

Generational Silence:

Impact on the Over-Identification of Alaskan Native Students with Learning Disabilities

A Meta-Synthesis

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**Abstract**

This meta-synthesis investigates the research and literature on the connections between historical trauma and the over-identification of Alaska Native students receiving special education services under the specific learning disability category. Historical trauma is defined. Intergenerational transmission is explained. The silence surrounding trauma and the loss of language fluency is explored and contextualized as a problematic factor in the disproportionate number of Alaska Native students being labeled as having a learning disability. The implications of misidentifying students, as well the life-long impact of receiving a disability label are discussed. Suggestions are reviewed with a focus on the ongoing development and practice of a special education teacher through the lenses of multiculturalism, critical theory and postmodernist thought. Not addressed in this meta-synthesis are issues of identity as they relate to and connect with historical trauma, colonialism and language.

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### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1. Background*

The literature defines historical trauma as, “the collective emotional and psychological injury over an individual’s lifetime and across generations” (Myhra, 2011). The start of the 1900’s began a cascade of trauma to the Alaska Native population. The first trauma, an influenza pandemic, resulted in the loss of 60% of the Alaska Native population. This initial event was followed by another flu epidemic within the decade. Tuberculosis took an additional toll on the Native population, bringing the total loss to 80%. Then came the forced removal of children to attend boarding schools. An already traumatized nation, whose cultures and languages were barely hanging on, had their children taken from them. While in the boarding schools, children were kept from speaking their mother tongues and engaging in cultural practices. This was often enforced through the use of punishment.

Historical trauma is transmitted down the generations in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. The transmission of language and culture is also intergenerational. The intergenerational transmission of languages and cultures of Alaska Natives was disrupted. The disruption was both a trauma in and of itself, and a compounding effect of the traumas already experienced. Language and culture are intricately connected. Language evolves from the culture and cultural thinking. Trauma has a negative impact on cognitive development. Language is a function of cognitive development.

In the United States, students qualifying for special education services under the broad category of specific learning disability (LD), account for more than one third (35-37%) of all students receiving special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There are

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fourteen eligibility categories. Thirty years of research has documented the overrepresentation of minorities in this category. There is also much documentation about its misidentification. This problem is not isolated to the United States. European countries are also seeing an increase in the percentage of students receiving special education services in the learning disability category. Alaska is no different. Of concern is that there is an overrepresentation of Alaska Native students within the specific learning disability category.

In the United States, the specific learning disability category is singled out to receive discussion within the Individuals With Disabilities Act (2016). The discussions are specific to the problem of over-identification in general and the overrepresentation of minorities. No other category receives this special treatment.

To obtain eligibility for the specific learning disability category, eligibility teams must determine three things:

1. Whether the student has a disability that adversely affects their educational performance;
2. Whether the student requires special education and/or related services; and
3. The educational needs of the student.

In the State of Alaska, students qualifying for special education services under the broad category of specific learning disability (LD), account for almost half (49.7%) of all students receiving special education services (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2016). Alaska Natives comprise almost one third (32.3%) of the total number of students identified with a learning disability (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2016). Alaska Natives make up less than one quarter (23.6%) of Alaska's public school population.

- (A) "IN GENERAL. The term 'specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding

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or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

- (B) DISORDERS NOT INCLUDED. Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, **cultural**, or economic disadvantage." (34 Code of Federal Regulations §300.7(c)(10)).

### *1.2. Author's beliefs and experiences*

Being a Jewish person, I am the product of centuries of historical trauma. I hold the pain of generations who toiled in slavery. I carry the uncertainty of wandering a desert for forty years. I embody the anxiety of discovery, expulsion, exile, torture, and death experienced during the Spanish Inquisition. And I'm riddled with the fear of humiliation, segregation, deportation, encampment and extermination experienced during the Holocaust, of which I am a child. I continue to bear the burden of false blame for the death of Jesus Christ, bubonic plagues, economic collapses and 9/11. I have experienced bald-faced anti-Semitism as well as its more subtle expressions.

The Holocaust is the most recent trauma experienced by my tribe. Both my parents are German immigrants who came to America *after* World War Two. They experienced the war quite differently from each other. My father was conscripted into the German Navy when he was sixteen years old. My mother was what is now referred to as a "hidden child." The term, hidden child, did not come into the vernacular until a few decades ago. Until then, my mother didn't have the language to talk about her experience. Not that she would have talked about it if she had.

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When the topic arose, the focus was always on those who survived the concentration camps. Since my mother had not been in a camp, she didn't feel as if her experience was valid, or as valid, as those who had been in one. Nonetheless, she displayed all the symptoms of survivor's guilt. Her trauma of being sent away at the age of seven, from her parents, by her parents, and being passed around to houses of virtual strangers was, very effectively, transmitted to me. I want it noted that, when stories of hidden children began to surface, it gave my mother the language, the words, to validate her and describe her experience. I think this was the beginning of her healing.

In 2002, I read an essay entitled, *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (Napoleon, 1996). This essay touched me in a deep and profound way, and has remained within me, surfacing when I have seen trauma, depression, suicide, substance abuse. The essay addresses the Great Death that, due to the flu epidemic in 1900, killed 60% of the Alaska Native population. This Great Death resulted in orphans being raised by grandparents grieving their children. This initial epidemic, in addition to killing 60% of the Native population, was also instrumental in the annihilation of the Alaskan cultures, virtually overnight. A systemic and multi-generational grief entered the hearts and minds of the survivors. The experience of historical trauma does not result in post-traumatic stress disorder. It results in something far more detrimental. It impacts the collective psyche of the survivors and its effects can be, and often are, transmitted down the generations.

Print awareness is necessary in the teaching and development of reading skills. Print awareness is somewhat organic in nature. It evolves from being read to. It evolves from seeing signage in the community, on houses and on the road. In 2003, while student teaching in a

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remote Alaskan village near the west coast, I noticed that there was a complete lack of signage. Roads were unnamed, traffic signs were unnecessary, and the store was unmarked. It made me wonder how can the young students in this village have print awareness if there is no print in the community. How can concepts about print bear any significance in their lives if they have no proof (signage) that it's necessary or even helpful?

Beginning 2010, I worked as a reading assistant at the Fairbanks Youth Facility (FYF) for five years. In this position, I administered the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) to every incoming resident as well as annually to those who were serving long sentences. What became apparent, early on, was that my students had fairly decent reading abilities coupled with a lack of comprehension. It should be noted that the population at FYF, at any given moment, is at least 80% Alaska Native, with the majority of those students coming from Interior villages.

During the fall of 2013, I took a course entitled, *Connecting the Past with the Future*. The culminating assignment was to attend at least twelve hours of the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention that was held in Fairbanks that year and bring back something to present as either an essay or lesson plan. My essay, *A "White" Girl's Odyssey of Connecting Her Past with the Future Through the Public Education System in the State of Alaska* (Van Flein, 2013), was the result. I include some excerpts here:

...speakers came and spoke of preserving language, preserving culture and how it's hard to learn family values when you weren't around family, which put my mind in a negative space. Here's why: I grew up in a household of War. The Viet Nam War was televised nightly, but at our dinner table and in our living room and always and everywhere, was World War II. My war weary inner-child started to groan. Not just about the "when I was a child" ruminations, but about the Alaska Cultural Standards and the Alaska State Standards and the State and Direction of Public Education.

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At some point I wanted a copy of the resolutions. A man sitting behind me had all kinds of paper, so I figured he'd know where I could get my hands on them. He told me he was only there trying to figure out what it meant for him to be Native. He lives in Anchorage, but grew up in the States and was just trying to find his place.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I knew I was going to raise it to be Jewish. My dilemma: I grew up here [Fairbanks] in the sixties. Not exactly a hotbed of Jewish Culture and my parents were more than happy to NOT BE JEWISH. I had to learn how to be and what it meant to be a Jew. And it's different for everyone. BUT...the first things I learned were the prayers...in Hebrew. My "aha" moment was this: THE LANGUAGE IS THE CULTURE!!!

I am entering the field of Special Education unexpectedly and late in life. I accepted the position of Special Education Teacher at a small village on the Yukon River this school year and worked in that capacity under a waiver while taking coursework toward my endorsement. This Koyukon village 140 west of Fairbanks has a population of less than 300 people, and one school serves 32 students in grades K-12.

Currently, the student-body includes 13 students (40.6%) on Individualized Education Programs (IEP's). Three of the 13 students are considered Intensive Resource (IR). Intensive resources are reserved for students whose needs are such that they require ongoing assistance throughout the school day. A one-on-one aide usually provides this assistance. Upon my arrival, I thought this percentage was extreme. I have been told that, at this school in the past, there were many years when upwards of 50% of the students had IEPs.

The eligibility category breakdown is: one student with Early Childhood Developmental Delay (ECDD); one student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); one student with Speech/Language Impairment (SLI); two students with Emotional Disturbance (ED); three students with Other Health Impaired (OHI); and five students with the Specific Learning

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Disability (LD) category. There had been one other student in the Speech/Language category, but during the Evaluation Summary and Eligibility Report (ESER) meeting, the parent thought the annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) from the year before had not been developed because the student no longer qualified as a student with a disability. During the meeting the parent wrote a Revocation of Consent for Services. Although the percentage of students with disabilities is high (34.2%), by any standard, the percentage of those with the category of specific learning disability (38.4%) is more in line with national rate and is lower than the Alaska rate.

Every four years, the State of Alaska conducts an on-site audit of each school's special education files to monitor for compliance with the law. My school had its on-site audit this past September. Ten files were reviewed. All of them were significantly out of compliance and corrective actions were lined out. It has been my good fortune to experience this process. I say this because my learning curve was steep, but invaluable. By going through each file, organizing them along the way and preparing for the corrective actions, which were, essentially, to re-hold ESER and IEP meetings for each student, I found myself asking many questions. One question was, why do students have IEP's when specialized instruction is not necessary? Another question was, why are students determined to be eligible for services under a disability category of which the criteria have not been met?

I started to think about over-identification as it pertains to my students found to be eligible for special education services under the specific learning disability category. Some were made eligible based on significant discrepancies between their non-verbal and verbal intelligence scores. Others were made eligible due to their higher non-verbal intelligence scores being used as the score of comparison to their achievement scores. This creates what appears to be a

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difference of significance between them, which, in turn, creates eligibility for the learning disability category using the discrepancy model. Full-scale intelligence scores were ignored. After one particular IEP meeting, one of the general education teachers, referencing the disparity between the student's non-verbal and verbal intelligence scores, mentioned that it hasn't been that long since Alaska Native children were removed from their homes, placed in Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, and forbidden to speak their mother tongues. This was the trigger that started me wondering about language development in Alaska villages and its connection to the historical trauma experienced by the Alaska Native peoples. It is my thought that, without being permitted to practice their native language, upon returning home, communication with their parents and grandparents was impeded. They no longer spoke their language fluently and their families did not speak fluent English.

Thinking about the systemic grief that has entered the Alaska Native cultures as a result of the Great Death, I began to think there might be a systemic lack of talk/banter in homes due to this: When students in BIA schools, after having been forbidden to speak their languages, returned home to parents/grandparents who didn't speak English, their ability to speak to each other was thwarted. Has this become systemic? In *Yuuyaraq* (Napoleon, 1996), much discussion is given to the passive silence pervasive in many Alaska Native households. The beginning of the healing that needs to occur is frank and open discussion, dialogue, and sharing of all the thoughts, feelings and actions that have transpired since the Great Death (Napoleon, 1996). Please note that I am not saying that Alaska Native families don't communicate. I want to explore the transmission of *language*.

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In my coursework toward the Special Education endorsement, I took a class entitled Language and Literacy. In this course, much was made of talking to, and having discussions with, students, and that oral language, reading, and writing are inseparable. The benefits of just listening to, and talking to, children are profound in the effect it has on their language development. Drawing pictures is the first step to writing. Our first historical documents are cave drawings. Having the child tell the teacher what the drawing is, and the teacher writing those words on the drawing builds the connections between language and writing, language and reading, and reading and writing.

After talking with my Alaska State Mentoring Program mentor about my interest in exploring language development and verbal intelligence as possible functions of historical trauma, she forwarded me, *The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3* (Hart & Risley, 2003). This article emphasizes that the home verbal environment is the critical element in language development.

Finally, my own attitudinal evolution toward Special Education mirrors that of the legal evolution, which began with a segregationist application with movement toward total inclusion and empowerment. My most important growth didn't occur until I started this program. A revelation I had the summer of 2016 is that if you're not in the field of Special Education, or disabled, or have a child with a disability, you know nothing about either disabilities or special education.

With this meta-synthesis, I hope to investigate the following research questions:

1. Could generational trauma be a factor, for Alaska Natives, in our over-identifying them as students with learning disabilities?

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2. If so, how can over-identification of these students be mitigated?

3. Could informing and educating parents and school personnel on what the disability categories are, the eligibility process for identifying a student with a disability, and what special education and specialized instruction are, stem the tide of referrals?

### *1.3. Purpose of this meta-synthesis*

This meta-synthesis, which focused on the intergenerational transmission of historical trauma among Alaska Native students and their overrepresentation in the category of specific learning disability, had multiple purposes. One purpose was to review journal articles related to historical trauma and its intergenerational impact on language and culture. A second purpose was to review journal articles related to issues surrounding the over-identification of, the overrepresentation of minorities with, and the misidentification of the specific learning disability category. I was specifically interested in articles that were specific to Alaska Natives and/or that provided suggestions for taking a more critical approach of the diagnostic criteria used in determining the presence of a learning disability. A third purpose was to look at strategies for culturally supportive and successful interventions. A fourth purpose was to classify each article by publication type, to identify the research design, participants, and data sources of each research study, and to summarize the findings of each study. My final purpose in conducting this meta-synthesis was to identify significant themes in these articles, and to connect those themes to my developing practice as a Special Education Teacher in the State of Alaska.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Selection Criteria*

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The 37 journal articles included in this meta-synthesis met the following selection criteria:

1. The articles explored issues related to the over-identification of Learning Disabilities.
2. The articles explored issues related to historical and intergenerational trauma.
3. The articles explored issues related to American Indian boarding schools.
4. The articles explored issues related to language.
5. The articles were published between 1983 and 2016 in peer-reviewed journals related to the fields of education.

### *2.2. Search procedures*

Database searches and ancestral searches were conducted to locate articles for this meta-synthesis.

#### *2.2.1. Database searches*

In the spring of 2017, I conducted systematic searches of the Education Research Information Center's database (ERIC, EBSCOhost). I used the following search combinations to conduct Boolean searches of this database:

1. ("over identification");
2. ("over identification") OR ("overrepresentation");
3. ("over identification") AND ("special education");
4. ("over identification") AND ("learning disability");
5. ("alaska native") OR ("alaskan native") AND ("over identification") AND ("learning disability") AND ("special education");
6. ("historical trauma"); and

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### 7. (“boarding school”) AND (“language”) and (“indian”).

These database searches yielded a total of 27 articles that met my selection criteria:

(Bullock, IL State Board of Ed & Others, 1984; Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Ellis, 2012; Ellis & Tod, 2012; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Guiberson, 2009; Haase, 1993; Hallahan & Mercer, 2001; Lipinski, 1989; Lipinski & Others, 1990; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Myhra, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011; Russell, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002; Soldier, 1993; Sower, 1987; Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012; Swisher & Deyhle, 1987; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Weaver, 1998; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002.)

#### *2.2.2. Ancestral searches*

Ancestral searches are conducted by reviewing and analyzing the reference lists of previously published works to locate literature relevant to one’s topic of interest (Welch, Brownell & Sheridan, 1999). I conducted ancestral searches using the reference lists of the articles retrieved through my database searches. These ancestral searches yielded ten additional articles that met my selection criteria: (Amos, 1997; Cartledge & Gibson, 2008; Faircloth, 2006; Grünke & Cavendish, 2016; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Bratton, 2003; Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015; Obiakor & Utley, 2004; and Shepard, 1983.)

#### *2.3 Coding Procedures*

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I used a coding form to categorize the information presented in each of the 37 articles. This coding form was based on: (a) publication type; (b) research design; (c) participants; (d) data sources; and (e) findings of the studies.

### 2.3.1. *Publication types*

Each journal article was evaluated and classified according to publication type (e.g., a research study, theoretical work, descriptive work, opinion piece/position paper, guide, annotated bibliography, review of the literature). *Research studies* use a formal research design to gather and/or analyze quantitative and/or qualitative data. *Theoretical works* use existing literature to analyze, expand, or further define a specific philosophical and/or theoretical assumption. *Descriptive works* describe phenomena and experiences, but do not disclose particular methods for attaining data. *Opinion pieces/position papers* explain, justify, or recommend a particular course of action based on the author's opinions and/or beliefs. *Guides* give instructions or advice explaining how practitioners might implement a particular agenda. *Annotated bibliographies* are lists of cited works on a particular topic, followed by a descriptive paragraph describing, evaluating, or critiquing the source. *Reviews of the literature* critically analyze the published literature on a topic through summary, classification, and comparison (Table 1).

### 2.3.2. *Research design*

For this meta-synthesis, each empirical study was evaluated and classified by research design (i.e., quantitative research, qualitative research, mixed methods research). *Quantitative* research involves the collection and analysis of numerical data in order to describe certain events or trends. *Qualitative* research collects and analyzes language-based (i.e., non-numerical) data.

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*Mixed methods* research uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods within the same study.

### 2.3.3. *Participants, data sources, and findings*

I identified the participants in each study (e.g., students with learning disabilities, Native American/Alaska Native grandparents, teacher-students, Alaska Native and Alaska non-Native males, State guidelines and regulations, Kindergarten students, second grade students, Native American/Alaska Native adults, students, parents, school faculty, and community support networks, past and present Native American boarding school students, school psychologists, Native American 4<sup>th</sup> graders, students in England, Federal government publications).

I also identified the data sources that were analyzed for each study (e.g., student records, surveys, focus groups, State guidelines and regulations, test and subtest scores, standardized assessment scores, open-ended interviews, interviews, observation and documentation, structured interviews, survey, observation, documentation and daily logs, surveys and National database information and Federal publications). I then summarized the findings of each study (Table 2).

### 2.4. *Data analysis*

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by Duke (2011) and Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 37 articles that I included in this meta-synthesis. I first identified significant statements within each article. For the purpose of this meta-synthesis, I defined significant statements as statements that addressed issues related to:

- (a) Impacts of Historical Trauma on Language, Culture and Identity;
- (b) Connections Between Culture, Language and Thought;
- (c) The Need for Cultural Competency;

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- (d) What Learning Disabilities Are Not and What Learning Disabilities Are;
- (e) Re-Educating Teachers; and
- (f) Suggestions, Implications and Ideas for Improvement.

I then developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping (verbatim) significant statements with (non-verbatim) formulated meanings. These formulated meanings represented my interpretation of each significant statement. Finally, I grouped the formulated meanings from all 37 articles into theme clusters or emergent themes. These emergent themes represented my interpretation the essence, or content, of the entire body of literature (Table 3).

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1. Publication type*

I located 37 articles that met my selection criteria. The publication type of each article is identified in Table 1. Fourteen of the 37 articles (37.8%) included in this meta-synthesis were research studies (Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Lipinski & Others, 1990; Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015; Myhra, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011; Sower, 1987; Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002.) Five of the articles (13.5%) were descriptive articles (Ellis & Tod, 2012; Faircloth, 2006; Hallahan & Mercer, 2001; and Obiakor & Utley, 2004). Eleven articles (29.7%) were opinion pieces/position papers (Cartledge & Gibson, 2008; Grünke & Cavendish, 2016; Haase, 1993; Kea, Campbell-Whately & Bratton, 2003; Lipinski, 1989; Russell, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002; Shepard, 1983;

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Soldier, 1993; Weaver, 1998; and Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008). One of the articles (2.7%) was a guide (Bullock, IL State Board of Ed & Others, 1984). Six of the articles (16.2%) were literature reviews (Amos, 1997; Ellis, 2012; Guiberson, 2009; Swisher & Deyhle, 1987; and Swisher & Deyhle, 1989).

### *3.1.1 Search Parameters*

Twelve of the 37 articles selected address issues surrounding the over-identification and overrepresentation of students with learning disabilities (Bullock, IL State Board of Ed & Others, 1984; Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Ellis & Tod, 2012; Grünke & Cavendish, 2016; Guiberson, 2009; Hallahan & Mercer, 2001; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Pilla, et al, 1999; Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002; Shepard, 1983; and Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012.) Eleven of the selected articles addressed issues surrounding education of Native Americans/Alaska Natives (Amos, 1997; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Faircloth, 2006; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Lipinski, 1989; Lipinski & Others, 1990; Pilla, et al, 1999; Swisher & Deyhle, 1987; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002.) Seven of the selected articles examined issues surrounding Native American boarding schools (Ellis, 2012; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Haase, 1993; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; Russell, 2002; Soldier, 1993; and Sower, 1987). Five (5) of the selected articles focus on issues of cultural diversity and assessment (Cartledge & Gibson, 2008; Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Bratton, 2003; Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015; and Obiakor & Utley, 2004). Five of the selected

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articles address issues inherent to Historical Trauma (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Myhra, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Weaver, 1998; and Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008.)

Table 1

<b>Author(s) &amp; Year of Publication</b>	<b>Publication Type</b>
Amos, 1997	Literature Review
Bullock, IL State Board of Ed & Others, 1984	Guide
Cartledge & Gibson, 2008	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Coffey & Obringer, 2000	Research Study
Ellis, 2012	Literature Review
Ellis & Tod, 2012	Descriptive Article
Evans-Campbell, 2008	Literature Review
Faircloth, 2006	Descriptive Article
Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005	Research Study
Grünke & Cavendish, 2016	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Guiberson, 2009	Literature Review
Haase, 1993	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Hallahan & Mercer, 2001	Descriptive Article
Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006	Research Study
Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Bratton, 2003	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Lipinski, 1989	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Lipinski & Others, 1990	Research Study
Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015	Research Study
McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005	Research Study
Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015	Research Study
Myhra, 2011	Research Study
Nielsen, 2010	Research Study
Obiakor & Utley, 2004	Descriptive Article
Pilla, et al, 1999	Descriptive Article
Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006	Research Study
Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011	Research Study

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Russell, 2002	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Shepard, 1983	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Soldier, 1993	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Sower, 1987	Research Study
Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012	Research Study
Swisher & Deyhle, 1987	Literature Review
Swisher & Deyhle, 1989	Literature Review
Weaver, 1998	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Zembylas & Bekerman, 2008	Opinion Piece/Position Paper
Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002	Research Study

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*3.2. Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies*

As previously stated, I found fourteen research studies that met my selection criteria (Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Lipinski & Others, 1990; Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015; Myhra, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011; Sower, 1987; Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002.) The research design, participants, data sources, and findings of each of these studies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Authors	Research Design	Participants	Data Sources	Findings
Coffey & Obringer, 2000	Mixed Methods	123 rural 1 <sup>st</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> graders placed in Special Education eligible under the Learning Disability category. 105 (85.4%) were non-white. 18 (14.6%) were white.	Student records.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Using Full Scale Intelligence Quotients and one (1) Standard Deviation in the discrepancy model reduced eligibility to 72 students.</li> <li>2. Using Full Scale Intelligence Quotients greater than 85 and one (1) Standard Deviation reduced eligibility to 50 students.</li> <li>3. Using Full Scale Intelligence Quotients and one and a half (1½) Standard Deviation reduced eligibility to 36 students.</li> </ol> Finding 2 was significant in changing the ratio between white and non-white students.
Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005	Quantitative	6275 Native American/ Alaska Native adults over 45 years of age. 319 caregiving grandparents and 5956 non-caregiving possible grandparents.	Compare and contrast two Federal government surveys.	There are significant disproportions in gender, disabilities, income, health, living conditions and access to resources between grandparents raising grandchildren and grandparents not raising grandchildren.
Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006	Qualitative	7 teachers in a graduate program and working in an Apache reservation school. 5 were Native Americans.	Focus group discussions.	Made a list of culturally unresponsive educational practices, their problems, and solutions. Five (5) categories: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learning Styles</li> <li>2. Reflective Learning</li> <li>3. Cooperative Learning</li> <li>4. Non-Verbal Learning</li> </ol>

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				5. Behavior Modification Learning.
Lipinski & Others, 1990	Quantitative	57 4 <sup>th</sup> –6 <sup>th</sup> grade (9-11 years old) Alaskan males. 20 rural remote Alaskan Natives, 15 urban Alaskan Natives, and 22 urban Alaskan white males.	Comparison of <i>Cognitive Laterality Battery</i> scores of the three sample groups.	The Alaskan Native groups had higher visuospatial as compared to verbal-sequential abilities. The Alaskan white group had higher verbal-sequential abilities as compared to visuospatial abilities.
Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015	Quantitative	50 states' learning disability regulations and guidelines.	Coding the learning disability regulations and guidelines.	Inter-state learning disability identification policies and guidelines have significant variability.
McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005	Quantitative	514 middle-class, English speaking Kindergarteners, excluding those with low incidence disabilities, and following them to the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade.	Subtest scores from a battery of phonological awareness and letter-sound understanding measures.	Early identification of students at-risk for reading difficulties is possible for the purpose of providing supports and interventions to enhance reading rather than categorizing them as being at-risk for learning disabilities.
Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015	Quantitative	177 2 <sup>nd</sup> graders who had not responded to school-based reading interventions.	Applied the concordance-discordance method across two (2) psycho-educational assessment batteries.	There is low agreement for Learning Disability identification as well as the specific academic domain.
Myhra, 2011	Qualitative	13 urban Native American/ Alaska Native volunteers	Open-ended interviews. Reflective journal.	One of the three questions this study sought to answer was: How is historical trauma transmitted to descendants?

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		23-64 years old. Six women, seven men.		Findings were organized into three categories and ten themes. Highlights the need for cultural supports and healing.
Nielsen, 2010	Mixed Methods	Students, parents, school faculty and community support networks from three Canadian school districts.	Interviews, observation and documentation over five (5) years.	Lack of full fluency in both a mother tongue and English (compromised language acquisition) may have a strong influence in problems with First Nations education.
Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006	Qualitative	46 Native Americans volunteers. 30 were former Indian boarding school students aged 18-72 and 16 were current Indian boarding students, aged 14-18.	Structured interviews.	Recommendations surrounding the need for resources to make Indian boarding schools more culturally relevant.
Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011	Qualitative	403 school psychologists.	Survey.	Need for more professional development and preparation for cultural knowledge. Need for more ethnic diversity. Longevity is positive factor in cultural competence.
Sower, 1987	Mixed Methods	30 Native American 4 <sup>th</sup> graders. 28 were Navajo. 2 were half Hopi.	Observation, documentation of behavior and talk and students' daily work logs.	Learning computer programming increased and enhanced language use in both Navajo and English.
Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012	Quantitative	15,640 students in 450 English schools in years 1, 5, 7 and 10.	Surveys and National Database information.	Teachers are labeling younger children within the year group (students born in Summer months) with

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				Learning Difficulties/Disabilities.
Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002	Quantitative	Three federal government publications. Census data and census follow-up surveys.	Data extraction from the publications.	Native American/Alaskan Native and African American students are overrepresented in Learning and other high-incidence Disabilities.

### 3.2.1. Research design

Four of the fourteen research studies (28.5 %) included in this meta-synthesis employed a qualitative research design (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Myhra, 2011; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; and Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011). Seven of the research studies (50.0%) used a quantitative research design (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Lipinski & Others, 1990; Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015; Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Three of the research studies (21.4%) employed a mixed methods research design, collecting and analyzing a combination of both quantitative (i.e., numerical) and qualitative data (Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Nielsen, 2010; and Sower, 1987).

### 3.2.2. Participants and data sources

All fourteen research studies included in this meta-synthesis analyzed primary data collected from human subjects. These studies collected data from a variety of participants including students with and without disabilities, parents and other caregivers of children both with and without disabilities, school faculty and administrators, school psychologists, Native

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American, Alaska Native and First Nations peoples, other races and community networks.

Seven of the research studies included in this meta-synthesis analyzed data collected from racially mixed students in Kindergarten through 10th grade with and without disabilities. (Coffey & Obringer, 2000; Lipinski & Others, 1990; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015; Nielsen, 2010; Sower, 1987; and Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012). Seven of the studies analyzed data collected from significant samples of Native American/Alaska Native and Canadian First Nations peoples (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Lipinski & Others, 1990; Myhra, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; and Sower, 1987). One study collected data from teachers who were also graduate students (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006), one study collected data from students, parents, faculty and community networks (Nielsen, 2010), and one study collected data from school psychologists (Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011). Two of the studies collected data from State and Federal publications (Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015 and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

The studies reviewed for this meta-synthesis used student records, surveys, focus groups, State guidelines and regulations, test and subtest scores, standardized assessment scores, open-ended and structured interviews, interviewer journals, observation and documentation, daily student logs, National database information and Federal publications to collect data from participants. Three studies used surveys (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011; and Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012). Three studies used test scores (Lipinski & Others, 1990;

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McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; and Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015). Three studies used interviews (Myhra, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; and Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006). Two studies used student records Coffey & Obringer, 2000; and Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012). Two studies used State or Federal publications (Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). One study used focus group discussions (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006). Other sources of data were also used in many of the studies. These additional sources of data include direct observation, focus group discussion notes, interviewer and research journals, surveys, questionnaires, direct observation, and student work logs.

*3.2.3 Search Parameters*

Four of the twelve (33.3%) articles that address issues surrounding the over-identification and overrepresentation of students with learning disabilities were research studies (Coffey & Obringer, 2000; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011and; Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012.) Four of the eleven (36.3%) articles that address issues surrounding education of Native Americans/Alaska Natives were research studies (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Lipinski & Others, 1990; and Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002.) Two of the seven (28.5%) articles that examined issues surrounding Native American boarding schools were research studies (Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; and Sower, 1987). Two of the five (40.0%) articles that focus on issues of cultural diversity and assessment were research studies (Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015; and

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Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015). Two of the five (40.0%) articles that address issues inherent to Historical Trauma were research studies (Myhra, 2011; and Nielsen, 2010).

### *3.2.4. Findings of the studies*

The findings of the 14 research studies included in this meta-synthesis can be summarized as follows:

1. The definitions of and criteria for the identification of learning disabilities are loose (Coffey & Obringer, 2000), there is significant variability of these definitions and criteria between States (Maki, Floyd & Roberson, 2015), and there is low agreement on the identification of the specific domain of the learning disability (Miciak, Denton & Fletcher, 2015). The resulting overrepresentation and over-identification of students with learning disabilities are factors of these loose definitions and criteria and permits the labeling of students born in summer months (Squires, Humphrey, Barlow & Wigelsworth, 2012) and the targeting of minority students (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002) as well as the misidentification of students with other (more stigmatizing) disabilities such as cognitive impairment, traumatic brain injury and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.
2. Cultural knowledge and competence (Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011), cultural relevance (Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006) culturally appropriate teaching practices (Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006), are needed as well as culturally appropriate assessments (Coffey & Obringer, 2000). Assumptions on assessment choices favor the dominant culture and are not valid measures for minority populations (Lipinski & Others, 1990), which points to the need for greater ethnic diversity in teachers, administrators and support service providers

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(Robinson-Zañartu, Butler-Byrd, Cook-Morales, Dauphinais, Charley & Bonner, 2011; Ingalls, Hammond, Dupoux & Baeza, 2006; Robbins, Colmant, Dorton, Schultz, Colmant & Ciali, 2006; and Lipinski & Others, 1990). A school staff that reflects the ethnic and cultural make-up of the student body is desirable and they need to have an awareness of cultural trends and patterns to provide appropriate supports (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2005) for families. Enhanced, culturally appropriate, supports for reading development in early childhood has been shown to keep students from being labeled with a learning disability (McNamara, Scissons & Roberson, 2015). Culturally appropriate supports are critical for healing people and communities that have experienced historical trauma and the subsequent/consequent intergenerational transmission of trauma (Myhra, 2011).

3. Lack of full language fluency in both the mother tongue and English is evident and problematic in the education of First Nations students (Nielsen, 2010), as well as Native Americans and Alaska Native students and enhancing the use of language is a critical component to student success (Sower, 1987).

### *3.3. Emergent themes*

Six themes emerged from my analysis of the 37 articles included in this meta-synthesis.

These emergent themes, or theme clusters, include:

- (a) Impacts of Historical Trauma on Language, Culture;
- (b) Connections Between Culture, Language and Thought;
- (c) The Need for Cultural Competency;
- (d) What Learning Disabilities Are Not and What Learning Disabilities Are;
- (e) Re-Educating Teachers; and

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(f) Suggestions, Implications and Ideas for Improvement.

These six theme clusters and their associated formulated meanings are delineated in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme Clusters	Formulated Meanings
<p><b>Impacts of Historical Trauma On Language And Culture</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The collective emotional and psychological injury over a lifetime and across generations.</li> <li>● Critical factor in transmission is communication around the events – notably – silence or guilt-inducing communication.</li> <li>● Survivors avoid talking about their experiences and related feelings.</li> <li>● A conspiracy of silence forms around the trauma.</li> <li>● Children and grandchildren unwilling to bring it up.</li> <li>● Impaired family communication is an effect of trauma.</li> <li>● Native American and Alaska Native survivors of trauma raised the surviving children.</li> <li>● There is still a high rate of grandparent caretakers among Native Americans and Alaska Natives. This may be another function of intergenerational transmission.</li> <li>● Traditional parenting practices were disrupted.</li> <li>● Forced boarding school attendance interrupted the intergenerational transmission of healthy child-rearing practices.</li> <li>● Parents and grandparents begin to doubt themselves, their culture and traditional ways of parenting.</li> <li>● Boarding schools compounded the trauma.</li> <li>● Boarding schools were a significant factor in the loss of language and traditional practices.</li> <li>● Community children were driven toward assimilation and punished for practicing cultural and spiritual ways.</li> <li>● Upon returning home, family communication was further hindered as children no longer fluently spoke their mother tongue and the family had not achieved fluency in English.</li> <li>● Loss of the language is equivalent to the loss of the culture.</li> <li>● Boarding schools have been slow to adopt bilingualism.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Connections Between Culture, Language and Thought</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Child development occurs in the context of social and language learning.</li> <li>● The relationship between language and thought is that we think in our language. Lack of language fluency limits thinking. Without language, thoughts cannot be expressed.</li> <li>● Language is a function of intergenerational transmission.</li> <li>● To learn a language, it needs to be spoken at home, school and play.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Language deficiency is at the heart of many problems of First Nations and Native American students.</li> <li>● Alaska Native languages use of many symbolic components.</li> <li>● Alaska Native languages are enhanced with sign and non-verbal cues and an attention to detail.</li> <li>● Alaska Native and Native American communication is centered around symbolism and non-verbal nuances.</li> <li>● This communication style clashes with Western public education's emphasis on literacy and theoretical knowledge.</li> <li>● Experiential and project based instruction is strongly indicated.</li> <li>● Alaska Native males perform better on visuospatial skills than non-Native males.</li> <li>● Studies show that Alaska Natives process language in the left hemisphere of the brain.</li> <li>● Instruction and activities that engage the whole brain is indicated.</li> <li>● There is a strong connection between the culture and the language.</li> <li>● Language is the heart of a nation.</li> <li>● School programs devalue learning, cultural and linguistic styles that differ from the mainstream.</li> <li>● Schools should let the culture control the language. Don't override concepts – cooperation v. competition, generosity &amp; compassion v. materialism.</li> <li>● Language can be enhanced with fun &amp; modern methods that don't ignore the culture.</li> <li>● Learning disabilities usually affect the intellectual functioning of language.</li> <li>● The acquisition of language fluency is essential to learning, identity, culture and healing.</li> <li>● Language skill interventions are indicated.</li> <li>● Early intervention is indicated.</li> <li>● Interventions should include the family.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Need For Cultural Competency</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Need to believe it's wrong to label a child with a disability out of cultural differences.</li> <li>● Need to not view differences as deficits.</li> <li>● Need to believe diverse learners do not deserve to be in segregated and/or stigmatizing programs.</li> <li>● Cultural knowledge stems from awareness and sensitivity.</li> <li>● Know your own culture, racism and biases.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Know the culture and worldviews of your community.</li> <li>● Recognize the cultural discontinuity between home and school.</li> <li>● Let cultural values be the rewards – rethink praise, status/ranking.</li> <li>● Acknowledge that there is inherent test bias and use culturally appropriate assessment tools.</li> <li>● Understand this through the cultural lens, not that of your or the dominant culture.</li> <li>● The more a culture relies on hunting, the higher the visuospatial skills.</li> <li>● Alaska Native males perform better on visuospatial skills than non-Native males.</li> <li>● Left brain dominance for language points to the need for whole brain teaching.</li> <li>● This points to the need for whole brain instruction.</li> <li>● Schools tend to separate the whole into parts.</li> <li>● Test administrators need training on culturally appropriate assessment tools.</li> <li>● Assessment and intervention needs to be used with caution.</li> <li>● There is a strong need for the recruitment and retention of Native teachers – teachers of the same culture.</li> <li>● Include Native Americans/Alaska Natives in the referral process to help identify cultural issues.</li> <li>● If the culture is not incorporated into the school, it has the same genocidal effect as punishment, segregation and physical violence.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>What Learning Disabilities Are Not and What Learning Disabilities Are</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A learning disability is not: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A learning problem;</li> <li>Mild mental retardation;</li> <li>A behavior disorder;</li> <li>Underachievement;</li> <li>A physical handicap;</li> <li>A sensory impairment;</li> <li>A cognitive impairment;</li> <li>Traumatic brain injury or;</li> <li>Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Guidelines for establishing a learning disability require that the following factors must be ruled out: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inadequate instruction;</li> <li>Attendance;</li> <li>Environmental or economic disadvantage; and</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

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	<p>Lack of English Language Proficiency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning disabilities usually affect the intellectual functioning of language.</li> <li>● A severe discrepancy between ability and performance needs to be present.</li> <li>● The problem needs to be consistent, identifiable, and significant.</li> <li>● Neuropsychological connections exist and can be measured.</li> <li>● Neuropsychological assessments need to be used to pinpoint the specific learning disability.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Re-Educating Teachers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers need training in cultural competency.</li> <li>● Teachers need not to confuse disability with disadvantage.</li> <li>● Teachers need to believe it's wrong to label a child with a disability out of cultural differences.</li> <li>● Teachers need not to view differences as deficits.</li> <li>● Teachers need to believe diverse learners do not deserve to be in segregated and/or stigmatizing programs.</li> <li>● Teachers should learn what and how the students have learned at home.</li> <li>● Teachers should be willing to change/incorporate teaching styles that accommodate different styles of learning using culturally congruent approaches.</li> <li>● Realistic special education is necessary but is not to be used to compensate for poor teaching.</li> <li>● Special education is not remedial education.</li> <li>● General education teachers are responsible for the instruction and progress of <i>all</i> their students.</li> <li>● The pre-referral process needs to include culturally supportive interventions for the students along with support for the teachers to be able to successfully implement the intervention.</li> <li>● Response to intervention should not be viewed as the path for a learning disability diagnosis, but as a process to figure out how the student learns.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Suggestions, Implications and Ideas For Improvement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family involvement in the schools is critical.</li> <li>● Families need to be involved in the schools at every level.</li> <li>● Language, history and culture should be included in the classroom.</li> <li>● Bilingualism equates to biculturalism.</li> <li>● Fluency in at least one language must be facilitated.</li> <li>● Emphasize systematic teaching of language sub-skills through direct instruction.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communities need to decide the direction they want to take, not the schools.</li> <li>● The recruitment and retention of Native and other minority teachers and service providers is vital.</li> <li>● The school staff needs to reflect the ethnic/cultural make up of the student body.</li> <li>● Have a strict pre-referral process.</li> <li>● Provide culturally appropriate and EARLY intervention services.</li> <li>● Don't be afraid to adhere to the guidelines. When looking for evidence of poor instruction, include attendance.</li> <li>● Culture is not a disability.</li> <li>● Use the discrepancy model with strict adherence to rigorous guidelines – Baseline Full Scale IQ of not less than 85 – require 1.5 standard deviations (22 points).</li> <li>● Be willing to employ dynamic assessments v. standardized assessments.</li> <li>● Pinpoint the specific learning disability.</li> <li>● Don't misidentify a learning disability that doesn't exist or is a different disability.</li> <li>● Don't deliver inappropriate services in order to avoid having difficult conversations.</li> <li>● Don't create an Individualized Education Program just because a student doesn't respond like the others – these students are the responsibility of the regular classroom teacher.</li> <li>● Use whole brain, multisensory teaching and interventions.</li> <li>● Improve teacher training.</li> <li>● Improve training and professional development emphasizing language and literature.</li> <li>● Create classrooms that incorporate Universal Design for Learning.</li> </ul>
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### **4. Discussion**

In this section I summarize the theme clusters that emerged from my analysis of the 37 articles included in this meta-synthesis. Then, I connect the theme clusters to how they will inform my professional practice as a special educator, as well as their impact on my personal worldview and understanding of my role as a non-Alaskan Native who chooses to continue to live here.

#### *4.1 Impacts of Historical Trauma on Language and Culture*

The literature defines historical trauma as, “the collective emotional and psychological injury over an individual’s lifetime and across generations” (Myhra, 2011). The start of the 1900’s witnessed a loss of 60% of the Alaska Native population due to disease. To put this in perspective, out of every ten individuals, only four survived. Our language addresses decimation and extinction; our language addresses decimation and annihilation. We don’t have words for what lies between. There is no descriptor for this inconceivably staggering devastation. The consequences of these initial traumas ranged from the loss of cultures, to the stunned silence of grief and shame. Inherent in this was the disruption of the family structure. Children were orphaned, grieving grandparents were left to raise their children’s orphans, people lost children and spouses.

Family communication was impaired. A critical factor in the intergenerational transmission of trauma is communication around the events, notably, silence or guilt-inducing communication. Survivors avoid talking about their experiences and related feelings. Parents and grandparents avoided talking about the events they experienced, keeping silent as a way to

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protect the children. Children and grandchildren were reluctant to bring it up for fear of opening up old wounds. A conspiracy of silence became the norm.

Parenting practices, which are transmitted generationally, were disrupted. The removal of children prevented the re-establishment of parenting practices as well as providing no parenting model to the children. To this day, there is a high rate of Alaskan Native grandparents who are the primary and long-term caretakers of their grandchildren. Subsequently, and compounding the initial traumas, the colonial government instituted forced boarding school attendance, creating an entirely new trauma. The clear message was that the government was better able to rear children than were their families. Parents and grandparents began to doubt themselves, their culture and their traditional ways of parenting. Woven into this was the presence of missionaries. To their credit, they saw value in preserving the languages of the Alaskan Natives. This value was demonstrated by translating the Bible into many of these languages while simultaneously devaluing entire cultural belief systems and spiritual practices. None of the selected articles addressed child abuse committed by some of the missionaries. Therefore, I will not address these individual traumas except to note that they should not be ignored when addressing historical trauma in its entirety and to make mention that many of the boarding schools were run by missionaries.

Boarding schools were a significant factor in the loss of language and traditional practices, further compounding the effects of the trauma. Their methods of isolating children from their communities and punishing them for practicing cultural and spiritual ways were standard procedures in the pursuit of assimilation. This included prohibiting students from speaking their mother languages. As a result, students' fluency in their primary languages was

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lost and fluency in English was not achieved. Meanwhile, people remaining in the villages were still speaking their languages and, with limited opportunities for practice and inadequate instruction, learning English imperfectly. When boarding school students returned, their ability to converse with their community was thwarted. The silence surrounding grief spread to everyday life. Lack of fluency, in either language, continues to be a barrier for these children in our schools.

### *4.2 Connections Between Culture, Language and Thought*

While thoughts exist independently, without language, thoughts will never be expressed. Leo Vygotsky viewed child development in the context of social and language learning; language and thought are intimately linked. Speaking well, and having strong language skills are essential to thinking well.

Some studies have looked at historical trauma through an educational lens. There are compelling arguments that language deficiency is at the heart of many problems seen in schools among First Nations and Native American students. To learn a language, it needs to be spoken at home, at school and at play. Language is also a function of intergenerational transmission. Losing a language and learning a new language has been an effect of the historical trauma experienced by Alaska Natives and Native Americans. Often, grandparents and parents have learned English incompletely or imperfectly. This insubstantial English has been transmitted down to each generation. Evidence of this is much stronger in small rural villages and isolated areas. Fluency was lost in the native languages while fluency in English was not fully attained.

Western public education's emphasis on literacy and theoretical knowledge differs from the emphasis of indigenous cultures. Language is a part of communication. Alaska Native

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languages are rich with symbolic components. These symbolic components are combined with non-verbal cues and nuances. Communicating this way requires attention to detail, which strengthens the connection between the culture and the language and indirect communication is often a cultural norm. School programs devalue learning, cultural and linguistic styles that differ from the mainstream; they are viewed as deficits rather than differences.

Language is the heart of a Nation. The literature researched for this meta-synthesis stresses that there is a cultural connection to language and that the language is the culture. Some suggestions point to the need for schools to let the culture control the language. There is an emphasis that the language we use in schools should strive not to override concepts valued in the indigenous culture such as cooperation v. competition, generosity and compassion v. materialism.

The lack of full language fluency, in any language, has been shown to be problematic for First Nations and Native American students. Research shows that Alaska Native students score lower than average on verbal intelligence tests than non-Natives, but also that their verbal scores are significantly lower than their overall intelligence scores. Several studies have enhanced students' use of language with methods that don't ignore the culture. Many of these methods apply emotionally engaging pedagogies, work with a whole brain approach and are often project based.

The languages that are learned are not as important as learning *one* language really well. Learning disabilities usually affect the intellectual functioning of language and presents as an imperfect ability to understand or use language. Studies indicate the need for improved training and professional development that emphasize culturally appropriate language and literature. The most effective approach for language development is to start early; early childhood education;

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early identification of students at risk for reading problems; and early interventions. It is suggested that language skill interventions should also include parents and other caretakers.

### *4.3 The Need for Cultural Competency*

Diverse learners do not deserve to be in segregated and/or stigmatizing programs. Cultural competency mandates the belief that it is wrong to view diverse learning styles and linguistic differences as deficits. It is also wrong to label a child with a disability based on cultural differences.

First, there is a need to really understand what cultural competency encompasses. A theme in virtually every study and article that was selected for this meta-synthesis is a cry for cultural competency. Discussions surrounding cultural competency are presented in the matter-of-fact tone of academia but, as a collective body, the tone is amplified to a screaming pitch. The call is not for the insertion of arts and crafts projects, or essays on a traditional activity that teachers currently pass off as proof of their cultural competency.

Cultural competency includes awareness, sensitivity, knowledge and understanding of each community. Cultural competency begins knowledge of your own culture, and honestly examining your own racism and biases. From here, there is a need to have cultural competency of your profession. Educators should examine the culture of education and teaching.

Educators need to know what the student has learned at home. Cultural competency means knowing the culture and worldviews of your community. Often, there is cultural discontinuity between home and school, and between the community and school. Cultural competency requires us to understand *how* the student learned at home, thereby understanding the learning style of the child.

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The articles selected for this meta-synthesis are harmonious in their suggestions to build a bridge between diverse cultures and Western public education's emphasis on literacy. Much attention is focused on using culturally appropriate methods of teaching and assessment tools that reduce the inherent cultural biases that are found in many of our standardized measurement tools. Arctic studies show Alaska Native students as having higher cognitive skills in perceptual analysis and image memory. Studies conducted in northern sub-Arctic regions focused on factors that identify visuospatial abilities especially in cultures that rely on hunting practices and the use of symbolic language. Rather than measuring discrete abilities, using assessments that measure clusters of abilities correlating to general intelligence is indicated. Suggestions for assessment instruments to explore are the Goodenough Draw-a-Man, and the Catell Culture-Fair Test, which have scores of Native American populations that are comparable to, and sometimes higher than, the scores of white populations. Other assessment tools that have little inherent cultural biases are Witkin Embedded Figures, Kohs Blocks Designs and Raven's Progressive Matrices.

If the culture is not incorporated into the school, it has the same genocidal effect as punishment, segregation and physical violence (Nielsen, 2010). In addition to allowing the culture to control the language, educators need to rethink praise, status and ranking. Often, teachers want students to work for rewards that aren't valued in the culture. Lack of motivation is only a descriptor when we fail to offer rewards that are meaningful. Thus, educators must learn what is valued in the community.

Standardized assessment tools are notoriously biased toward Western values and the dominant culture. There is inherent test bias in any assessment. Therefore, it is important to find and use culturally appropriate assessment tools. The more a culture relies on hunting, the more

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strongly developed are visuospatial intelligence and skills. Studies indicate that Alaska Native males perform better on visuospatial intelligence tests than their non-Native peers regardless of whether they live in rural or urban areas. Some more culturally sensitive assessment tools are being offered, but the messages are clear; assessment and intervention need to be used and interpreted with caution and the consideration of using more dynamic assessments is strongly indicated.

Evidence shows a left-brain dominance for language in the Native American and Alaska Native cultures. What this strongly suggests is that the teaching needs to engage the whole brain. Educators tend to compartmentalize language instruction geared toward right-brain dominance. Teachers need to rethink their delivery of language and reading instruction and create lesson plans that will engage the whole brain.

Thinking develops from language. Language develops from physical activity. The two cannot be disconnected. When the primary learning mode of a culture, or a student, is physical and experiential, a major component for cognitive development is suppressed sitting inside a classroom. Direct and experiential learning, a “see-do” approach, may be vital for First Nations students, but this type of learning has been shown to have meaningful benefit to all learners.

We need better teacher training and professional development to address cultural competency through teaching methods. Test administrators, school psychologists and service providers should have more training in culturally appropriate assessments and assessment tools. Ideally, the ethnic representation of school personnel would mirror that of the student body. Native Americans and Alaska Natives must be part of a stronger effort to recruit and retain Native teachers, which is vital to identifying cultural issues.

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### *4.4 What Learning Disabilities Are Not and What Learning Disabilities Are*

Before a learning disability can be identified as such, there are clear guidelines that need to be addressed and ruled out. Is the discrepancy the result of environmental and/or economic disadvantage or inadequate instruction to include poor attendance? Additionally, the level of English Language Proficiency must be taken into consideration. If a student is not English Language Proficient, categorizing and labeling the student with a learning disability is problematic for many reasons. The most glaring reason is that the services ignore or misidentify what the student really needs in the way of academic support.

The learning disability category is not a catchall to avoid more stigmatizing categories that may cause shame and/or embarrassment. A learning disability is not mild mental retardation, underachievement, sensory impairments, physical handicaps, a learning problem or a behavior disorder. Nor is a learning disability a cognitive impairment resulting from fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or traumatic brain injury. The learning disability category is also not to be used as compensation for poor teaching.

When a learning disability exists, one or two tasks are problematic for a student. With mild mental retardation, every task is difficult. The learning disability category should not be used to avoid having honest and potentially painful discussions with parents.

A learning disability may be present when a student's performance is not rising to the student's ability. A gap, or discrepancy, between performance and ability needs to exist and needs to be severe; at least one standard deviation between comparable measurements.

Learning disabilities, by definition, usually affect the intellectual functioning of language. Neuropsychological connections to specific learning disabilities exist and can be measured.

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Assessments for a learning disability need to include neuropsychological evaluations to pinpoint the specific learning disability. The problem needs to be consistent, identifiable and significant, i.e. a visual memory problem.

The issue of poor instruction came up repeatedly. This includes poor attendance, which results in poor instruction. Instruction cannot be received when students arrive late or miss school frequently because they are not in the classroom. This leads into the problem of poor teaching and the need for better training and professional development opportunities, addressed below as a separate emergent theme.

### *4.5 Reeducating Teachers*

Many of the articles selected for this meta-synthesis address the problem of poor teaching and the need for better training and professional development opportunities. These trainings should have an emphasis on language and literature. The strongest message conveyed is, 'be a better teacher.' In addition to developing meaningful cultural competency it is necessary for teachers to understand what disabilities are, in general, and what a learning disability is, specifically.

Becoming culturally competent means not viewing differences in learning styles as a deficit, not confusing disability with disadvantage, and believing that it is wrong to label a child with a disability out of those differences. Becoming a culturally competent teacher doesn't happen after one or two in-service sessions; it is an ongoing process in which the first item to address is to know one's own culture, racism and biases. Becoming culturally competent entails finding out what and how your students learned at home. Culturally congruent approaches require a willingness to change and incorporate teaching styles that can accommodate different

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styles of learning.

Special education should never be confused with remedial education. Realistic special education is necessary, but many diverse learners do not deserve to be in segregated and/or stigmatizing programs. Teacher training and professional development also needs to focus on clarifying teacher perceptions of what disabilities are and, more specifically, what special education is.

General education classroom teachers are responsible for ensuring their students are learning. There is much discussion about reasons teachers make referrals for special education services. The reasons range from teachers making referrals on the misguided thought that the student will either be removed from their classroom or that, once the student has an Individualized Education Program, their responsibility to that student is passed to the special education department, teacher or aide. These reasons are especially prevalent with the learning disability category.

Research recommends that a pre-referral process be adhered to. Response to intervention has often used as the means to obtain a hoped-for learning disability diagnosis. This was not the original intent in the establishment of response to intervention. Response to intervention needs to provide culturally appropriate support for students. It also needs to provide support for teachers to assist them in becoming comfortable with differentiated techniques. Often, when culturally appropriate supports are implemented, the student is better able to succeed in the classroom. Essentially, if a student is able to progress in the classroom after successful intervention has determined the best teaching approach for that child, there is no learning disability. Interventions of this nature are effective, and *early* intervention has shown the most promising results.

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### *4.6 Suggestions, Implications and Ideas for Improvement*

The articles selected for this meta-synthesis most strongly recommend demonstrated cultural competency in our schools. On an individual level, this means educators must rethink what we do in our classrooms from how we teach, to rethinking what student work products we accept, to our attitudes about disability, rewards and diverse language and learning styles. We teachers need to be willing to reach out to families to find out what and how each of our students learned at home. This would provide the best starting place to differentiate instruction.

On the classroom and school level, this entails bringing families into the schools at every level. There should be parent-volunteers in classrooms and on school boards. We should also offer curricula that include language, history and culture, in addition to music, arts and crafts. Dynamic assessment should be ongoing beginning with screenings for students at-risk for reading problems as early as pre-school.

In communities with diverse linguistic styles, it is critical to communications to facilitate fluency in at least one language. According to the research I read, the best results from interventions are when they are offered early and are culturally supportive. With parents and other caretakers included in interventions, language support includes the whole family, not the student in isolation. Our emphasis should be the systematic teaching of language sub-skills through direct instruction using multisensory methods to engage the whole brain.

Communities need to decide the direction they want to take, not the schools. The decision to offer a bilingual program should be honored when there is community desire and support. Some communities have decided to have their schools teach English only. This, too, needs to be honored. Federal and State Departments of Education, universities, school districts and high

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schools need to plan for the recruitment and retention of Native and other minority teachers and service providers. School personnel should reflect the ethnic and cultural make-up of the student body.

School staff, teachers, administrators and aides need training to understand what disabilities are, when special education is appropriate, and when it is not. General education teachers need to understand that they are responsible for the instruction and learning of all their students. Special education is neither remedial education nor compensation for poor teaching.

The definition of Learning Disability should be tightened and consistent among states. School districts should have a strict pre-referral process. Culturally supportive interventions for students, and support for teachers to implement them, should be readily available. This process needs to be exhausted before a formal referral initiates the assessment process. The goal of interventions is not to categorize or label a student with a disability; the goal is to determine the student's best modes of learning to be able to offer better instruction that will facilitate success for the student.

The crux of this discussion, which I will address, in-depth, in the *Conclusion* of this meta-synthesis, is the issue of cultural disadvantage. Culture is not a disability and every safeguard must be taken to avoid labeling and stigmatizing a student with a learning disability when cultural factors may be what are really at play. When a student does not respond to interventions, the decision to further assess needs to be entered with caution. A first step is to adhere to the guidelines for identifying a learning disability. When looking for evidence of poor instruction, for example, look at the attendance of the student. When students are habitually late or absent, they cannot receive good instruction. Absenteeism is not a disability. Other factors to

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consider are economic and/or cultural disadvantage. Poverty is unfortunate; it is not a disability.

Test administrators need to be willing to use assessments that are more culturally appropriate and be willing to employ more dynamic assessment strategies rather than standardized assessments that have inherent cultural bias. We need to use care and caution when deciding which assessments to use. The ability/performance discrepancy model should be rigorously applied with an eye toward using full-scale intelligence scores tempered with using culturally appropriate assessments that tap into the intelligence strengths of the students. Finally, when determining that a student has a learning disability, it is important to pinpoint the specific learning disability.

We need to tighten the definition and identification criteria for learning disabilities. If specificity of the learning disability is not determined, it is difficult to determine what modifications and/or accommodations are appropriate. Misidentifying a learning disability results in delivering inappropriate or inadequate services and harms the student. Some truths are hard to face and some conversations are difficult to initiate, but the goal should always and only be what is in the best interest of the child.

### **5. Conclusion**

With this meta-synthesis, I investigated and, in part, answered the following research questions:

1. Could generational trauma be a factor, for Alaska Natives, in our over-identifying them as students with learning disabilities?
2. If so, how can over-identification of these students be mitigated?

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3. Could informing and educating parents and school personnel on what the disability categories are, the eligibility process for identifying a student with a disability, and what special education and specialized instruction are, stem the tide of referrals?

Vygotsky (as cited in Kea, 2003) supported the idea that to know a child one must know the family. To know the family one must know the community. To know the community, family and child, one must have knowledge of the powerful the societal forces affecting their lives. Inclusive to this idea are the issues of cultural competency and an understanding the intergenerational transmission of historical trauma.

Toward my development of cultural competency, I explored and examined my own worldview, culture and biases using the Hardiman White Racial Identity Development Model (Sue & Sue, 2003). During my analysis of the subject and emergent themes for this meta-synthesis, I made the effort to be aware of my own thinking process. I took into consideration the oral traditions and the non-verbal cues and nuances of the communication styles of Alaska Native cultures, and I questioned the importance of teaching reading and writing at all. Is the insistence of teaching reading and writing a Western value incongruent with the indigenous culture? With this in mind, I want to begin this conclusion by addressing my personal cultural biases on teaching language and literacy.

One of the many tactics of oppression is to deny access to education, especially literacy. For this reason alone, I advocate for global literacy. “Language brings with it an identity and a culture, or at least the perception of it. A shared language says ‘We’re the same.’ A language barrier says ‘We’re different’” (Noah, 2016). The nature of colonialism and colonists is, by design, to instill their rules, in their language, to get on with the business of extracting and

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removing a land's resources. That people may occupy a land is, in the colonial mindset, of little consequence. Unfortunately, this results in the occupied and oppressed needing to learn the language of the oppressor, because negotiating injustice requires the ability to think in the language of the oppressor.

In answer to my first question, 'could generational trauma be a factor, for Alaska Natives, in our over-identifying them as students with learning disabilities?', the research studies and articles selected for this meta-synthesis point to a resounding, "Yes." There is a distinct line from historical trauma directly connected by the loss of language, and the intergenerational transmission of imperfect language fluency. The end of this line is the over-identification of Alaska Native students as being learning disabled.

Based on my experiences and research, many of our Alaska Native students receiving special education services under the specific learning disability category have been incorrectly identified as being students with a disability. Culture is not a disability. Lack of English Language Proficiency is not a disability. I contend that the environmental conditions and disadvantages suffered by and perpetrated on the Alaska Native peoples is the result of historical trauma that has been passed down the generations. The results of the historical traumas experienced by Alaska Natives include the loss of fluency in their own languages and the transmission of an imperfect fluency in English. The silence of grief flows through generations.

My second question asks, 'how can over-identification of these students be mitigated?' Postmodernist thought leans toward the concept that disability is a social construct. The learning disability category is, I think, more vulnerable to this than other disability categories. The lack of clear definition and loose identification criteria makes it more vulnerable, opening the door for a

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flood of referrals based on erroneous assumptions about differences. Differences in learning and communication styles are not disabilities. It is incumbent upon educators to explore all aspects of student profiles to better able their success in our classrooms. We stigmatize and do a disservice to a student with no disability by labeling them as disabled. This practice needs to stop.

We are just now becoming aware of the cognitive impacts trauma has on brain development. Trauma interferes with cognitive development. Language enhances cognitive development and language development is one avenue to re-pattern the brain. Movement is another. In my practice as a special education teacher, I hope to guide general education teachers toward a constructivist approach using whole-brain teaching methods for experiential and project-based learning. Critical components for reducing future over-identification of students with specific learning disabilities are culturally appropriate interventions and direct instruction in language.

Special education is never to be confused with remedial education (State of Alaska, DEED, 2017). Neither is it a magic bullet. The learning disability category is being used for both these reasons, many times from the referral and request of teachers. The result is an over-representation of students within this category, especially for minority groups who are culturally and/or linguistically diverse. Almost half of all students receiving special education services in the State of Alaska are receiving them under this category. The percentage of Alaska Native students being served under this category comprises a proportion significantly greater than the percentage of the total number in the school population. After reviewing literature on the overrepresentation of Alaska Native, Native American and First Nations students in the learning disability category, as well as other minority groups in the United States, and after reviewing

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studies from Europe on the ballooning use of this category in general, I have come to three conclusions:

1. Cultural bias needs to be acknowledged and avoided. We need to address diversity of a cultural nature. Whenever the student in question has a cultural and/or linguistic background not of the dominant culture, we need to take great care prior to making a referral. After identifying a student at-risk for a learning disability, we should insist on a rigorous pre-referral system that includes culturally appropriate intervention supports with the intention of finding the student's learning style(s). Then we can begin the process of developing the skills that will help the student make progress to be successful in the classroom. Intervention includes supports for the general education classroom teacher. The intention of intervention is not to steer the student into special education. When/if, after interventions have been employed, the student still has not made meaningful progress, and the student's English Language Proficiency is not the dominant issue, making a referral for assessment is indicated. As discussed in Chapter 4.3, the use of culturally sensitive intelligence tests is essential. Team membership should include people of the student's culture.
2. The definition and identification parameters of the learning disability category can be easily misapplied. The name of this category is actually "Specific Learning Disability" and its definition should be clarified and require rigorous and more specific guidelines. It is essential that the specific learning disability be determined.
3. Teachers need clarification on their responsibility for teaching and executing interventions. Teachers and parents should be informed on what disabilities are, the purpose of special education and what specialized instruction looks like. This should include discussions on

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the negative impacts of labeling a student with a disability over their lifespan. Just as labeling a student with a learning disability does not make up for poor instruction, it also does not assist the student if it means we avoid facing the truth about the nature of other, possibly more painful to admit, disabilities. Other discussions should include clarifying disability from disadvantage to include looking at historical trauma and its impact on language.

This last conclusion answers, in part, my third question, ‘could informing and educating parents and school personnel on what the disability categories are, the eligibility process for identifying a student with a disability, and what special education and specialized instruction are, stem the tide of referrals?’ The literature strongly suggests improved training and professional development for teachers, service providers and administrators. I would like to think that passing this information on to parents is a logical extension.

Our goal, at all times, should be to improve educational outcomes for all our students. Over-identification and misidentification of any disability category distracts our attention from doing what is really necessary. The IDEA has provisions and procedural safeguards for getting information to parents, but this begins only after a referral has been made or if their child already has an IEP. In my practice, I would like to offer information on Special Education to *every* parent.

I conclude by connecting the theme clusters to how they will inform my professional practice as a special educator, as well as their impact on my personal worldview and understanding of my role as a non-Native Alaskan who made the choice to continue to live here. I believe there is a connection between language and spirituality. Healing the soul wound of historical traumas needs to begin by breaking the silence. Silence surrounds secrecy. Secrecy

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surrounds shame. Keeping silent feeds shame. Silence is kept by stuffing pain down with overeating, poorly eating and engaging in the wide variety of self-medication that is available. The silence of trauma needs to be broken. Alaska Natives and Native Americans need to talk. They need to talk and heal amongst and between themselves, giving a language to the pain to better hear the pain.

But here's the catch. Alaska Natives and Native Americans may have been silenced by trauma, but we colonial descendants have enforced it. Our history ignores our crimes and, as a society, we have not unpacked and looked at our wrongdoings in a meaningful way. We, too, are silent. We, too, need to break our silence, secrecy and shame. We need to talk and talk and talk and then talk some more. We need to give ourselves a language that allows us to own our crimes and heal our spirits, too. We need to do this honestly amongst ourselves. Until we do this, we close ourselves off from being able to hear the pain.

In Alaska, there are school districts and university programs focusing on reviving and preserving some of the Native languages. Because language is a culture and the loss of a language results in the loss of a culture, it is my hope that these programs continue to grow.

Questions that arose, for me, during the development of this meta-synthesis are:

- Can the culture be saved without saving the language?
- How does spirituality affect the education process?
- What can we learn about historical trauma to inform us about disabilities and Special Education?
- What is the educational model to heal the wounds of colonialism?
- Western education programs embody a distinct culture. When people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds enter these teaching programs, they have, to a great degree, adopted the values and culture of the education system. Is this problematic?

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