

PAKISTANI IMMIGRANT PARENTS' PERCEPTION ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN REFERRAL FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CLASSES IN TORONTO

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents regarding the referral of their children to special education programs in Toronto. The study is qualitative and is based on the grounded theory method. The interviews with five parent participants provide insight into the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents whose children (8-12 years) are in special needs classes. The findings of the study found three main factors contributing to the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education: 1) Parents' denial: 2) Cultural and linguistic differences: and 3) Immigration. The results indicate that there is an over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children [in Toronto schools] according to Pakistani parents' perceptions. Recommendations are made for implementing change within the special education system in the TDSB and areas for future research are identified.

Key Words: Special needs, parents' perception, attitudes, cultural and linguistic differences, grounded theory

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The contemporary world has turned into a global village a big example of it is the rising influx in the immigrant population of Canada year by year. Between 2006 and 2011, Canada's population grew by 5.9%, which is a little up from the previous inter censal period (2001 to 2006), when it grew by 5.4% (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2011). This increase has resulted in an increase in the number of immigrant students in Canadian schools as well. Toronto District School Board, (2011) reported that approximately 26% of their students were born outside of Canada and 53% of TDSB students have a language other than English as their mother tongue or as the primary language spoken at home. These students for whom English is not the primary language are referred to by many terms including "English Language Learners" (ELL), "Second Language Learners" (SLL), "English as a Second Language" (ESL), "Limited English Proficient" (LEP), and "Culturally and Linguistically Diverse" (CLD). This article used the term culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), to identify these immigrant children who are coming from the homes and communities where English is not the primary language of communication.

The Problem Statement

Upon arrival immigrant families bring along with them a rich cultural heritage in the form of their own culture and languages, but problems often arise when the children of these culturally and linguistically diverse families start going to school. In school, the children have to face many difficulties because of their cultural and linguistic differences. One disturbing result is the over referral of these children for special education programs. This phenomenon occurs because it is very difficult for teachers and other professionals to determine whether the learning and behavior problems of these children are due to cultural and linguistic differences or based on real disabilities (Barrera, 1995; Beier, 2006; Brown, 2004; Connor & Boskin, 2001; Kester et al., 2002; Sullivan, 2010, 2011; Tomlinson, 1989; Tyler, et al., 2004). Cultural and linguistic biases often influence teacher and examiner perceptions of a student's ability (Zine, 2001, 2006). What teachers see as problems for these children is greatly affected by these views (Baca, 2005). Thus referrals of CLD students to special education may have more to do with differences in language and perceptions of culture than with actual disability (Barrera, 1995; Gonzalez, 2001). It is hard to distinguish actual learning disabilities from linguistic differences in the assessment of a child's cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1984; Schon, et al., 2008). Often a student's difficulty in learning two languages at the same time is misunderstood as a learning disability (Spinelli, 2008).

Objective and Questions of the Study

In the present study, I examined the experiences of Pakistani families whose children are referred for special education in elementary public schools in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). My aim was to provide insights into the factors that may have impacted the referral process of these CLD children for special education in the city. I conducted interviews with five parents and hoped that by undertaking such a study I could give power back to Pakistani parents and create a chance for them to speak about their perspectives regarding the referral of their children for special needs. The main research question was: What is the Pakistani immigrant parents perspective regarding their children referral for special need classes? To my knowledge, there is no prior research available on this topic.

As focus of my study is to identify and examine the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents in Toronto with regard to the referral of their children for special education, these four questions framed this exploration:

1) What do Pakistani immigrant parents perceive as the factors contributing to the referral of their children for special education?

2) Do Pakistani immigrant parents perceive that these referrals are based on true learning or language disabilities?

3) Do these parents perceive their children are being over-referred for special education in Toronto?

And if yes than,

4) What reasons do Pakistani immigrant parents perceive to be the cause of over-referral?

There is no single factor behind the problem of CLD children being referred for special education programs. There are large variations in North America from city to city and from province to province (Sullivan, 2011; Utley, 2006). However, there is quite a lot of research available that explains different reasons why the phenomenon of over representation of culturally and linguistically children in special education occurs.

Reasons behind the over referral of CLD children for special need classes

It is very difficult for a general educator to evaluate for special education placement the students in his or her class who do not speak English. It is impossible to be absolutely sure when identifying a Limited English Proficient (LEP) student as a student in need of special services. Even though there is a pre-referral process, which is developed to help the teacher identify their students' special needs still it is very difficult for a teacher to identify whether the LEP student simply has a second language problem or suffers from a real disability (Beier, 2006; Chamberlain, 2005).

The Second Language Acquisition Associated Phenomena (SLAAP)

The lack of clear distinction between language disorder and the process of second language acquisition is a major factor responsible for the over-referral of CLD children in special education. Some of the language problems found in CLD children are not necessarily due to any language disorder but only a part of acquiring a new language. Brown (2004), in an attempt to make a clear distinction between language disorder and language difficulties, has proposed a new terminology: the Second Language Acquisition Associated Phenomena (SLAAP). SLAAP includes those performances of CLD students who are in the process of acquiring English as a second language and that could be misidentified as having language disorders. According to Brown (2004), the factors leading to SLAAP emerge from the process of moving to a new country. These factors include cultural differences, feeling uprooted and isolated, change in the socio-economic status, and language problems while adjusting to the new country (Barrera, 1995; Berhanu, 2008).

Cultural or linguistic diversity

Diversity can create problems only when differences in knowledge and skills of CLD children are undervalued. The problem associated with culture and language depends on the degree of similarity or difference between the culture and language of the child's home environment and educational setting. It also depends on whether these similarities or differences are accepted or not in the new culture. Instead of helping in increasing their learning abilities, cultural and linguistic differences can affect immigrant children's school performance (Agbenyega & Jiggets, 1999; Zine, 2006, 2001). Teachers sometimes judge CLD students' competence on the basis of race, sex, socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural differences, rather than on actual abilities (Barrera, 1995; Sullivan, 2010). These problems are more dependent on external circumstances than on internal conditions and can vary according to the degree of similarity or difference between the cultural and linguistic context of the child's home environment and that of the school.

A lot of special educational literature on the education of CLD learners mentions the over-representation of some specific cultural groups in special education categories (Berhanu, 2008; Blanchett, 2006). Some cultural groups are over referred for special needs classes than others like Black American (Klingner, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). There are differences within groups in terms of gender and age, which could also be a reason for referring CLD children for special education. According to Beth and David (2005), Black girls are less likely to be over-represented than Black boys but they are more likely to be labeled in need of special education than either White girls or boys because we can assume that Black boys and girls

have a similar social class background. Moreover, when language is taken into consideration, Spanish-speaking students who are learning English are much more likely to experience over-referral than those who are not (Artiles, et al., 2006; Baca, 2005).

Low Socio-Economic Status

There is a strong co-relation between children who receive special education services and their poverty status (Brown, 2004). Many other researchers have also suggested that socioeconomic status matters a lot in the over-referral of CLD children for special education classes. The appearance of extremely low literacy skills may be caused by unfavourable environmental factors rather than by a “natural” condition. Most CLD parents have little time to help their children with schoolwork and do not have the financial means to provide additional materials that could help to improve their children’s school performance. Most parents of CLD children have demanding, low level, menial or labour jobs. Moreover, they often have to take on several jobs at a time. The general education teacher might misinterpret CLD students’ learning problems that are in reality due to socioeconomic status as deficiencies and thus refer them for special education (Berhanu, 2008; Brown, 2004).

The effect of over-referral on the scholastic achievement of CLD children

Whatever the reasons behind the over-referral of CLD children for special education, the phenomenon affects their scholastic achievement. Over-referral has a negative effect on the academic performance of CLD students who are labeled as having a disability. It also lowers teachers’ expectations from these children who tend to have higher rates of suspension, face more severe disciplinary actions, and experiences a higher dropout rate than their White and non-disabled peers (Beth & David, 2005). The teachers differentially interact with CLD students for whom they hold low expectations. They wait less time for these students to respond, offer fewer opportunities to learn, focus on student behavior and discipline rather than academic work, seat low expectation students further away from them/the front of the classroom, and pay less attention to them (Zine, 2006).

In special education classes, students from racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority groups are more likely to be placed in more restrictive or separate classrooms than their European American peers (Sullivan, 2011). Notably, students from minority groups who attend special education schools in large, urban districts are placed in the most segregated and restrictive placements (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). These classes are overly restrictive and may limit a student’s ability to gain access to the general education curriculum or to keep up with their grade level peers. Students who are English language learners (ELL), who are labeled as having limited English proficiency (LEP), or who are placed in ESL or bilingual classes at the

elementary level, are usually over-referred for special education in the upper grades. When these children fail to obtain a high school diploma, their future occupational opportunities is restricted and this leads to the increased likelihood of poverty (Artiles et al., 2002).

The consequences of misperception about the language abilities of CLD children can affect their overall performance as well as opportunities to learn. They may not be provided adequate opportunities to help them be at par with their peers as they may be placed wrongly in special education classes. They will, as a result, be unable to access a curriculum that is challenging and that may help them reach their fullest potential (Brown, 2004). Special education classrooms do not meet their true needs. Instead, they receive services for deficiencies and disabilities which they do not have. As compared to other children, many CLD children are denied the opportunity to increased academic development (Klinger, 2006). They are separated from students in regular education programs and this separation can potentially affect them for their entire life. There is no chance for them to learn positive things in a positive environment again. The over-referral is not only problematic for individual students but also for cultural groups as well. It can create stereotypes about specific groups' educational abilities (Chamberlain, 2005).

Methods

Theoretical Framework

This area lacks both conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Grounded theory, qualitative approach was used in an effort to it might be possible to generate a conceptual framework that could lead to the development of testable hypotheses about over-referral issues related to Pakistani immigrant children. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method which is widely used to generate theories rooted within the data and allows a researcher to find out themes and links within data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2008; Neuman, 2006). My grounded theory approach is modified because there was no prior research on Pakistani immigrant children available to guide this research. Grounded theory approach has been proved to be very helpful in generating hypotheses when there are no pre-existing ideas available about what will emerge from the data (Creswell, 2008).

Following the tenets of grounded theory I then collected my own field data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews of Pakistani immigrant parents. Once the data was collected, it was broken down into different units, coded, analyzed and interpreted according to the research question. For the data analysis, critical social science (CSS) was used to develop a conceptual framework for the over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education in Toronto.

Research Sample

The parents of Pakistani immigrant children referred for special education in Toronto were the focus of this study. Five parents (Three mothers and two fathers) of Pakistani immigrant children (from six to twelve years old) were selected. The children themselves, their teachers, other school staff and classmates were not included in the research because it was intended as a small scale study. Moreover, it was not possible to involve more people in this study given its short time frame. Convenience and snowball sampling were used in selecting the participants for this study because of the investigative nature and small sample size of Pakistani population participating in the study. Convenience sampling was chosen because of feasibility and the relatively easy access I had to the parents of the Pakistani immigrant children I was concerned with.

Findings/Discussion

It was clearly stated by the Pakistani parents who participated in this study that they believe their children were over-referred for special education classes. Two big reasons, according to their perceptions, were cultural and linguistic differences and immigration. None of the participants accepted the referral of their child completely. They all said that they were not properly informed by the school about their child's referral. The main reason behind the referral according to them was their unawareness of the Canadian system, their low socio-economic status, and their poor language proficiency in English. They present many arguments to support their claim, such as their child's behavior at home or his/her normal interaction with family members, particularly with grandparents, and brothers and sisters. Most of the parents gave the example of home language or religious studies as "proof" that their children were doing well. They also gave examples of their other children who are performing well at school. For example I interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Ahmed, who moved to Canada one year ago and have a son who is in grade six. Mr. Ahmed does not agree with the school's decision for special needs placement. According to him,

The referral decision is not fair my son is absolutely fine he has no disability at all. When he first brought the letter from his school I was shocked. Mr. Ahmed further said,

My son is absolutely normal like the other kids in the class. He is absolutely normal at home. He remembers many Urdu poems and is very active in play. He has no problem in solving math questions. In his religious classes his performance is absolutely fine and he is learning the Quran by heart, which is not easy at all.

The main reason for the parents' attitude is their cultural background: Pakistani culture does not support children being labeled as special needs children unless they have a true

physical or mental disability. All five parents talked about these cultural norms. They were concerned that once children are labeled as having any kind of disability, they can never overcome their reputation. This labeling can affect their whole life. As Mrs. Ahmed said,

When we first came to Canada one year back my son did not get good marks in the first term. The teacher complained about his learning deficiencies and recommended him for extra need classes. I was totally shocked. Mrs. Ahmed further explained,

I can't say he is absolutely fine. He has some attention deficiency. He easily loses his interest from his studies. But it is not at that extreme that I can say that he has some type of deficiency.

According to Mrs. Ahmed, deficiency means handicapped or refers to some kind of mental illness or weakness. In her view, being slow in learning is not a deficiency. She commented,

In Pakistan, back home, we never label a child with a learning disability because it is a very serious issue and people don't accept this kind of labeling. In fact, once a child is labeled it can never be removed and people don't want to marry these kids when they grow up. So for me it is a very big challenge and I always try to hide this from my family and friends. There is no need to put my son in special education classes when he has no deficiency.

The second Pakistani couple I interviewed was Mr. and Mrs. Akram. Their son was nine years old and in grade four. He had been referred for special needs classes due to what his teachers believe is a learning disability. The Akrams moved to Canada six years ago. According to Mr. Akram,

My son is not weak or slow in learning. He just has a speech problem and because of that he performs a little slow in the class. He is shy because of his speech problem, but he does not have any learning problems at all.

In Pakistani culture, the word deficiency has a completely different meaning than it has in Canada. Among Pakistani people, deficiency usually means a physical or mental deficiency or a deficiency which can be observed. Deficiencies such as having a learning disability or being a slow learner are not considered deficiencies. In Pakistani culture, boys have a different upbringing than girls so there are behaviours e.g., carelessness and mischievousness that, when performed by boys, are considered normal. Respect of elders is very important in Pakistani culture. Behavior that would be considered respectful in Pakistan is sometimes considered as shyness in Canada because Canadian children are more independent. In other words, not talking in front of teachers is a positive quality in Pakistan but not in Canada. It is possible that Pakistani immigrant children in Toronto are being

recommended for special need classes because of what Canadians regard as their shyness. Another factor is language difference as most of the Pakistani immigrant children speak Urdu at home and have English as their second language. These linguistic differences could create a misunderstanding related to the competence of these children and thus they may be recommended for special need classes. Sometimes the children feel difficulty in understanding the accent of their teachers and peers in the class.

Almost all the parents mentioned their immigration as a possible reason for their child's referral. According to them, after immigration everything changes, including their social relations, their socio-economic conditions, and even their language. They have to spend more time on their jobs or on learning new ways to survive in their new environment. Most parents of CLD children have demanding, low level, menial or labour jobs. These jobs restrict these parents from giving much time to their child and home. According to Mr. Ahmed, the main reason behind his son's referral is immigration. As he stated,

When we first came to Canada my son was confused and shy due to the cultural and linguistic differences. The teacher's behaviour, his peers' attitude towards his differences, and even the language and syllabus everything was different. His first attitude towards other peers and the class teacher was not impressive. The teacher's and classmates' accents were totally different from his own and he felt difficulty in understanding what they were saying with those accents.

According to Mrs. Akram, her son does not have any disability at all, although he is a little shy. When Mrs. Akram first came to Canada she was so busy in finding and working at her jobs that she could not get the time to spend with him. She feels that is why he became shy. At that time, it was very important for her to become familiar with the Canadian system. She was totally unaware of how to speak English and could not understand English well. She is still struggling with her English, although she attended LINC classes for three years. She worked hard to become economically stable enough to provide a good life for her children. In Pakistani culture it is the mother's responsibility to look after both the children and the home at the same time. Mrs. Akram considers herself responsible for her child's slow learning or shyness. When the Akram family first came to Canada her son was very small and, in her view, he had no problem. He explained,

Due to immigration everything changed as I am a totally different person now. My son was attached with his family in Pakistan, especially with his grandmother. These things affected him a lot. Last summer when his grandmother visited us he was very happy and he improved a lot in everything.

Implications for Teaching

All the parents involved in this study gave suggestions for improvement of the referral process. All parents feel that it is crucial that school personnel make sure that all important and related information is considered in the assessment process. Mrs. Ahmed suggested that,

Parent involvement is very important. Most of the new immigrant parents don't know much about the Canadian system and these things create misunderstandings and it is hard for them defend or explain their feelings. The schools should provide translators so the parents can understand everything more clearly.

According to Mr. Ahmed, schools should consider the language and cultural differences of Pakistani immigrant children and provide them more time to adjust in their new environment. He also said schools should be more supportive of new immigrant parents who are trying to understand the Canadian system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main findings were that Pakistani immigrant children are unnecessarily referred for special education according to their parents' perceptions. Most of the parents interviewed did not want to accept their child's special needs because in the Pakistani culture from which they came the word deficiency means that the child has some kind of physical disability. Parent participants also stated that other behaviours that are seen as undesirable among Canadian teachers are considered very normal in Pakistan, especially among boys.

According to the parents' recommendations these problems can be solved through hiring more multicultural staff or by educating and involving parents in school activities. Teachers should become more knowledgeable about the home culture and language of CLD children for better understanding. Almost all the parents emphasized that Pakistani CLD children should be given more time to adjust to their new environment. Provision of language interpreters for parents would also be a good step toward reducing the communication gap between schools and parents. As stated in a review of the Ontario Education Act, more parental involvement in the referral procedure is needed so that everyone can be treated equally in our multicultural Canadian society. Parental involvement is also very important since most new immigrant parents do not know about the Canadian education system. This lack of awareness creates misunderstandings and parents often cannot defend or explain their feelings. Almost all the parents showed that they lacked awareness about the whole referral process. They tended to think that only the teacher is responsible for the decision making about their child's referral. Schools should provide translators so that parents can more clearly

understand the education system in general and the referral process in particular. Schools should hire multilingual teachers from different cultures so they can help in explaining student issues and problems to the parents. Schools should consider the language and cultural differences of immigrant children and provide them more time to adjust to their new environment in a better way. Schools should involve parents more in school time activities and celebrations, such as those that are held during Eid or Dewali, so that children can know more about their own cultures and those of their classmates.

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