

Presented by Huda Swelam, EdD Candidate  
Wednesday, April 29th, 2026

**University of Washington**

**School of Education**

**Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership  
Dissertation Defense**

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

# Introduction – Why This Study Matters

This study advances equity in special education by centering students' cultures and identities through culturally relevant support. Using surveys, interviews, and outreach, it aims to empower families with knowledge of educational processes and rights. The goal is to create an inclusive support model that addresses systemic barriers, strengthens school-family partnerships, and promotes self-advocacy.

## Background

- Persistent inequities in special education systems
- Disproportionate impact on Native and marginalized families
- Systems rooted in deficit-based and colonial frameworks

## Research Problem

- Families excluded from meaningful decision-making
- Cultural knowledge and lived experiences undervalued
- Limited implementation of trauma-informed practices

## Significance

- Urgent need for equity-centered transformation
- Elevates family voice as expertise
- Supports culturally grounded, trauma-informed systems change



# Problem Statement

- **Disproportionality in Special Education:**

Native American students represent a small portion of the U.S. population but are disproportionately identified for special education services

- **Gap in Support:**

Students whose cultural identities and languages are not reflected in schools are often misidentified, underserved, or inappropriately placed

- **Systemic Barriers:**

Bias, inequitable practices, and lack of culturally responsive approaches contribute to exclusionary discipline and restrictive placements

- **Impact:**

Reduced student success, limited family engagement, and diminished sense of belonging

- **Research Need:**

A culturally responsive, family-centered approach is needed to address inequities, empower families, and improve outcomes in special education



# Research Questions

---



How can collaborative partnerships empower families and strengthen advocacy in special education?

What supports educator commitment to student academic and social-emotional success?

How can positive behavior supports be effectively implemented and reinforced?



Do families feel respected, included, and heard in the IEP process?

What culturally responsive and restorative practices improve family engagement and empowerment?

# Literature Review

## Theoretical Foundations:

Grounded in Foucault's genealogical analysis, culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay; Ladson-Billings), and disability justice frameworks that center equity, power, and historical context in education.

## □ Key Literature Trends:

- Persistent disproportionality and inequities in special education placement and discipline
- Importance of family engagement for student success under IDEA and IEP processes
- Growth of culturally responsive, restorative, and trauma-informed practices
- Increasing recognition of systemic bias, deficit thinking, and exclusionary practices in schools

## Major Issue Identified:

Despite legal protections (IDEA) and research on best practices, marginalized students especially students of color and Indigenous students continue to experience misidentification, exclusion, and limited access to equitable supports

## Critical Gap in Literature:

Limited integration of culturally responsive, restorative, and family-centered partnership models that address both systemic inequities and empower families as equal decision-makers in special education.



# Methodology & Approach



**Research Design:** Mixed-methods approach to capture both broad trends and in-depth experiences



**Participants:** Families, students, and educators in special education



**Methods Used:** Surveys, interviews, and community outreach



**Approach:** Culturally responsive and equity-centered framework

**Outcome Focus:** Inform development of an inclusive, family-centered support model

## Why These Methods:

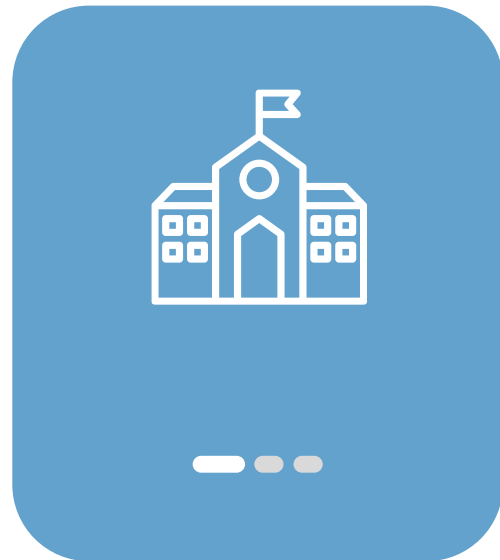
- Surveys → identify patterns and common needs
- Interviews → provide deeper insight into lived experiences
- Outreach → build trust and increase community voice



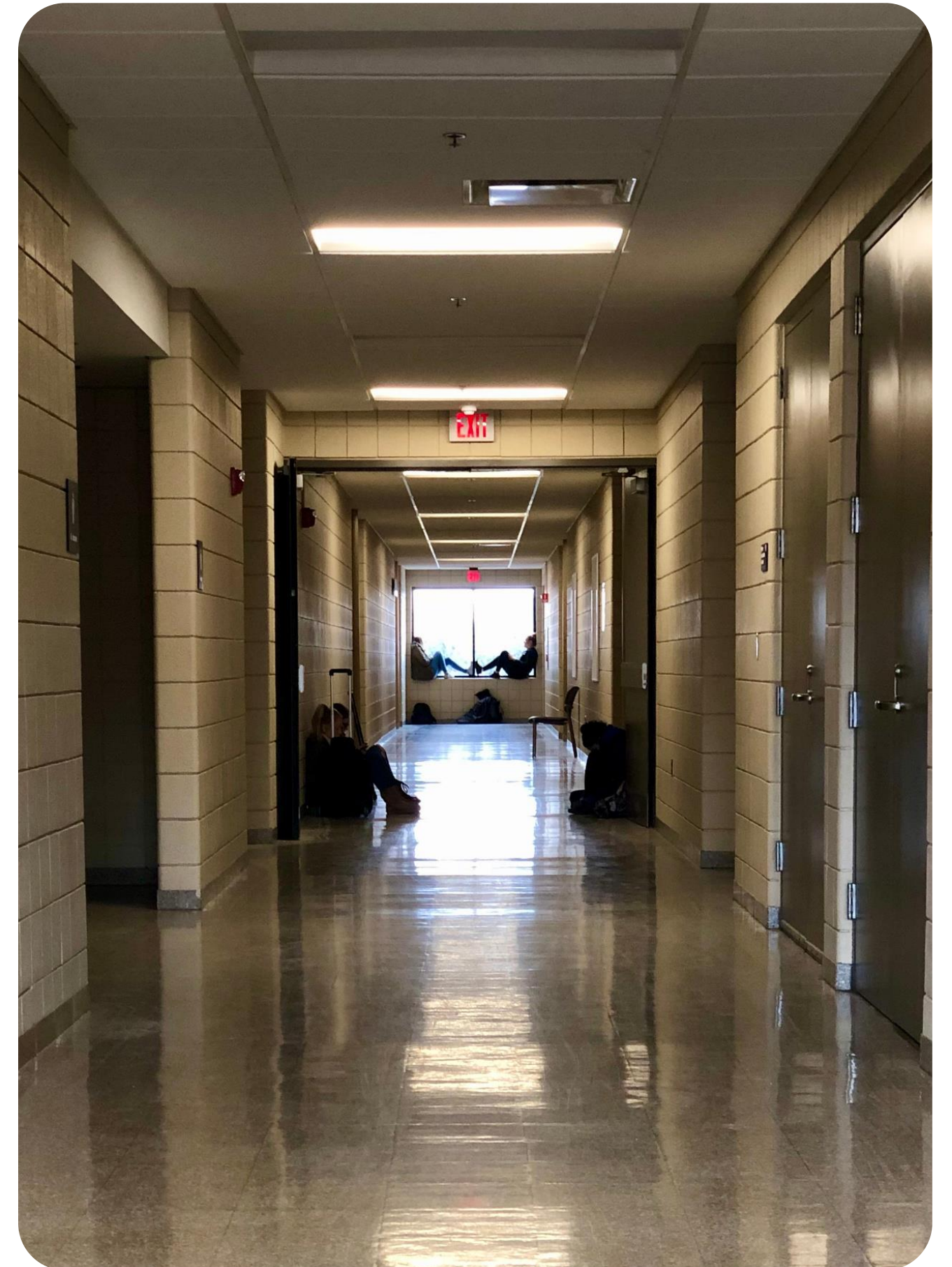
# Data Analysis Procedures

- Mixed-methods, Community Based Participatory Research approach centered family voices
- Data collected via Google Forms surveys, social media outreach, focus groups, and phone interviews
- Quantitative data analyzed using descriptive statistics (trends, patterns)
- Qualitative data analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke) with inductive coding

# Results/Findings



- **Key Finding 1:** Gaps in family understanding of special education processes and rights
- **Key Finding 2:** Cultural and linguistic differences often not reflected in services or supports
- **Key Finding 3:** Stronger outcomes when schools actively partner with families
- **Key Finding 4:** Families report barriers to advocacy, including lack of access to information and resources



# Results/Findings Continued



## Thematic Analysis:

- Equity gaps in service delivery
- Need for culturally responsive practices
- Importance of trust and communication

## Overall Insight:

- Systemic barriers persist, but culturally responsive, family-centered approaches significantly improve engagement and student support

## Connection to Study Goal:

- Findings directly informed the development of an inclusive, responsive support model



# Discussion of Findings



- This study examined how culturally responsive and restorative practices can better support Native American students with disabilities and strengthen family-school partnerships.
- Findings highlight persistent disproportionality in special education identification, placement, and discipline, consistent with prior research (Brewer, 2024).
- Students whose cultures are not reflected in school systems continue to experience misidentification, exclusionary discipline, and limited access to equitable supports.
- These inequities negatively impact engagement, academic outcomes, and trust between families and schools.
- Qualitative findings (interviews and document analysis) show that current practices often reflect punitive systems rather than restorative or culturally responsive approaches (Lodi et al., 2022).

**Implication:** Culturally responsive and restorative frameworks are needed to reduce disparities and strengthen equitable, family-centered special education systems.



## Conclusions

- Caregiver responses (n=43) show moderate but inconsistent trust, communication, and engagement in special education systems
- Most caregivers only sometimes feel respected, heard, and included in decision-making
- Major gap identified: Limited understanding of IDEA rights (only 10% fully understand their rights)
- Family participation in IEPs is often not fully collaborative, with limited shared decision-making
- Cultural responsiveness is inconsistent, with 40% reporting little or no recognition of cultural values
- Many caregivers report only partial safety in voicing concerns, reflecting ongoing power and trust barriers

### **Key Conclusion:**

Special education systems show persistent gaps in equity, communication, and cultural responsiveness, limiting meaningful family engagement and advocacy.



# Recommendations

- Strengthen family education on IDEA rights and IEP processes
- Increase culturally responsive and restorative practices in schools
- Improve communication and trust-building between schools and families
- Promote shared decision-making in IEP development
- Conduct future research with larger and more diverse samples to expand findings

# Limitations

---



- Small sample size (n=43 caregivers) limits generalizability of findings
- Self-reported data may reflect personal perceptions and response bias
- Limited geographic scope may not reflect broader populations
- Short data collection period may not capture long-term experiences or changes over time



- Online/social media recruitment may have excluded families with limited digital access
- Findings may also be influenced by external factors such as changing laws, political pressures, or school-level administrative practices (e.g., principals and district leadership)
- Results should be interpreted as exploratory and context-specific, not broadly generalizable

# References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Brewer, S. (2024, May 28). Unequal access: The failure of special education in Indian Country, Part 1. *Early Learning Nation*.  
<https://earlylearningnation.com/2024/05/unequal-access-the-failure-of-special-education-in-indian-country-part-1/>

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.

Lodi, E., Perrella, L., Lepri, G. L., Scarpa, M. L., & Patrizi, P. (2022). Use of restorative justice and restorative practices at school: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(1), 96. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010096>



A photograph of an empty classroom. Rows of wooden desks with attached writing surfaces and dark brown chairs are arranged in the room. In the background, there is a whiteboard, a chalkboard, and a large map of the United States on the wall. The room is lit by overhead fluorescent lights. A dark blue horizontal bar is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text "Thank You" in white. A light blue square is positioned on the left side of the dark blue bar.

**Thank You**