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THE REFERRAL OF PAKISTANI IMMIGRANT CHILDREN FOR SPECIAL
EDUCATION IN TORONTO: PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF PARENTS

by

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A Major Research Paper
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in the Program of
Early Childhood Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2009

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Dedication

To my loving husband, Amjad
and
daughters Aleena and Aleesha...

THE REFERRAL OF PAKISTANI IMMIGRANT CHILDREN FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION IN TORONTO: PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF PARENTS.

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Master of Arts
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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. Interviews were conducted by the author with five parent participants and were transcribed and coded. This research provides insight into the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents whose children (8-12 years) are in special needs classes. Also included in the data is an interview the author conducted with a Pakistani parent who is also working as a special needs assistant in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The findings of the study indicate that there are five main reasons behind the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education: 1) parent attitudes; 2) cultural and linguistic differences; 3) teacher attitudes; 4) peer attitudes; and 5) 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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Introduction

The contemporary world has turned into a global village. Many people are now migrating from one place to another to improve their quality of life. A major example of this trend is the rapid increase in the immigrant population in North America. According to the Canadian Census for 2006, from 2001 to 2006 about 1,110,000 new immigrants arrived in Canada. This figure comprises 3.6% of Canada's total population of 31.2 million (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2006). The U.S. Census Bureau Report (2001; cited in Brown 2004) also shows an increase in the immigrant population to the United States. According to the report, over 11.1% of the total U.S. population was born in a foreign country.

This rising influx of immigrants in North America has resulted in an increase in the number of immigrant students in schools. Students who come from diverse immigrant populations make up of the 38% of all elementary public school students in the U.S. (USDOE, 2001; cited in Tyler et al., 2004). In Canada, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reported a figure of 40,788 immigrant students in public primary schools, or approximately 23% of the whole public school population (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2006).

The term culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children is used by the U.S. Department of Education (2003) to refer to immigrant children who are enrolled in educational programs, either as non English Proficient (NEP) or as limited English Proficient (LEP). Educators use the term CLD to identify children from homes and communities where English is not the primary language of communication (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2004).

Objective and Significance of this Study

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 families start going to school. In school, the children (who may have been born in either the home country or the destination country) have to face many difficulties because of their cultural and linguistic differences. One disturbing result is the over referral of CLD 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 problems or based on real disabilities (Barera, 1995).

The 24th annual report to congress on the implementation of the Individual with Disability Education Act (IDEA) indicates that between 1987 and 2001, the percentage of students in the U.S. whose home language is not English has increased by 2.5%. Further, there has been an increase of 10.9% in the placement of students requiring special services from these homes (U.S. Department of Education, 2003 cited in Brown, 2004). According to the U.S. Department of Education, CLD students comprise 37.7% of the nation's special education population (USDOE, 2001; cited in Tyler et al., 2004). The Ontario Environmental Scan (2007) indicates an increase in the number of immigrant students in special education programs in Toronto. There is a clear indication from these reports that there is an over representation of CLD children in special education (Brown, 2004). The increased number of CLD children in special education programs puts a question mark on the whole special education referral process.

In this 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. My aim is to provide insights into the reasons for these referrals and to understand the factors that may have impacted the referral process of CLD children for special education in the city.

There is a large Pakistani immigrant population in Canada. According to the Canadian Census for 2006 a total of 1,110,000 immigrants from around the world came to Canada during 2001 to 2006. Of this total, 57,990 immigrants (5.2% of the whole Canadian immigrant population) are from Pakistan. The Pakistani immigrant population is the fourth largest immigrant population in the Canada, following China, India, and the Philippines (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2006). South Asian students from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh comprise almost half of the total school population in Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Of these South Asian students, 4,663 are from Pakistan. Pakistan has the second largest immigrant population in TDSB elementary schools after China (Ontario Environmental Scan, 2007). The importance of recognizing the issues related to CLD immigrant children is evident through this huge number of Pakistani immigrant children in TDSB elementary schools.

This study explored the reasons behind the referral of Pakistani immigrant children to special education programs in the TDSB documenting their parent's experiences. I conducted interviews with five parents in order to determine whether the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education is based on true disabilities in TDSB elementary public schools. My personal experience and Pakistani background provided me with considerable motivation to represent issues related to the Pakistani immigrant

families. I 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.

For a better understanding of the term culturally and linguistically diverse children (CLD) it is very important to explore the meaning of culture, language and diversity as they are discussed in the literature.

Culture

Champlain (2005) defined culture as values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world and a way of interacting within a social group. I personally think that in the context of immigration, culture is a belief or set of beliefs held by an immigrant family. These beliefs are not necessarily permanent. The beliefs may change after the immigration process and the adaptation to the new ways of life. In every culture, child rearing practices and expectations about young children's behavior are different. In order to understand issues related to CLD children it is very important to view these children in their family context. We can say that culture is an important base for developing an understanding of our self, our family, our society, and the world around us. Our perception of the ways others think and act depends on our culturally moulded way of thinking. It is very important to expand our understanding of others and to realize that every culture is different from other cultures. Without such awareness we will possibly stereotype people (Champlain, 2005).

Language

Language is the tool we use to communicate with each other. Through language we can express our feelings, our thoughts, and knowledge (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2004). It is obvious that immigrant students who do not understand the language of the classroom will have great difficulty in learning. This difficulty could be the main reason behind their failure at school.

Diversity

Tyler et al, (2004) defined diversity as the recognition and appreciation of the characteristics that make individuals unique in an atmosphere or in a particular environment/setting. These characteristics are: age, cognitive style, culture, disability, economic background, education, ethnicity, gender, geographic background, language(s) spoken, marital or partnered status, physical appearance, political affiliation, race, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation.

According to my own professional experience, from a child's perspective, culture and language are the most important characteristics among those just mentioned. One cannot deny the importance of culture and language in a child's life as culture is a part of their identity and language is a way of self-expression. Following immigration to a new country, cultural and linguistic diversity creates many problems for CLD children. Without understanding such diversity, we can not properly study issues related to CLD children.

Cultural and linguistic diversity

Cultural diversity is based on the idea that we should try to give priority to our cultural identities. We cannot ignore the importance of cultural diversity in educating

CLD children. Ignorance of cultural diversity can be harmful for these children's cultural identities because every culture has its roots in history. Baca (2005) suggests that we should use cultural identities as a source of power not as a weakness. Much research has shown that linguistic diversity is as important as cultural diversity. On the other hand, it is also considered very important for immigrants to learn the national language of the new country to which they have migrated. The maintenance of the primary language is especially important for CLD children because if they lose their native language they will lose their cultural bonds. This loss will have a negative impact on their development as a normal person (Cummin, 1984; cited in Champlain, 2005).

Reasons behind the over-referral of CLD children for special education

There is no single factor behind the problem of CLD children being over referred for special education programs. There are large variations in Canada and USA from city to city and from province to province (Utley, 2006). However, there is quite a lot of research available that explains different reasons why the phenomenon occurs. The United States Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has reported a constant problem of overrepresentation of minority children in certain disability categories since the 1970s. 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 (Champlain, 2005, Beier, 2006).

We have to be very careful when trying to make a decision about whether or not to place a student in a special education program and we have to continuously look for signals to confirm our decision. It is important to identify LEP students by questioning ourselves again and again. We are allowed to change our minds before making final decisions (Beier, 2006). I can say that rethinking before referring a child for special education is a very important process because one wrong decision could affect the whole life of a child. As Utley et al. (2005) have written, "The over representation issue implicates the entire special education process being unfair to students: the quality of instruction prior to referral, the decision to refer, the assessment, the placement in special education programs and the quality of instruction that occurs in that program." Existing research indicates that there is no single factor behind this problem.

Cultural or linguistic diversity related reasons for over referral.

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).

According to Barrera (1995), teachers sometimes judge CLD students' competence on the basis of race, sex, socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural differences, rather than on actual abilities. Problems stemming from linguistic diversity are, in contrast to those stemming from disabilities, not reflective of "within the child" conditions. These

problems are more dependent on external circumstances than on internal conditions. Barrera gives the example of González (1993a; 1993b) and Mallory & New (1994) who discussed problems associated with unrecognized diversity and how it 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. This unrecognized cultural and linguistic diversity could be a reason for the referral, and thus over referral, of CLD children for special education.

Teachers' related reasons.

Often teachers cannot understand properly the issues related to CLD children. As a result of their own unfamiliarity with the culture and language of CLD children, they may misdiagnose them as children with special needs and refer them for special education classes. To resolve this issue, teacher training designed to increase teachers' knowledge about the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of all their potential students is very important. According to Brown (2004), teachers should have knowledge about the following areas: second language acquisition; the relationship of home language proficiency to the development of English; assessment of proficiency in the home language and English; socio-cultural influences on learning; effective first and second language instruction; informal assessment strategies that can be used to monitor progress, particularly in language and literacy development; and effective strategies for working with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities.

Some teacher related reasons behind the over-referral of CLD children for special education includes:

Teachers' personal biases. A review of literature by Brown (2004) shows that teachers in mainstream classrooms who are from the majority culture have pre-conceived notions about CLD students' language abilities and potentials for success. What teachers see as problems for these children is greatly affected by these views. Teacher biases are the main reason behind the over-referral of CLD children for special education. There are many possible reasons behind these biases. A given teacher's unfamiliarity with the culture and language of CLD children is one of them. Brown (2004) quotes an example by Baca (1998), which shows that many teachers perceive the normal language difficulties that a child encounters while learning a second language as a learning disability. Baca (2005) also mentions examiner and teacher biases as a big factor behind CLD children's over-referral for special education. Agbenyega & Jiggets (1999), highlight the fact that in the past intelligence was considered inborn, permanent, and naturally distributed in different classes and culture. Cultural and linguistic biases often influence teacher and examiner perceptions of a student's ability.

Cultural and linguistic differences between teachers and CLD students. Olson (2000), asserts that difference in students' and teachers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds is a major reason for the over referral of the CLD children. Olson states that 90% of public school teachers in the United States are white, whereas 40% of U.S. public school students belong to racial or ethnic minorities. Because they are almost all from the dominant white majority, U.S. teachers are unable to understand the issues related to CLD children. They are unfamiliar with the culture and language related differences of CLD children. Delpit (1995) has shed some light on the special education referral process, which typically begins with a teacher's referral. Delpit (1995) points out that a

teacher's familiarity with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of CLD children is very important. To reduce the over-referral of CLD children for special education, Delpit (1995), observes it is very important to have teachers with diverse backgrounds who can understand their problems. But instead of decreasing, the cultural imbalance between most U.S. teachers and the diverse population of U.S. public school students has been increasing. Tomlinson (1989), in his article about special issues related to Asian pupils specifically in the UK presents one solution to prevent learning difficulties. The solution is the employment of more bilingual teachers and professionals, both in bilingual language programs and for dealing with Asian pupils referred for special education. The knowledge and culture of CLD children differs considerably from that of their teachers who come mainly from the dominant culture. Both teachers and students bring to the classroom their beliefs and values about learning. Sometimes because of these beliefs and values class, teachers might consider their students' behavior as deviant (Brown, 2004). 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). According to Cummins (1984), it is hard to distinguish actual learning disabilities from linguistic differences in the assessment of a child's cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). This difficulty may lead to misunderstandings about the knowledge and skills of CLD children. Frequently, a student's difficulty in learning two languages at the same time is misunderstood as a learning disability (Goodz, 1994 in Spinelli, 2008).

CLD children related reasons

CLD children from Minority Groups. The over-referral of CLD children from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups is very common. 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. Agbenyega & Jiggets (1999), present statistics about minority children in the U.S. They note, especially, African American children who continue to be enrolled in large numbers in special education as compared to children of other cultures. According to the figures given by Agbenyega & Jiggets (1999), in special education the total percentage of the distribution of minority school children relative to those of the majority is 90% to 10%. The problem of over-representation is complicated and it is not limited only to African American children, however; Hispanic, Asian, and Native American students are also over-represented in special education (Baca, 2005).

CLD children and within-group differences. 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 & David (2005), Black girls are less likely to be over-represented than Black boys in the U.S., 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 (Baca, 2005).

Socioeconomic status (SES) of CLD children. In 2003, the 24th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(IDEA) also clearly pointed out the strong co-relation between children who receive special education services and their poverty status (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; cited in 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 (Brown, 2004).

Ability tests related reasons

Test designs. Standardized tests complicate the over-referral problem further by focusing on CLD students’ English language proficiency rather than on their knowledge of a particular subject or their skills (Menken, 2000 in Spinelli, 2008). There is a high risk of misdiagnosing such children as learning disabled when the real problem is their lack of proficiency in English language. The situation of CLDs being over-represented in special education shows a lack of understanding in the school system about the effects of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences (Heward, 2003; Ortiz, 2003; Ortiz & Yates, 2001; Smith, 2001 in Spinelli, 2008). Although in the fields of educational psychology and special education, ability tests are

very important and seem reliable, many people think these standardized tests are forms of institutionalized racism. Much research has shown that the use of these ability tests is inappropriate for the assessment of CLD children. The accuracy of these tests most of which have been designed for monolinguals is doubtful. Two primary reasons for failure in the language assessment of bilinguals are the use of translations of assessment tests and the use of tests designed for monolinguals of the child's home or second language. When children are tested according to these tests, they are misdiagnosed as language deficient because of their low results. This situation can exacerbate misunderstandings about the knowledge and skills of CLD children and they could be referred for special education as a result. Kester et al. (2002), Tomlinson (1989), and Connor & Boskin (2001), also criticize these tests' reliability. As a solution, they emphasize the development of language tests especially for bilinguals.

The use of biased ability tests. Beier (2006), says that bias during the assessment and evaluation process has contributed significantly to both the over and under-representation of CLD children in special education programs. The majority of educators evaluate culturally diverse students' performance through white influenced parameters of competence. It is impossible to match culturally diverse students' performance with such parameters and, as a result, such students are often regarded as deficient (Gutierrez et al., 2002). Stereotypical beliefs about CLD children's abilities can also affect the assessment of these children in many ways. Stereotypes can create biases, which not only affect human thinking but also affect the assessment tests used to evaluate CLD children. Blanchett (2006) criticizes the use of biased evaluation instruments because they develop false intellectual hierarchies among different cultural groups. Stereotypical beliefs affect

the whole life of CLD children from their childhood to their adolescence. One of the difficulties for educators and assessment personnel is to differentiate between language errors and language disorders (Espinosa, 2005; Ortiz & Graves, 2001 cited in Spinelli, 2008). The situation is more complex in the case of children who are learning English as a Second Language as it is easy to mistake the characteristics of second language acquisition with that of learning disorders (Abedi, 2000; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2002 cited in Spinelli, 2008; Espinosa, 2005). The resulting assessment can lead to misunderstandings about the child's true language potential (Espinosa, 2005). On the other hand, a child truly needing support might not get it as educators may not identify the child as having any disorder in an effort to avoid misdiagnosis (Abedi, 2000; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2002 in Spinelli, 2005). Both situations may be problematic for a given child's academic progress.

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; Gonzalez, 2001).

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 (Good & Brophy, 1973).

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. 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 (Connor & Boskin, 2001). 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).

An overview of the special education referral process in Ontario

In the Ontario Statutes and other provincial legislation (2002), a child with special needs is described as “.....a child who has a physical or mental impairment that is likely to continue for a prolonged period of time and who as a result thereof is limited in activities pertaining to normal living as verified by objective psychological or medical findings and includes a child with a developmental disability” (para. 9).

The Ontario Human Rights Code provides the right of equal treatment to everyone in the province with respect to services, without discrimination on the basis of a number of grounds, including disability. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which came into effect in 1982, specifies that "Every individual is equal and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without any discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability." Ontario's Human Rights Code also supports equal treatment for all individuals. In 1980, Ontario's education system was reviewed and Special Education Acts (SEACs) were established. To support students with special needs an Education Act, often referred to as Bill 82, came into effect in Ontario. According to the Bill 82, a special education program is defined as, "An educational program that is based on and modified by the results of a continuous assessment and evaluation of the pupil and that includes an Individual Education Plan (IEP) containing specific objectives and an outline of the educational services that meets the needs of the exceptional pupil (subsection 1(1)). It is the responsibility of school boards to provide (or to purchase from another board) special education programs and special education services for their exceptional pupils (paragraph 7 of subsection 170(1))."

According to the Ministry of Education (2000), Bill 82 has had a significant impact on parents, teachers, and other professionals associated with providing special education support to students. The IEP is developed on the recommendation of the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). It is the IPRC's responsibility to include parents and students over 16 years of age in a meeting arranged to discuss special needs of the student. Parents have the right to "...be present at and participate in all committee

discussions; be present when the committee makes its decision about identification and placement; have a representative present to speak on their behalf or otherwise support them” (para. 10). The IPRC committee decides if the student should be referred for special education and determines the special needs of the child as well as an appropriate placement according to the mandate of the Ontario Ministry of Education (2007). The IPRC must provide reasons for placement in special education and upon request must discuss the decision with—parents and students over 16 years of age. Under Bill 82, parents who are dissatisfied with school boards’ identification and placement of their children as exceptional are given the right to appeal the decision to a Special Education Appeal Board (Valeo, 2003). It is clearly documented that, “....an IPRC placement decision cannot be implemented unless a parent has consented to the decision or has not filed a notice of appeal within the required time limit” (para. 15). Ontario Ministry of Education resource guide (2004) described that parental involvement is very important in all special education referral procedures because parents take an important role in their child’s personality, development and learning.

Purpose And Questions Of The MRP

The purpose of this qualitative, interview based study was to examine Pakistani parents’ beliefs regarding special education referral in Toronto and also to investigate their perceptions about the reasons behind the referral/over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education programs in the city. Through the review of literature I conducted, it was clearly evident that 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.

Four questions framed this exploration:

- 1) What do parents perceive as the reasons behind the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education?
- 2) Do parents perceive that these referrals are based on true learning or language disabilities?
- 3) Do parents perceive that Pakistani immigrant children are over-referred for special education in Toronto?
- 4) What reasons to parents perceive to be the cause of over-referral?

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, I used qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is a form of investigation used to develop a deep understanding of the reasons behind human behavior (Neuman, 2006). A qualitative approach helped me to better understand the perceptions of the Pakistani immigrant parents in my study regarding their children's referral for special education as well as the reasons behind this referral. A modified grounded theory perspective was used to guide this research. 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 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Neuman (2005) grounded theory is used when theory is built from data or grounded in the data. The grounded theory helps in generating a theory when there is no prior theory is available to address the problem and it "also help in systematic and step by step

procedure for analyzing data” (Creswell, 2005, p. 396). 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, 2005).

Already available literature on CLD referral used as a first step toward finding the reasons behind the over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children to special education classes in Toronto. Following the tenets of grounded theory I then collected my own field data. Once the data was collected, it was broken down into different units, coded, analyzed and interpreted according to the research question (more detail will be included in the end of this section). 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. This procedure helped to disclose the reasons for the over-referral of the Pakistani CLD children and to answer the following question “Is the referral based on true disability or are Pakistani immigrant children over-referred because of other reasons?” According to Neuman (2006), “Critical researchers reveal myths, disclose concealed truths and help people change the world for themselves. The CSS researcher begins with a viewpoint and notes down the issues ignored in interpretive explanation” (p. 95). In the Literature Review section of this paper, I have discussed some of the known reasons for the over-referral of CLD children for special education in general. The explanatory critique provided by several authors helps reveal the truth of why Pakistani children are referred for special education because according to Neuman (2006), “CSS tries to explain and change the world by penetrating hidden structures” (p.

95). The findings of the interviewees help us to understand whether referral is based on true disability or if over-referral is at work.

Search Criteria

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. Included in my sample of Pakistani immigrant parents, who have children referred for special education in Toronto schools, is an individual who along with being a Pakistani immigrant parent is also working in a school as a special education teacher.

Scope

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.

Strategies

The aim of this study was to develop an explanation which could help me in my understanding of the reasons behind Pakistani immigrant children's referral by pointing out differences, recognizing contradictions and revealing myths in the data that I gathered

from my interviews (Neuman, 2006). “The explanations are critiques that show a pathway for taking action and achieving change” (Neuman, 2006).

Ethical Review

Before starting recruitment I submitted a research proposal to the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board. In this proposal, I gave detailed information about the research including all the risks involved. After an in-depth review of the proposal, the Ethics Board gave me permission to gather data.

Initially, I chose the areas of Gerard Street and Thorncliffe Park for this research because these areas have large Pakistani immigrant populations and because most of the children from the Pakistani communities in these areas are taking special education classes. I contacted the Early Learning Center in Thorncliffe Park but they did not wish to participate because it was against their rules set by the supervisor. Then I contacted the Gerard Street Resource Center and they agreed to post a flyer for me. However, I did not receive any responses to this flyer. The reason which I assumed for this is the low socio economic status (SES) and education level of new immigrant Pakistani parents of this area which couldn't give them courage and time for participating in such kind of research. (See Appendix A for Flyer)

Because of the seeming lack of support for my project in the above two areas, I decided to post another flyer in the basement of a residential building in Brampton because this area also has a huge Pakistani immigrant population. The flyer contained information about the research and parents were requested to contact me if they wanted to participate. There was an option that both the father and mother could participate in these interviews. Both of them would be interviewed separately on a one-on-one basis.

Two couples contacted me by phone regarding the flyer. I explained the research in detail to these parents. They said they would think about it and inform me later on about their decision. After one week only one couple called back. Both the husband and wife wanted to participate in the research. They both were new comers to Toronto and they thought this interview might help them in protesting against the referral of their child for special education. I explained more to them about the research and told them that it is just a part of my Master's program requirement, I hoped it could help in doing further research on this issue and that the comments of the parents would help me in highlighting the issue. I provided the parents with the consent forms I had made prior to conducting each interview. I asked the parents to review the consent form carefully and thoroughly and ask as many questions regarding the research as they wanted to before signing the consent forms. (See Appendix B for Consent form)

I selected another couple through convenience sampling (Creswell, 2005). They were my personal friends. This couple was also provided with the same flyer. I explained to them the details of the research and provided consent forms to them as well. These parents cannot read English, so I provided a translation of the consent form in Urdu. Another parent who was a special education teacher was selected through snowball sampling one of my friends introduced this participant to me. I followed the same procedure of explaining the research and providing the consent form with this participant.

To all of the participants, I explained the confidentiality measures and voluntary nature of the research verbally. I explained to the participants that rather than use their real names in the research paper, I would use pseudonyms. I also gave the participants the choice to say "no" when it came to having my interviews with them audio-recorded. Only

three parents (those who are my own personal friends) agreed to be audio-recorded. The other two participants refused this option.

The interview questions were provided to the parents along with the consent form in advance of the interview date. Thus, the parents were familiar with the interview questions beforehand. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What do you think about the referral of your child for special education?
2. Are you satisfied with the decision?
3. Do you think it's on the basis of true disability?
4. How was your child's performance before coming to Canada?
5. Do you think these classes help in improving the performance of your child?
6. What are your recommendations for the improvement of special education system in schools?

Translation into Urdu of these questions was provided to the parents who could not read English. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded every participant that it would not be necessary for them to answer every question. I told them that they could stop or refuse to answer if they felt any discomfort in answering any particular question. I tried to explain every question thoroughly to the parents. In the interviews I conducted by telephone, I used the same strategies.

Setting

The participants who chose the face-to-face interview option were provided with the choice of being interviewed either in their own homes or in the nearest library's discussion room. Two parents chose the home option because according to them they felt freer and more confident in sharing their experiences in their home settings. These

participants felt secure in sharing their experiences at home. Neuman (2006) says that home settings are not always the best, however, because a family member may be preoccupied or have no privacy because of the other family members around him or her. To reduce these problems, I made prior appointments with the parents before going to their homes. These two interviews were audio-recorded as well.

The two parents who were recruited through the flyer posted in Brampton wanted to conduct interviews by phone, so I made an appointment with these two parents and interviews were conducted on the phone. I took notes during these interviews since these two parents asked not to be audio recorded.

All participation was purely on voluntarily basis and no one was paid. The parent who was a special education assistant in a school preferred to have her interview at home. The same procedure was repeated with her too and the interview was audio-recorded.

Data

Data collection tools. My primary data consists of my face-to-face and telephone interviews of the participants, my field notes and key-word notes collected during the interviews. Three interviews were tape-recorded and later on notes were checked against the tape recording. These tape recordings provided details about what occurred during the interviews. Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. According to Neuman (2006), "The interview is a short term, secondary social interaction between two strangers with the explicit purpose of one person's obtaining specific information from the other" (p. 103). The observational notes I took during the interview were read to the interviewee after each interview for the parents who chose no audio-recording option. This strategy helped me in making corrections of any mistakes I

made during recording the notes and the parents got the chance to review their comments and make any necessary changes.

A face sheet was also created at the beginning of the notes, which contained the date, the basic characteristics of the interviewee (age, gender, duration in Canada and special need of the child) and the contents of the interview (Neuman, 2006).

(See Table 1 for face sheet)

A main purpose of conducting interviews is that through interviews it is easy to bring out the deeper feelings and thinking of the participants. In face-to-face interviews, the interviewer not only can observe the surroundings but also can use nonverbal communication (Silverman, 1997). Another advantage of interviews is that we can arrange telephone interviews. According to Neumann (2006), "The telephone interview is a flexible method with most of the strengths of face-to-face interviews" (p. 301)

Data collection procedure. My semi-structured face-to-face interviews of parents were conducted personally on a one-on-one basis. The one-on-one method was more time consuming, but it allowed me to give full attention to the interviewee. Both husband and wife were interviewed on different days of the week. The interviews were between 30 to 60 minutes long. During the interviews open-ended, informal and in-depth questions were asked about the participants' experiences regarding the over-referral of their children for special education. Along with questions I used probes to get more detailed answers from the participants. I recorded my field notes soon after each interview. These notes were documented as accurately as possible. Each and every interview was recorded, critical words were avoided, and personal comments and emotional feelings recorded separately (Neuman, 2006).

Data confidentiality. The researcher was very careful in maintaining the participants' confidentiality. The data collected through tape recording and field notes was kept strictly confidential. Participants were provided pseudonyms instead of their real names for taking field notes and these pseudonyms were later on used in transcriptions from audiotapes and field notes. The main purpose behind providing the participants with pseudonyms was to maintain confidentiality and to distinguish between their perceptions. The field notes and tapes were placed in a secure place to which only I have access. All audiotapes and field notes will be destroyed at the end of the study (Waterman, B, B., 1994).

Data organization and analysis. All audiotapes and interview notes were gathered and transcribed by me. I used the grounded theory approach of the constant comparison method in that I read and reread the transcripts several times (Whitney et al., 2008). I developed themes through line-by-line reading of all the transcripts. I carried out triangulation of the data by comparing interview transcripts, audio-tape recordings and keynotes (Creswell, 2005). These measures are intended to provide validity to responses and to verify the data obtained (Creswell, 2005). While reviewing the transcripts I noticed that several topics were used repeatedly, so I organized or "coded" this data into different categories on the basis of ideas or similar features (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). As described by Creswell (2005), coding is "...the process of segmenting and labelling text to form descriptions and broad themes into the data" (p. 237). Creswell (2005) described the process of coding as follows: "make sense out of text data, divide it into text or image segment, label the segment with codes, examine the codes for overlap and redundancy and collapse these codes into broad themes" (p. 237).

The data was broken down into individual piles and coded according to the research question. Three phases of coding applied: 1) open 2) axial, and 3) selective (Neuman, 2006; Creswell, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The raw data was separated into small groups through open coding. For this purpose, data was continuously divided into categories and subcategories and compared with each other until all data was categorized (Neuman, 2006; Creswell, 2005). I gave labels to each theme. After open coding the second stage was axial coding. In the axial coding stage, codes are used instead of actual data. Axial coding helps in linking data with the research question and it also raises new questions too. According to Neuman (2006), "It reinforces the connections between evidence and concept" (p. 464). In axial coding, less important ideas are dropped and important ideas furthered in details. After doing the axial coding, I then performed selective coding in which I first identified differences and similarities between ideas and then finally selected one idea (Neuman, 2006). As Creswell (2005) stated, "describing and developing themes from the data consists of answering the major research questions and forming an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon through description and thematic development" (p. 241).

Researcher Self Disclosure

Being an immigrant from Pakistan with two school age children, I have experienced personally many issues related to the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education. In my everyday life before doing this MRP, I had also come across different Pakistani immigrant families in my social circle who have children in special education programs. These experiences are the main reasons why I decided to do research on the over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education in Toronto. My main

research question is: Are all the Pakistani immigrant children who are referred to special education in Toronto referred because of true disabilities or are they being over referred? To my knowledge, there is no prior research available on this topic. The primary focus of my study is to identify and examine the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents in Toronto with regard to the referral or over-referral of their children for special education.

Presentation of Data

One main point that emerged from my data is that almost all of Pakistani immigrant parents who participated in my study believe that their child's referral for special education is not based on a true disability. The parents believe their children are over-referred because their children have never before been referred for special education and/or because their children appear to function without any problem at home. I interviewed two Pakistani couples, Mr. & Mrs. Ahmed and Mr. & Mrs. Akram. In both cases, the husband and wife were interviewed separately on a one-on-one basis. I also interviewed a Pakistani mother who is working in a Toronto school as a special needs assistant.

Parents' attitude towards their child's referral

One theme throughout the data was the parents' attitude towards their child's referral. Mr. and Mrs. Ahmed, who moved to Canada one year ago, have a son who is in grade six. They both expressed the same feelings about the over-referral of their child for special needs classes. Their son was nine years old when they came to Canada and was in grade five at the time. According to them, he was "absolutely fine" back home and took part in extra-curricular activities. His teachers also made positive comments about him. Now he is in grade six in Toronto and has been referred for special needs classes. He has

been labeled as a slow learner. 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.

When I interviewed Mrs. Ahmed regarding her perception about the referral of her son, her attitude was similar to that of her husband. According to Mrs. Ahmed,

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 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 labelling. In fact, once a

child is labelled 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 is nine years old and in grade four. He has 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.

Mrs. Akram also said that her son has been referred for special needs classes as his teacher identified him as a slow learner. She said his grades have been continuously low and that he spends a lot of time in finishing his work. She stated,

I can't totally disagree with this decision but he is not a child who has any disability.

I also interviewed one Pakistani mother who is a special needs assistant in a Toronto school. According to the teacher,

Mostly, Pakistani parents deny the fact that their child has any problem. They always blame teachers and schools about the referral of their child for special education. They have lot of conflicts regarding this with the teachers. They don't want to accept the reality, but in Canada the referral process is very fair. For every

child, a referral committee is appointed and they have meetings with parents and there is little participation of the teachers in this decision.

Cultural and linguistic differences

Almost all the parents I spoke to mentioned cultural and linguistic differences as another big reason behind the referral of their child for special needs classes. Mr. Ahmed said that in his culture, the word deficiency connotes a physical or mental disability. To him, slow learning should not be considered as part of the category of special needs. The term special needs are not as acceptable in Pakistan as it is here in Canada. Mrs. Ahmed agreed and explained that,

Some kids can have a different pace of learning but it does not mean they have a deficiency or they are poor learners. My son was not paying full attention towards his studies but it does not mean he has any learning disabilities.

Mr. Ahmed and Mrs. Ahmed have two other children besides the son who is in special education. One is a girl and one is a boy. Both are older than him. These children don't have any problems at school. When the family first came to Canada, the Ahmeds told me, the son in question was doing well. He was a little mischievous and was not paying complete attention towards his studies. But they believed that in these ways he was just like an average student, not extraordinary but normal. Teachers complained about his mischief but they never identified him for special needs classes. In Pakistan, there are no special classes for students with learning disabilities. Mischievous behavior is considered normal in boys, as they are brought up differently from girls in Pakistani culture.

Mr. and Mrs. Ahmed said their son improved in the special needs classes because he got a chance to sit in front of the teacher and because the student-to-teacher ratio is

low. But they said that he always hates these classes because he loses his friendship with his peers in his other classes. Mr. Ahmed said that the special education classes helped in improving his son's English language problems and that he made some new friends. But Mr. Ahmed also observed that he became more shy because he felt ashamed of telling others about his special classes. In the beginning, when their son was assigned for special needs, Mr. Ahmed and his wife both tried to reason that he was not doing well because he was not working hard. They pressurized him verbally to work hard, but gradually they realized that the problem was not just a matter of working hard. Instead, it was his shyness in class that was the problem. Mr. Ahmed feels responsible for this as the following words indicate,

When we first came to Canada everything was new for us. We were very confused and this confusion affected our children as well. The school called us for our child's referral decision but I was very busy because I had to work morning till evening. I had two jobs at that time so my wife went there to the school. But her English is not good so she could not understand all the conversation going on there. She did not say anything. She just said, "Yes" to everything without understanding them properly.

Mrs. Ahmed remained silent because she perceives that her and her husband's lack of proficiency in English is one of their cultural drawbacks. They don't want to show others their deficiency in the English language because English is a language of pride in their country.

The second couple in my study also presented cultural and linguistic differences as a big reason behind the referral of their son for special needs classes. According to Mr. Akram,

The main reason behind my son's shyness is the respect of teachers in our culture. Because of that, he doesn't talk too much in the class. It is totally due to the cultural differences that he speaks less compared to the other kids in the class. Whenever my son feels alone or is in a new situation, he starts stuttering. Otherwise he is absolutely normal at home. With his brother he speaks absolutely fine. They talk in Urdu and he does not stutter at all. His learning problem is just because of his shyness and the behavior of his classmates towards him. He took a lot of time in making friends. He is a shy child but once he got familiar with the things he performed perfectly alright. He needs more time to adjust in a new situation but it does not mean he is a slow learner.

Mr. Akram said that when they came to Canada their son was just three years of age. When he went with his mother to her LINC classes, he was absolutely fine and spoke without stuttering. He started stuttering when he first went to school. The Akram was totally unaware of his stuttering at first, but gradually they noticed this change in his behavior.

The final participant that I interviewed, the Pakistani parent Marriam who is also a teacher, said that in her school there is only one Pakistani girl who has been referred for special needs classes. She said,

I was surprised when I saw her in the class because her parents never told me about this and I was unaware about it. She seems absolutely normal but she has a

learning disability and some children with learning disabilities don't have any visible symptoms, they seem okay. In our culture people don't accept these deficiencies. They never accept a learning disability as a true disability. They don't want to accept that there is something different about their child. They reason that their child is poor in learning because he is not working hard, but they don't accept the fact that he/she has some problem. Some children are gifted by birth just like some children have disabilities by birth. You can't change that or deny the facts by saying no. The learning disability is not caused due to any defect in the parents. If their child is sharp or if he is poor in studies there is no fault of the parents too. It is very normal. It is the chemistry of the mind. Parents usually say their children are not working hard, or that they are lazy. But in reality this is not true. There are certain theories of mind which prove these things.

Immigration

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 behavior, 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. As she 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.

Teacher's Attitude

According to the Pakistani parents I interviewed, teacher attitude is also a big reason behind the referral of their children. Mr. Ahmed stated that,

My son complained many times about the behavior of his teacher towards him being different from her attitude towards other kids. I never complained about the teacher's attitude because he is afraid that the situation will become worse.

The class teacher of Mr. and Mrs. Akram's son referred him for ESL and special needs classes. They stated that they are not sure whether the teacher gave their son any tests before referring him or not, as they just moved to a new house. Mr. Akram thinks

that the teacher did not give his son enough time to prove himself. He thinks his son did not get enough time to adjust in the class. Mr. Akram admitted that,

My son's ESL classes helped him a lot because in that class he made some Pakistani friends who helped him in getting familiar with the environment. He started playing with his new friends. And another change is that he gets one-on-one attention from his teacher. He likes his ESL teacher. These classes do not just help him in his English language but these also help in his learning and socializing.

The Akrams recently got their son's report card from the school and he has good grades. But he is still shy and they believe his teacher can not judge his performance properly. They believe his performance is not good due to his shyness not because of learning problems and his shyness is due to his speech problems. So actually his main deficiency is still unrecognized by his teacher.

The Pakistani parent/teacher Mariam in my study explained the teacher's role in the referral process in these words,

It is not just the teacher's decision to refer a child; there is a team behind this decision. Observations about the child are done and data is collected regarding the child's performance and a different staff is usually hired for this purpose. The teacher's job is to just recommend the child, not refer. They can't be biased. There is a board that makes the decision. It is teamwork.

She said further that there are few South Asian teachers at schools in Toronto. In her school, she is the only South Asian teacher. However, there are a large number of South Asian children in her school. This particular school is located in a community which consists of a large number of immigrant families.

Peer Attitude

Another important theme which emerged during my review of the data is peer attitude.

Regarding this theme Mr. Akram said,

My son can't speak properly so his classmates sometimes make fun of him. This makes him shy and he avoids talking in class. Due to communicating less in class, teachers misunderstand him as a slow learner. At home he talks to me about how he spent his day in school and he is always absolutely fine. He is very expressive at home and even with his mother and other two brothers. I often call his grand parents in Pakistan and he shares his class experiences with them. Last summer when my mother came to visit us he was totally normal and had no problem in his speech. He talked to them normally.

Mr. Akram further explained,

As he grew older he became more shy and asked many questions about why he speaks like this? Why he is not like the other children in the class? Other children's attitude is not good towards him. He improved because he tries to follow the teacher's comments, due to his respect for the teacher.

Mr. Akram also complained about his son's peers' attitude. He commented,

In junior classes my son was completely fine but as he grew older other students in the class didn't want to listen to him because of his speech problem. So he became shy. Other students ignored him and he had very few friends due to his shyness.

Mrs. Akram also mentioned how her son improved because of his special education classes and especially because of the opportunities the classes give him for making new friends. She said the classes help in improving his performance because teachers are

specially trained to teach children with special needs and Mrs. Akram arranged tuition for him. One of her neighbours teaches children after school, so she started sending him to these classes and a lot of other children from the neighbourhood also attend these classes.

She said,

He made new friends there and they speak Urdu. He talks in Urdu with his friends and teacher there. Also some of these children are in his class at school, and because of that now he has friends at school too. They all have the same background so they know each other's cultures very well. His grades improved and he performs well in the class now.

Recommendations

All parents gave suggestions regarding the improvement of referral process.

Mrs. Ahmed suggested that,

Teachers should not judge the students' performance just by test results. They should evaluate each child independently and give them some time to adjust in the new environment. Parent involvement is also very important. Most of the new immigrant parents don't know much about the Canadian systems 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. The schools can hire more teachers from different cultures so they can help in explaining issues and problems related to the children to the parents.

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 when they first come to Canada. For her part, Mrs. Akram recommends,

Schools should hire more multicultural teachers both in schools and in the committees who make decisions of referring these children for special education. The schools should involve parents more in their school activities like Eid or Dewali so children can know each other in a better way.

Mr. Akram always teaches his son to respect teachers because, in his opinion, teachers are like parents so it is important to follow them like real parents and elders at home. He recommends that,

Parents of culturally and linguistically diverse children need to receive education about the school system in Canada because sometimes the cultural norms of home and the present culture are not same. In our culture, not speaking in front of elders, respecting teachers and shyness is a part of the children's upbringing. But here in Canada, children are trained to be more independent. So parents' education along with children is very important so they can understand the system along with their children and can help their children to cope with the problems at school. Teachers also need to be educated to teach these children. They must have a deep understanding of the cultural norms of their students. I personally think more parent teacher interaction is needed.

The special education teacher I interviewed gave the following recommendation,

In schools we need more diverse staff for the diverse population of Toronto's schools. A person with the same cultural background can explain many things more efficiently, both to the parents and children, because he/she has the same

background. He/she will also be able understand and explain the problems in a more culturally aware manner. It is a reality that you don't want to hear about your child's disability from a person with a different background and you might think that the teacher has a bias against your culture. So it is good to have multicultural teachers in schools.

Referral Process

The parent/ teacher Marriam I interviewed explained the referral process in these words,

It is not a single person's decision. It takes six months to one year in deciding if the child has a special need or not Group discussions and tests are conducted and sometimes the child is referred to the doctor too. The committee which decides if the student should be referred for special education and determines the special needs of the child is called Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). The children are put into groups according to their problems. For example, children with learning disabilities are put in a class which usually has a ratio of one teacher and six to eight children. An individual learning plan [IEP] is developed at this stage because every child has a different pace of learning and this plan is according to the individual's needs. These children can follow their individual plans even if they are in a regular class-room. They can integrate with the whole class.

Synthesis

It was clearly stated by the Pakistani parents who participated in my study that they believe their children are over-referred for special education classes. The reasons,

according to their perceptions, are cultural and linguistic differences, teacher attitudes, peer attitudes, and immigration (See Table 2). 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. On the other hand, the participant who was both a mother and a teacher assistant in special needs classes said that it is not only a teacher's decision to refer a child for special needs classes. She explained that there is a referral committee who makes the decision according to the child's need. The committee observes the child for a long time and then refers him/her for special needs classes. This participant said that parents are informed about the decision before any final decision is made.

Discussion

The present study was developed for the purpose of understanding Pakistani immigrant parents' perceptions about the referral of their children for special needs classes in Toronto. There has been an absence of research on this topic to date. It was unclear that whether there is an over-referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special needs classes. The objectives of this research project were to investigate the following questions: 1) What do parents perceive as the reasons behind the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education? 2) Do parents perceive that the referrals are based on true learning or language disabilities? 3) Do parents perceive that Pakistani immigrant children are over-referred for special education in Toronto? 4) What reasons do parents perceive to be the cause of over-referral?

This project was an exploration of perception and attitudes of the parents of Pakistani immigrant children about their referral for special education. No hypotheses were used to predict the results of the research. Instead, a grounded theory approach based mainly on one-on-one interviews was used to find out the perceptions of Pakistani immigrant parents. The modified grounded theory approach provided a lot of rich, qualitative data. Within the transcripts, four primary themes were developed: 1) parents' attitudes towards the referral of their child for special education; 2) cultural and linguistic differences; 3) teacher attitudes and 4) peer attitudes. Recommendations from the parents for the improvement of referral process were also included. The findings were supported by existing literature on the referral of CLD children in many ways. (See Table 3)

Parents attitudes towards the referral of their child for special education

All Pakistani parents demonstrated almost the same reaction towards their child's referral. According to all four Pakistani parents' perceptions, their child does not have any disability. Rather, they perceive that he/she is just over-referred. 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 I interviewed 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. 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.

(See the descriptors used by the parents in Table 4)

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 labelling can affect them their whole life. The reasons which were presented by these parents behind the referral of their child are as follows.

Cultural and linguistic differences

The first and main reason that parents perceived as being behind the referral of their child has to do with cultural and linguistic differences. 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. 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.

The existing literature supports the idea that cultural and linguistic differences are a reason why CLD children are over-referred to special education classes. According to Barrera (1995), teachers sometimes judge CLD students' competence on the basis of race, sex, socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural differences, rather than on actual abilities. Barrera gives the examples of González (1993a; 1993b) and Mallory & New (1994), who discussed problems associated with unrecognized diversity and how it 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. The problem associated with culture and language depends on the degree of similarity or difference between the culture and the language used in the child's home environment and in the educational setting. Instead of helping in increasing their learning abilities, cultural and linguistic differences can affect immigrant children's school performance negatively (Agbenyega & Jiggets, 1999).

Teacher attitudes

All five parent participants considered teacher attitudes towards their child as a main reason behind his/her referral. According to them, most teachers in Toronto schools are unaware of Pakistani cultural norms. Due to this lack of familiarity with Pakistani culture, it is very difficult for teachers to understand the fundamental norms of the culture. Due to this lack of understanding sometimes childrens' actual disability is misdiagnosed or confused with other deficiencies. The existing literature also supports the idea that teachers' unfamiliarity with the culture and language of CLD children can become a major reason behind the referral of these children for special education. Olson

(2000) asserts that difference in students' and teachers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds is a major reason for the over-referral of the CLD children. They are misdiagnosed as special needs children and may be referred for special education classes. Good & Brophy (1973) discussed how teachers interact differently with CLD students, at times because they hold low expectations of these students. 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 or at the front of the classroom, and pay less attention to them. Not only there are student competencies misdiagnosed but their second language acquisition process is considered as their weakness. Brown (2004) quotes an example by Baca (1998) which shows that many teachers perceive the normal language difficulties that a child encounters while learning a second language as a learning disability. According to many parents' perceptions, teacher attitude is a main reason behind the referral of their child for special education because usually these teachers come from a different cultural background and are mostly unfamiliar with the culture of these children. Delpit (1995), points out that a teacher's familiarity with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of CLD children is very important. 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).

Peer attitude

Another main theme revealed in my data is peer attitude towards Pakistani immigrant children's differences. According to the participants in my study, the non-Pakistani classmates of their children would sometimes point at and mock them due to their

differences. Their peers from other ethnic groups would start singling them out with the result that usually the Pakistani children ended up having very few non-Pakistani friends. This lack of cross-cultural or cross-ethnic friendship makes these children feel segregated and alone. They mostly have friends from their own cultural background. In this study, the parents who participated mentioned their child's friendship in special needs classes or in other extra help classes with peers from the same culture. These same culture friendships help these children in adjusting to the new environment. These children are often misdiagnosed as learning disabled because of their differences and other peers in the class try to avoid them. Once these children are labeled as learning disabled or as slow learners, other kids start ignoring them. According to Stone & LaGreca (1990) and Wiener, Harris, & Shirer (1990), children with learning disabilities are more commonly rejected and ignored by their peers than children without learning disabilities.

Immigration

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. According to Brown (2004), several factors leading to Second Language Acquisition Associated Phenomena (SLAAP) emerge from the process of moving to a new country. These factors include cultural differences, feeling uprooted and isolated, change in socio-economic status, and language problems while adjusting to the new country (Barrera, 1995; Gonzalez, 2001). Brown (2004) also recognized that 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 childrens' school performance. 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.

Referral Process

Most of the Pakistani parents I interviewed showed 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. Only the mother, who is also a teacher assistant in a special needs classroom, mentioned the decision making process in detail but there is a big difference between the comments of parents and teacher/parent. She said it is not a single person's decision to refer a child to a special needs class, and she also explained that it takes six months to one year to decide whether a child has a special need or not. Group discussions and tests are conducted and sometimes the child is referred to a doctor as well. The Ministry of Education (2000) also explains how the Ontario Education Act has had a significant impact on parents, teachers, and other professionals associated with providing special education support to students in the province. The Individual Educational Plan (IEP) is developed on the recommendation of the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). The IPRC can not make any decision on their own; they have to invite parents to consult with them so that they can explain every reason behind a child's referral. In the case of children over 16 years of age, they consult with the child directly.

The reason behind the difference of opinion about the referral process between teacher/parent and other parents according to my observation is that the teacher/parent is

explaining the reasons according to what she heard and learnt in books about it. She has just started her job and does not have too much experience.

Limitations of the Study

My Pakistani background helped parent participants to freely express their feelings in front of me. In addition, the discussions were relatively easy since we shared the same language (Urdu). But still, in some places I felt that the participants hesitated a little in revealing their true feelings to me. In some parts of our discussions, they left some points unclear as they assumed I already knew what they were talking about.

One of the main limitations is the focus of this paper on the perception of Pakistani parents, even though I noticed a clear distinction between the perception of the parent who is also a teacher and the others. I was not able to include more teachers or immigrants of other nationalities in this study and thus I have not been able to look at the larger picture. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to include immigrants of other nationalities to see whether their experiences around the issue of referral match those of people of Pakistani background. Ideally, teachers and other school personnel should have been involved in this research so that I could have collected data that would have yielded a more balanced point of view. The sample size of the study was very small. More detailed results need to be obtained from a broader sample.

Future Research

A lot of research is available on the reasons behind the referral of CLD children for special education in USA but a very limited amount of research is available on the over-referral of CLD children in Canada. More research and exploration on these topics is needed. It is very difficult to find research on peer pressure and peer attitudes towards the

differences of CLD children. A future study should investigate what kind of impact peers can have on the referral of CLD children for special education. A larger sample would also help for more precise findings.

Recommendations

All the parents involved in this study gave suggestions for improvement of the referral process. A poignant comment from among my data was that the teachers should not judge a student's performance just by testing. Rather, they should evaluate each child independently and give them some time to adjust to the new environment. Moreover, parents feel that it is crucial that school personnel make sure that all important and related information is considered in the assessment process.

A method which has worked for one student may not work for another. It is very important to investigate in detail CLD children's backgrounds in order to prevent CLD children from being misdiagnosed as having language disabilities (Beier, 2006). Classroom teachers need to observe CLD children very carefully and then utilize appropriate strategies and resources to collect data properly about these children. They have to be very careful and patient. The collected data must portray CLD students in detail regarding language issues (Brown, 2004). Chamberlain (2005) recommends that the assessment personnel should support CLD students by conducting assessments with the best interests of these students in mind. Educators should focus on the learning environments in which CLD students underachieve rather than on trying to find deficiencies in these students.

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. 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 more 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.

More multicultural teachers should be hired and more should be included on the committees who make decisions around special education referral. Delpit (1995) observes that it is very important to have teachers with diverse backgrounds who are able to better understand the problems of CLD students. In Toronto, we clearly need a more diverse teaching staff to better reflect the diverse student population. In his article about special issues related to Asian pupils specifically in the UK, Tomlinson (1989) presents one solution to prevent the learning difficulties. The solution is the employment of more bilingual teachers and professionals, both in bilingual language programs and for dealing with Asian pupils referred for special education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main findings were that Pakistani immigrant children are unnecessarily referred for special education according to their parents' perceptions. Five reasons behind their referral were identified, including the parents' own attitudes towards their child's referral. 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.

This study also found the reasons behind the referral of Pakistani children. One main reason as mentioned by the parents is cultural and linguistic differences between the child and the dominant culture. Another reason according to the parents is teacher's attitudes and teacher's unfamiliarity with differences among CLD students. Peer attitude is also a big factor because when a child's abilities are underestimated at school, other children start avoiding them. According to parents' perceptions, immigration, low socio-economic status, parents' lack of involvement in and lack of awareness with the Canadian education system is also a major reason behind the referral of their children.

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 emphasised 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.

Table 1: Face Sheet

	Parents Name	Child's age	Gender	Grade	Special need	Stay in Canada
1	Mr. Ahmed	11 Yr.	Male	Six	Learning disability	One year
2	Mrs. Ahmed	11 Yr.	Male	Six	Learning disability	One year
3	Mr. Akram	9 Yr.	Male	Four	Learning disability	Six years
4	Mrs. Akram	9 Yr.	Male	Four	Learning disability	Six years
5	Marriam Teacher/Parent	-	Female	-	-	-

Table 2: Attitudes towards Pakistani immigrant children special needs according to the parent's perception

Attitudes towards referral	Parents perception	Teacher/parent perception
Parent's attitude	1. Shocked 2. Unfair 3. Totally disagree	1. Deny the decision 2. Don't want to accept child's special need
Teacher's attitude	1. Biased 2. Unfamiliar of children's diverse cultural and linguistic differences.	1. Can't be biased 2. Not the only person responsible for this decision.
Peer attitude	1. Making fun 2. Not friendly	
Referral process	1. Unfair referral. 2. No proper participation of parents. 3. No proper guidance 4. Not properly judged before referral.	1. Fair 2. Team work 3. Parents participation 4. Observation 5. Data collection before referral.

Table 3: Themes and Sub Themes emerged from the data

Themes	Sub Themes
Parent related reasons	1. Unaware of referral process 2. Language barriers 3. Low SES
Teacher related reason	1. Unawareness of Cultural differences 2. One on one interaction needed
Peer related reasons	1. Peer Pressure 2. No friends
Language and culture related reasons	1. New culture 2. New Language and accent 3. Unrecognized cultural and linguistic diversity.

Table 4: Descriptors used by parents for describing special needs

Positive	Negative
Normal	Mentally retarded
Never labelled	Physical deficiency
Absolutely fine	Handicapped
No problem at all	Slow learner
Performs well	Learning disable
	Attention deficiency
	Mental illness

Appendix A-Flyer

REFERAL OF PAKISTANI IMMIGRANT CHILDREN FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

You are invited to come and participate in a study on the referral of Pakistani immigrant children (ages six to twelve) for special education. You can participate if your child between six to twelve year is referred for special education.

Parent's interviews will be done, no longer than 30 to 60 minutes in length. All of our discussion will be CONFIDENTIAL in nature and real names will not be used in any reports. Your experiences, opinion and ideas are a valuable source of information. Please come and share them with us.

Note: The participation will be purely on voluntarily bases.

For more information please contact

AFSHAN AMJAD (647 968 8957)

Student Master's in Early Childhood Studies Ryerson University

Appendix B- Sample Consent Agreement

Master's Research Project School of Early Childhood Education Ryerson University

Study Title:

The referral of Pakistani immigrant (CLD) children for special education

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators:

This research is a part of the Master Research Paper, which is the requirement of Early Childhood Studies Master's programme at Ryerson University and Dr. Jason T. Ramsay, will be the supervisor of this research.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is

- To examine Pakistani immigrant parent's beliefs and values regarding special education in Canada.

- To investigate Pakistani parents perceptions about the referral of Pakistani immigrant children for special education.

Description of the Study:

This research will be an explanatory critique about the referral process of Pakistani immigrant children for special education.

Procedure:

- The interviews of the parents will be done on one to one basis.

- Interviews will be audio recorded or if you don't want to record your interview only field notes will be taken.

- Important points or observations will be recorded.

Location:

Interviews with parents will be conducted in the family homes: parents will choose the room.

All of the interview questions will be related to their feelings, beliefs and experiences about special education. Expected duration of the interview is 30 to 60 minutes.

What is Experimental in this Study:

None of the procedures (or questionnaires) used in this study are experimental in nature. The only experimental aspect of this study is the gathering of information for the purpose of analysis.

Risk or Discomfort:

You are free not to answer any particular question for any reason and can stop the interview at any time, with no negative consequences or effects on your relationships with you the researcher and Ryerson.

If you show unwillingness and/or show lack of interest in the tasks, all procedures will be terminated without reprimands or comments.

Benefits of the Study:

Potential benefits of the interviews will be the discussion of a topic, which is of the concern to Pakistani immigrant families.

Confidentiality:

The data (recordings of the interviews and field notes made during the tasks) will be used to prepare written reports. In the written reports, confidentiality will be maintained. For example codes will be used and there will be no identification of subjects. Places of residence and/or places of employment (schools) will not be recorded.

In December, 2010, all tapes will be erased and all field notes will be destroyed (shredded).

Incentives to Participate:

The participants will not be paid to participate in the studies.

Costs and/or compensation for participation:

There will be no costs associated with participation.

Voluntary Nature of participation:

Participation in this study is on voluntarily bases. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University. If you decided to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time. At any particular point in the study, you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop participation altogether.

Questions about the Study:

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact.

Dr. Jason T. Ramsay Ph. # 416 833 0500

Afshan Amjad ph. # 647 968 8957

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board

C/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation

Ryerson University

350 Victoria Street

Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

416-979-5042

Agreement

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

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