

**Probing the Pattern of Asian American Underrepresentation  
in Special Education:  
Educator Perceptions of Students and Parents**

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## ABSTRACT

While other minority groups in the United States tend to be overrepresented in special education, Asian American students are persistently and significantly underrepresented—a phenomenon that is not yet fully understood. This study endeavors to answer the questions of if educators perceive Asian American students and/or parents as different from other groups in the context of special education designation processes, and if so, how their perceptions of these groups differ. By investigating educator-parent and educator-student interactions in this way, my study sheds light on what might be occurring during intermediary steps in special education designation processes that could contribute to the underrepresentation of Asian Americans. Its data are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 14 educators in a public-school system with a high percentage of Asian Americans. It finds that educators do have distinct perceptions of Asian American students and parents in the context of special education designation processes. While most of the themes identified indicate trends that would contribute to underrepresentation, other do not. Most pervasively, educators see language barriers as presenting significant hurdles to identifying student needs, providing appropriate services, and communicating with parents regarding special education. Also, educators sometimes perceive Asian American students as more hesitant or more prone to having certain disabilities than other students. Educators view a number of distinct concerns, values, and beliefs as influencing Asian American parents. Notably, valuing educational achievement and preferring increased effort over special education are seen as contributing to parental resistance toward special education, and Asian American communities are identified as significant social influences which warrant educator sensitivity around issues of special education. At the same time, educator-identified trends of parents trusting in educators and valuing compliance may contribute to support of special education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Special education<sup>1</sup> in the United States serves 6.5 million children and youth between the ages of three and twenty-one, accounting for approximately 13% of all public-school students (“The Condition of Education” 2016). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975—now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA—is the most recent major legislation guiding special education policy in the United States. In its section pertaining to school-aged children, its stated purpose is to ensure a free and appropriate public education for all children with disabilities, to protect their rights and the rights of their parents, and to ensure that the education of children with disabilities is effective (Subpart B of the Part A Regulations).

As well-intentioned as such guarantees of special education may be, there is significant concern about the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. African Americans, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives are consistently overrepresented in all special education categories, while Hispanics tend to be slightly underrepresented in most disability categories but overrepresented in others (including learning disabilities). Numerous studies have examined these trends, including the historical precedent of minority students being redirected into special education classrooms on the heels of school integration, and the causes and implications of these trends today. Asian Americans, however, are consistently and significantly underrepresented in special education across disability categories (see *Historical Background* in the Literature Review for more information; Fujiura et al. 1998; Fierros and Conroy 2002; Parrish 2002; Losen and Orfield 2002; Oswald et al. 2002). Far fewer studies have concerned themselves with this trend. Likewise, while an increasing number of studies

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted or specified, the term “special education” denotes not a separate space, but systems of supports and services (Losen and Welner 2002).

have focused on assessing and disproving the pervasive stereotype that Asian Americans have superior intelligence and abilities to other racial groups, far fewer have considered the effects of this stereotype on special education designation for Asian American students, or considered the real sociocultural influences that serve to inform and/or reinforce aspects of the stereotype. In short, the pattern remains un-probed.

In the effort to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students, we must seek to understand all aberrations in representation, including underrepresentation—perhaps there are simply relatively fewer Asian American students who could benefit from special education, but perhaps there are those who would benefit from it but remain unserved. I am not making a normative judgement on special education as good or bad nor on whether there should or should not be more Asian Americans in special education. Rather, I approach this trend from the standpoint of simply wondering why it exists and persists. Research has shown that social processes contribute significantly to the overrepresentation of other minorities, so it follows that social processes may also contribute to underrepresentation. Special education implicates many actors who make judgements and decisions based on their perspectives, experiences, and goals. The three primary actors involved in informing whether or not a student receives special education are students, parents, and educators, with parents and educators acting as the key decision makers. Data collected from Asian American populations help to shape an understanding of how they view disabilities generally and begin to illuminate their experiences with educators regarding special education. However, tapping into educators as informants on Asian American students and parents in the context of special education designation has not, until now, been done. Thus, my research questions are whether, and if so how, educators perceive their experiences with Asian American students and/or parents in the context of special

education designation processes as distinct from their experiences with members of other racial/ethnic groups.

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with public school educators in a small east coast city with a significant population of Asian Americans, primarily of Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese origin (see the Data and Analytic Approach section for more demographic details). My sample of fourteen educators included regular education teachers, a special education teacher, an English language learners (ELL) teacher, a vocational-technical teacher, a guidance counselor, and a school psychologist. The school levels in which they work ranged from elementary through high school. I asked them about special education designation processes in general, patterns of parent and student behavior in general, and patterns of parent and student behavior by a number of categories, including race/ethnicity. In this way interviews were designed to see whether or not Asian Americans are perceived distinctly without implying by the interview structure that they must be.

I found that educators consistently identify language barriers with this group as presenting significant hurdles to recognizing student needs, providing appropriate services, and communicating with parents regarding special education. Asian American students were sometimes noted to be more hesitant during these processes or more associated with certain disability categories, namely mutism and autism. Although some educators identify Asian American parents as generally not initiating in the designation process, the majority did not generalize them as more resistant to special education than other groups. Academic wellbeing concerns and trust between parents and educators were noted as contributing to either parental support or parental resistance to special education. Values and beliefs regarding academic achievement, effort, and mental health were linked to resistance to special education, while

valuing compliance was linked to support of it. Finally, Asian American communities were identified as wielding significant social influence which warrants educator sensitivity around issues of special education.

This thesis proceeds as follows. First, a literature review will provide historical background, explain the social construction of disability, address the roles of parents and educators, and discuss the intersection of English language learning and special education. It will also explore research on the model minority stereotype, as well as Asian American constructs of success and attitudes toward disability which may inform attitudes toward special education. The sections following the literature review present my research questions, data sources, and analytic approach. Finally, my results are presented, followed by a conclusion summarizing them in relation to my research questions, a description of my study's limitation, a discussion of my findings in conversation with existing literature, and suggestions for further research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Historical Background*

Historically, minority groups tend to be represented in disability categories at greater rates than non-minority students, with the exception of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, who in fact rank consistently and significantly lower in disability rates than whites; trends in overrepresentation can in large part be traced to social and historical forces and experiences (Fujiura et al. 1998; Fierros and Conroy 2002; Parrish 2002; Losen and Orfield 2002; Oswald et al. 2002). In 2008, national statistics indicated that 12.04% of white students were disabled, compared to 15.18% of American Indian/Alaskan natives, 14.99% of African Americans, 10.42% of Hispanics, and only 6.03% of Asian Americans (Zhang et al. 2014). Hispanics are represented less than whites, but by a much smaller difference than that between whites and Asian Americans. Furthermore, in a breakdown by learning disability, intellectual disability, and emotional disturbance (three major disability categories), Hispanic representation surpasses white in the category of learning disabled, while Asian Americans maintain significantly lower representation across categories (Zhang et al. 2014).

History provides a precedent for concern about the intersection of race and disability. Disability has historically been conflated “with other identity factors and the ideology of normalcy,” and race and disability share similar histories of segregation and exclusion facilitated by the educational system (Reid and Knight 2006: 18). Until *Brown v. Board* (1954), school segregation was a legal and prevailing policy in the United States. With the integration of schools, special education classrooms became a space for continuing racial segregation under a different name (Fierros and Conroy 2002; Losen and Welner 2002).

Legislation has since targeted overrepresentation with mixed/unclear success (Glennon 2002). For instance, students deemed disabled (by that or other names, i.e., handicapped or mentally retarded) were largely consolidated into completely separate classrooms, if not separate facilities, until the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed in 1975 (Losen and Orfield 2002). The stated purpose of IDEA is as follows:

- (a) To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living;
- (b) To ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected;
- (c) To assist States, localities, educational service agencies, and Federal agencies to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and
- (d) To assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities.  
(Subpart B of the Part A Regulations)

As part of this legislation, the definition of children with disabilities excluded those whose learning problems resulted primarily from economic, environmental, or cultural disadvantages (Parrish 2002). This represents an effort to compel the educational system to meet children at whatever levels of learning and with whatever background they arrive at school, without assigning disability labels at the first sign of learning problems. This historical precedent alone, particularly considering its recency in history, demands vigilance in examining both the systems whereby students become designated as disabled and the ramifications of this labeling.

From an immigrant population of 491,000 (representing 5% of the U.S. foreign-born population) in 1960 to 12.8 million (representing 30% of the U.S. foreign-born population) in 2014, the Asian American population in the United States has grown significantly since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act removed national-origin quotes from Asian

countries (Zong and Batalova 2016). As a result, 74% of Asian American adults are first-generation Americans, about half of whom say they do not speak English very well (Taylor and Cohn 2012). Thus, a sizable population of Asian Americans has arrived in the United States during or on the heels of significant special education legislation and policy change. Special education in China, Vietnam, and India, which are significant countries of origin in the U.S. generally and in my research location specifically, is relatively nascent compared to in the United States, a topic further addressed in the subsection *Comparison with Special Education in Countries of Origin*. This means that while residents of the United States in general have faced and adjusted to these changes, many Asian Americans have faced them without country-of-origin precedent and alongside the many changes and challenges that accompany immigration.

#### *On Terminology: Disability and Special Education*

This section and the next one will attempt to make some essential terminological and conceptual distinctions that will enable better engagement with this paper as a whole. First, a student with a disability and a student receiving special education can generally be understood as one in the same. When a school identifies a student as belonging to one of IDEA's 13 disability categories (listed in the next paragraph), all of which include the requirement that educational performance is adversely affected by the disability, they qualify for special education ("The Condition of Education" 2016). However, should they—or rather, their parent—refuse special education services, they also reject the school's disability identification, and thus the student does not have a disability in the eyes of the educational system. In this way, having a disability and receiving special education is synonymous. Of course, it is possible that a parent could consider their child disabled and personally accept the identification while refusing to formally

accept special education, or believe that their child is disabled despite the school's findings to the contrary. In such cases the student is, according to the school system, and therefore also to statistical sources, not counted among the disabled.

Furthermore, it is generally safe to assume that discussion about student disabilities concerns mental disabilities more than physical ones, an unfortunately yet necessarily simplified dichotomy. According to stats from the U.S. Department of Education, specific learning disabilities account for 35% of students with disabilities in the U.S., speech or language impairment for 21%, other health impairment (encompassing a range of diagnoses from ADHD to asthma) for 13%, autism for 8%, intellectual disability for 7%, developmental delay for 6%, emotional disturbance for 5%, and hearing impairment, orthopedic impairment, visual impairment, multiple disabilities, deaf-blindness, and traumatic brain injury accounting for the remaining 5% ("The Condition of Education" 2016). While this is not an indication of the comparative severity of the disabilities or the intensity of special education necessitated by them, it does indicate that the most common disabilities are linked to mental rather than physical conditions or issues.

#### *Disability: Medical versus Social Conceptualization*

As the preceding terminological clarification implies, disability occupies a sort of liminal space where it is physically and mentally linked but also socially constructed. Understanding these conceptualizations of disability is essential for understanding how social processes are a critical component of producing trends in disability designation.

Partly as a result of legislation that sought to identify disability as a medical issue to counter the practice of clumping disadvantaged children who struggled in school into the

category of “disabled,” education policy and practice today largely reflect the medical conceptualization of disability that identifies fault and limitation within the student and not as a product of a society designed to accommodate normalcy (Rieser 2012). Thus, as focused as educational institutions are on identifying students’ problems on a personal, psychological level, they rarely take into consideration the myriad social processes that facilitate the identification process (Collins 2013).

However, these processes are comprised of many layers of individuals and interactions, bringing together teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, guidance counselors and parents.<sup>2</sup> They are also more broadly socially influenced. For instance, the so-called autism epidemic, whereby autism identification has both spiked in quantity and also occurred at increasingly young ages, has been largely attributed to social awareness: in California, for instance, a child living near a child diagnosed with autism is more likely to be diagnosed with autism themselves than if they did not live near that child because of information diffusion (Liu et al. 2008).

Combining this knowledge with that of the previous section, it is clear that since disability designation in schools is premised on the acceptance of special education, and the acceptance or rejection of special education is the result of social processes wherein actors interact and make pivotal decisions, disability in schools is largely socially constructed. The following section will detail how educators, parents, and the relationships between educators and parents are implicated in special education designation processes. This will prepare us to

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes parents seek the advice or evaluations of medical experts because they want to confirm or contend the findings of the in-school evaluation. Sometimes outside evaluation is necessitated when desired services are beyond the scope of the school, for example, a parent wants to medicate their child for ADHD. Regardless of whether the findings of a medical expert indicate disability, a parent still may refuse special education. Because such experts are a potential but not necessary contributor to these processes, I do not consider evaluating their role as within the scope of this thesis.

consider how educators working with Asian American students and parents might approach or experience special education designation processes differently than with other groups.

### *Educators, Parents, and Educator-Parent Interactions*

As previously discussed, conceptualizing disability as strictly medicalized risks disregarding or minimizing the vital impact of parents and educators on special education designation processes. Parents and educators are “two groups of adults who have as their immediate common interest the...student group” (Jenkins and Lippitt 1951: 40). However, not only do they interact with the student at different times and in different contexts, and may have vastly different ideas about what is best for the student, but they also “have major differences in the way they look at their common relationship” (1951: 50). This complex social relationship has broad implications for students’ education—including, if not especially, whether special education is a part of it. For example, research in Italy has shown that “blame games” of mutual accusation, implicating issues of compliance, morality, and authority, are significant to the relationships between adults involved in the lives of children with ADHD (Frigiero et al. 2013). The nature of these relationships in turn influences student experiences.

Some research on the intersection of race and special education conceptualizes parental involvement as officially confined to the meetings in which the educators and parents discuss the school evaluation and recommendations. This quintessential meeting is thus framed as the primary zone for potential parental influence, and as more or less a front to reaffirm the decisions about students that have already been made by the school (for instance, see Lytle 1988). However, more recent research, like the ADHD study referenced above, serves to highlight that this is a vast oversimplification.

Parents are pivotal influencers and decision makers in special education designation processes. Higher education levels, higher socioeconomic status, and in some cases the race/ethnicity of parents contribute to greater ability, in terms of knowledge, time, and resources, to advocate for children, whether it be for them to be placed in higher level classes or to receive desired special education services (Lewis and Diamond 2015). For instance, should minority parents be suspicious of or concerned about school diagnoses or proposals, their ability to legally challenge diagnoses or to seek other professional opinions is often more limited than it would be for white parents due to socioeconomic differences and power dynamics (Collins 2013; Losen and Welner 2002). Immigrant parents who lack proficiency in English may be limited in their ability to understand what the school is advising for their child and in their ability to effectively advocate for their child (Chamba and Ahmad 2000). Social class also influences how fully parents are able to comply to educators' requests, e.g., in providing specific support to children at home (Lareau 1987). The implementation of such home support may influence whether special education services in-school are necessary and/or successful.

In terms of educators, research has shown that vagueness, inconsistency, and subjectivity in the processes whereby students are deemed "disabled" create ample space for the influence of educator stereotyping and bias. There is extensive and longstanding evidence of blame for children's learning struggles being placed on the parent(s) and child, and on the context of home life, instead of being placed on school experiences; yet, the school as a social space must also be considered in evaluating student performance (Lytle 1988; Oswald et al. 2002). Educators make assumptions about parental involvement, disorder or lack of nurturing in the home life, and the ability or inability of children to change, learn, and advance, while the classroom context may go unconsidered; these assumptions and judgments inform teacher referrals and psychologist

evaluations (Lytle 1988; Harry et al. 2002; Harry and Klinger 2006). Furthermore, having certain expectations of students has been shown to lead to self-fulfilling prophecy effects in terms of student performance (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968).

Racial and cultural diversity creates even greater opportunity for educator subjectivity. For instance, Harry and Klinger (2006) find evidence of racial bias in the nuances of educators' manner and tone toward students and in the ways in which educator discomfort (for example, in teaching students of different cultural backgrounds) feeds into lower expectations for those students. Thus, when it comes to special education, in order to avoid the pitfall wherein diversity lends itself to inaccurate or unequal perception and treatment of students and parents, "teachers must come to know the community and understand cultural norms and values that are important to family members" (O'Shea 2001: 60). This serves not only to enhance parent-educator communication in general, wherein socio-cultural differences are a demonstrated barrier, but also to relieve some of the cultural learning and adjustment burden from the diverse parent, who, research suggests, currently takes on the greater share of this work (Chu 2014; Ozmen et al. 2016). This is imperative since educators tend to simultaneously state that they value parental involvement while preferring that parents be supportive, positive, and trusting of their evaluations and opinions—in other words, their preference is not for an equal partnership, but for one which favors them and their expertise (for example, see Lareau and Horvat 1999).

### *The Model Minority*

In the case of Asian American underrepresentation in disability categories, biases and assumptions may be lending themselves to *opposite* phenomena than is observed with other minority groups, and thus to underrepresentation rather than overrepresentation. A label

popularly associated with Asian Americans is “the model minority,” a term dating back to a *New York Times Magazine* article from 1966 that remains salient today as a catch-all for the stereotype that Asian Americans display “proper behaviors and attitude (e.g., uncomplaining and docile) and proper work ethic (e.g., hardworking, persistent, diligent, and self-abnegating)” (Li 2008 quoted in Bradbury in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015). The model minority student, then, is respectful, obedient, smart in general but especially in science and math, cooperative, hard-working, diligent, quiet, and college-bound (Bradbury in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015).

It is not difficult to understand the ways in which a stereotype of universally high academic achievement may generally disadvantage a group. For instance, research indicates that educators may presume success on the part of their Asian American students, which may bias their evaluation of these students’ actual performance. Ying and Garcia (2009) find that for the educators in their study, the model minority stereotype was a major attribution error, which contributed to their overestimation of Asian American student achievement and informed their less than reasonable concern about Asian American student challenges/underachievement. All the teachers in their study described their Asian American students as “high achieving” or “average,” although it was discerned that some of the “average” students actually had poor academic performance. Relatedly, Jegatheesan (2009: 130) found that one experience repeatedly cited by Asian American mothers of children with disabilities was the disregard professionals had for their concerns about their children’s learning challenges, writing the mothers off as “typical Asian mom[s]” who were too intense. A quantitative meta-analysis analysis of teachers’ expectations toward Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and European Americans

found that teachers had the highest expectations of their Asian American students over all other groups (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007).<sup>3</sup>

The model minority stereotype was thrust into the media spotlight most recently with the publication in 2011 of Amy Chua's provocative parenting memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Her depiction of tiger mothers, including herself, as authoritarian, controlling, intense, and achievement-at-all-costs oriented, seemed to confirm the most dramatic stereotypes about Asian (and particularly, Chinese) parenting styles (Chua 2011; Juang et al. 2013). While such parenting does exist among Asian Americans, it is *not* common, nor is it associated with best outcomes for children (Juang et al. 2013). Despite Chua's parenting style being abnormal, the book served to not only reinforce model minority stereotypes of high achievement in popular culture, but to associate high achievement with demanding and emotionally unsupportive parenting (Juang et al. 2013).

The idea of the model minority has, in effect, the power to unauthenticate student performance by inclining individuals to take on one simplified perspective and disinclining them to view or validate digressions from that presupposed norm. Alice Bradbury (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015) studied model minorities in Britain, which included Asian immigrants and a number of other specific groups, and found that the discourse surrounding model minorities unauthenticated student success in multiple ways. Success was dissociated from the individual in dominant discourse that identified entire communities, rather than individuals within communities, as successful. Furthermore, model minorities' success was more likely to be

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the meta-analysis also looked at trends in referrals (e.g. to special education, disciplinary action, gifted programs), and speech patterns (positive, neutral, negative) toward African American, Latino/a, and European Americans; there were no Asian American implicating studies included for these trends (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007). It is unclear whether this was due to their lack of existence or that they were simply not successfully located for the analysis. Either way, such studies, specifically of referrals, would be significant in considering Asian Americans and special education.

attributed to parental pressure and hard work than was white students' success, which was conceptualized more as the result of something personal and innate, i.e., more authentic. A third major discourse of inauthenticity was the "refugee mentality" that linked success explicitly to desperate necessity and not to intelligence.

At the same time, Asian Americans do tend to have higher academic aspirations than their white peers (Kao 1995). Even in comparisons between Asian Americans and their white peers with the same academic aspirations, Asian Americans tend to overcompensate academically in pursuit of them (Kao 1995). Grace Kao (1995) proposed that this overcompensation may be in anticipation of discrimination, i.e., this group anticipates being discriminated against as a minority and thus strives to achieve excess levels of qualification in order to be more competitive against the non-discriminated, or favored, groups. This idea is supported by the work of Lee and Zhou (2015: 58) who find that Chinese and Vietnamese American parents direct their children toward certain careers where the need for exceptional credentials may "lessen potential discrimination and bias." A related possibility that integrates the authenticity thesis of Alice Bradbury is that Asian Americans anticipate that in the eyes of colleges, employers, etc., their academic achievements will be judged as less authentic or impressive than the achievements of their white peers even if they are, objectively, the same.

While there is ample evidence that disconfirms the model minority stereotype, it persists because, according to Lee and Zhou (2015: 176), "people are less likely to notice (cognitive processes) and mention or give credence to (social processes) the disconfirming evidence of Asian American exceptionalism." In other words, there is a psychological bias to see what one expects to see, i.e., Asian American exceptionalism, and a social bias to disregard or not discuss any anomalous evidence that challenges general perceptions because it is seen as

uncharacteristic, insignificant, or unpopular. This has the potential to decrease the likelihood that an educator will recommend an Asian American student for assessment simply because educators are not expecting Asian Americans to qualify for or be in need of such services. In this way, the model minority stereotype may impact educators in ways that contribute to underrepresentation.

### *Asian American Achievement Culture?*

Still, it is not productive to simply disregard the model minority stereotype, or to stop considering it beyond the influence it has on educators, for in fact there are cultural, social, and demographic factors at play that emphasize ideals of academic achievement and stigmatize failure and nonconformity—both of which the presence of a disability may indicate. These are particularly meaningful considering that the majority of Asian American adults in the United States are immigrants, which is why a number of the studies considered here were conducted in other countries or consist of international comparisons. The following sections will describe and support these claims in consideration that they all have the logical potential to increase parental resistance toward special education. They show that while disability may be considered shameful or disappointing to many families, particular components of Asian American cultures and experiences suggest that special education may be particularly unwelcome to members of this demographic.

Multiple studies inform the hypothesis that many Asian Americans are, in some way, implicated in a socio-culturally specific achievement-focused culture. First, I will address the function of shame and honor in informing an achievement culture through the family, extended family, and community levels of socialization. From there I will outline factors that may be

linked to the formation and maintenance of the achievement culture, including the growth mindset, Confucianism, religion, status inconsistency, and stereotypically model Asian behaviors in the words of Asian Americans themselves.

An Asian American student is likely imbedded in a social fabric wherein his or her achievement, and the honor or shame he or she attains via achievement or lack thereof, is a focal point of conversation—so much so that it stands out to them as something unique to their culture. Lee and Zhou (2015) studied how 1.5 and second generation Chinese and Vietnamese Americans perceived the academic attitudes and behavior of their Chinese and Vietnamese American parents. They found that these parents reportedly brag about their children’s achievements to coethnics, but are highly selective about what constitutes achievement. Achievement is interpreted via a “success frame” wherein one is expected to obtain a high school, college, and advanced degree such that one becomes a lawyer, doctor/pharmacist, scientist, or engineer (Lee and Zhou 2015: 54). Furthermore, bragging, comparing, and prying about success-related topics is constant. While there is no evidence that Asian American parents actually engage in this behavior more than non-Asian American parents, those interviewed by Lee and Zhou (2015: 163-4) persistently attribute this intense, pervasive, and stress-inducing behavior to their specific culture, saying things like “Asian culture likes to compare” and “Chinese parents do that a lot,” or explaining constant comparison by pointing to “Vietnamese culture.” In this discourse, “alternative narratives” (i.e. failures) “are conspicuously suppressed” (Lee and Zhou 2015: 165). Furthermore, because their culture and the success frame are so intertwined, those children who do not achieve it may eventually ethnically dissociate, meaning they self-identify no longer as Chinese or Vietnamese, but rather only as Asian American (Lee and Zhou 2015).

And so, the family and its honor are embedded in a larger community, be it extended family, coethnics or otherwise. This phenomenon is not limited to Chinese and Vietnamese Americans. Through interviews with young adults from a different subgroup, Indian Americans, Amardeep Kahlon (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015: 226) found a pervasive concern with “pleasing the aunties” and caring about “what the aunties think”; in other words, not disappointing the extended family. Interviewees learned from a young age that family honor is paramount and failure is considered dishonorable and shunned. Thus, community perception is highly valued; one young adult compared academic and personal decisions to a “public relations campaign” for maintaining family honor (Kahlon in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015: 227). From this stems the mentality that one should not reveal weakness, and that if one needs help, such as mental health counseling, it should be kept secret. In this manner, a family may maintain its honor.

### *Associated Factors*

A number of factors may influence and inform an Asian American achievement culture. It is worthwhile to address these to prepare to discern if, and if so how, they enter into attitudes about or actions regarding disability and special education. First, any consideration of East Asian culture would be remiss without considering the influence of more than two thousand years of Confucianism, particularly since its influence is increasing in China (Paramore 2016). Although Confucianism has been called a religion and/or a philosophy, it is not conducive to concise definition or categorization due to its long history of diverse manifestations and reinterpretations. However, it is consistently characterized in part by its emphasis on order and harmony as couched in right relationships (Yao 2000; Paramore 2016). This may inform emphasis placed by Asian cultures on belonging and community harmony. Furthermore,

Confucianism sees learning and self-improvement as a highly spiritual path (Yao 2000). This tenet may encourage emphasis on success in the processes of learning and self-improvement.

Religion, of many kinds, is highly influential in the lives of Asian American immigrants. This is a fact often overlooked in consideration of this group, including in consideration of the construction of such ideas as the model minority (Carnes and Yang 2004). Carnes and Yang (2004) found that almost all Asian Americans are conservatively religious and, especially in the first generation, a group culture and mentality rather than an individual culture and mentality characterize their religiosity. These religious Asian American immigrants with group-informed morality tend to be shocked by American individualism; parents desire to see their children show obedience to social norms, not challenge or diverge from them. In terms, then, of an achievement culture, religious communities provide another space in which family honor may be upheld through achievement of a standardized success framework.

Lee and Zhou (2015), who studied Chinese and Vietnamese Americans as previously detailed, identify a third possible causal factor: Asian American immigrants' disproportionately high status inconsistency. Changes to U.S. Immigration Law in 1965 gave "preference to applicants with high levels of education and high skills," and, to refugees like the Vietnamese, extended "government assistance to aid their transition" (Lee and Zhou 2015: 49). The result is that the educational and related occupational demographics of Asian Americans today are not a mere reflection of the demographics of the general populations in their countries of origins. Quite to the contrary, they tend to represent a selective group. In the terminology of Lee and Zhou (2015), the immigrant population in the U.S. hailing from China is hyper-selected, meaning they are highly educated compared to their counterparts who did not immigrate and generally more highly educated than the average American. Vietnamese immigrants are highly

selected, meaning they are highly educated compared to their counterparts who did not immigrate *but* are not generally more educated than the average American. Taylor and Cohn (2012) find similar patterns of high selectivity among South Korean and Japanese immigrants. For those group assessed by Lee and Zhou (2015: 164)—Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants—the authors contend that their developed skill sets, credentials, etc. are less likely to transfer when they immigrate due to cultural and linguistic barriers, a phenomenon known as “status inconsistency.” Thus, fostering the success of their children, and sharing their children’s achievements with their family and community, is particularly important and serves as a way to regain lost status. This phenomenon would be more prevalent among Asian Americans than among, for example, Mexican Americans who are “hypo-selected,” or generally less educated than both the average Mexican and the average American (Lee and Zhou 2015).

A fourth factor is a growth mind-set that is effort focused. According to psychologists Harold Stevenson and Shin-ying Lee (1990), in a comparative study between the U.S., China, and Japan, mothers in the United States and their children weigh ability more heavily as a determinant of academic performance compared to Japanese and Chinese mothers, who weigh effort more heavily. In other words, Chinese and Japanese mothers primarily link success to effort, and emphasize effort as a path to improvement, far more than mothers in the United States. This is closely linked to the growth mind-set versus fixed mind-set: those praised for effort are more likely to stick with challenges even in the face of set-backs and failure (growth mindset), while those praised for their abilities and performance are more likely to shirk away from challenges in the face of set-backs or failure (fixed mind-set) (Mueller and Dweck 1998; Dweck 1999). The particular emphasis on effort demonstrated by Asians is part of a growth mind-set that conceptualizes failure or struggle as more attributable to insufficient effort than

other factors (Lee and Zhou 2015). This may in turn contribute to a distaste for or discomfort with labels like disability or services like special education, as they recognize an issue that impedes success but which is virtually dissociated from effort.

Considering this research, the idea of the model minority begins to seem, albeit still harmful and over-simplified, not necessary unfounded. A pointed comparison between the model minority stereotype and Asian American views on stereotypically model characteristics serves to highlight nuanced differences between the two. Tien Ung et al. (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015) took this to task through in-depth interviews with four Asian Americans over the course of three months, discussing the model minority stereotype versus the reality of being Asian in America. From this, the researchers discerned three cultural drivers of the Asian American view of stereotypically model characteristics. One is the mentality of karmic predetermination, because of which action is driven in part by intentions toward others, both past (i.e., ancestral) and present. This karmic connection also implicates the honoring of social ties, especially familial. Another driver is honoring social relationships, which is rooted in the mentality that the self does not exist independently of social relationships, and which is manifested in showing loyalty, respecting authority, and engaging with others so as to promote their dignity and reduce their shame.

The third driver, or rather set of drivers, is balance and harmony, through which participants believe “management of conflict and difference is best acquired” (Ung et al. in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015: 277). This does not mean passivity or avoidance of conflict, but rather working to navigate conflict in a harmonious and balanced way, for example, by acting diplomatically and empathetically. Each of these three drivers aligns with the overarching observation that participants value, and believe their culture to value, action over rhetoric: it is

important to work hard, and harder as necessary, “for family honor and ancestral homage” (Ung et al. in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015: 273). Ultimately, Ung et al. (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015) produced a table, reproduced below, that contrasts the two “dialects” of the model minority myth: the White dialect (model *imposed*) versus the Asian dialect (model *acquired*):

**Table 1: Model Minority Myth Acquired vs. Imposed**

Model Minority Myth Acquired	Model Minority Myth Imposed
<p>Karmic Predetermination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Noble thinking (e.g., honoring family, balanced and non-excessive living, valuing continuous learning)</li> <li>- Noble Action (e.g. debt conscious, intergenerational caretaking, civic engagement, pragmatic)</li> </ul>	<p>Achievement Oriented:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educationally driven</li> <li>- Hardworking</li> <li>- Economically ambitious</li> <li>- Shrewd/frugal</li> </ul>
<p>Honor Directed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Face saving</li> <li>- Loyal</li> <li>- Respect for authority</li> </ul>	<p>Rule Driven:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Obedient</li> <li>- Conforming</li> </ul>
<p>Belief in Balance and Harmony:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Active negotiator</li> <li>- Persistently adaptive</li> <li>- Strategically flexible</li> </ul>	<p>Passive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Risk averse</li> <li>- Weak</li> <li>- Non-confrontational</li> </ul>

Source: Hartlep, N. D., and Porfilio, B. J. (2015). *Killing the Model Minority Stereotype: Asian American Counterstories and Complicity*. Information Age Publishing p. 279.

### *Asian Americans and Disability*

In light of this information, the themes of shame, stigma, and embarrassment associated with disability can be understood as part of a continuous narrative.<sup>4</sup> According to Woo (in

<sup>4</sup> It is true that these themes exist among non-Asian Americans when it comes to the disability. In fact, a review of studies of student and teacher attitudes toward those with intellectual disabilities since the 1950s show that attitudes toward children with intellectual disabilities “have not kept pace with the philosophic shift that has occurred in

Walker 1991), Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cultural beliefs, informed by mixtures of shame and protectionist instinct, lend to isolating clearly disabled family members from public life. Furthermore, many Asian cultures traditionally view disability “as destiny or a condition ordained by spirits or the Gods” (Woo in Walker 1991: 65; Baker et al. 2010). According to Woo (in Walker 1991), this among other factors has contributed to the disabled Asian American’s difficulty in achieving work and relationship success. Investigating youth attitudes specifically, one study showed that middle school students in the United States are more likely than their Japanese peers to be willing to interact with intellectually disabled peers in and out of school (Special Olympics 2005). A chart of the survey results is available in Appendix Part 2. Of course, this cross-national comparison is limited in that the U.S. sample itself include students of many racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Stigma puts a great social burden on those families who are caring for a child with a disability. In a comparative study of the U.S. and Japan, A. Kamei (2013: 1) found “that more Japanese mothers experience a caregiving burden related to social stigma or rejection than do U.S. mothers, face more difficulties in their social relationships, and feel more socially isolated than American mothers.” Such stigma may discourage parents from accepting that their child has disability-based needs or working to cater to them. For instance, in a study of a Japanese elementary school, Misa Kayama and Wendy Haight (2013: 24) found “that parents’ sensitivity to other people’s ‘eyes,’ or stigma, can be an obstacle to their acceptance of their children’s need

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special education” (Siperstein 2007: 146). In other words, negative attitudes have become somewhat reduced, but not nearly to the degree that policy and philosophy have evolved. Unfortunately, similar longitudinal studies on the general public’s attitudes toward intellectual disability or otherwise are not available. Anecdotal evidence (for example, see Appendix Part 1) suggests that the stigma or embarrassment attached to disability and special education is lessening. For the purposes of this research, efforts have been made to draw on distinctly Asian-specific perspective/attitudinal influences.

for special education, permission for their children to receive services, and collaboration with educators.”

Although those two studies looked specifically at an Asian country, similar trends were exposed in Dian Baker et al.’s (2010) domestic research on Hmong and Mien (peoples from Laos) underrepresentation in U.S. social services for those with developmental disabilities: they found that the underuse of services was largely traceable to stigma concerns. In a single but compelling case study conducted by Sage and Jegatheesan (2010), a set of Asian American parents hid one child’s autism diagnosis from the other child for years for fear of the other child’s negative reaction, the risk of exposure to the community, and the embarrassment that would accompany such exposure.

While stigma may discourage accepting or addressing disability, other sociocultural factors also strongly influence Asian American experience with disability. Brinda Jegatheesan (2009: 126, 131), whose study subjects were first-generation Asian American mothers of children with disabilities, found that a number of mothers had “ingrained cultural beliefs, many of them negative, about having a child with a disability” and some “talked about the strains of being part of a community where there is a strong emphasis on one’s child being smart and talented.” These issues manifested in a number of ways, including avoidance of meetings with professionals. Meanwhile, other mothers, even if in disagreement with their child’s diagnosis, unquestioningly complied with professionals as a sign of respect and/or due to fear of embarrassment or appearing demanding; such compliance would not appear to contribute to underrepresentation. Complex terminology and limited to no proficiency in English also generated substantial communication barriers that contributed to anxiety, and some mothers were discouraged and frustrated by a shutdown of their proposals that they explore alternative

medicine as part of treatment. Of course, this particular study only engaged parents of children with disabilities, and thus excludes Asian American students who were perhaps referred for disability testing but were not ultimately deemed disabled or granted special education services.

In terms of accessing educators' perspectives on these issues, research is more limited, which is a significant motivator for my study. Ying and Garcia (2009), as discussed earlier, found that the model minority stereotype contributes to attribution error. They also found that when it came to struggling students, the educators in their study would overlook low achieving Asian Americans unless they showed behavioral problems, and tend to attribute the low achievement of English language learners to their limited English proficiency, without adequately addressing their language needs in order to determine whether underlying disability is possible. Thus, the barrier of language not only hinders successful communication between parents and educators, but also successful evaluation of students by educators.

### *Comparison with Special Education in Countries of Origin*

Since most Asian American adults in the U.S. are immigrants, it is vital to consider differences in the landscape of special education between the U.S. and Asian Americans' countries of origins. I look particularly at China, Vietnam, and India, not only because commentary on every Asian country would be lengthy, but also because nearly all of the Asian Americans in the city from which I drew my participants are of Chinese, Vietnamese, or Indian origin. In China, special education processes and resources are quite inconsistent and fairly nascent in quality, compared to the U.S.; Jeffrey Kritzer (2012) draws similarities between Chinese special education today and the state of special education in the United States before the Education for all Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975. Furthermore, China's

economy, particularly due to its large rural population, makes skills like reading and writing less vital to leading a “normal” life; thus, more subtle learning disabilities and autism may not be identified and served as they would in the U.S. (Deng et al. 2001).

In Vietnam, over two thirds of children with disabilities are unable to attend school, and those who do face negative social attitudes toward disability as well as scarcity of skilled teachers, support staff, and appropriate learning facilities (World Bank n.d.; Tran 2014). In India, historically disadvantaged groups such as poor, rural, or female persons are actually underrepresented in special education, because unlike in the U.S., special education is still a relatively scarce resource and these groups face general exclusion from resources (Kalyanpur 2008). It seems from an overview of Indian and Vietnamese sources that, similarly to China, subtler learning disabilities and autism are not as recognized or prioritized in these countries when it comes to special education. While this overview is brief, it demonstrates that special education in the United States may look very different to first-generation Asian American immigrants than those systems with which they are familiar, thus contributing to issues such as confusion, embarrassment and hesitancy.

### *Language Learning and Special Education*

Recognizing the recent immigrant status of a significant portion of Asian Americans also necessitates considering whether not speaking English as a first language influences student chances of being in special education. A number of studies have researched the influence of English language learning, or English as a second language, on representation patterns in special education. The literature indicates that combined services for English language learners with disabilities is fairly non-standardized and nascent in its development (Liu et al. 2008). Although

IDEA specifies that English language learning shall not be the basis for special education designation, systems are not currently in place to determine the degree to which limited language proficiency is preventing learning, masking a learning disability, or contributing to poor performance on special education assessments that are not designed to accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity (Wagner et al. 2005). Policies on dealing with these issues vary dramatically by state and locality, from some school systems working to develop bilingual special education assessments and services to others prioritizing language acquisition prior to offering special education (Keller-Allen 2006).

Amanda Sullivan (2011) found that being an English language learner made students more likely to be placed in special education than their English-fluent peers; however, her state-wide sample of English language learners was 91% Spanish-speaking. A similar case occurred in the study by Artiles et al. (2002) of eleven urban school districts, in which they identified a trend of overrepresentation of English language learners in special education; however, the English language learners' population in the elementary schools was 94% Spanish-speaking and in secondary schools was 91% Spanish-speaking, while Asian American English language learners accounted for only 3.3%.

The general idea supported by such evidence of overrepresentation is that a student's English language learning makes them more inclined to communicative and/or academic struggle and thereby increases their likelihood of being assessed for special education and identified as disabled. For instance, it can be linguistically challenging for the typical teacher, without significant special training, to distinguish the qualities of English language learning speech from the speech of someone with a disability (Case and Taylor 2005). However, statistical and linguistic studies do not consider the narrative accounts of parents and/or educator

experiences with English language learners in special education. Furthermore, as noted above, they disproportionately reflect the experiences of Spanish-speaking students. These Spanish-speaking students may experience overrepresentation to a greater degree than other ELL students because Spanish is the most represented second language in U.S. public schools, such that resources for assessing and serving this population are more well-developed than for other languages, including many of Asian origin, that account for much smaller proportions of overall English language learners (Zehler et al. 2003).

In a highly revealing contrast to national statistics on overrepresentation, a 2015 state-commissioned report on English Language Learners found that, in the city from which my study participants were drawn, ELL students are designated for special education at a rate less than 1/3 the rate of the general population of students (report uncited to protect confidentiality of participants). If this is correlated to the city's significant Asian American population, national statistical studies that disaggregate ELL-special education stats by race may show similar patterns of representation.

### *Implications*

It is imperative to ensure that Asian American students across the spectrum of achievement have their educational needs met, not only on the principle of providing satisfactory public education, but also because of potentially more distressing outcomes resulting from the inability of students to meet expectations at home and/or in school. As summarized by Lee and Zhou (2015: 183):

At home, [Asian American students'] immigrant parents stress a growth mind-set and believe that their children's outcomes can improve with increased effort. At school, however, teachers and peers make assumptions about Asian American students' innate talents and abilities based on their ethnoracial status, thereby

emphasizing a fixed mind-set. The clash of mind-sets, coupled with the high expectations of parents, teachers, and both Asian and non-Asian peers, can result in low self-esteem and efficacy among 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese when they are unable to meet the high expectations and the perceived norm.

Although these authors focused particularly on Chinese and Vietnamese subgroups, I have already addressed evidence that other Asian American subgroups experience similar expectations and stressors. The results of underperformance, as discussed, include the potential for stigma, the loss of family honor, and even the possibility that an individual ethnically dissociate if they cannot attain the ideal of success. Research has also suggested that perceived educator favoritism of Asian American students has led other minority students to dislike Asian American students and target them with bullying (Rosenbloom and Way 2004). Furthermore, Asian American children report higher levels of depression but receive less mental health care than their peers (Lee and Zhou 2015). Asian Americans are also at a higher risk of suicide than other ethnic groups, and model minority pressure and lack of communication with parents have been cited as top contributing factors to this trend (Kahlon in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015).

I contend that to best serve lower-achieving and possibly disabled Asian American students, it is insufficient to discourage educators from making decisions informed by the model minority stereotype: it is also essential to inform educators about the sociocultural influences at work in Asian American students' lives (particularly 1.5 and second generation Asian American students), and in the lives of their parents, so as to most sensitively and successfully work with both students and parents. It is also critical to understand the impact of English as a second language on Asian American subgroups' parent and student experiences. These topics motivate my pursuit of investigating educator interactions with Asian American parents and children throughout special education designation processes, as described in the next section.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To briefly review the major findings of the literature review: we know that Asian Americans are underrepresented in special education, that educators are influenced by the model minority stereotype which leads to overestimating the abilities of Asian American students, and that some significant elements of Asian American culture and experience encourage certain standards of success and stigmatize disability. We also know that special education designation processes are social processes in which actors, especially parents and educators, make important judgements and decisions regarding students.

What we need is a better understanding of Asian American student-educator and Asian American parent-educator interactions during these processes. Interviewing the parents of Asian American students with disabilities, while essential, can only take us so far in this endeavor, as it excludes parents who may have declined assessment or special education for their child. Thus, I contend that there is value to investigating educators' perspectives. I do not assume that educators are perfectly accurate or unbiased informants, but I do contend that they possess a critical perspective in terms of illuminating whether and how patterns in interaction may lend themselves to underrepresentation. Educator observations may, or may not, indicate that some components of the posited Asian American achievement culture, attitudes toward disability specifically, and/or English language learning are relevant in special education designation processes.

I intend to discern whether or not educators find that their experiences with this group vary in any notable way from their experiences with other racial/ethnic groups because perceptions of patterns are not only influenced by experiences and expectations, but also influence current and future thinking and decision-making. This research will contribute to

crafting a fuller picture as we work to understand what contributes to Asian American underrepresentation in special education and how best to serve this population in the U.S. educational system.

Thus, my research questions are:

1. Do educators identify their experience(s) with Asian American students and/or parents as distinct from their experiences with students and/or parents of other racial/ethnic groups?
2. If so, in what ways do they identify those experiences as distinct?

## DATA AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

My data sources are 14 semi-structured interviews with current and recently retired educators, including one special education teacher, one English language learners (ELL) teacher, a vocational-technical teacher, a guidance counselor, and a school psychologist in the public-school system of a small city, population of approximately 100,000. According to the U.S. Census, the median income in the city is approximately \$65,000, and about 90% of adults have a high school diploma or higher while 40% have a bachelor's degree or higher. According to a city-published report using U.S. Census data from 1990-2010, the percentage of the population that identifies as Asian American was, as of 2010, 24%. The largest subgroup is of Chinese ancestry (67%) followed by Indian (13%) and Vietnamese (11%). The Asian American population increased by more than 300% between 1990 and 2000, and increased by 64% between 2000 and 2010.

How does this population compare to Asian Americans in the United States as a whole? According to 2010 U.S. Census data, Chinese-Americans account for 23.2% of all Asian Americans. They are followed by Filipinos at 19.7%, Indians at 18.4%, Vietnamese at 10%, Koreans at 9.9%, and Japanese at 7.5% (Taylor and Cohen 2012). Thus, three of the top four groups nationally are the top three groups in my sample city, and descend from largest to smallest in the same order. Although data on income by race was not available for my sample city, the median household income of Asian Americans in the United States is, as of 2010, \$66,000; this is only \$1000 more than the average income for the total population (Asian Americans included) of my sample city (Taylor and Cohn 2012).

Although specific data regarding immigration generation (e.g., first, second, etc.) of my city's Asian American inhabitants is not available, it is likely that a high percentage of the city's

Asian American inhabitants are first or early generation considering that 74% of all Asian American adults are first-generation immigrants and that the city I sampled was recently required to have ballots in both English and Chinese (Taylor and Cohn 2012).

In my sample city, according to a 2015 state-commissioned report on English language learner statistics by city and town within the state, 30% of ELL students' first language is either Cantonese or Mandarin (report not cited to protect participant anonymity). The language most represented percentage-wise is Mandarin at 28%, and the next, Cantonese, accounts for only 2%. The third largest and beyond are not reported. Thus, it's clear that while there is a huge amount of language diversity, all other languages after Cantonese and Mandarin are represented at 2% or less. These unlisted percentages must include a number of the languages associated with other Asian ethnic groups that are prominent in the city, including Vietnamese and Indian languages. Thus, the dominant group of ELL students, if not the majority, speaks languages of Asian origin.

Participants were gathered through the use of personal contacts who knew individuals in the school system and through snowball sampling from those participants. I was vaguely acquainted with two of my participants prior to interviewing, but was still referred to them by others; the remaining twelve were previously unknown contacts of personal contacts, or participant contacts. This sample is not considered to be representative.

**Table 2: Characteristics of Educators, n=14**<sup>5</sup>

	<b>Number of Participants</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	1
Female	13
<b>Role</b>	
Regular Education Teacher	9
Special Education Teacher	1

<sup>5</sup> I did not collect data regarding the race/ethnicity of the educators. In retrospect, I should have included this in my interview protocol.

Vocational-Technical Teacher	1
English Language Learners Teacher	1
Guidance Counselor	1
School Psychologist	1
<b>Years of Experience in Role</b>	
1-10	5
10-20	5
20-30	4
<b>Employment Status</b>	
Currently employed	12
Recently (2 ≥ years) retired	2
<b>Level of School</b>	
Elementary School (4 schools represented)	6
Middle School (3 schools represented)	5
High School (2 schools represented)	3

One of my interviews was conducted over the phone, and the rest were conducted face-to-face either in person or via video call. These semi-structured interviews were designed to serve the dual role of (1) discerning the systems and social processes by which students in the school system come to be identified as disabled, for my knowledge and for prompting the interviewee to reflect on their experiences, so as to orient themselves for the questions to follow and (2) discerning the different experiences/perceptions that these individuals may have with/of Asian American students/parents as compared to other ethnic groups. I chose not to ask about Asian American students/parents bluntly, but rather, when asking about patterns, would suggest thinking about any patterns by gender, by race/ethnicity, by immigrant or not, socioeconomic status, etc. If prompting about patterns by race/ethnicity was not yielding any reference to the substantial Asian American population in the city, I would prompt more specifically by mentioning the diversity of the city in, for example, its substantial Asian American population. The intention was to not appear as though the intersection of Asian Americans and special education was my primary interest, since making this interest apparent could (1) make participants defensive or uneasy (e.g., in fear of being perceived as racist) and (2) imply that

there is necessarily a distinct perception to be had between Asian Americans and other groups in terms of special education processes, an assumption this research does not presume to make.

The interviews' semi-structured nature allowed for more free-flowing discussion and flexible questioning during the interviews. The interview schedule is available in Appendix Part 3. During these interviews, educator responses may have been influenced by my position as a white, female college student, as well as by the fact that I was vaguely associated with two of the educators, and was referred to the others through mutual acquaintances/snowball sampling—in other words, they may have felt their sense of anonymity compromised despite privacy assurances in place.

Interviews were used to inform the model provided in the beginning of the results section below, which provides guidance for understanding special education designation processes in general. Interview transcripts were coded to answer my research questions using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Since much of the interview content was largely irrelevant to my research questions (e.g., distinct impressions of boys versus girls), the first level of coding discerned who or what was being generally discussed. Codes included Asian American parents, Asian American students, Asian/Asian American cultural differences, and Asian language-related. Analysis of these groupings led to the development of more nuanced codes regarding patterns of behavior, categories of differences in values/beliefs, categories of parent and student concerns, and more. The final codes are listed in the tables in the results section, with summaries of the coded content and sample excerpts from the interviews supplied for each. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

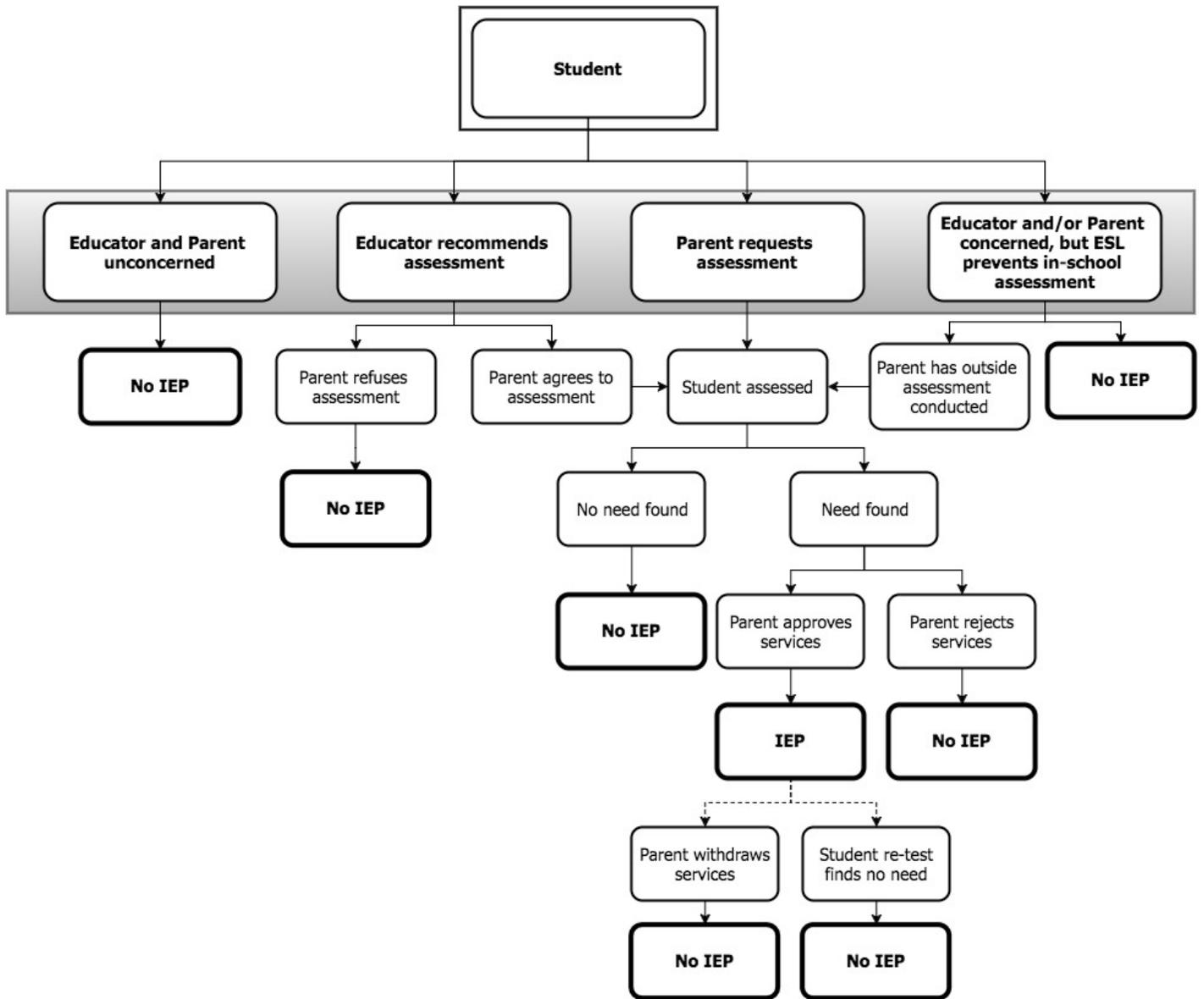
## RESULTS

To place the following results in context, it is helpful to be familiar with the standard processes by which a student does, or does not, receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which details their needs and the special education services they are to receive regarding those needs. For this reason, I have constructed Figure 1, informed by my participant's descriptions of these processes. It shows the general pathways to an IEP or lack thereof. When educators describe different perceptions or patterns of behavior, these can be visualized as influencing the journey along these pathways.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In reality the experience is in many ways more fluid and complex. For instance, it is not unusual for assessment to be the result of an ongoing dialogue between educators and parents about a student's performance, and a number of non-IEP interventions at home and at school are normally tried before resorting to assessment. Furthermore, "educator" here is shorthand for what can be a larger "team" of educators supporting a student, which generally includes a school psychologist, guidance counselor, and multiple teachers if the student is in middle or high school. If a teacher thinks a student may need assessment, the teacher would discuss this with the team before the request for assessment would reach parents for approval. A student, especially as they get older, may become a more influential behind-the-scenes actor in terms of negotiating with their parents, but as this was only mentioned by one of my participants, and since signing an IEP is formally the decision of the parent, I have not included a "student approval" step in the model. It is also important to note that the IEP, once signed, is not necessarily permanent, as, for instance, there are periodic reassessments of students' progress and needs. Moreover, if parent and school cannot come to a satisfactory agreement for them both, the case may be taken to arbitration. This list of examples is not exhaustive, but demonstrates the complexity that a model must necessarily exclude.

**Figure 1: Special Education Designation Processes**



Note: The dashed line indicates paths to possible, but not inevitable, changes to the state of the IEP.

**Perceptions of Asian American Students**

The table below shows the prevalence of themes that emerged related to distinct perceptions of Asian American students in the context of special education designation

processes. The vast majority of the educators identified the significance of language barriers. Beyond this, most did not perceive their Asian American students as distinct from their other students. The few exceptions indicated a tendency of the group to demonstrate hesitancy toward the processes, and a tendency to demonstrate mutism and autism.

**Table 3: Distinct perceptions of Asian American students**  
(Perceptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive)

<b>Percent of Educators Reporting, n=14</b>	
<b>Language barriers</b>	86%
<b>Hesitation</b>	
Due to missing classroom material	7%
Due to lack of understanding	7%
<b>Prevalence of particular disabilities</b>	
Mutism	7%
Autism	7%

*a. Language barriers*

Twelve educators expressed that there is difficulty in discerning whether or not an ELL student is struggling on account of the impediment of an unrecognized need or the impediment of learning English as a second language. Although English language learners are not necessarily Asian, my subjects consistently brought up ELL and special education in the context of, or as including, their Asian American students. As one educator articulated,

I'm almost always when I'm speaking [about ELL], I'm thinking in my mind...about, uh, Asian families, because, the reality at my school, that is, of the...students, um, ELL population...it would be like 98% Asian and a small amount of, uh, other cultures.

When reading quoted evidence, note that ELL and ESL, meaning English language learning and English as a second language respectively, are interchangeable. ELL students get pulled out of the classroom for ELL services during the school day, or are educated in a completely separate ELL classroom for the entire day, depending on need and available resources. According to the special educator interviewed,

A tougher thing we've been dealing with lately is trying to figure out if a kid is having ELL issues or special ed issues...Or a combination of both. That's been very challenging.

*Interviewer: So, how have you dealt with that or been trying to?*

It's tough. Because then... the three of us that test, you know, we don't speak any other languages. You know, so sometimes you're not sure if a kid just didn't understand the question. Or, you know, if they did understand it, they just don't know the answer.

Similarly, another educator said,

We have a lot of English language learners at this building. And when there's an English language learner who also has a processing issue, it's very hard to diagnose because you're not sure if it's the lack of language or that there's some learning disability. So, that's tricky.

Critically, the school system does not have the resources to conduct its assessments in other languages. The guidance counselor interviewed stated that

If you don't have linguistic English skills, you can't really be assessed... Oftentimes our ESL teachers will say, 'I know the student has a disability in any language.' But [according to state law] we can't even do any kind of formal assessment process to put them on an IEP until they've been here for three years.

Even after three years, a student's language level may limit the number of assessments they are able to take, and their performance during those assessments. The school psychologist interviewed noted that the Asian American students she works with "are a little more reserved, especially if there's an ELL...component to it."

Only one educator mentioned that there have been, to her knowledge, rare occasions of the school system bringing someone in to conduct testing in a student's native language. That same educator also mentioned that one of her Asian ELL students has an IEP because his mother, who observed him struggling not only in English but also in his native language, had him tested at "a local agency." That these kinds of anecdotes were not repeated in any of the other interviews, despite nearly unanimous emphasis on language barriers, may indicate just how rare such cases are. Notably, the ELL teacher interviewed could not "even put a finger on a student that [she knows] who is in [ELL] with an IEP."

Even at the point that a student can be and is assessed, and need is found, language learning can continue to complicate the process of serving that student adequately. One educator teaches an inclusion class, meaning there are students with and without special education in the classroom. As this educator said,

Well, last year I had a boy in the tenth grade who...couldn't even really put together a cogent sentence. It was, like, kind of crazy... So I asked the head of ELL to pull his file because he doesn't speak English at home, he can't use it. And she said, 'Well... they diagnosed him when he was ELL, as on the [autism] spectrum.' So, they pulled him from ELL and put him in a [special education] program, but...he's basically illiterate in English in [high school]. Because they never finished addressing his ELL issues because, I guess, under law that [special needs] trumps ELL. Um, so I had to have him put into an ELL English class...He actually needed to learn to read and write in English, because he couldn't do it in my class.

*Interviewer: And he was in your inclusion [students with and without IEPs] class?*

He was a tenth-grade inclusion student... and I'm like, this is, this isn't working. And when they tested him...he...really did belong back in ELL. So, they moved him back there but this is a process, like, you have, I mean...it's crazy.

In this scenario, the student was diagnosed as having a disability (autism) and so was placed in a setting where he could receive special education services. However, that setting was

inappropriate for his language abilities. A setting that would satisfy his language and disability needs did not, evidently, exist.

*b. Hesitation:*

*I. due to missing classroom material*

*II. due to lack of understanding*

I. Two educators distinguished the behaviors of their Asian American students as more hesitant. According to one, these students seemed more concerned about missing classroom material:

This year I have...like 3 that do time with the ELL teacher and with the literacy teacher that are Asian and mostly they don't want to leave the classroom. They don't want to feel like they're missing, for them it's in the afternoon so they're missing Social Studies or Science. They're kinda like ... 'I don't want to leave Social Studies again' so I try to find another time that they can do their Social Studies or Science lesson.

II. The other attributed student hesitancy to lack of familiarity, saying:

I would say those kids [Asian Americans] might be a little more hesitant because they really aren't understanding the process and, you know, haven't had that, you know, background as much. So, I would say maybe recent immigrants. But, again, it's rare that we'd be testing a recent immigrant because, like I said earlier, usually the thought is that they're still...their acquisition of the language that's making them, you know, not able to learn at that level.

As the last line indicates, the overwhelming distinction for educators was the language barrier that existed between them and many of their Asian American students, which may have overshadowed, minimized, or cast doubt upon other possibly perceived patterns.

*c. Prevalence of particular disabilities:*

*I. mutism*

*II. autism*

Although my interview schedule did not explicitly ask about patterns in the kinds of disabilities students were identified as having, two educators highlighted mutism and autism as significantly connected to Asian Americans.

I. The guidance counselor interviewed said that her school has

had a number of students that have been diagnosed with selective mutism and they've all been Asian...And it's very challenging to work with those families because outside of school, they may communicate just fine. And it is not a learning disability. It is more based on a traumatic incident or anxiety.

She went on to discuss a case of a student dealing with trauma (albeit not trauma that has led to mutism, but to other issues), in which the trauma was moving at a young age to live with his parents who he barely knew, since they had moved to the U.S. long before he joined them.

II. Another trend identified was autism. According to one educator,

A lot of our, um, students who are from China, the boys particularly, tend to be on the spectrum...That tends to be the issue.

It is interesting that these educators noted these particular trends in disabilities. Because of the behavioral components of autism, and the communication components of mutism, neither necessitate that the individual is low-functioning academically, and they are most likely to be noted by educators in social contexts. The challenge may be discerning when behavioral differences and unwillingness or inability to speak are results of cultural difference and/or language learning versus results of disability issues unrelated to cultural difference or language learning.

### **Perceptions of Asian American Parents**

This section is divided into two parts. Part 1 compares the number of claims that Asian American parents are generally resistant during special education designation processes versus generally supportive during the processes. Part 2 delves into other distinct perceptions of Asian

American parents. Regardless of whether they identified parents as generally resistant, supportive, or neither, all educators identified elements of working with these parents that distinguishes them from other parents.

**Part 1**

Half of the educators do not see the Asian American parents as generally more *or* less resistant than any other group of parents, and of the half who do, the majority describe them as generally more supportive. Though this sample is not representative, it indicates that most educators probably do not perceive a pervasive resistance to special education designation processes among Asian American parents.

**Table 4: Asian American parents perceived as generally resistant or generally supportive, compared to other groups.**

	Percent of Educators Reporting, n=14
<b>General resistance</b>	14%
<b>General support</b>	36%

*a. General resistance*

Two educators view Asian American parents as generally resistant to the special education process. According to one,

The two biggest ethnic groups I have had contact with...have been Indian parents and Chinese parents. Chinese parents, by and large, are extremely resistant. They want achievement, they don't want to hear that there's a problem, their children just need to work harder. Indian parents extremely similar...The particular ethnicity of being Chinese or being Indian, or we'll just say Asian as a whole, did not acknowledge or want testing for any kind of what you would call psychological, be it Asperger's, autism, any kind of mood disorder, those were not acknowledged.

The school psychologist, who is highly involved in the designation process in terms of conducting assessments, attached a specific percentage to the trend of refusing assessment, saying that of

the parents that decline assessment, probably 99% of the time it's been Asians. And I'm not saying 99% of them decline it, but [that is the percentage] of the decline that [happens].

If this percentage is accurate or even close to accurate, it signifies a very high relative rate of declining assessment, which would be a major contributor to underrepresentation.

*b. General support*

Thirty-six percent of the educators contend that Asian American parents are generally more supportive of the processes. Some feel that Asian American parents are particularly agreeable and trusting when it comes to disability designation. Some note, however, that they are not sure that agreeable parents with limited English fully understand what is happening, even with the aid of a translator, and believe this has sometimes resulted in the withdrawal of their children from special education services after realizing, for example, that it requires them leaving the regular education classroom for all or a portion of the day. Excerpts regarding these themes will appear in Part 2.

*c. No general trend*

Half of the participants did not identify Asian American parents as generally resistant or generally compliant/supportive. However, this did not exempt them from identifying distinct impressions of and experiences with Asian American parents in special education processes. The distinct themes that arose in my interviews are detailed in Part 2.

**Part 2**

I found that every educator perceives language barriers with parents as significant. Other themes—levels of trust between parents and educators, the influence of Asian American communities on parents and educators, non-initiation by parents, and a variety of parental concerns, values, and beliefs—appeared to lesser degrees.

**Table 5: Distinct perceptions of Asian American parents**  
(Perceptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive)

	<b>Percent of Educators Reporting, n=14</b>
<b>Language barriers</b>	100%
<b>Trust</b>	36%
<b>Asian American communities</b>	21%
<b>Non-initiating</b>	14%
<b>Concerns</b>	
Social wellbeing informing resistance	7%
Educational achievement informing resistance	21% (29% w/ ELL parallel)
Educational achievement informing support	7%
Being “kicked out” of school	7%
<b>Values and Beliefs</b>	
Educational achievement	21%
Effort	21%
Compliance	14%
Beliefs about mental health	7%

a. *Language barriers*

All educators noted that language barriers exist and are influential in working with Asian American parents, many of whom are first generation immigrants. Some noted that a third-party translator without knowledge of special education concepts may have limited ability to clearly communicate with parents. One articulated a common sentiment that the translator

just adds, like, a middle man and it makes it a little bit difficult because I feel like sometimes things get lost in translation.

Two educators expressed the concern that Asian American parents who do not speak English seem to agree with the desires of the educators without fully understanding that to which they are agreeing. As one educator articulated,

Sometimes I feel that [parents with limited English] just say yes but they don't quite understand exactly what I'm saying, but they agree with it... They usually, they're like 'Okay, we trust you. Whatever you can do to help our child.' But I don't know that they know the full process.

The special education teacher expressed a similar sentiment when talking about the use of translators in parent-teacher meetings, saying:

Sometimes in the meetings, you're not sure if everything is being communicated the way you want it... and you just hope that they fully understand, you know, what the deal is. Sometimes we have kids come up here and all of a sudden, the parents want them out of special ed. And I almost feel like maybe they didn't know what they were signing up for.

One educator described how her school has an aide who speaks multiple Asian languages and can act as translator. However, her participation in the Asian community outside of school impacts her style of communication with parents in a way that concerns the educator:

One of the... problems with that is she is very involved in the Asian community and has many friends at our school, so when you're asking them [sic] to convey something that might be uncomfortable or embarrassing, you know, maybe that parent might perceive that as, you know, we're saying their child isn't intelligent. It can be a little hairy... And... sometimes what happens is she might not be conveying the information correctly, even, because she's sort of trying to sugar

coat it, you know, or downplay it or something because it's someone she knows very well and so, it can be a little tricky, so it is oftentimes better to have an outside person if there's an opportunity.

Another described how language barriers led to misinterpretation of a phone call home, saying

You're a new teacher, and you're like, okay I'm going to call every parent and tell them how well their kid is doing. Well, you don't do that in Chinese households. Especially, [if] the parents don't speak English...I made a call to say this kid is working really hard and I guess, in that culture, if you call, there's a problem and therefore that kid got in trouble. So, the kid came in, he was like, 'Miss Darlene, why were you calling my house? I've got, like an "A" in your class.' I was like, 'I was calling to say you were doing a good job.' He was like, 'Don't call my house. That's no-no, like don't do it.' And I was like, okay.

Although this specific anecdote was not about special education services, or even a student who was struggling, the interpretation of a phone call as necessarily indicating bad news was invoked by this educator as relevant to any parent-educator contact.

*b. Trust*

Whether a parent trusts an educator can influence how open they are to educators' suggestions about what would benefit their child, whether special education related or otherwise. Four of the educators in my sample specifically identified the significance of trust, but in different ways. Two characterized Asian American parents as being generally trusting of the school, one saying,

I think that there's that trust factor with the school, especially with different cultures, you know that they know that you're doing your very best for their child.

And the other saying,

I've never had...for a special needs child, for a parent to say 'oh no, no, no.' They usually, they're like 'Okay, we trust you. Whatever you can do to help our child.'

One educator perceived early generation Asian American parents as initially lacking trust until it is built up, saying,

For first generations with oldest children, there's almost a complete lack of trust. For ensuing generations, the trust really, it grows with each generation, it seems to anyway... I had a family that has a first-generation mother [and] a third-generation father, the father was much more willing to accept help whereas the mother was more like 'Oh, no, this is... close the doors, we're fine, everything's good.' So it was really interesting within that family that she was so new to the country that she just wanted to guard all her chicks and the dad was saying 'no, we need help,' so it was him convincing her to allow some intervention and ultimately, if you treat them with respect, the parents, and with kindness, and show them over and over and over again how much you are devoted to their child, the trust grows.

This educator also mentioned trust in an anecdote quoted on page 55.

Finally, one educator identified having a guidance counselor with foreign language skills as a significant asset in fostering trust, saying,

One of [the guidance counselors] speaks like Mandarin, different dialects. So, she's wonderful to have in the meeting. She can talk to most of the parents.... and she'll communicate and translate for us. Without her, we'd be in a lot of trouble.

*Interviewer: Do you think it's different having a guidance counselor as opposed to just a, you know, strictly a translator?...*

Yeah, she's here all the time. And the parents trust her. You can tell they trust her.

This example indicates that this educator perceives a spectrum in the effectiveness of translation services, and that there is a link between communication and trust.

### *c. Asian American Communities*

Asian American communities were mentioned by 36% of the educators as being significant social forces that influence not only parent behavior, but educator behavior in working with parents. According to one, the communities increase the impetus to be culturally sensitive, which may discline educators from identifying disabilities:

I don't know what the ELL Department is seeing. And I don't know if they would not identify that student, they're very sensitive culturally and might not identify that... they're very worried about upsetting the communities.

*Interviewer: They being the teachers?*

Yeah, and they tend to focus on the skill of teaching English reading and writing, but not necessarily the whole student.

*Interviewer: So... the special ed kind of designations can be upsetting to the communities?*

It could. I think that certain, the Arabic communities.

*Interviewer: Arabic?*

Yeah, they don't want anything to do with it. They'll be the first to say, say, 'We don't, we don't want these services.'

The embeddedness of resources within communities can also lead to sensitive situations, as in the case described on page 51 of an aide who often provides translation services that seem somewhat less than accurate as she tries to "sugarcoat" or "downplay" because the information might be "uncomfortable or embarrassing."

When asked about her assertion that Asian Americans tend to be resistant to special education, one educator brought up this anecdote to highlight the emphasis on academic achievement. It also serves to indicate the relevance of Asian community.

We had an issue with one group of Indian parents at one school in particular that wanted all of their children to skip a grade because one family tested in with their six-year-old at a second-grade level so they put that child at a second-grade level and that became a status symbol. 'Oh no, my child should be in second grade, oh no my child should be not in fourth grade they should be in fifth grade,' and so the push was on...

It is clear that these educators have Asian American communities in mind when they think about Asian American attitudes toward academics and special education.

*d. Non-initiating*

In special education designation processes, parents or teachers can initiate, i.e., bring forward concerns or suggest/request assessment. Two educators identified early generation Asian American parents as less likely to initiate than other parents. According to one,

A lot of times those families look to us to initiate, I'm not quite sure they know what to ask for whereas somebody who maybe has been in this country or who has...the availability of resources, like, to know what to ask for.

The ELL teacher interviewed said that at parent/teacher conferences she has not

seen it brought up that a parent would say, 'Oh, I believe my child has some special needs.' We don't...seem to get that kind of, uh, conversation.

The first educator attributes this non-initiation to lack of information and resources, while the second does not attribute it to anything in particular.

*e. Concerns:*

- I. social wellbeing informing resistance*
- II. educational achievement informing resistance*
- III. educational achievement informing support*
- IV. being "kicked out" of school*

Social wellbeing concerns were mentioned as informing resistance to special education processes, educational achievement concerns were mentioned as informing resistance or support, and a parent's concern about their student being kicked out of school due to their disability was also mentioned. The following paragraphs will detail these themes one-by-one.

I. One educator talked about an Asian American student who was perceived by educators to be clearly autistic as early as kindergarten, but whose parents refused services throughout elementary school, saying persistently that there was nothing wrong with him.

According to the educator,

There was no trust of the system. There was no trust that we have this child's best interests at heart, and we only want to help him, but they didn't sign [for services] ...They don't trust that their child is not going to be stigmatized and outcast, but what they're not realizing is that he was an outcast anyway.

Thus, to the educator's impression, the parents' concern about the student's social wellbeing informed their resistance to special education services.

II. Three educators identified parental concern regarding students' educational achievement as motivating resistance to special education. One explained,

In the Asian culture...many of the Asian parents think that school is very easy here. Um, you know, that...there's not the rigor that they would have at home...So, I think when parents, you know, are hearing that their child may be pulled out of class, they're thinking how is this going to impact my child from, you know, being at the top of their class.

According to the school psychologist interviewed,

I think schooling in China is different, from what I've heard. It's, you know, very rigorous and the expectations are a lot higher. Like I know they get a lot of homework and it's some corporal punishment. So, I think parents, especially first generation or that...were schooled in China, have a certain set of expectations. So, conversations about maybe reduced homework...different accommodations, I think sometimes they're unsure of what that means and why we wouldn't necessarily expect their child to do things that other students would do.

Thus, both of these educators identify parents as believing that school in the United States is less intensive than school in their country of origin, so that special education accommodations, which may be perceived as making school even easier than it already is, are particularly unwelcome. Educators are also, of course, making statements about what they perceive school to be like in Asian countries—whether they are basing this on what Asian American parents have told them, or on un-researched suppositions perhaps linked to the model minority stereotype, is unclear. As should be kept in mind in reading all of these results, they are the testimonies of particularly placed actors obtained in the quest to investigate interactions; as such, they are not taken to be fact, but perceptions.

A fourth educator pointed to examples of educational achievement concern motivating resistance to ELL services, since she likened the removal from the classroom for ELL services as similar to removal for special education services, saying:

Testing showed that the child could benefit from being pulled out two days a week for a half an hour, but we've had parents that say 'no, no, no,' they're afraid

that the child is going to miss too much in the classroom by being pulled out. They say, 'No, no, we don't want our child to get pulled out.' We do try to, both the ELL teacher and myself, have...tried to say that 'This is really going to help your child. The extra...small group setting will help them to get better English, writing complete sentences, reading stories.' But they're still adamant...they don't want their child to be out of the classroom.

Like the other educators who spoke on the topic, she perceives Asian American parents as demonstrating an educational achievement concern that deters them from accepting assessments or services that would change their children's educational experience from that of their peers.

III. The ELL teacher, on the other hand, perceives the educational achievement concern as informing parental *support*, saying,

I think the difference I see is that...the parents, I feel like they just value the education, it's a priority to them, whatever the school says, they go along with...They, you know, came here for a purpose. They want their kids to have a better life, better education, so parents, um, really, I think, uh, are supportive of whatever we say and...at home they try to just make sure their child, you know, does what they're supposed to do.

However, this educator was unable to recall ever having had an Asian American student with a disability in her class, so her extension of the observation of supportiveness in general to supportiveness for special education processes may be considered more tenuous.

IV. One educator had an Asian American student with disabilities whose mother, during special education designation processes, revealed her concern that her son's issues put him at risk of being expelled from school. As the educator said,

He [the student] wouldn't speak, he couldn't write and there was nothing. The parents were heartbroken...They knew [the issues], they knew. They didn't know what to do...I remember the mother, through the translator... telling me [that] she thought that he might get kicked out of school. And I said, 'no, we'll keep him and we're keeping him until June.' And they were...so thankful... Because they thought he was going to get kicked out of school.

This fear might reflect that the mother did not previously know that her son was guaranteed an education regardless of his special educational needs.

*f. Values and beliefs:*

*I. educational achievement*

*II. effort*

*III. compliance*

*IV. beliefs about mental health issues*

Three values specifically linked to Asian American parents were educational achievement, effort, and compliance. Different beliefs about mental health were also mentioned.

I. Three educators talked about the particular value that Asian American parents place on educational achievement. To their impression, it is something that is especially important to Asian American parents, and this can make the possibility of a disability particularly difficult to understand or accept. According to the guidance counselor interviewed,

There's a cultural bias against—you know, a lot of Asian parents push their children a lot more than some of our other parents...And, you know, they've worked hard and long to come to this country to get a good education. And here we're presenting the fact that their child has a disability and it's just really hard for them to comprehend.

II. Three educators identified a cultural value placed on effort that is in tension with their own concept of disability and special education. According to the ELL teacher,

The parents might know that their child is struggling a little bit, but I don't know, perhaps it's a cultural thing, that they just focus, 'well then my child has to work harder,' type of thought, that okay then he or she, they need to practice more and they have to work harder in class, and it's just more focus and more effort on the child's part. So, you know, I don't know if the parents, um, you know would ever say, oh my child is, you know, does have special needs.

Regarding Asian American parents' contributions during special education meetings, one educator implied that they tend to want to see more effort from their children, saying,

Sometimes you get [the parents] to say, 'Tell them to read more' – whatever you can do, it's kind of like they want us to be the disciplinary for them.

And according to another,

[Chinese and Indian parents] want achievement, they don't want to hear that there's a problem, their children just need to work harder.

Thus, the observation of these educators was that Asian American parents prefer increased effort as a problem solver, both in general and as opposed to special education.

III. Another value identified by two educators was compliance, e.g., to the assessments and suggestions of educators. One made a cultural connection very bluntly, saying,

With the Asian people we had to always remember, culturally they want to say yes to everything. Because they want to please the person that they're in front of. So you have to make sure that they understand. So we always had interpreters with us to make sure that they understood...Just make sure that yes, is yes. Do try to just be nice, [say] 'You can say no and you can say yes.'

The special education teacher interviewed implied the same value of compliance but without making such a clear cultural connection. Furthermore, this educator identified that such initial compliance appears all the more distanced from sincere understanding and agreement by a number of cases in which parents withdrew their children from special education shortly after it was implemented:

Sometimes in the meetings, you're not sure if everything is being communicated the way you want it, you know? And sometimes I think the [Asian American] parents just want to please and be onboard with us...Sometimes we have kids come up here [to special education] and all of a sudden, the parents want them out of special ed. And I almost feel like maybe they didn't know what they were signing up for.

IV. One educator said, "It's very hard for some cultures to understand any kind of mental health issues." When questioned later about this statement, the educator elaborated,

When I worked in my other job, you know, I worked with some Asian clients whose parents would not agree with any of their mental health diagnosis [sic]. For example...the clients staying with us, the parents would come in and say, 'Don't take your medications. Here, I have some voodoo trinkets that you should sleep with under your pillow.' So, there's this whole other, you know.

This educator likened the culturally differentiated thinking about mental health as experienced in her previous job to parents' thinking about disabilities as experienced in her current job.

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To reiterate, I have investigated educator-parent and educator-student interactions during special education designation processes from the educator perspective so as to explore ways that, in the perspective of educators, Asian Americans view and navigate these processes differently than other groups. Of course, questions remain that my results cannot answer: for example, what objective truth is there to these perceptions? And how do these perceptions influence how educators approach and interact with these students and parents? Without answers to such questions, I view these results as suggestions about how these interactions may be unique, suggestions which may serve as important launch points for further research. In the following section I will state my conclusions, address limitations of my study, put my results in conversation with the literature, and finish by discussing areas for further research.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this study, I conclude that educators do distinguish their experiences with Asian American students and parents as distinct from other students and parents in the context of special education designation processes. In terms of *how* they distinctly perceive these students and parents, language barriers were the most prevalent theme. When working with the children of immigrants, educators struggle to discern whether learning issues are language acquisition or disability related, and are unable to assess students who lack the language fluency to complete assessments conducted in English. Although the rare cases of outside testing and school-facilitated native-language testing were mentioned, it certainly does not appear standardized. Furthermore, simultaneously providing ELL and special education to students in need of both services does not appear standardized, which may necessitate prioritizing one at the expense of the other.

Educators describe their communication with many Asian American parents as being impacted by language barriers and the frequent use of translation services. Even with the availability of translation services, educators doubt whether or not the communication is adequate, a doubt furthered by cases in which parents agree to have their children receive special education only to pull them out once the services begin. Having an educator who can communicate directly with parents can be an asset; however, if that educator knows the family outside of school via the Asian community, it can present a sensitive situation in which their translation decisions are affected by those personal relationships. Another aspect of communication mentioned by two educators was their observation that Asian Americans tend not to initiate the processes of special education designation as compared to other parents.

Beyond language barriers, few educators distinguished their experiences with Asian American students in the context of special education from their experiences with other students. Two educators mentioned that these students tend to be more hesitant, which one of them connected back to limited English skills while the other connected it to an aversion to missing classroom material. The two disability trends that educators noted were autism and mutism. This is interesting because the behavioral components of autism and the communication components of mutism indicate that the individual need not be low-functioning academically, and that the issues are most likely noted in social contexts. I contend that a challenge may be discerning when behavioral differences and unwillingness or inability to speak are results of cultural difference and/or language learning versus results of disability issues unrelated to cultural difference or language learning. It is such challenges that highlight the importance of considering how disability is socially constructed.

Some educators perceive Asian American parents as being distinct in their concerns. One noted that a mother worried about her child being socially stigmatized due to special education, without realizing that, according to the educator, his disability had already made him a social outcast. One educator was shocked to discover that a mother had feared that her son's disability would mean he could not go to school at all. When it came to educational achievement being a concern, one educator noted that this concern drives parents to be supportive of school suggestions—however, this particular educator had not worked with any Asian American students with disabilities, nor had any been through the special education designation process while in her class. The other educators that noted educational achievement as motivating

parental concern saw it as motivating parents to be resistant to special education because they perceive it as compromising, rather than promoting, their children's educational achievement.

Particular values and beliefs were also seen as influencing Asian American parents. Specifically, valuing compliance was seen as influencing parents to agree with educator suggestions and assessments. On the other hand, value placed on educational achievement was seen as making it difficult for parents to comprehend or accept disability diagnoses or special education. Value placed on effort was seen as driving Asian American parents to prefer that their children work harder, rather than receive special services, to overcome their difficulties. One educator pointed to cultural beliefs about mental health issues being at odds with standard beliefs in the U.S. today. Highlighting these values shows that the educators regard them as different from their own, either in nature or degree. This signals the potential for tension wherein ideas about best choices for a student are fundamentally at odds with one another.

At the same time, educators who spoke of trust tended to describe Asian American parents as having trust in the school's intentions of helping their child. Lastly, educators highlighted Asian American communities as significant social entities toward which they demonstrate sensitivity; two educators indicated that disability and special education were potentially uncomfortable or embarrassing and thus warranted sensitivity toward the community.

In sum, language barriers serve to impair communication with students by minimizing opportunity for assessment and special education provision, and with parents by compromising parent-educator communication about special education. Beyond this, a number of distinct concerns, values, and beliefs are seen as influencing parental behavior. Notably, valuing educational achievement, effort, and community perception may contribute to resistance to

special education, while trust in educators and valuing compliance may contribute to support of special education.

### *Limitations*

My results are subject to the limitations of interviewing specifically positioned informants. Consequently, they are limited by any biases demonstrated by educators as well as the weaknesses and selectivity of recalled memory. As discussed in my literature review, attribution error and the model minority stereotype have been shown to significantly influence educator perceptions of Asian Americans (for example, see Ying and Garcia 2009). Thus, while objectivity in general must not be taken for granted, this is especially so in cases where educators reference attitudes or behaviors that may fit the model minority stereotype.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, my sample is not representative. The educators interviewed represent a small group in a particular urban setting interacting with a particular demographic of Asian Americans (mostly of Chinese background, followed by Indian and Vietnamese). In terms of the diversity of types of educators interviewed, having only a single guidance counselor, psychologist, ELL teacher, vocational-technical teacher, and special education teacher are limitations on the perspectives presented here. I was also unable to secure interviews with any administrators, like principals, leaving this group entirely unrepresented.

Lastly, the responses of educators may have been influenced by my position as a white, female college student, as well as by the fact that I was vaguely associated with two of the educators prior to interviewing them, and was referred to the others through mutual acquaintances/snowball sampling—in other words, they may have felt their sense of anonymity compromised despite privacy assurances in place.

### *Results in dialogue with the literature*

By analyzing the ways in which educators distinguish their interactions with Asian Americans in the specific context of special education designation processes, my results suggest that major drivers of underrepresentation may include language barriers as well as value placed on educational achievement and effort. However, my results also identify a number of factors that may inform support of special education among Asian American populations, including trust placed in educators and value placed on compliance.

Most of my findings are supported, if not predicted, by the literature. For instance, Harold Stevenson and Shin-ying Lee (1990) found that Chinese and Japanese mothers primarily link success to effort, and emphasize effort as a path to improvement far more than mothers in the United States. This is closely linked to the contrast between the growth mind-set and the fixed mind-set (Mueller and Dweck 1998; Dweck 1999). The particular emphasis on effort demonstrated by Asians informs a growth mind-set that conceptualizes failure or struggle as more attributable to insufficient effort than other factors (Lee and Zhou 2015). Three educators in my study perceived an effort-focused mind-set in Asian American parents, and two of them linked it directly to resistance to special education. There is a tension here between valuing effort and hard work and considering student ability finite and thereby sometimes necessitating special services. When this tension arises in an interactive context with power dynamics and possibly language barriers, it becomes more complicated to navigate it successfully so as to reach a solution agreeable to all.

The literature also indicated an Asian American-specific emphasis on educational achievement as critical to success: young adults of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indian background indicated feeling that their cultures and communities stress educational achievement, career

success in particular professions, and the maintenance of family honor (Lee and Zhou 2015; Kahlon in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015). Amardeep Kahlon (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015) specifically noted that honor maintenance may necessitate keeping needs like mental health counseling a secret. Relatedly, the literature indicates significant stigma associated with disabilities in Asian and Asian American cultures, in both non-comparative and comparative contexts (Woo in Walker 1991; Special Olympics 2005; Jegatheesan 2009; Baker et al. 2010; Kayama and Haight 2013; Kamei 2013). These sentiments were echoed by educators in my study who perceived Asian American parents as placing a particularly high value on educational achievement that informed resistance to special education, and who, in regards to Asian communities, saw special education as a sensitive subject and educational achievement as valued to the point of motivating highly competitive behavior. Furthermore, one educator noted that their Asian American students seemed particularly hesitant to leave the classroom and miss classroom material. This may indicate that the educator views these students as valuing classroom material more than their peers. Curiously, only one educator noted a parental concern about social stigma specifically. Of course, it is possible that parents, Asian American or otherwise, have concerns that they choose not to articulate to educators or which educators did not deem significant or distinct enough to mention during these interviews.

Ung et al. (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015), in comparing the model minority myth *acquired* to the model minority myth *imposed*, identified face-saving behavior, loyalty, and respect for authority as Asian American values that are coded as obedience and conformity by white Americans. Ung et al. (in Hartlep and Porfilio 2015) also identified the values of balance and harmony, entailing adaptation and flexibility, being coded as passive and non-confrontational by white Americans (see Table 1). Some of the Asian American mothers of children in special

education interviewed by Jegatheesan (2009) reported that even if in disagreement with their child's diagnosis, they unquestioningly complied with professionals as a sign of respect and/or due to fear of embarrassment or appearing demanding. In my study, a number of educators noted Asian American parents' tendency to trust in them and comply with their suggestions. One noted that recognizing the parental desire to say "yes" drives her efforts to ensure that parents truly understand their options throughout the processes. This kind of assurance may serve to quell fears of appearing disrespectful or demanding.

One educator in my study indicated that she perceives Asian American understanding of mental issues as fundamentally different than non-Asian American understanding, referencing her experience with Asian Americans wanting to use alternative treatments like "voodoo trinkets" instead of suggested medications. This is particularly interesting in light of interviews with Asian American mothers of children in special education who felt discouraged and frustrated by a shutdown of their proposals to explore alternative medicine as part of treatment (Jegatheesan 2009). For educators, awareness of and openness to culturally different approaches to mental issues may be critically valuable for building positive and productive relationships with Asian American parents.

For first-generation immigrants from countries whose special education programs are more nascent than in the United States, sheer unfamiliarity can influence experiences with special education (World Bank n.d.; Kalyanpur 2008; Tran 2014). Unfamiliarity with policy and practice in the U.S. may explain why, as one educator in my study reported, an Asian American mother feared that her son would be kicked out of school due to his disability. Even parental tendency not to initiate special education designation processes, a tendency reported by two

educators in my study, may reflect a simple unawareness that the school will serve students' special needs rather than a lack of desire for the school to do so.

Finally, the most prevalent theme in my findings was one that appears somewhat in agreement with and somewhat in contradiction to the current literature: the practical impact of language barriers on communication between educators and students as well as educators and parents. This is especially important considering that about three-quarters of Asian American adults were born abroad, about half of whom identify as speaking English very well and about half of whom do not (Taylor and Cohn 2012). Jegatheesan (2009) found that many of the Asian American mothers of children in special education that she interviewed experienced anxiety around the special education process due to complex terminology and limited proficiency in English. Considered in tandem with my results, it is clear that while translation services are obviously an improvement upon no communication at all, they are no substitute for translator-free communication and contribute to issues on both sides of the interaction.

The puzzle presented is that while the current literature on English language learning and special education points to English language learners being statistically overrepresented in special education, the impression given by the educators in my study was that ELL students are less likely to receive special education since it is harder to discern whether or not they need services and harder to provide appropriate services. This is supported by city data compiled by the state that shows underrepresentation of its ELL students (including Asian Americans and otherwise) in special education. Since many statistical sources reflect Spanish-speaking ELL students more so than Asian language-speaking students, disaggregating these populations and assessing both quantitative and qualitative evidence seems critical to understanding nuances in the relationships between language learning and special education. For instance, how do trends

vary as language acquisition advances, and how do the native language resources available to Spanish-speaking students compare to the resources available to the diversity of Asian language-speaking students represented in the United States?

### *Suggestions for further research*

My study, by its exploratory and non-representative nature, presents far more questions than it does answers. First, many perspectives must be considered to approach a complete investigation into the phenomenon of Asian American underrepresentation in special education. Jegatheesan's *Cross-cultural issues in parent-professional interactions: A qualitative study of perceptions of Asian American mothers of children with developmental disabilities* (2009) looks at the perspectives of a sample of Asian American mothers. My study contributes the perspectives of a sample of educators. Further studies exploring both of these perspectives more thoroughly—as well as the perspectives of Asian American students and parents who experience special education designation processes, regardless of outcome—will provide invaluable insights into the interactions that take place between these actors. Long-term ethnographic work that reduces the biases and inaccuracies that inevitably stem from interviewing particular actors will also be a vital addition.

I also suggest further research into trends in Asian American special education designation by disability category. Two educators in my study highlighted mutism and autism in association with Asian American students. Considering the documented social construction of autism, and the social nature of both autism and mutism, there should be further investigation of possible trends in what disabilities Asian American students are designated as having and reasons for these trends.

The most common finding across my interviews was the prevalence of language barriers in educator perceptions of Asian American students and parents. According to educators, they limit student assessment and service options and impede critical communications between parents and educators. Studies determining the prevalence of such perceptions on state-wide and national levels may indicate that new policies and practices are needed to best serve this population. Research identifying and comparing schools that are more or less successful in facilitating communication may prove useful in constructing such policies. Moreover, my review of the literature indicates that educational studies have a growing emphasis on the intersection of ELL and special education, but sociology of education studies have not integrated this area as thoroughly as is necessary to present research that is of practical relevance to educators and policy makers. In other words, sociologists studying minority representation in special education *must* account for the impacts of language in their consideration of relevant social processes. And, of course, the language abilities of parents should not be neglected as a critically influential factor in understanding Asian American representation in special education. Further research should assess the variations, if any, that occur when educators and parents with differentiated language abilities come together in an effort to help struggling students.

And, of course, Asian American is shorthand for a large and incredibly diverse group of people. Not only is every Asian country of origin unique in its culture, language, and educational systems, but the experience of every Asian American varies by their family history, their gender, their socioeconomic status, where they live, and whether they are first, second, or even fifth generation Americans. Further research should be as nuanced as possible to the diversity of this demographic, and the uniqueness of experiences, in education and beyond, that this diversity generates.

The most essential take-away from this exploratory study is that it demonstrates the necessity of considering interactions at every level along the pathways to special education or lack thereof (see Figure 1 on page 42). When statistics show underrepresentation of Asian Americans in special education, they are in fact using data from the final step of special education designation processes: IEP or no IEP. These statistics do not tell us anything about representation at the steps between. For instance, they do not give information about students who educators wanted assessed or wanted enrolled in special education but whose parents refused assessments or services. They also do not give information about students who educators and/or parents wanted assessed, but could not assess or serve due to language barriers. Collecting these numbers and calculating these statistics, not only for Asian Americans but for all racial, ethnic, gendered, and socio-economic groups, could reveal highly informative patterns that could help to explain trends in special education representation.

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## APPENDIX

### *Part 1: Anecdotal evidence of diminishing stigma*

According to one educator with over 25 years of experience,

We...had to dispel the idea of pink folder IEP, which is a thing that goes around – our neighborhood was very small, where our school was and the aura of the Pink Folder was almost like the Scarlett Letter to some people. ‘I don’t want my child to have a pink folder.’ ...Yeah, ‘How long will they have that pink folder?’, ‘Does it ever go away?’, ‘Can anyone see it?’ Technically, those folders are locked in the psychologist’s room and no one – we only see them. However, there was that way of thinking – this more in the beginning and as the years went by, no one was really that concerned. They were more concerned about the welfare of the child...and it was just old fashioned thinking, that’s all.

### *Part 2: Japanese and U.S. Youth willingness to interact with students with intellectual disabilities*

	Japan Youth	U.S. Youth
<b>What I would do in school</b>		
Greet the student	69%	81%
Share a textbook with the student	56%	91%
Talk with the student at lunch	40%	61%
Choose a student with intellectual disabilities	36%	55%
<b>What I would do out of school</b>		
Spend time with the student out of school	17%	43%
<b>Talk about personal things with the student</b>	20%	29%
<b>Invite the student out with friends</b>	22%	38%

Source: Special Olympics (2005). Changing Attitudes Changing the World – A Study of Youth Attitudes about Intellectual Disabilities. Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc. p. 2.

### *Part 3: Interview Schedule*

*Slight variations were made for cases like the ELL teacher, vocational-technical teacher, and guidance counselor.*

1. What got you into teaching? How did you start teaching/counseling/working in school administration?
2. What is your educational/occupational background?
3. Can you describe your daily/regular duties of your job? What does your job entail on a regular basis?
4. Describe your school's policy on diagnosing students with disabilities.
5. For non-special education teachers:
  - a. When you receive information regarding your incoming class, how are you made aware of student's disabilities?
  - b. Have you ever had a student enter the academic year without a disability diagnosis and leave with one? If so, what was the process (per student)?
  - c. What processes does this entail? Who is involved, and how?
  - d. Where does your job fit into these processes?
  - e. How do students act throughout these processes? Patterns?
  - f. How do parents act throughout these processes? Patterns?
6. For special-education teachers:
  - a. Where does your job fit in the processes of students being diagnosed with disabilities?
  - b. How are students placed in your class versus receiving special education resources while remaining in a non-special ed classroom?
  - c. How do students act throughout these processes? Patterns?
  - d. How do parents act throughout these processes? Patterns?
7. For school psychologists:
  - a. Where does your job fit in the processes of students being diagnosed with disabilities?
  - b. How are students placed in special education classrooms versus receiving special education resources while remaining in a not-significantly separate classroom?
  - c. How do students act throughout these processes? Patterns?
  - d. How do parents act throughout these processes? Patterns?
8. Have language or cultural differences ever been a challenge to you in communicating with parents, particularly about special education? How?
  - a. Does your school offer translation services?

Part 4: Codes (rows) x educator (columns)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	% of 14 educators
<b>Students</b>															
Language barriers w/ students			*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	86%
Student hesitant because missing classroom									*						7%
Student hesitant because not understanding														*	7%
Mutism							*								7%
Autism											*				7%
<b>Parents</b>															
General resistance	*							*							14%
General support						*			*	*		*	*		36%
Language barriers w/ parents	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	100%
Trust	*					*			*				*		29%
Communities	*									*				*	21%
Non-initiating												*	*		14%
Social concern informing resistance	*														7%
Education concern informing resistance	*							*	(*)					*	21-29%
Educational concern informing support												*			7%
Kick-out concern										*					7%
Educational achievement			*				*					*			21%
Effort	*								*			*			21%
Compliance						*				*					14%
Mental health understanding							*								7%