times inconvenient for parents (Linan-Thompson & Jean, 1997); and (c) conveying information about services and parents' rights through written materials in English higher than a fifth-grade reading level to families with limited literacy skills (Harry, 1992b; Leung, 1996; Linan-Thompson & Jean, 1997) or to non-English-speaking immigrants who may not be literate even in their native language (Weiss & Coyne, 1997). Kalyanpur et al., 2000, p. 120)

This study's findings illuminate the complex interplay between educator practices, school-community relationships, and culturally grounded approaches that support Indigenous learners. These themes highlight both systemic and individual-level barriers, as well as practical strategies and pedagogical principles that promote equity, trust, and holistic student development.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to examine caregiver experiences within special education systems and to explore how restorative and culturally responsive approaches can better support families navigating these systems. Centering the voices of caregivers, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, this study sought to identify systemic barriers and opportunities for transformation. Using a mixed-methods design, data was collected through interviews (n = 3), a questionnaire (n = 10), and a social media survey (n = 30). This triangulated approach provided both depth and breadth, revealing patterns across relational, cultural, and structural dimensions of special education.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Findings across all three data sources revealed the following themes:

1. Caregivers experience limited inclusion in decision-making processes
2. Communication between families and schools is inconsistent and often lacks relational trust
3. Knowledge of rights does not equate to meaningful empowerment
4. Cultural responsiveness is uneven and inconsistently applied
5. Punitive and exclusionary practices remain prevalent

Together, these findings suggest that while procedural structures exist within special education, they are not consistently experienced as relational, inclusive, or empowered by caregivers. As Kalyanpur et al. (2000) explain, "... despite the legal requirement for eliciting parental input in the educational decision-making process, the greater weight given to professional expertise in the hierarchy of knowledge skews the balance of power away from

parents” (p. 129). As a result, parents are expected to know and understand what professionals know, such as the meaning of a diagnosis or a placement. They are also expected to know how to access this knowledge, for instance, by exercising their right to be informed. However, many parents may be denied access to professional knowledge due to a lack of cultural capital and a lack of awareness of advocacy. Further, families whose cultural beliefs may offer opposing points of view tend to be labeled as non-compliant or to be perceived as having deficits. For example, families from low socioeconomic backgrounds with limited resources are often unfairly situated within a system heavily weighted in favor of professional access to resources.

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research**

Table 4 synthesizes the Holistic Model of an Indigenous Quality Learning Environment (Toulouse, 2016) and translates its core principles into implications for educational practice, policy, and future research. Grounded in relational, culturally responsive, and restorative approaches, the table emphasizes the importance of supporting Indigenous and historically marginalized families within special education systems. In practice, the model highlights the need for educators to move beyond procedural compliance toward relationship-centered approaches that prioritize trust, cultural humility, and meaningful family engagement. This includes integrating culturally sustaining pedagogies, honoring Indigenous ways of knowing, and ensuring that families and communities are active participants in decision-making processes related to student learning and support.

At the policy level, the implications call for systemic reform to address structural inequities embedded within special education systems. This includes revising identification, referral, and placement processes to reduce disproportionality, as well as embedding culturally responsive and restorative frameworks into schoolwide discipline and service delivery systems.

Policies must also support shared power between schools, families, and communities, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives are meaningfully included in educational governance and decision-making structures.

For future research, Table 4 identifies the need for continued investigation into how culturally responsive and relational practices influence student outcomes, family engagement, and equity in special education. Research should also explore how educators enact cultural humility across diverse contexts and how such practices impact patterns of disproportionality in identification and discipline. In addition, participatory and community-based methodologies are recommended to ensure that Indigenous families and communities are positioned as partners in knowledge creation rather than as subjects of study, thereby aligning research practices with Indigenous relational and holistic epistemologies.

Overall, Table 4 underscores that advancing equity in special education requires integrated change across classroom practice, policy systems, and research approaches, all grounded in respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, relational accountability, and systemic transformation.

**Table 4**

**Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research Based on the Holistic Model of an Indigenous Quality Learning Environment**

*Adapted from Toulouse (2016), Holistic Model of an Indigenous Quality Learning Environment.*

Key Finding	Implications for Practice	Implications for Policy	Implications for Future Research
Limited inclusion in decision-making	Facilitate shared decision-making in IEPs and school processes; Recognize caregivers as experts	Strengthen accountability for family engagement- Embed family-centered approaches in policy	Explore strategies to consistently involve caregivers in decision-making- Examine impact on student and family outcomes

Key Finding	Implications for Practice	Implications for Policy	Implications for Future Research
Inconsistent communication / lack of relational trust	Build safe, welcoming environments- Practice active listening and transparent communication	Policies should require meaningful family communication and relationship-building	Study methods to foster relational trust between families and schools
Knowledge of rights does not equal empowerment	Provide relational support and actionable guidance; Create opportunities for meaningful participation	Ensure policies support not just awareness of rights, but meaningful engagement	Examine how empowerment interventions influence participation and outcomes
Uneven cultural responsiveness	Honor family cultural values and identities- Incorporate community knowledge- Provide cultural humility training	Require cultural responsiveness and accountability in schools	Investigate how culturally grounded practices affect student engagement and success
Persistence of punitive practices	Implement restorative and trauma-informed approaches- Use strength-based behavior strategies	Align disciplinary policies with restorative frameworks- Reduce exclusionary practices	Evaluate long-term outcomes of restorative approaches for students and families

### **Conclusion**

A systems approach to school improvement emphasizes the importance of examining how social factors such as race, class, age, ability, and language interact with institutional structures to shape educational outcomes. Bal et al. (2012) argue that these interconnected dynamics reveal how inequities are produced and maintained within schools, influencing both identification and placement practices as well as broader student experiences. By critically analyzing these relationships, educators and leaders can better understand how policies and practices become routinized in ways that reinforce power and privilege. As Bal et al. (2012) note, “in understanding these dynamics, it is possible to affect the policies and practices that

routinize activity in order to balance the regimes of power and privilege with those of social justice, access, and equity” (p. 5). This perspective highlights the potential for systemic change when schools intentionally address the structural and cultural forces that shape student outcomes. Making systemic change that lasts over time and exists at scale requires that the dynamics within a system be made explicit and carefully considered as reform is crafted and carried out. Accordingly, local Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) implementers need to build sustained systems-level support (outside-in) to achieve their organizational goal-related school behaviors and change (inside-out).

This study highlights critical gaps in how special education systems engage with families. While formal structures for inclusion may exist, they are not consistently seen as meaningful, equitable, or culturally responsive. At its core, this study calls for a reimagining of special education as a space grounded in relationship, respect, shared power, and cultural humility. Cultural humility extends beyond awareness of cultural differences; it requires an ongoing commitment to self-reflection, recognition of power imbalances, and accountability in relationships with families and communities. Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) conceptualize cultural humility as a lifelong process that emphasizes openness, mutual learning, and the intentional redistribution of power in professional relationships. Within special education, this means positioning families as equal partners whose knowledge and lived experiences are essential to decision-making processes.

Culturally responsive practice is deeply aligned with cultural humility, as both require educators to critically examine their own assumptions and adapt their practices to better serve diverse learners. As Cartledge and Kourea (2008) emphasize, effective instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly those with or at risk for disabilities, requires

educators to meaningfully incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into classroom practices and interactions. However, without a foundation of cultural humility, such efforts risk becoming superficial or performative. Cultural humility ensures that responsiveness is not reduced to a set of strategies, but instead becomes an ongoing, relational practice grounded in respect and reciprocity.

Special education systems must therefore shift from procedural compliance toward relational, culturally responsive, and restorative approaches that actively address historical and systemic inequities. This includes reexamining policies and practices that marginalize families, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and creating structures that genuinely invite shared decision-making. Centering families' voices fosters more equitable, empowering, and community-centered educational experiences. By embedding cultural humility into practice and embracing restorative approaches, educational systems can move beyond compliance-driven models and transform into spaces that not only serve students but also authentically support and uplift the communities to which they belong.

The model presented in Figure 4 illustrates key considerations that promote balanced conditions for student learning, emphasizing holism, diversity, and engagement within Indigenous education contexts. As adapted from Toulouse (2016), the model reflects a holistic understanding of learning that extends beyond academic achievement to include intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions of student well-being. This framing aligns closely with culturally responsive and equity-centered educational frameworks that emphasize the importance of identity, relationships, and belonging in student success.

The model's emphasis on holism is consistent with principles found in Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS), which extends traditional

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) by integrating cultural responsiveness into schoolwide behavior systems. Like Toulouse's framework, CRPBIS challenges deficit-based interpretations of student behavior by recognizing that behavior is shaped by cultural context, relational experiences, and systemic conditions rather than individual deficit alone. This alignment reinforces the importance of creating school environments that support the whole child and affirm diverse cultural ways of being.

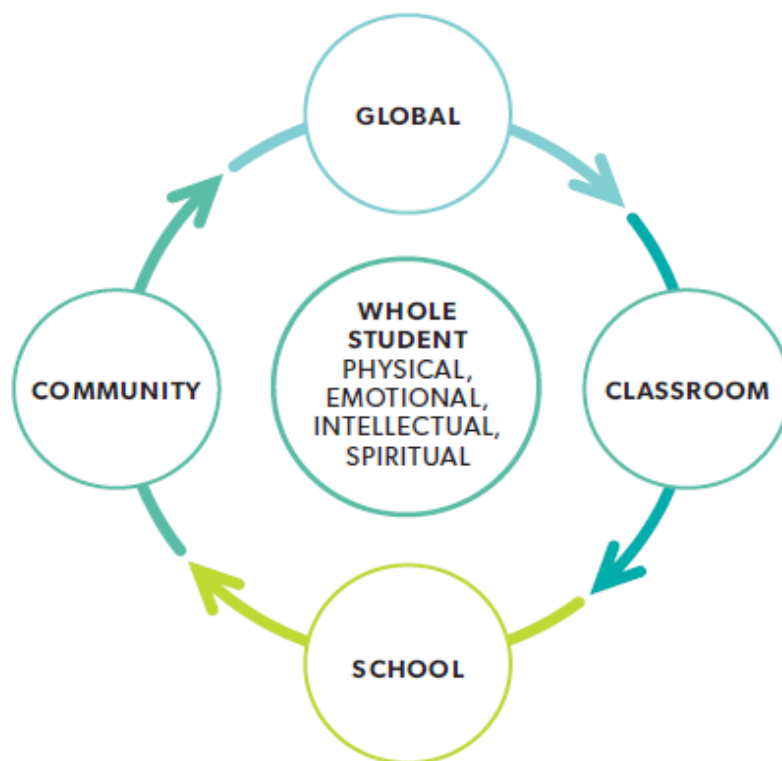
Similarly, the model's focus on diversity directly reflects the principles of cultural humility, which require educators to engage in ongoing self-reflection, recognize power imbalances, and remain open to learning from students and families. Cultural humility shifts the role of educators from experts to co-learners, emphasizing respect for community knowledge and lived experience. Within special education equity frameworks, this perspective is critical for addressing disproportionality in identification, placement, and discipline, as it challenges assumptions that often pathologize Indigenous and other marginalized students. Instead, it encourages educators to examine how institutional practices may reproduce inequities and to actively work toward more just and responsive systems.

The model's emphasis on engagement also aligns with equity-oriented special education practices that prioritize meaningful family and community partnerships. In CRPBIS and related equity frameworks, engagement is understood not simply as participation, but as authentic collaboration grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared decision-making. This mirrors Toulouse's emphasis on relational learning environments in which students, families, and communities are actively involved in shaping educational experiences. Such engagement is essential for disrupting exclusionary practices and ensuring that school systems reflect and respond to the cultural contexts of the learners they serve.

Overall, Toulouse's (2016) holistic model complements CRPBIS, cultural humility, and special education equity frameworks by collectively challenging deficit-based and compliance-driven approaches to schooling. Together, these perspectives call for educational systems that are relational, culturally sustaining, and equity-oriented, with a focus on affirming identity, redistributing power, and creating learning environments where all students can thrive.

**Figure 4**

**Holistic Model of an Indigenous Quality Learning Environment**



Note. Adapted from *What matters in Indigenous education: Implementing a vision committed to holism, diversity and engagement* (p. 15), by P. Toulouse (2016). People for Education.

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## Appendices

## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Verbal Consent**

Hello, my name is Huda Swelam. I am a doctoral student at the University of Washington.

Thank you for meeting with me today. I am doing a research study about families' experiences with special education and how schools can better support families in respectful, fair, and culturally responsive ways.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study asks about your experiences with special education services, including what has helped you and what has been difficult.

### **What participation involves**

If you agree to participate:

- I will ask you interview questions today
- You can skip any question

### **Voluntary participation**

You do not have to participate.

- It is your choice
- You can stop at any time
- There is no penalty for saying no or stopping

### **Risks and benefits**

There are no expected risks.

There may be no direct benefit to you, but your participation may help improve special education services for families in the future.

### **Privacy**

Your name will not be used in any reports.

- You will be given a number instead of your name
- Only the researcher will see your information
- All answers will be kept private

### **Questions**

You can ask questions at any time before, during, or after the interview.

## **Consent check**

Before we begin, I want to confirm:

- Do you understand what this study is about?
- Do you have any questions?
- Do you agree to participate in this interview?

If yes, thank you. We can begin.

## Appendix B

### Initial Contact Script

**Subject:** Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on Special Education Experiences

Hello,

My name is Huda Swelam, and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Washington Tacoma. I am conducting a research study about families' and educators' experiences with special education and how schools can better support families through culturally responsive and restorative practices.

I am inviting you to participate in this study. Participation may include completing a short survey and/or participating in an interview to share your experiences.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential.

To see if you are eligible to participate, please answer the following questions:

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?  
 Yes  No
2. Which best describes your role? (Check one)  
 Parent or caregiver of a child currently receiving special education services  
 Educator or school staff working with students receiving special education services  
 Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is the age of your child receiving special education services? (For parents/caregivers only)  
 5–8  9–12  13–15  16–18  Not applicable
4. Do you work directly with students who receive special education services? (For educators/school staff only)  
 Yes  No  Not applicable
5. What is your preferred language for communication?  
 English  Spanish  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me:

Email: [hudaswel@uw.edu](mailto:hudaswel@uw.edu)

Phone: 425-207-6285

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Huda Swelam

Doctoral Student, University of Washington Tacoma

## Appendix C

### Call for Participants Flyer



# Together We Rise: Family Insights Wanted!



Please take the anonymous interview by scanning the QR code.

Huda Swelam, a Muckleshoot Tribal member and doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of Washington, is researching how to create a family-centered advocacy platform for families navigating special education. She invites participants to complete a short, anonymous 14-question interview. The goal is to uplift family voices and guide culturally responsive, restorative, and empowering practices in special education.

## Appendix D

### **Social Media Survey -Empowering Families Through Restorative and Culturally Responsive Frameworks in Special Education.**

Hello, my name is Huda Swelam, I am a doctoral student with the University of Washington. I am conducting research in the hopes of building a supportive advocacy platform that helps families navigate special education. Your participation in this survey is voluntary and is truly instrumental in collecting the necessary data to aid in my research. This survey consists of 6 questions, is anonymous, and you can exit at any time.

Are you 18 years of age or older?     Yes  No

Instructions; Consent to Participate in Research -Your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Please indicate your consent by selecting one of the options below:

- Yes, I agree to participate in this research study and will complete the questionnaire.
- No, I do not agree to participate in this research study and will not complete the questionnaire.

Are you a Parent or caregiver of a child currently receiving special education services?  Yes  No

Do you understand FAPE, IDEA and your rights and responsibilities as it pertains to accommodations & modifications?

1. Yes
2. No

Do you feel respected by your child's school staff when discussing your child's special education needs?

1. Yes
2. No

Is communication between you and the school regarding your child's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) encouraged, well received, and welcomed?

1. Yes
2. No

Are your cultural perspectives respected and acknowledged within the special education process?

1. Yes
2. No

Thank you for sharing your time, your perspective, and your truth. Together, we can co-create a more culturally inclusive, and responsive special education system one where all families are heard, respected, and empowered.

Principal Investigator: Huda Swelam, University of Washington Tacoma - Doctorate in Educational Leadership Program, Doctoral Student Contact: hudaswel@uw.edu, 425-207-628

## **Appendix E**

### **Questionnaire for Families Navigating Special Education**

#### **Centering Your Voice: A Questionnaire for Families Navigating Special Education!**

Hello, my name is Huda Swelam, and I am an enrolled member of the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, a mother to three school-age daughters', and a current doctoral student at the University of Washington. My research focuses on empowering families through restorative, culturally responsive approaches within special education systems.

I invite you to take part in a short, anonymous questionnaire designed to better understand your experiences with the special education process. Your valuable input will help shape the development of a family-centered advocacy platform dedicated to supporting and guiding families as they navigate special education.

Your voice matters together; we can create a resource that truly meets the needs of families and strengthens advocacies for all students.

#### **Student's Gender**

1. Male
2. Female
3. Non-binary
4. Two-Spirit
5. Prefer to self-describe

#### **Student's Grade**

1. Preschool/Pre-K
2. Kindergarten – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade (Early Elementary)
3. 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Grade (Upper Elementary)
4. 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Grade (Middle School)
5. 9<sup>th</sup>-12 Grade (High School)

#### **Student's Race/Ethnicity**

1. American Indian or Alaska Native
2. Asian
3. Black or African American
4. Hispanic or Latino/a/x
5. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
6. White
7. Middle Eastern or North African
8. Prefer to self-describe
9. Prefer not to say

#### **Are you 18 years old or older? (if no, please exit this survey)**

1. Yes

2. No

**Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time. Please indicate your consent to participate in this survey by selecting one of the options below:**

**Yes, I agree to participate (please continue to the survey)**

**No, I do not agree to participate (please exit the survey)**

1. Yes
2. No

**Are you a parent or caregiver of a child who currently receives special education services?**

1. Yes
2. No

**Do you feel respected and heard by your child's school staff when discussing or expressing your concerns of your child's special education?**

1. Never
2. Sometimes
3. Always

**Do you feel like you understand your rights and responsibilities in the special education process, including things like IEPs, BIPs, and IDEA?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Somewhat

**Do school staff recognize your strengths and role as a key partner in your child's education during meetings or conversations?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Sometimes

**Are your family's cultural values recognized and incorporated into the special education planning and support process?**

1. Not at all
2. Slightly
3. Somewhat
4. Completely

**Is the communication between you and the school transparent, respectful, and consistent when discussing your child's special education needs?**

1. Not at all
2. Rarely
3. Sometimes
4. Often
5. Always

**Do you feel safe and supported when raising concerns with your child's IEP team or school staff?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Sometimes

**Do you feel like a valued partner in decision-making about your child's education and services?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Sometimes

**Are your meetings with school staff, IEP team, etc. collaborative that takes into account your family values and voice?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Sometimes

**Have you observed/experienced school administrators using punitive measures in response to your child's disability-related behaviors (e.g., emergency removals, suspensions, CPS/ICW reports, 911 calls, or involvement of law enforcement)?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Sometimes

**When mistakes, oversights, or shortcomings occur, do school staff and IEP team members acknowledge them sincerely and demonstrate a genuine effort to correct or improve the situation?**

1. Always
2. Often
3. Sometimes
4. Rarely
5. Never

**What areas of the special education process would you like more information on? (Check all that apply)**

1. Referral and evaluation
2. Eligibility determination
3. Individualized education plan (IEP)
4. 504 Plans
5. Parental Rights and Procedural Safeguard's
6. Special Education Services and Support
7. Inclusion and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
8. Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs)
9. Progress Monitoring and Reevaluation
10. Dispute Resolution and Mediation

11. All of the above

## Appendix F

### Culturally Responsive Listening Sessions and Family Focus Group Interview

Your voice matters. I invite you to participate in this anonymous interview, created to center and honor your lived experience. Your input will help inform culturally responsive, restorative, and empowering approaches that better serve families and students across communities.

Are you 18 years of age or older?  Yes  No

Instructions; Consent to Participate in Research -Your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Please indicate your consent by selecting one of the options below:

Yes, I agree to participate in this research study and will complete the questionnaire.

No, I do not agree to participate in this research study and will not complete the questionnaire.

Are you a Parent or caregiver of a child currently receiving special education services?  Yes  
 No

#### Students Gender

Male

Female

#### Students Race

- Self-disclosed

#### Students Age

- Self-disclosed

#### Students Grade

- Self-disclosed

Questions	Rating Scale
Do you feel respected and heard by your child's school staff when discussing or expressing your concerns of your child's special education?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Do you feel like you understand your rights and responsibilities in the special education process, including things like IEPs, BIPs, and IDEA?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Do school staff recognize your strengths and role as a key partner in your child's education during meetings or conversations?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always

Are your family's cultural values recognized and incorporated into the special education planning and support process?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Is the communication between you and the school transparent, respectful, and consistent when discussing your child's special education needs?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Do you feel safe and supported when raising concerns with your child's IEP team or school staff?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Do you feel like a valued partner in decision-making about your child's education and services?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Are your meetings with school staff, IEP team, etc. collaborative that takes into account your family values and voice?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
Have you observed/experienced school administrators using punitive measures in response to your child's disability-related behaviors (e.g., emergency removals, suspensions, CPS/ICW reports, 911 calls, or involvement of law enforcement)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always
When mistakes, oversights, or shortcomings occur, do school staff and IEP team members acknowledge them sincerely and demonstrate a genuine effort to correct or improve the situation?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> Often <input type="checkbox"/> Always

Thank you for sharing your time, your perspective, and your truth. Together, we can co-create a more culturally inclusive, and responsive special education system one where all families are heard, respected, and empowered.

Principal Investigator: Huda Swelam, University of Washington Tacoma - Doctorate in Educational Leadership Program, Doctoral Student

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