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Understanding how English Language Learners Immigrant Preschool Children and Families Navigate Early Childhood Special Education Programming

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**Understanding how English Language Learners Immigrant Preschool Children and
Families Navigate Early Childhood Special Education Programming**

by

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Table of Contents

	Page
List of Table	3
Chapter	
1. Introduction	4
Background of the Study	4
Rationale of the Study	5
Research Questions	6
Literature Review Description	7
Definition of Terms	7
2. Literature Review	10
Review of Literature Summary	10
English Language Learners	11
Immigrant Preschool Children and Families	14
Early Childhood Special Education Programming	16
3. Results	19
Conclusions	19
Discussion and Reflections	21
Recommendations for Research	22
Recommendations for Practice	23
References	24

List of Table

Table	Page
1. Summary of Results Presented in Samson and Lesaux (2009) from the U.S. Department of Education	13

Chapter 1: Introduction

This starred paper seeks to understand how English Language Learners immigrant preschool children and families navigate early childhood special education programming. Due to the United States of America's population becoming increasingly diverse, the need for early intervention services to serve English Language Learners immigrant preschool children and families have increased (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

Background of the Study

According to the United States 2020 census data, 57.8% of Census participants are white (not Hispanic or Latino), 18.7% are Hispanic or Latino, and 12.1% are Black or African American (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The white (not Hispanic or Latino) population has decreased 5.9% from the 2010 Census data (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The Hispanic or Latino population has increased, and the Black or African American population has remained the same. As the United States population increases in diversity, the heterogeneity of language and cultures will increase too. Students enrolled in the educational system from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade will continue to represent diverse cultures and language. The educational needs for these students will range from needing no additional support to special education placement.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides special education and related service supports to children who meet state and federal guidelines for disability qualifications (United States Department of Education, 2022). Under IDEA Part C and IDEA Part B children from birth through age 21 who meet eligibility requirements receive early intervention and/or special education and related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

When determining if a culturally and linguistically diverse learner qualifies for special education, criteria must be established to ensure standardized norms are followed. The standardized norms must support overall developmental stages. Children who are culturally and linguistically diverse learners have a multitude of factors that may impact their learning and development (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). These factors may cause a delay in identification for special education services (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Identification for special education services in early childhood can often be a delayed process for culturally and linguistically diverse learners as compared to their White peers (Sullivan, 2011).

Rationale of the Study

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) outlines the importance of supporting children with disabilities in the initial stages of development. IDEA ensures children with disabilities receive support in education to prepare them for all educational opportunities, future employment, and independent living later in life (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, E.S.S.A, 2015). Children who identify as English Language Learners (ELL) or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse learners (CLD) have a widening opportunity gap as compared to their White peers (Park & Thomas, 2012). Early childhood education provides children and their families an opportunity to develop an educational program of support (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, E.S.S.A, 2015). The educational program of support helps to decrease an ever-widening opportunity gap for marginalized and disproportionately underrepresented groups (Park & Thomas, 2012).

Identifying children who need developmental support through IDEA is facilitated through their school districts' early childhood special education program. The timeliness and

effectiveness in which children are identified may influence the perceived efficacy of the education support services by families. Parents need to understand typical developmental milestones to know when to contact the community for support in finding resources to assist in their child (ren)'s developmental growth (Bogin, 2006). Research has illustrated that children and families that receive early intervention have a higher developmental outcome than their counterparts who receive educational support later in development (Park & Thomas, 2012). Helping families identify what typical development looks, feels, and sounds like is a key factor in supporting families early. Community and local educational agencies help connect families and children to early childhood special education services (Bogin, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to deepen our understanding of how parents and families of immigrant preschool children navigate early childhood special education programming. This paper will explore how do these families identify and connect to support services. School districts and community partnerships may collaborate in the identification process for CLD learners (Bogin, 2006). Through the identification process parents can be connected to early childhood special educators. Identification and assessment resources can be developed to support teacher development and preparation, policies, procedures, and educational outcomes for young learners (Park & Thomas, 2012).

Research Questions

This starred paper is guided by this main question: How do recent English Language Learners immigrant preschool children and families navigate early childhood special education programming? The review of literature will focus on the sub questions below, specifically to be addressed in Chapter 3:

1. How are recent English Language Learners immigrant preschool children and families introduced and exposed to early childhood special education programming?
2. To what extent are families able to interpret and understand the interventions and practices delivered by service providers?
3. To what extent does the human services community assist newly arrived immigrant families with seeking early childhood special education services?

Literature Review Description

Research for this starred paper was procured from electronic journal databases, data from the Minnesota Department of Education, educational literature, early childhood organizations within the United States, and online scholarly searches. Key identifying words to help develop this starred paper were: English Language Learner, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learner, immigrant, early childhood special education, community support in early education, early intervention, and racial and ethnic diversity in special education. The main themes and identifying content in this review of literature encompasses identification of English Language learners within early childhood development, utilizing culturally applicable developmental milestones and expectations, community agencies that support early identification, and the historical implications of identifying marginalized and underrepresented student and family groups within special education.

Definition of Terms

Culturally and linguistically diverse learners (CLD)—Students enrolled in education programs who are either non-English proficient (NEP) or limited-English proficient (LEP). Student's whose home and community language are non-English (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

English Language Learner (ELL)—Individuals who have limited proficiency in the English language. (Ortiz & Artiles, 2002)

Early Childhood Special Education—Early intervention programs, supports, and related services for infants, toddlers, and preschool aged children with disabilities and their families until kindergarten entrance (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023)

Immigrant—Children and adults who have migrated to the United States who are from ethnic communities who have social, cultural, and linguistic norms that differ from mainstream culture (Fillmore, 1991).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—A law that provides free and appropriate public education, special education, and related services to individuals with disabilities within the United States of America (Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1997).

WIDA [Wisconsin (WI), Delaware (D), and Arkansas (A)]—Research tools and assessments for families and education professionals to support language development for multilingual learners (Board of Regents, 2022)

Early Intervention—Supplemental instructional services to support students who are below grade level requirements get to a level of educational understanding to actively participate in general education activities (Ortiz & Artiles, 2002).

Early Childhood Screening—A developmental screening program that looks at early childhood learners (age 3 through kindergarten) in the areas of health (hearing, vision, height, weight, medical coverage, immunization records), gross and fine motor, cognitive skills, speech

and language, social emotional development in the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020).

Individualized Education Programs (IEP) –A legal document developed in collaboration between the school and the family to identify the areas of needs within special education in instruction, supports, and services for the student’s academic success (IDEA, 2004).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this review of literature is to examine the process immigrant children and their families utilize when needing special education. In addition, this paper will address who are English Language Learners, immigrant preschool children and families, what is early childhood special education programming, and what can service providers do to support culturally and linguistically diverse learners and their family through the special education evaluation process.

Review of Literature Summary

The review of literature within this chapter indicates that English Language Learners are under identified for special education programs during the early years of development birth to age 5 (Sullivan, 2011). Students who receive early intervention services have higher developmental outcomes as they do not have to unlearn their self-developed coping strategies and relearn and implement researched based intervention practices (Konstantin et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2008; Ziviani et al., 2014). Community agencies support families in connecting with a state's platform for identifying children with a disability (United States Department of Education, 2017a).

The research from the literature review outlined early childhood educators and related service professionals utilize teacher preparation programs to support early intervention services (Reichow et al., 2017). Early intervention professionals should be from diverse backgrounds to allow for a wide array cultural perspective (Romero, 2014). Title VI ensures all families have access to language assistance (United States Department of Justice, 2023). Parents from diverse cultures and heritage bring strong skills. Those skills may not be adaptive for the larger social ecology which their children navigate (Jung et al., 2012). IDEA outlines parent participation as a

right and the public agency must utilize all tools necessary to ensure parents understand the individualized education program proceedings (United States Department of Education, 2017a).

Educators and community agencies working with families during the special education process who are English language learners should work collaboratively (PACER Center, Inc., 2023). Steps should be taken to support parents and families before, during, and immediately following any special education team meeting to ensure participation (United States Department of Education, 2017a). Following the qualification of a student for special education services the education professionals need to continue to center the cultural and linguistic background of the student to allow for the highest impact of special education services (Zerfas, 2016). Parents connect with community agencies, a referral is made to school district officials, school officials connect with families, if language supports are needed then they are attained, an assessment is completed, the school district and family work together to develop an individualized program if the student qualifies for special education services (PACER Center, Inc., 2023).

English Language Learners

According to the United States Department of Education 1.6% of public education students enrolled in special education identify as English Language Learners (United States Department of Education, 2022). Recent literature suggests ELL students are underrepresented in special education during the early years of development birth to age 6 (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Early identification allows students to receive interventions at the onset of need (Riffel, 2011). ELL students begin receiving special education services two to three years after their non-ELL counterparts (Artiles et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011). Studies have outlined that ELL students are over identified starting at third grade (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Students who are identified for

special education services and are ELL are less likely to graduate with a diploma than students who are non-ELL and receive special education services (United States Department of Education, 2022). Early identification helps support a child's development, growth, and learning (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012).

Early identification helps children and families receive early intervention services, which help support growth and development (Konstantin et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2008; Ziviani et al., 2014). Children who receive early intervention services for developmental delays have higher future capabilities (Bailey & Wolery, 1992). Early identification and planning support child and family outcomes no matter the level of the delay (Bailey & Wolery, 1992). Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners are not receiving early intervention services and supports they need to make developmental and academic growth in school settings (Sullivan, 2011). Educators may consider children's dual language acquisition as the reason for low academic performance during the early years of development and not refer an ELL student for early evaluation for special education services (Munoz et al., 2014; Pérez et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2011).

Research studies examining ELL students receiving special education services indicate students are not being identified during the early years of development birth to age 6 (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). Samson and Lesaux (2009) utilized direct assessments, question analysis, and the public data from the 1998-1999 school year Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort to determine the degree to which ELL students were receiving services in special education. The study determined that by spring of the 1998-1999 school year there was a clear difference between ELL students identified and receiving special education services. The sample consisted of 22,782 students enrolled in kindergarten nationally of those students, 2,470 were

ELL students and 8,517 were native English speakers. Table 1 outlines the percentage of ELL and native English-speaking children who were identified and received special education.

Table 1

Summary of Results Presented in Samson and Lesaux (2009) from the U.S. Department of Education

Grade Level	Percentage of Language Minority Learners identified and receiving Special Education services	Percentage of Native English-Speaking Children identified and receiving Special Education services
Kindergarten	4.03	5.50
First Grade	8.48	8.99
Second Grade	16.31	12.76

This study shows that ELL students were under-identified in kindergarten and first grade for special education services compared to their native speaking peers. ELL students who were later identified as needing special education had reading proficiency scores that were significantly less than their ELL peers who did not need special education. ELL students who needed special education had reading proficiency scores similar to their native English-speaking peers who needed special education. This data outlines the inconsistencies in how ELL students are identified for special education services (Samson & Lesaux, 2009).

A study conducted by Artiles et al. (2005) demonstrated that ELL students were under identified in grades kindergarten through fifth. By the sixth grade they were overrepresented. When ELL students were compared with students who were proficient in English, they were under identified until grade three after which they became overrepresented by the fourth grade. This study supports the Samson and Lesaux (2009) study which outlines the underrepresentation of ELL students in early years of development birth to age 6.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that children with a developmental delay receive early intervention services (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Primary sources are required to make a referral through the Help Me Grow system within seven days after a developmental concern has been identified in early learners (birth to age 6) (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). The early intervention services are provided free and immigration status will not limit a family's ability to access services. The federal government started Part C services to enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Provide early intervention services to reduce the need for special education programming in later development (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Provide tools and strategies to support families in meeting the needs of their students with disabilities (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012).

Immigrant Preschool Children and Families

Many immigrants arrive in the United States and are housed in lower income neighborhoods, employed at below living wage jobs, and interact in disproportionate social institutions (Jung et al., 2012). Reuben Hill, the founder of family-stress theory, outlines the impact stressful family moments can have on the parents and members of the family unit (Patterson, 2002). Family members within a family unit have roles and expectations. When a family has a stressor, member roles may shift which can have negative impacts on the family system (McLoyd, 1998). These stressors often have a deeper impact for immigrant parents who are learning to navigate educational and employment systems in addition to another language (Garcia Coll & Marks, 2009). This can cause strain on the parent's mental health, employ them

to use stricter discipline, utilize low language usage, and engage less in learning activities (Fuller et al., 2009; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Kohen et al., 2008).

The migratory patterns and historical commitments of immigrants impact the early development of social, emotional, and academic skills of their children (Jung et al., 2012). Jung et al.'s research outlines the impact external factors can have on child development. The early learning practices of Latino immigrants indicated that reading to their child(ren) occurred less frequently when compared to Caucasian's with children their same age. Chinese and South Asian immigrants were identified to place a stronger emphasis on reading and continue to increase this practice as the child(ren) grow in age. Latino immigrants showed high levels of social-emotional development at times higher than their Caucasian peers. Asian immigrants demonstrated lower baseline social-emotional functioning that increased over time. This research outlined how differing cultures and heritage support or slowly develop early learning skills (Jung et al., 2012)

This study illustrates the impact heritage, culture, and acculturation can have on early learning development. Mexican born mothers demonstrated higher levels of in-home arguments the longer they lived in the United States. Chinese mothers started with elevated levels of in-home arguments as a baseline then decreased the amounts of arguments the longer, they lived in the United States. Having strong baseline supports such as social-emotional functioning for Mexican immigrants is a positive trend but with other essential early development skills decreasing overtime such as reading these skills are not adaptive for the new social ecology. The new social ecology requires a solid foundation in social and academic skills (Jung et al., 2012).

Early Childhood Special Education Programming

Early childhood special education (ECSE) was founded from Early Childhood Education (ECE) which was developed from nursery schools which focused on education, the social-emotional development of young learners, and provided information and resources for parents (Peterson, 1987). Many families with young children with disabilities prior to ECSE services fought to keep their children in their home (Reichow et al., 2017). In 1972, federal programs required Head Start to have 10% of their enrollment be students with a disability (Reichow et al., 2017). Head Start became one of the first public ECE programs to service students utilizing an inclusive model (Reichow et al., 2017). In 1965, under P.L.89-313 states received financial reimbursement for educational services provided for children with disabilities, birth to age 20 (Reichow et al., 2017). The Education of the Handicapped (EHA) helped provide states with funding to support the identification, assessment, and service delivery of students birth to age 3 (Reichow et al., 2017). Following legislation teacher preparation programs, community services, and professionals who serviced students with disabilities developed skills to service children based on their development (Reichow et al., 2017).

Early childhood special education is programs and services that support children birth to age 6 who have a disability or developmental delay. Early childhood special education and intervention improves the developmental outcomes and trajectories of birth to 6-year-old learners with a disability who are of low socioeconomic status or speak a language other than English (Diamond et al., 2013). ECSE programming can be comprised of speech and language support, fine and gross motor therapy, adaptive services, social-emotional programming, and cognitive services based on the individual student and family needs. Under the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) young children are provided intervention services if they have a developmental delay (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Services are provided free of charge and regardless of immigration status (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012).

Early Childhood Service Providers

Early childhood service providers provide direct and indirect services to students who qualify for special education services and related services. The service providers are early childhood special educators. These educators attend accredited programs to help them learn how to provide research based early intervention services (Reichow et al., 2017). Early childhood service providers must be on teams of professionals with diverse backgrounds and cultures to provide a deeper understanding and support for immigrant families (Zerfas, 2016).

Community Resources and Supports

All primary referral sources are required to refer children birth to age 5 as soon as possible following the identification of developmental concerns but no later than 7 days in the state of Minnesota through Help Me Grow (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Help Me Grow is a Minnesota interagency tool in correspondence to IDEA to identify and connect children with a disability and their families to evaluation, intervention, and support services (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). After a referral is made in the Help Me Grow system, it is sent to the local school district where the student lives. Primary referral sources are hospitals, physicians, parents/guardians, childcare and early learning programs, education agencies and school districts, public health facilities, human services agencies, healthcare organizations, facilities and providers, public agencies and child welfare staff, unhoused family shelters, and domestic violence shelters and agencies (Minnesota Department of Education,

2012). These community organizations, stakeholders, and families are pivotal in ensuring children receive early intervention services.

Community agencies that support families with diverse languages and heritages can refer children who have been identified with a developmental concern. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 13166 require all recipients of federal funds to have a language access plan to effectively meet the needs of those who speak a language other than English (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023).

Chapter 3: Results

This starred paper is adding to the research on connecting ELL students with early intervention services as the United States population is becoming increasingly diverse with more languages being spoken in schools. This starred paper also examines how English Language Learner immigrant families access early childhood special education services. A further examination of the grade in which ELL students are over identified and under identified for special education services. This paper also examines what human services support immigrant families in connecting with early childhood special education services. The results of this starred paper will help early childhood special educators and community agencies increase immigrant family's access to special education services for their children who have an identified developmental concern.

Conclusions

Chapter 2 literature review was guided by the following three questions. These three questions will be answered below.

1. How are recent English Language Learners immigrant preschool children and families introduced and exposed to early childhood special education programming?

Primary referral sources connect with parents in various settings (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). The referral source sends a developmental referral through the state's child find to meet the IDEA federal child find requirement (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). The child's local school district connects with the parent regarding all referrals for children birth to age 5 (Minnesota

Department of Education, 2012). Information is provided to the parent in the language that allows for the parent to fully participate throughout the referral process (United States Department of Education, 2017b). The referral is completed and if the student qualifies for services, they are provided free regardless of immigration status (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). Immigrants are exposed to early childhood special education through primary referring agents who work directly with immigrant English Language Learning families.

2. To what extent are families able to interpret and understand the interventions and practices delivered by service providers?

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 13166 ensure local agencies who receive federal funds have a language policy in place to support families who speak a language of other than English access educational support services (Minnesota Department of Education, 2023). The PACER Center provides support for parents and educational staff for effectively working with an interpreter throughout the special education process (PACER Center Inc. 2023). Educators should have a plan of action before the meeting. Educational team members need to develop a plan for utilizing plain language during the meeting. Engaging with the parent in their native language throughout the evaluation process with an interpreter ensures the parent can be an active member of the special education process. Clear expectations of the interpreter need to be communicated to the interpreter and family members during all team meetings. Seating arrangements during the meeting should allow for the family to be an active participant while adhering to cultural needs.

Following the meeting, ensure parents and interpreter can provide feedback to the team (PACER Center Inc. 2023).

3. To what extent does the human services community assist newly arrived immigrant families with seeking early childhood special education services?

The human services community is the primary referral source for connecting parents to the state child find system (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013).

The state child find system helps connect parents to local school districts who support families who may have a child(ren) with a developmental delay. The state and community agencies are direct connectors to supporting immigrant families in getting early intervention services.

Discussion and Reflections

The author's perspective on the topic is presented in this section of the article. The findings from chapter two along with the author's personal experience, are how the author developed the conclusions.

Immigrant English Language Learners and their families need staff who have a cultural understanding of their cultural background and developmental expectations. Research outlined the importance of having educators from diverse backgrounds on the early intervention team. Utilizing practices that highlight student strengths, needs, culture, and linguistic abilities to assess if they need early intervention supports helps support families receive early intervention services.

Early intervention services help support development. When immigrant English Language Learners are not able to access this vital support, their child may continue to be in an

every widen opportunity gap. Early childhood education provides parents and children with an opportunity to build a strong foundation of pivotal knowledge practices to ensure they continue to attain gains academically. The use of cultural navigators throughout the evaluation process helps ensure the student and family's culture are considered when determining developmental abilities, expectations, and educational supports.

Recommendations for Research

Extended research on how to help immigrant English Language Learners access early intervention services is needed. Research around early childhood educators' professional development on the differences for cultural and linguistic expectations for development amongst each community's immigrant population is needed. A deeper understanding of how immigrant English Language Learners access primary referral sources is needed. The literature illustrated opportunities for further growth and some recommendations for future research studies are listed below.

1. During the prereferral process how are primary referral sources and educators utilizing the student's strengths and needs, educational and social concerns, medical history, cultural and linguistic background to develop an immigrant English Language Learners developmental need (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005).
2. How is documentation collected of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in multiple settings prior to a referral for early intervention services (Skiba et al., 2008).
3. How do we use alternative assessments (performance and portfolio assessment, curriculum-based measurements, rubrics, dynamic assessments, learning logs and student journals, think-alouds, and self-evaluation techniques (Salend & Garrick

Duhaney, 2005)) aside from standardized assessments in supporting early identification for early intervention services for immigrant English Language Learners (Skiba et al., 2008).

Recommendations for Practice

Early childhood educators need ongoing professional development around the cultural and linguistic expectations of immigrant English Language Learners within their community. Educators need to understand each immigrant community may have strengths, but they may not align with larger social ecology's goals (Jung et al., 2012). Suggestions for how service providers and early childhood educators supporting immigrant English Language Learners and their families can access early intervention are listed below.

1. Professional development that allows early education service providers to better understand the immigrant English Language Learner population in their community (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005).
2. High quality pre-referral process to develop a deep understanding of the child's strengths, needs, and cultural expectations (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005).
3. A structured process to ensure parents understand what early intervention services are, how can the school support educational development, and that immigrant parents understand how to participate and lead the early intervention process (PACER Center Inc., 2023).

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