A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES

OF EDUCATORS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS IN THE IDENTIFICATION PROCESS OF

MINORITY STUDENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION IN EAST TENNESSEE

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and service providers in identifying minority students in special education in Tennessee elementary schools. The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This theory emphasizes cultural tools and their functions in understanding a different culture. It also provides a framework for researchers to investigate how education links individuals to their culture. The study's sample consisted of ten participants, including general education teachers of core content areas, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and ELL teachers from three elementary schools in Tennessee. I used the triangulated research strategy to collect data through interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing. I used content analysis to interpret participants' lived experiences of the unique education process for minority students and the transcendental phenomenological design to study data. I used the techniques of epoché, coding, horizonalization, clustering data into themes, textural description, and synthesis to ensure that every statement had equal value. Composite descriptions were derived from the textural and structural descriptions from the analysis to synthesize data. The results of this research study increased understanding of educators' experiences with referral and assessment of minority students for special education. The two primary findings of this study revealed that educators want special education referrals, assessments, and eligibility decisions to be unbiased, and they desire additional training on making special education decisions for minority students. This research study supported existing literature claiming inconsistency in the referral and assessment practices for minority students considered for special education.

Keywords: Disproportionalit*y,* Overrepresentation, Misidentification, Assessment Specialists, Sociocultural Theory

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my father, Roger Lovegrove. He was the first to teach me how to set and pursue goals. This journey was always with him in mind. To my husband, who sacrificed time and energy to ensure I always had what I needed throughout this process and always showed me unconditional love and support. To my daughter Ella, who has been a constant cheerleader and who has always been understanding when I had to give my time to write. To my mother, who has shared my excitement for completing this degree and has prayed many prayers on my behalf. Finally, to my circle of friends, who are my extended family, thank you for always cheering me on and encouraging me.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Center of Minority Research in Special Education (COMPRISE)

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR)

English Learners (ELs)

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

Linking Academic Scholars to Educational Resources (LASER)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRES)

National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSU)

Nonword Repetition Tasks (NWRT)

Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP)

Special Education (SPED)

Student Support Team (S-Team)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Teacher perceptions of students with disabilities and statistical discrepancies among teacher-student demographics influence classroom instruction and special education referrals (Green & Stormont, (2018). Research has not identified the exact factors that have led to minority overrepresentation, but it has revealed some of the most frequently identified reasons (Green et al., 2020). For example, the overrepresentation of black students receiving special education may be due to a lack of cultural understanding and biased perceptions of teachers, inadequate instructional practices, unequal access to educational opportunities, and discriminatory policies influenced by socioeconomic status (Green et al., 2020). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and related staff in the identification processes of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. This chapter includes background information, an explanation of the research problem, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, research questions, definitions, and a summary.

Background

Demographic shifts in U.S. schools continue to occur each year, impacting the number of racial minorities in special education for the past 40 years (Kramarczuk et al., 2017). Evidence supports Hispanic and Black students, for example, are particularly overrepresented in special education, and students coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds make up 60-80% of students with eligibility for special education (Farkas et al., 2020; Guiberson, 2009).

The issue of minority overrepresentation in special education has led to attempts to identify why these disparities are occurring. Efforts by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE),

the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, and the Office of Special Education are programs that help determine the cause of overrepresentation (Morgan et al., 2023). Some conclude that minority overrepresentation results from misidentification based on race or ethnicity (Morgan et al., 2023). Racial and cultural-based decisions have the potential to impact not only students but also communities (Cruze et al., 2018).

Teachers and assessment specialists accommodate students from diverse backgrounds in their respective roles with the instruction and assessment processes. However, it remains unclear how prepared educators are when considering minority students for special education. In addition, educators struggle to ensure the curriculum is culturally and linguistically responsive (Goodwin, 2017). Minority overrepresentation in special education examines historical, social, and theoretical contexts.

Historical Context

Racial segregation traces back many decades, but the pinnacle of debate over educational inequality occurred in the 1960s (Isenberg et al., 2022). In 1968, a report produced by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders created ideas to adopt a binary American model dividing Black and White citizens, which eventually resulted in minority students not having the same access to education as their non-minority peers (Anderson, 2017; National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968).

Although U.S. schools no longer segregate, integrating immigrant students and representing multicultural and ethnic groups in schools brings about new equality concerns. The Immigration Act of 1924, which limited the number of immigrants from specific ethnic groups, was later eradicated by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Goodwin, 2017). Unlimited immigration led to an increase in diversity represented in U.S. communities and schools.

The most significant immigration in U.S. history occurred at the beginning of the 20th century, bringing immigrants from various countries with many cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Goodwin, 2017). The Hispanic population is reported to be the most significant and fastest-growing group in the U.S., according to data from the 2007 U.S. Census Bureau (Guiberson, 2009). The increasing diversity represented in schools is particularly interesting to special education. According to Dunn's (1968) study, minorities represented 60-80% of students in a unique education program. Although the U.S. Department of Education, as well as the Office of Civil Rights, have made efforts to correct the issue, representation discrepancies persist in the form of disproportionality, overrepresentation, and misidentification (Gage et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Guiberson, 2009).

Social Context

The past three decades show demographic shifts in the U.S., with significant changes within the White, Black, and Hispanic populations, particularly between 1980 and 2008, resulting in social and educational attempts to improve policy and practice (Voulgarides et al., 2017). However, despite current courses designed to address the diverse needs of minority students, research continues to reveal inadequate representations (Elder, Figlio, Imberman, & Persico, 2021; Sinclair et al., 2018). In addition, a lack of training exists in placing diverse students in special education despite teacher preparation programs, including special education and culturally diverse issues (Hutchison, 2018).

To address the disproportionality of minority students in special education, the U.S. Department of Education's "Equity" rule within the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) details federal monitoring requirements, including the use of a standard formula (Morgan et al., 2018). While these measures aim to decrease disproportionality, there is a continued

overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Despite the need for culturally supportive classrooms that support diverse students with various backgrounds, research shows that educators may be relying on an evidence base that is not relevant to the populations they are serving (Barrio, 2021; Horton & Munoz, 2021; Sinclair et al., 2018). In addition, while pre-service teacher programs are beginning to address teachers' responsibilities in instructing English Language Learners (ELLs), this does not address concerns regarding in-service teachers' confidence and comfort levels or those responsible for eligibility determination (Wissink & Starks, 2019).

Several factors in research identify possible causes of the overrepresentation of minority students, including variables related to social demographics, general education, related resource inequity, and unique education processes (Kirksey, 2022; Yammine & Lowenhaupt, 2021; Othman, 2018). Other factors that influence attitudes toward minority students in education include race, gender, language status (Voulgarides, 2017), inappropriate identification procedures, explicit or implicit bias toward English learners, and limited assessment resources for language minority students (Unmansky et al., 2017).

Literature reveals that negative attitudes or unfamiliarity with minority cultures from community leaders, teachers, and peers can cause lasting effects on students (Jaffe-Walter & Miranda, 2020). Negative attitude is of particular concern in special education, given that a student's cultural background and linguistic identity are often misunderstood and interrupted as a problem requiring individual interventions (students (Jaffe-Walter & Miranda, 2020).

Misconceptions from teachers, service providers, and assessment specialists not only cause potential disparity among minorities but can also impact how students view themselves (Unmansky et al., 2017). For example, understanding teachers' attitudes toward minority

students, identifying measures taken to ensure classrooms are culturally inclusive, and researching criteria assessment specialists use to distinguish disability from cultural or linguistic differences can contribute to the disruption in minority overrepresentation.

Theoretical Context

Vygotsky's (1936) sociocultural theory provides a framework for researchers to investigate how education links individuals to their culture (Alkhudiry, 2022; Panhwar et al., 2016). Sociocultural theory emphasizes cultural tools and their functions in understanding different cultures. It states that children learn through the connections between their culture and environment (Azadi et al., 2018; Subero et al., 2018). Second language learners rely on scaffolding, where an educator or peer facilitates new experiences for a new learner to help them internalize further information (Alkhudiry, 2022; Castrillon, 2017). This theory guides educators in instructing, referring, and assessing diverse students by emphasizing their specific cultural interactions (Kim et al., 2015). The concepts of sociocultural theory, when put into practice, have guided educators for several years, leading to the success of many EL students (Alkhudiry, 2022; Azadi et al., 2018; Castrillon, 2017). Scaffolding, building on previous knowledge, creating non-threatening environments, and providing practice opportunities are successful classroom techniques for EL students (Eun, 2019; Castrillon, 2017; Beverly & Michele, 2015; Jarvis & Krashen, 2014).

Through the sociocultural theory framework, this study explained educators' experiences in teaching and assessing students from diverse languages and cultures by asking teachers to explain how they use cultural tools to accommodate minority students. In addition, this study described how educators have experienced differentiating instruction and assessments to accommodate diverse language and cultural differences, which are key concepts of the

sociocultural frameworks (Kozulin, 2018). The results of this research study contributed to the understanding of how minority students might access learning opportunities using Vygotsky's sociocultural framework to prevent overrepresentation in special education.

Problem Statement

The problem is a lack of knowledge of the lived experiences of educators and related service providers in identifying minority students to special education. Minority overrepresentation is a problem for Hispanic and Black students served in specific disability categories (Farkas, Morgan, Hillemeier, Mitchell, & Woods, (2020); de Brey, Musu, McFarland, Wilkinson-Flicker, Diliberti, Zhang, Branstetter, and Wang, (2019). According to data reported from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2019, "the percentage of students who received services for a specific learning disability was higher for those who were Pacific Islander (43 percent), Hispanic (42 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native (40 percent), and Black (37 percent) than for those of the other races/ ethnicities" (de Brey et al., p. 63, 2019).

Elementary schools in the United States continuously gain a more diverse community of students each year. Demographic changes have impacted minority groups in how they view both general and special education teachers and how they are assessed when being considered for special education services (Sinclair et al., (2018). In addition, referring students for special education because of their race, ethnicity, or spoken language impacts students and communities (Cruze et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2018). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and related service providers in the unique education identification processes for minority students, including referral and assessment.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and related service providers in the identification process of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. At this stage, research defines disproportionality in special education as having a higher or lower likelihood of being identified in a particular education category or specific disability category than those given that subgroup's representation in the overall (student) population (Unmansky et al., 2017).

Significance of the Study

Demographic shifts occurring in the United States have increased diversity within school populations, leading to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Farkas et al., 2020; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Teacher perceptions of students with disabilities and teacher-student demographics influence the disproportionality problem in classroom instruction and referrals made to special education (Green & Stormont, 2018). Lack of cultural understanding by educators and unequal access to educational opportunities by minority students contribute to the problem of overrepresentation (Green et al., 2020). The sociocultural theory served as the theoretical framework for this study, which focused on the experiences of educators regarding how a student's culture and environment relate to how they learn.

Research indicates a need to explore contributing factors of racial and cultural disparities in special education, specifically with minority overrepresentation. Social, socio-demographic, and environmental factors, along with classroom practices, have previously been identified as contributors to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Chow et al., 2021; Hoover et al., 2018; Skiba et al., 2006; Donovan, Cross, & National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council, 2002; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). For example, English language

learners often lack support in the classroom with their native language and receive inappropriate interventions for their culture (Hoffman, 2018; Ramu, 2017; Harris et al., 2015). Additionally, standardized assessment criteria are not always culturally sensitive to the differences among minority students (Newkirk-Turner & Green, 2021; Hoover et al., 2018; Hutchison, 2018; Spinelli, 2008). Although the research identifies the problem of minority overrepresentation, there is a lack of information on educators' experiences in accommodating their students' diverse needs (Cavendish et al., 2020; Park, 2020; Unmasky et al., 2017). This transcendental phenomenological design allowed educators to describe how they have experienced language, culture, and racial differences among their students through special education identification, including referral and assessment.

Educators' perceptions and practices contribute to the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. Minority students report having experienced discrimination in some form through both teachers and peers and state it is typically based on their spoken language and immigration status (Brown & Chu, 2012). Describing educators' decisions to refer students for special education, assessment decisions, and eligibility determinations could prevent practices that over-identify minority students as having a disability. The findings of this study highlighted ways referral and assessment practices account for cultural and linguistic differences. The data from this transcendental phenomenological study may help institutions and policymakers to develop strategies for solving the overrepresentation of minority students in elementary special education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and related service providers in the identification process of minority

students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. The research questions consisted of one central question and three sub-questions. The first main research question will enable me to explore educators' overall experiences in assessing students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds for special education. The four guiding questions will provide insightful information about the experiences of educators in the special education referral and assessment process for minority students.

Central Research Question

What are educators' experiences identifying minority students referred to special education in Tennessee Elementary Schools?

Sub-Question One

How do K-5 educators identify minority students for referral to special education?

Sub-Question Two

What information do K-5 educators consider besides academic performance and standardized assessment scores when determining special education eligibility for minority students?

Sub-Question Three

How do K-5 educators incorporate minority students' culture or language into referral and assessment for special education?

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Definitions

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1. *Disproportionality* – An individual from a given subgroup (e.g., Els) having a higher or lower likelihood of being identified in a category (e.g., special education or a specific disability category) than what would be expected given that subgroup's representation in the overall (student) population (Unmansky et al., 2017, p. 76).

2. *Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education programs is higher* than that in the school population (Guiberson, 2009, p. 167).

3. *Misidentification* occurs when students with disabilities have an identified disability that they do not have (Guiberson, 2009, p. 167).

4. *Assessment Specialist-* Individuals with a distinctive role in the assessment process. Also referred to as educational diagnosticians who "share an ability to assess and diagnose the learning problems of students" (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education [NCPSE], 2000, p. 1)

5. *Multiculturalism-* A theory used to identify and critically analyze educational practices considered discriminatory in schools (Adiguzel & karagol, 2020).

6. *Sociocultural Theory-* A theoretical framework that links education to individuals' culture (Panhwar et al., 2016).

Summary

Consistent demographic shifts in U.S. schools have made it challenging for general and special educators to accommodate minority students in both instruction and assessment—the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education views historical, social, and theoretical contexts. Disparities among minority groups in education have existed since the 1960s, as evidenced by disproportionality, overrepresentation, and misidentification (Guiberson, 2009).

Minority overrepresentation in special education links various social constructs, including race, gender, and language status (Voulgarides, 2017), and inappropriate identification procedures, including bias toward English learners and limited assessment resources for language minority students (Unmansky et al., 2017). Given the responsibility of schools to ensure respect for all spiritual and cultural differences, identifying discriminatory practices can

be accomplished through the lens of multicultural theory (Adiguzel & karagol, 2020).

Multiculturalism can influence minority students' educational experiences and impact their

cultural identity (Brown & Chu, 2012). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological

study was to describe the experiences of educators and related service providers in the

identification process of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools.

Additionally, the study sought to describe if and to what extent the assessment process is

sensitive to cultural and language differences.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic literature review explored the problem of disproportionality among minority students in elementary special education. This chapter will present a review of the current literature related to the topic of study. It will review Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory relevant to intellectual development, communication, and environmental influences on learning. In addition, this chapter synthesizes recent literature regarding the disproportionality of minorities in elementary special education, disparities in the assessment and identification of minority students for special education, and factors leading to the referral and eligibility determination of minority students for special education. Finally, the literature addresses district-level achievement gaps related to minority students.

Theoretical Framework

The concept that learning occurs between an individual student and the student's culture is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory states that intellectual development occurs in two separate stages. The first stage is inter-psychological, when students communicate with other people, and the second stage is intra-psychological, which occurs when students use new ways to strengthen the learning they have acquired from others and their society (Bodrova, 2003). Vygotsky also distinguished two types of development, derived from knowledge gained through everyday life and personal experiences (Lantolf, Jiao, and Minakova, 2021). According to Vygotsky, during everyday experiences, children typically develop an understanding of new concepts through personal experiences that occur in their reality, which are often guided by the adults surrounding them (Lantolf et al., 2021).

These personal, everyday experiences are concrete concepts observed in their culture and are primarily language-based. Unfortunately, minority students are not always allowed to experience these concepts in the context of their culture or primary language (Lantolf et al., 2021). What a child observes may differ from their experience; however, both can impact their educational development (Lantolf et al., 2021). Vygotsky (1987) stated that while academic learning should be distinct from personal, observational learning, instruction should generalize information from human experiences and combine natural and social sciences (Lantolf et al., 2021). The theoretical framework of this study consists of the sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the link between a child's education and environment with their culture (Vygotsky, 1936).

Sociocultural theory proposes that learners acquire knowledge from peers who assist them in more complex learning in their environment (Bodrov, 2003). Vygotsky stressed the importance of identifying and building on a child's strengths or competencies, including their natural language, rather than focusing on their limitations (Karimi & Nazari, 2021). According to Vygotsky, educational instruction should utilize language matching a child's ability level, guiding instruction, and assessment (Ellis, 2004). The principles of the sociocultural theory guide this study by describing the experiences of educators in instructing, referring, and assessing minority students with specific cultural differences.

The sociocultural theory prevents the misinterpretation of a student's ability or possible disability based on their cultural background (Othman, 2018). However, if teachers cannot distinguish between language differences and language impairment, minority students may be misrepresented in high-incident disability categories (Othman, 2018; Kim et al., 2015). Therefore, this study will include general education teachers, school psychologists, speech-

language pathologists, and ESL teachers involved with the referral and assessment of students for special education. In addition, the researcher will collect data through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing to allow educators to describe how they have experienced cultural differences in their own words.

Investigating educators' experiences teaching and assessing students with cultural and language differences through the socio-cognitive lens could impact the disproportionality rate in special education. Therefore, this study describes the experiences of educators and related staff in identifying minority students, including the referral and assessment to special education in Tennessee elementary schools.

Related Literature

School leaders attempt to find ways to decrease the gaps in achievement between poor and wealthy schools and those with high percentages of students with a disability. Although schools have demonstrated consistent demographic changes over the past several years, including race, culture, and language, current teacher education programs continue to utilize pedagogy that is decades old (Farkas et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2018; Prezas & Ahyea, 2017; Sobel et al., 2007). Many school districts place English language learners (ELLs) in classrooms with teachers who are only English-speaking and who have limited preparation for teaching Els through evidence-based practices (Portes et al., 2018). In addition, IDEA (2004) requires educators to address the "exclusionary clause" to eliminate inappropriate identification of EL students, requiring educators to provide evidence that learning deficits do not result from language, culture, environment, or economic factors or improper instruction (Ortiz et al., 2018). Given that these measures through IDEA are in place, it remains unclear how educators are

accommodating minority students in their instruction, referral, and assessment methods for special education.

Efforts to Correct the Issue of Minority Overrepresentation

The issue of minority overrepresentation in special education has been identified as one of the most significant challenges in public education over the past 30 years and has led to various research approaches on the subject (Chow et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2020; Hoover et al., 2018; Skiba et al., 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). However, traditionally, researchers have approached the issue of overrepresentation from a learning, behavioral, and intellectual angle rather than a social, cultural, and historical focus (Cavendish et al., 2020; Thomas, 2016). In addition, some scholars note that while research focuses on race and disability, racial issues are typically a lesser focus (Cavendish et al., 2020).

According to Farkas et al. (2020), the US Department of Education (2016) created regulations that require school districts to calculate risk ratios, which report measures of significant disproportionality and provide the probability that minority students might receive special education services compared to students who are White. Despite efforts from the Office of Civil Rights and the Department of Education to resolve racial disparities, most students represented in special education continue to be minorities. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) reported that for the 2019-2020 school year, 18% of students represented in special education were American Indian/Alaska Native students, followed by Black students who represented 17%., and racial and ethnic minorities accounted for 43% of students served under IDEA under either a specific learning disability or a speech/language impairment during the 2019-2020 school year (NCES, 2021). Additional efforts by various organizations, including the Center of Minority Research in Special Education (COMPRISE), the Linking Academic

Scholars to Educational Resources (LASER) Project, the National Center for Culturally
Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRES), and the National Institute for Urban School
Improvement (NIUSU) address the issue of minority overrepresentation (Park, 2020; Artiles,
Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). However, there is an evident gap in the literature explaining
how educators have experienced the identification process of minority students for special
education.

Special Education Referral

Minority students are commonly referred to special education under high-incident or
"judgment categories," including specific learning disability, speech-language impairment,
emotional and behavioral disorders, and mild cognitive disabilities (Othman, 2018, p.172).
Between 2013-2014, more than half of students receiving special education services were
identified as having either a specific learning disability or a speech-language impairment (NCES,
2016).

Although the literature documenting minority overrepresentation in special education is
extensive, limited information exists regarding how educators address this issue (Skiba et al.,
2006). Patterns of minority disproportionality identify possible causes of continued minority
overrepresentation, including social, socio-demographic, and environmental factors, along with
general education contributions to the referral process (Skiba et al., 2006; Donovan, Cross, &
National Academy of Sciences - National Research Council, 2002; Coutinho & Oswald,
2000). General education teachers play an essential role in educating students with diverse
cultural and linguistic backgrounds by providing differentiated instruction. When teaching
literacy, for example, ELL students should demonstrate grade-level proficiency in listening,
speaking, reading, and writing (Genese et al., 2005; Ramu, 2017).

Emphasizing oral language development is critical to proficiency in other language areas (Genesee et al., 2005). Building solid oral language and literacy skills, specifically among linguistically diverse students, includes explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (Ramu, 2017). Unfortunately, the delivery of instruction often does not address cultural and linguistic differences, particularly within the classroom curriculum and referral procedures, which are primarily for fluent English speakers. General education teachers usually deliver generic teaching methods due to a lack of understanding of the second language acquisition process, which often results in misjudgments about the need for a referral for special education (Hoover et al., 2018). EL students are often separated from their general education peers, resulting in a lack of instruction in these content areas and leading to oral language deficits (Hoffman, 2018). For example, academic achievement for Latino ELs has been linked to teacher warmth and being in a well-managed classroom (Song, Luo, & Zhan, 2022; Banse & Palacios, 2018; Hoffman, 2018).

Although research indicates that some teaching methods that neglect to address cultural differences influence the success of cultural and linguistic minorities, educators continue to refer these students for special education (Park, 2020). Some researchers have proposed that disproportionality is due to the sociopolitical and historical context in which the referrals are occurring, inappropriate diagnostic tools, and discrimination (Artiles & Klingner, 2006; Klingner, Artiles, Kozleski, Harry, Zion, Tate, Duran, & Riley, 2005; and Shifrer, Juller, & Callahan, 2011). In addition, inadequate classroom support and general education teachers' inability to determine the cause of low academic achievement among EL students may also result in disproportionality (Park, 2020).

Additionally, educators often cannot identify the protocol for when or how to refer these students (Park, 2020). Cultural behavior differences also lead to special education (SPED) referrals when behaviors do not align with non-minority student behavior expectations (Woodson & Harris, 2018; Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006). Finally, in some cases, school referral policies created to avoid overrepresentation have resulted in either delayed or avoided referrals by teachers (Unmasky et al., 2017).

There is an evident problem with inconsistent practices among general educators and the many factors contributing to the disproportionate representation of EL students in special education. Among the inconsistencies in referring EL students for SPED are the "wait to be sure" and "the sooner, the better" approaches (Park, 2020, p.1). Some educators hesitate to refer ELs until they have tried to justify the referral. In contrast, other educators feel they should guide students when they notice the student struggling (Park, 2020). Previous research has identified several factors to consider when referring diverse students for special education to represent better current cultural and linguistic changes in schools (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). Sufficient data, for example, should be collected on students considered for special education referral, including understanding and applying appropriate developmental milestones of English language learning, applying multi-tiered interventions that consider cultural and linguistic differences, providing an instructional environment that allows the use of native and English languages, and the use of research-based methods in the instruction of EL students (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018).

Decisions on when to refer students to special education appear to vary among general and special educators and often depend on the teachers' attitudes (Green & Stormont, 2018).

Teacher Attitude

The US Census Bureau (2011) reported that 20% of students in grades K-12 spoke a language other than English at home. Additionally, US elementary school teachers reported that 45% of students whose first language is Spanish are in their classrooms (Wood, Wofford & Hassinger, 2018). According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, there are 5.1 million ELs in US schools, with more than 80% of students speaking Spanish as a first language (Wood et al., 2018). With the consistent increase in culturally diverse learners, the issue of racial disparity in special education has become an issue in need of remediation, specifically the overrepresentation of minorities (Othman, 2018).

Students whose primary language is not English are often unsuccessful due to a lack of educational support, including high-quality instruction, aid in their native language, and academic interventions appropriate for a student's culture (Harris et al., (2015). Students from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds encounter more barriers in school than higher socioeconomic, majority students due to unequal opportunities (Bodvin, Verschueren, De Haene, & Struyf, 2018). ELs are often not given the same educational opportunities as their English-speaking peers, which leads to poorer academic performance (Hoover et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2015).

There is evidence that teacher attitude is linked to student motivation and shows how a teacher's perspective heavily supports a student's overall push to learn (Ali & Masroor, 2017). Teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities and those with linguistic differences impact how successful these students will be academically, socially, and emotionally (Chu, 2011; Hoang & Dalimonte, 2007). Teachers' attitudes reveal their feelings about having diverse students in their classrooms. Walker, Shafer, & Liams (2004) showed that out of 422 teachers interviewed,

70% did not want ELs in their classrooms. Negativity and resentment are two common factors contributing to negative feelings toward Els, with teachers feeling it was the learner's responsibility to adapt to American school culture (Song et al., 2022; Mellom et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2004).

The lack of teacher education for multilingual students is one identified factor in negative attitudes (Wood et al., 2018). Unfortunately, many educators in small, rural areas have minimal multicultural experience, which is becoming an increasing problem, considering many of these areas consistently show more demographic changes (Mellom et al., 2018). Multilingual differences have typically not been a priority in education curricula (Costley et al., 2020; I & de Araujo, 2019; Lan & de Oliveira, 2019; Garcia, 2008). Teachers' familiar with the principles of English-Language learning and willing to modify their classrooms to accommodate diverse students have shown to be more effective with their EL students (Woods et al., 2018). Teachers are more successful when implementing EL learning principles and understanding individual student differences.

How a student feels personally about learning a second language and how prepared they feel to engage in communication with another person determines each learning difference (Li, 2022). Students learning a second language may also struggle with personal identity due to how others perceive them (Hendy & Cuevas, 2020). These students may be more motivated to learn a second language in an environment that allows social and cultural opportunities (Hendy & Cuevas, 2020). Educators focusing on individual differences can better support linguistically diverse students (Guler, 2022).

While individual differences are essential to second language acquisition, a student's learning strategies are critical to second language development (Sukying, 2021). Students

learning a second language utilize language learning strategies (LLS), which are behaviors chosen to complete specific tasks, including memorization, processing, storing, and retrieving new information, which help students with self-confidence and self-regulation skills (Sukying, 2021). Unfortunately, teacher education programs vary in how they train educators to teach culturally diverse students (Clark and Andreasen, 2021). For example, one study revealed that preservice teachers rated their capability for teaching diverse students as adequate. Still, self-rating scores significantly dropped after one full year of teaching (Clark and Andreasen, 2021).

Teachers are faced with instructing EL students and other diverse students with disabilities. Diversity in classrooms has resulted in a strong need for culturally responsive teaching; however, teachers' negative biases, attitudes, and personal beliefs impact the instruction of culturally diverse students (Glock et al., 2019). How teachers approach minority students with disabilities depends on several factors, including behavior management strategies, cultural differences among teachers and students, and their cultural competence (Green & Stormont, 2018). Racial differences often result in behavior and special education referrals due to a lack of evidence-based practices used to interpret behavior differences, inconsistent practices among educators, and failure to address students' home culture (Green & Stormont, 2018; Othman, 2018; Banse & Palacios, 2018). Multiple researchers have found that improving instruction for diverse students depends on teachers' beliefs and perspectives regarding diverse learners (Glock et al., 2019).

An educator's willingness to develop and implement diverse instructional strategies that reflect a multicultural student population greatly benefits diverse learners (Kumar and Hamer, 2013). Creating more cultural sensitivity among educators begins with preservice programs, which can shape personal beliefs on multicultural learning (Kumar and Hamer, 2013). Negative

attitudes from teachers regarding diverse students often originate with a lack of self-confidence in their ability to develop and implement curriculum, instructional strategies, and interventions for multicultural learners (Clark and Andreasen, 2021; Barrio, 2021).

Several school systems have implemented pre-referral practices to provide an opportunity for in-class intervention before a special education referral. Unfortunately, many teachers are unprepared to implement effective interventions for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Barrio, 2021). Pre-referral models include Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which assist teachers in implementing instructional practices for struggling students (Carta et al., 2015). These practices include instruction for students from diverse cultural backgrounds; however, there is little evidence that educators provide culturally responsive teaching methods for these students during the prereferral process (Barrio, 2021; Artiles et al., 2010). To get a better idea of the phenomenon of minority disproportionality in special education, understanding the level of training general education teachers have had in providing culturally responsive practices is very important (Artiles et al., 2010; Hosp & Madyun, 2007).

Education programs do not always offer instruction on the principles of RTI to preservice teachers, leaving the responsibility up to school districts and professional development. Unfortunately, many teachers need to implement RTI practices before receiving adequate training. Educators should be proficient in delivering multi-tiered support utilizing evidence-based practices, progress monitoring, and data collection (Vollmer et al., 2019).

While some education programs address RTI for preservice teachers, there is a lack of consistency among others that offer specific curricula on the topic. Therefore, many new teachers are unprepared to implement the components of RTI in their classrooms (Vollmer et al.,

2019; Hurlbut & Tunks, 2016). Special education teachers have reported feeling more prepared with the RTI system than general education teachers referring students for assessment (Hurlbut & Tunks, 2016). Unfortunately, there is a lack of literature regarding the amount of preservice teacher training on RTI and prereferral practices, which is a problem, given teachers are finding more diversity in their classrooms. (Vollmer et al., 2019).

Teachers have students representing many cultures and languages in their classrooms, initiating many special education and behavior referrals (Zakszeski et al., 2021; Woodson and Harris, 2018). Like RTI, schools have implemented behavior programs such as school-wide positive interventions and supports (SWPBIS) to reduce negative behavior (Zakszeski et al., 2021). Behavioral concerns are the leading cause of teacher referral to special education, which subjective behavioral assessments confirm (Woodson and Harris, 2018; Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). Unfortunately, many educators do not feel adequately equipped to handle behavior issues in the classroom and think that a referral to special education is their only choice (Unal & Unal, 2009; Skip et al., 2006). Teachers have often viewed classroom behavior of African American/Black males as disruptive, which has led to higher rates of disciplinary referrals for these students than other racial groups, which often results in a referral for special education (Woodson & Harris, 2018; Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brian, Brennan, & Leaf, 2010).

Special education referrals are primarily based on the classroom teacher's reasons, attitudes, and core beliefs for the referral, suggesting that the overrepresentation of minorities correlates to teachers not distinguishing between cultural diversity and disability (Chu, 2011; Green & Stormont, 2018; Unmansky et al., 2018). Additional factors, including gender, race, teaching experience, teacher attitude toward inclusion practices, and teachers' inexperience working with African American/Black students, have led to more frequent referrals to special

education (Woodson & Harris, 2018). Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion have been directly linked to special education referral, suggesting teachers do not believe inclusive interventions are beneficial (Anderson et al., 2012; Dallas, Sprong, & Upton, 2014; Swain, Nordness, & Leader-Janssen, 2012). Attitudes toward a specific group of students or behaviors have also led to more referrals to special education because of stereotypical and symbolic beliefs (Anderson, Watt, & Noble, 2012). Stereotypical views refer to thoughts about people's characteristics, and suggestive ideas refer to speculations about a group's values, customs, and traditions (Anderson et al., 2012).

In several cases, teachers view minority students more negatively than non-minority students (Glock, Kovacs, & Pit-ten Cate, 2019; Guler, 2020). Teachers have indicated their attitudes are more favorable toward students with disabilities when they have adequate support such as workshops, seminars, and lectures (Hoang & Dalimonte, 2007). Preservice teacher programs are beginning to address teachers' responsibilities in instructing English-Language Learners (ELLs) by mandating college coursework called Structured English Immersion (SEI) which focuses on instructional strategies (Wissink & Starks, 2019). Although teacher preparation programs include special education and culturally diverse issues, there appears to be a lack of training in placing diverse students in special education (Hutchison, 2018).

While classroom teachers are not responsible for assessing or determining special education eligibility, they are the first professionals to determine if a child needs extra support. It is particularly challenging for teachers working with bilingual learners and those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Prezas and Jo, 2017). In addition, most ELL students with disabilities consist of those with specific learning disabilities and speech-language impairments, which

create challenges for educators in distinguishing between language impairments and lack of language acquisition (Liu, Thurlow, & Christensen, 2017; Liu et al., 2017).

Issues occur when teachers cannot distinguish between a disability and a cultural or language difference. Teachers have reported not understanding bilingual development and not having adequate support to assist them with bilingual students (Prezas and Jo, 2017). Teachers' lack of self-efficacy, personal biases, and lack of training lead to inconsistent referral practices. These practices impact the referral process and influence assessment and eligibility decisions (Othman, 2018).

Classroom Accommodations

Students with cultural and language differences often are in environments insensitive to their background (Yamasaki & Luk, 2018). Classroom accommodations given to minority students are often inconsistent among teachers due to their judgment rather than a structured protocol (Koran & Kopriva, 2017). Most minority students referred for special education are Hispanic students referred for a specific learning disorder (SLD) (Sepúlveda-Miranda., Otero, & Moreno-Torres, 2018). Among statements from the NASP, the manifestation of SLD is partly due to the types of instruction, support, and accommodations provided to students and their learning expectations (Christo & Ponzuric, 2017).

Providing appropriate accommodations to students with cultural and language differences can influence the student's overall success and can either positively or negatively impact the assessment process (Christo & Ponzuric, 2017; Koran & Kopriva, 2017). EL students with no appropriate classroom accommodations may appear to have academic deficits. Therefore, it becomes difficult to determine if an actual disability is present (Christo & Ponzuric, 2017).

Classroom accommodations and interventions are seldom research-based, lack fidelity, and are not administered appropriately (Barrio, 2017; Russo-Campisi, 2017).

Education has moved toward a perspective that allows students' culture to influence instruction (Karimi & Nazari, 2021). Some school systems currently instruct educators to provide differentiated instruction (DI) to accommodate each student's differences (Karimi & Nazari, 2021). DI includes differentiated curriculum and instruction using three categories: student readiness, student interest, and student learning profile (Tomlinson et al., 2002). Implementing DI requires educators to consider a student's social, cultural, and psychological background, which helps them better meet their needs (Karimi & Nazari, 2021).

Assessment Practices in the Identification of Minority Students

Minority overrepresentation among high-incidence categories appears to be a continual problem, as evidenced by a 1996 study showing a much higher percentage of African American students receiving special education under either a learning disability, emotional disturbance, or mental retardation than those students with orthopedic, vision, or hearing impairments (Morgan et al., 2023; Cavendish et al., 2020; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). Other reports indicate that the majority of minority students represent disability categories with the most social stigma, which results in the most segregation from their peers (Kramarczuk et al., 2021; US Department of Education, 2020); Blanchett, 2010; US Department of Education et al., 2016). Some disability categories result in either higher or lower social status which is due to the amount of access to the general education curriculum and social interaction with peers (Kramarczuk et al., 2021; Blanchett, 2010; Ong-Dean, 2009; Harry & Anderson, 1994). High-status disability categories, for example, include Other Health Impairments, Speech-Language Impairment, and autism

spectrum disorder and carry less social stigma, while lower-status categories such as emotional disturbance and intellectual disability have a higher social stigma (Fish, 2019; Blanchett, 2010).

School psychologists and speech-language pathologists' professional judgment determine these high-incident disability categories (Sinclair et al., 2018). Unfortunately, eligibility determination is subjective and often influenced by social and racial factors (Fish, 2017; Harry & Klingner, 2007). In addition, federal mandates through IDEA provide specific guidance on the referral and assessment process of ELL students for special education (Park, 2020). For example, IDEA (2004) states that ELL students should receive prompt assessment and identification; however, students should not be made eligible for special education based on limited English proficiency or lack of appropriate instruction (IDEA, 20 USC •614, 2004).

As the sociocultural theory, 1978) states, children learn through the connections made between their culture and environment; however, if students do not have this opportunity, it may be negatively reflected in assessment results. Assessing students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds for special education is one of the most prominent challenges assessment specialists face (Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022; McFarland et al., 2018; Overton, Fielding, & Simonsson, 2004). Assessment protocol through IDEA (2014) assists with identifying a specific learning disability. It uses multiple data sources, including responses to intervention, informal observations, parent and teacher interviews, record reviews, and standardized assessments (Christo & Ponzuric, 2017). However, standardized assessment criteria have not always considered the cultural differences of minority students who may experience up to a 30% point loss on a given assessment (Cormier et al., 2022; Hutchison, 2018).

Although culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) assessments value cultural and linguistic features, there is a lack of consistency among particular education intervention,

referral, and assessment processes (Hoover et al., 2018). EL students identified as having a disability continue to increase in K-12 schools within the US (Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022; McFarland et al., 2018; Watkins and Liu, 2013). Although assessment bias is always a concern, it is a particular issue for students with diverse backgrounds when the influence of culture and language is not considered (Hoover et al., 2018).

Most standardized assessment tools used in the determination of eligibility are not available in languages other than English, and there is a lack of understanding of how to administer and interpret cultural and linguistic differences among assessment specialists (Cormier et al., 2022; Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022; Spinelli, 2008). IDEA (2004) regulations state that EL students must not have an identified disability due to their lack of English proficiency (Park, 2020). Minority students often lack support and connections with their teacher in both classroom instruction and the assessment process, which may be due to a lack of communication between the student and teacher or assessments not addressing diverse cultures (Goktas & Kaya, 2023; Longobardi et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2015). Connections also exist between a student's disability and their proficiency in second-language acquisition (Liu et al., 2017).

In recent years, there has been a focus on the acquisition of academic language and its influence on reading comprehension and literacy (Wood, Schatschneider, & VelDink, 2021; Ogle, Blachowicz, Fisher, & Lang, 2016; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). While there is a correlation between academic success and academic language, research reveals that students develop academic language at variable rates (Wood et al., 2021; O'Hara et al., 2020). Students exposed to academic vocabulary regularly in their communicative exchanges are more likely to comprehend academic language (August et al., 2021). While some students have daily exposure to academic

vocabulary, others have limited exposure, which suggests a connection to socioeconomic/cultural background, English proficiency, and language-based disorders (Lipping, 2021).

Students who experience gaps in their academic language acquisition could be experiencing a lack of exposure due to a disadvantaged background or a cultural difference in the emphasis placed on academic language use (Lipping, 2021; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000). English learners may struggle to acquire academic language at the same rate as non-English learners, and their limited English proficiency may influence how they meet grade-level expectations (O'Hara et al., 2020; Ogle et al., 2016; Townsend, Filippini, Collins, & Biancarosa, 2012). In addition to those students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, students with language-based disabilities also struggle with acquiring higher-level academic vocabulary (Wood et al., 2021). Language-based impairments impact how students develop new words using context, establish foundational language, and understand abstract concepts (Aguilar, Plante, & Sandoval, 2018; Steele & Watkins, 2010; Kan & Windsor, 2010).

Regarding assessment, a child's language development and the nature of their disability must be considered together (Newkirk-Turner & Green, 2021; Poehner & Wang, 2021; Liu & Barrera, 2013). For example, for a bilingual student to meet the criteria for a learning disability, the student must be assessed in their first language and English and must show deficits in both (Orellana, Wade, & Gillam, 2019; Overton et al., 2004). Unfortunately, eligibility criteria for disability categories vary from state to state, resulting in inconsistencies (Robinson & Norton, 2019; McNicholas et al., 2018; Bocian, Beebe, MacMillan, & Gresham, 1999). These inconsistencies make it difficult for assessment specialists such as school psychologists to decide when considering a student for special education eligibility. Another factor that has contributed to inconsistent eligibility determination has been the ongoing pressure felt by the assessment

team to provide educational support for struggling students through special education without adequate consideration of diverse cultures or languages (Gamble, 2021; Sullivan, Sadeh, & Houri, 2019; Overton et al. 2004).

Cultural disconnection on assessments accounts for up to 5-8% loss on tests, and a lack of cultural connection to the student may result in poor performance that otherwise would not have occurred (Hutchison, 2018). Assessments used to determine an educational disability typically address students who are native English speakers (Pichardo, 2014). At the same time, these assessments can use translators, and grammatical structures such as syntax and word meaning often become altered (Aguilar et al., 2018; Pichardo, 2014). English learners are commonly referred for a special education assessment to either a school psychologist or a speech-language pathologist (SLP) when students demonstrate a lack of progress in the classroom or exhibit language barriers (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2021).

School psychologists and speech-language pathologists follow specific guidelines for the assessment practices of EL students. Federal policy, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and the American Psychological Association (APA) provide specific guidelines for the assessment of EL students and SLPs following the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA) in the evaluation of ELL students in school settings (ASHA, 2021; Harris et al., 2015)

The Role of School Psychologists in the Assessment Process

The continued increase in student diversity has brought about new challenges for school psychologists and their role within the educational setting. School psychologists are becoming involved in culturally and racially related issues, including academic achievement gaps between white students and those of color, discipline gaps, culturally responsive teaching, appropriate

social/emotional support, and equity of educational services (Parker, Castillo, Sabnis, Daye, & Hanson, 2020). The responsibility of school psychologists is not only to evaluate students for disabilities but to support them in numerous ways before special education referral (Parker et al., 2020). One way they provide such support is through consultative services. Consultation is a service delivery model in which specialists work with classroom teachers to help them provide appropriate support for students within the classroom (Parker et al., 2020). School psychologists offer Consultative services to ensure students' overall well-being and promote evidence-based practices in the classroom (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010).

Within the consultation delivery model, school psychologists assist classroom teachers with becoming aware of cultural differences, understanding cultural differences, helping them improve their relationships with culturally diverse students, and assisting parents with school expectations for their children (Behring, Cabello, Kushida, & Murguia, 2000; Ingraham, 2003; Ramirez & Smith, 2007; O'Bryon & Rogers, 2016). Scholars in school psychology have developed a specific framework for consultative services specifically to address cultural differences (Parker et al., 2020). These scholars refer to this framework as Multicultural School Consultation (MSC) and provide guidelines for understanding diverse cultural dynamics in the school setting (Ingraham, 2000). The specific set of guidelines assists school psychologists in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students before and during the referral process (Ingraham, 2000; Harris et al., 2015).

Although there are guidelines for assessment specialists to follow, school psychologists appear to have deficits in assessment practices, especially for EL students (Harris et al., 2015). According to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (1999), assessments should be based on the examinee's language proficiency and preference and should be

considered comprehensive, multifaceted, fair, practical, and demonstrate reliability and validity

with the student population (APA, 2002; NASP, 2010). However, a significant problem with

standardized testing is that assessment items with complex linguistic concepts, such as

mathematics, can potentially negatively impact assessment outcomes for ELLs (Abedi, Zhang,

Rowe, & Lee, 2020).

The American Educational Research Association (AERA), APA, and the National

Council on Measurement in Education (1999) state that the first step in assessing an ELL student

is to determine the student's language proficiency in both languages. Determination of language

proficiency should include both formal and informal measures (O'Bryon & Rogers, 2010).

Unfortunately, formal assessments often do not account for variations in the use of language

(Aston et al., 2022; Cormier et al., 2022; Costa et al., 2022; Graves et al., 2020; Ortiz, 2019;

Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018; O'Bryon & Rogers, 2010). Informal measures are not normed

for a specific population of students and rely on information received from direct observations,

questionnaires, teacher rating scales, and language samples (Rhodes et al., 2005).

Screening and Assessment Measures

Assessing acculturation is essential, allowing the administrator to understand a student's

cultural experiences, which may influence test responses, school behavior, and overall test

performance (Rhodes et al., 2005). There is typically less consideration of second language

development and acculturation as standardized measures when assessing for a disability

(National Education Association, 2007). Unfortunately, guidance is often lacking in assessing EL

students, and assessment mainly relies on the personal judgment of school psychologists who are

testing (Harris et al., 2015). Some reports have shown that 80% or more of school psychologists

feel inadequate in administering and interpreting bilingual assessments (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 2000).

Although standardized assessments that determine whether a disability exists should be objective and unbiased, research has shown that school psychologists often choose assessments that are most likely to yield their desired results, fail to consider a test's cultural and linguistic differences, and usually do not determine a student's actual abilities (Skiba et al., 2006; Hoover & Baretta, 2016; Ortiz et al., 2011). IDEA (2004) requires school districts to monitor racial disproportionality in special education and offers schools incentives to ensure students placed in special education are appropriate. However, standardized assessments used in determining eligibility do not consider cultural and linguistic differences, and many EL students are unfamiliar with the assessment language (Abedi, Zhang, Rowe, & Lee, 2020; Harris et al., 2015).

The Role of Speech-Language Pathologists in the Assessment Process

English-language learners are often referred to Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) when they are underperforming in the classroom (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2021). SLPs are responsible for the assessment and intervention of students with speech or language impairment through evidence-based and culturally competent practices (ASHA, 2020). Diagnostic criteria for a language impairment include standardized scores, which are more than one standard deviation from the mean from same-age peers (Selin, Rice, Girolamo & Wang, 2019). Like other disability categories, a lack of understanding of diverse cultures and languages often leads to over-referrals of minority students for special education (Przymus & Alvarado, 2019). Most standardized assessment norms are appropriate for monolingual students (Przymus & Alvarado, 2019). Students suspected of a language impairment should be assessed in both their native and second language (Prezas & Jo, 2017; Abbot-Smith, Morawska-Patera, Luniewska, Spruce, & Haman,

2018). Typically, bilingual students with assessments in both languages can distinguish bilingual students with communication delays (Abbot-Smith et al., 2018). Unfortunately, many school systems only have monolingual SLPs available to assess bilingual students without an interpreter, which often results in both the over and under-representation of bilingual students in SPED (Prezas & Jo, 2017; Santhanam, Gilbert & Parveen, 2019).

Given the increase in students who are non-English speakers, research has sought to determine the level of competence among SLPs in working with ELLs. As part of a formal assessment, SLPs collect background information and family history from students they are evaluating. However, it is difficult to administer an assessment in English to non-English speaking students and obtain adequate information from families (McNeilly, 2019). SLP guidelines state that in these scenarios, they should utilize interpreters and alternative assessment procedures (McNeilly, 2019). The question is how SLPs are meeting these guidelines. Some SLPs have reported a lack of assessment tools for specific languages and have admitted to forming their informal assessment system in these cases (Núñez, Buren, Diaz-Vazquez, & Bailey, 2021). SLPs also lack understanding of bilingual development (Centeno & Eng, 2006). This lack of knowledge often hinders the choice of appropriate assessment tools for CLD students (Centeno & Eng, 2006).

SLPs working with bilingual students should consider the language acquisition history of the student when choosing an appropriate assessment (Centeno & Eng, 2006). Acquisition history includes the context in which a student experiences a second language, the level of mastery in both languages and the age of exposure to the second language (Centeno, 2003; Centeno, 2005; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001). Considering a student's acquisition history can aid in differentiating language differences and language disability (Centeno & Eng, 2006). In

addition, students can be misdiagnosed or misplaced in an intervention or special education program when background language is not considered in the assessment choice (Centeno & Eng, 2006).

Before choosing an appropriate language assessment for bilingual students, educators determine whether there is a need for a referral. Unfortunately, most educators are not bilingual, unfamiliar with a student's heritage language, and cannot determine if the student is proficient in their native language (Aston et al., 2022; Cormier et al., 2022; Abbot-Smith et al., 2018). Parent questionnaires and checklists may aid educators in deciding if a referral for a communication disorder is warranted (Abbot-Smith et al., 2018).

Several factors can impact how bilingual students perform on a single language evaluation, including sociolinguistic interactions and sociocultural and societal characteristics (Centeno & Eng, 2006; Centeno, 2005). These factors result from language patterns used in the home, school, and community and the frequency and intensity of their exposure to each language (Hoffman, 1985; Pearson, Fernandez, Lewedge, & Oller, 1997; Oller & Pearson, 2002). How students use their native and second languages impacts their performance on standardized assessments (Centeno & Eng, 2006).

Social and cultural differences and socioeconomic factors impact bilingual students' language development (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001). For example, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have limited opportunities for learning or less exposure to language and literacy in their home environment (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2001). Considering these factors when conducting a formal language assessment for CLD students helps avoid misinterpreting a language difference for language impairment (Centeno & Eng, 2006).

The decision to serve a student with a speech or language impairment under special education depends on what assessment the SLP chooses, how they administer the assessment, and how they interpret the results (Arias & Friberg, 2017). Interpreting assessment results depends on how well the SLP understands that bilingual language development differs from monolingual (Arias & Friberg, 2017). A bilingual student does not acquire two languages separately but interdependently (Grosjean, 1989). Therefore, SLPS must distinguish between language patterns that are developmental, cultural, or delayed (Grosjean, 1989). IDEA requires that all school-based SLPs choose assessments that do not discriminate based on race or culture, are in the child's native language, or have alternative modes that will most likely yield valid and reliable results (IDEA, 2004).

Most SLPs choose to administer standardized assessments for monolingual and bilingual students (Girolamo et al., 2022; Castilla-Earls et al., 2020). Standardized assessments are typically selected out of convenience but are not always appropriate for bilingual students (Daub et al., 2021; Selin et al., 2019). Standardized assessments yield standard scores that are based on a normative sample of same-age peers but do not always represent all cultural groups in their normative sample (Girolamo et al., 2022; Selin et al., 2019; Friberg, 2010; Padilla, 2007). SLPs are responsible for assuring that the student's demographic profile is represented in the assessments they choose through reviewing test manuals (Daub et al., 2021).

Some standardized assessments have versions of the same test to accommodate different languages but are not always reliable measures (Daub et al., 2021; Selin et al., 2019). Spanish language assessments, for example, based on a test's English version, do not always account for differences in language structure (Cowan et al., 2022; Bedore and Peña, 2008). Cultural and linguistic biases may also exist in standardized assessments, which an SLP is responsible for

determining (White & Jin, 2011). Therefore, choosing assessments that yield valid and reliable results is essential for bilingual students and those with dialectal differences or whose language differs from mainstream English (Overton, Baron, Pearson, & Ratner, 2021).

Speech-language pathologists can modify evaluation scoring for students who do not speak mainstream English, such as African American English (AAE) or Southern White English (SWE), and who exhibit various grammatical differences as related to culture (Oetting, Berry, Gregory, Rivière, & McDonald, 2019). In the case of both AAE and SWE, grammatical variations are typical in those cultural dialects (Beyer & Hudson-Kam, 2011; Charity, Scarborough, & Griffin, 2004; Terry, Jackson, Evangelou, & Smith, 2010). These dialectal differences include syntactic, morphosyntactic, phonological, semantic, pragmatic, and lexical differences, which can be scored as correct responses, although they vary from mainstream English (Oetting et al., 2019; Newkirk-Turner & Green, 2021). Although modified scoring helps close gaps between mainstream and non-mainstream English speakers, it does not always yield valid results and should be used cautiously (Hendricks & Adlof, 2017). Language assessments should go beyond standardized scores and consider the child's strengths, weaknesses, and spontaneous language outside of test items (Newkirk-Turner & Green, 2021; Arias & Friberg, 2017).

Alternatives to Standardized Assessment

In addition to using standardized assessment and scoring to determine eligibility for the language impaired, alternative forms of language evaluation can provide more information for language minority students (Newkirk-Turner & Green, 2021). Alternatives to standardized assessment, such as language sampling, nonword repetition tasks (NWRT), and dynamic assessment, provide clinicians with information about a student's language use that is both

elicited and spontaneous and can often be the only measure that captures a student's functional language (Newkirk-Turner & Green, 2021; Arias & Friberg, 2017; Miller, Andriacchi, & Nockerts, 2015). Distinguishing between language impairment and a language difference is substantially increased when therapists incorporate language sampling in the evaluation process for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Horton-Ikard, 2010). Language samples provide more information than standardized scores and are a requirement of all comprehensive language assessments according to ASHA guidelines (ASHA, 2004).

Language samples can be collected in both English and the student's native language but are only successful if the therapist adequately understands language differences between the two (Gutierrez-Clellen, Restrepo, Bedore, Peña, & Anderson, 2000). Some tools assist with analyzing language samples, such as the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT), computer software that examines differences in language structure (Hudry et al., 2023). SALT assists therapists in analyzing grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and dialectal differences between two languages comprising 15 databases with language samples representing 7,000 languages, an age range between two years, eight months, and eighteen years, nine months, and a variety of sampling tasks including narrative, expository, and conversation tasks (Hudry et al., 2023; Miller & Iglesias, 2016).

Additional assessment techniques include examining how students process language, which is evaluated through nonword repetition tasks (NWRT) (Arias and Friberg, 2017). NWRTs are especially beneficial for distinguishing between language differences and language impairment by analyzing students' ability to understand, store, recall, and reproduce phonologically based processes (Summers, Bohman, Gillam, Peña, & Bedore, 2010). This process involves giving students nonwords that involve the phonotactic characteristics of the

language assessed (Arias & Friberg, 2017). Students must rely on their experiences and knowledge of specific sound patterns to perform NWRTs (Arias & Friberg, 2017). A student's ability to repeat nonwords reveals how successful they are at manipulating phonemes, which is an additional process to avoid cultural and linguistic bias on language assessments (Guiberson & Rodriguez, 2013; Gutiérrez-Clellen & Simon-Cereijido, 2010).

Dynamic assessment (DA) is used with linguistically and culturally diverse students when assessing for language impairment and is another example of an alternative to standardized testing (Zhang, 2023; Hoover et al., 2018). In addition, it is an alternative to norm-referenced, monolingual tests given to bilingual students (Farangi & Kheradmand-Saadi, 2017). The dynamic assessment model eliminates testing bias and evaluates what a student can learn rather than their exposure to standardized testing content (Arias & Friberg, 2017). Furthermore, DA includes instruction of a specific skill within the actual assessment, which helps SLPs evaluate a student's potential (Zhang, 2023; Farangi & Kheradmand-Saadi, 2017).

Norm-referenced language evaluations produce scores that determine whether a student meets the specified criteria for a disability, such as vocabulary assessments (Petersen, Tonn, Spencer & Foster, 2020). However, this approach does not accurately assess a child's knowledge if they have limited language exposure or speak a different language (Petersen et al., 2020). Standardized assessment measures what a child already knows rather than what they can learn. It is a more interactive approach involving evaluation, teaching, and subsequent assessment to distinguish between language differences and disability (Hussain & Woods, 2019). According to ASHA guidelines, various formal and informal instruments should assess bilingual students using standardized testing, dynamic assessment, parent interviews, and a case history (Petersen et al., 2017; Arias & Friberg, 2007). Case history and parent input are essential to any language

evaluation and provide information about the child's cultural, linguistic, and familial differences (Caesar & Kohler, 2007).

Parent Involvement in the Referral and Assessment Process

Parent participation in educational placement decisions is vital to the special education process and is mandated by IDEA (Lim & Cheatham, 2021). IDEA states that parents should be involved in the special education process's referral, evaluation, and placement stages (Lim & Cheatham, 2021). Unfortunately, family participation is much lower among culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families (Aceves, 2014

When communication between educators and families is poor, it may result in the neglect of important information, such as the child's developmental and medical history, which is often a result of educators not providing all essential information to families in their native language or through the utilization of interpreters (Aceves 2014). In addition, families not supplied with crucial information, including the referral and assessment process details, could be viewed as uninterested or uninvolved, leading to unfair bias against parents (Aceves, 2014). Differences in cultural perspective and communication styles are two critical factors impacting poor interaction between school professionals and families (Lim & Cheatham, 2021).

A culture-centered approach to communication has been suggested to improve interactions between CLD families and educators, and a specific communication style for a given cultural group has been used (Rosetti et al., 2017; Hall, 1981). Communication styles involve high-context cultures (e.g., Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Central European, and Latin American) and low-context cultures (e.g., Western European, Northern American) and differ in how information is shared (Voulgarides & Barrio, 2021; Webb et al., 2019). In addition, differences can involve direct and indirect communication methods such as direct, explicit

language and rules versus implicit language (Williams-Duncan, 2020). The consideration of cultural differences show to improve communication between minority families and educators and specific communication needs throughout the special education process (Voulgarides & Barrio, 2021; Hart, Cheatham, & Jimenez-Silva, 2012).

Monolingual ideology has influenced bias toward culturally and linguistically diverse families and its impact on special education services (Rowe, 2022; Ortega, 2014; Ellis, 2006; Edwards, 2003). The monolingual ideology impacts how parents feel toward their ability to understand English when it is not their native language. Some parents feel guilty for not fully understanding the dominant language and, therefore, do not challenge any decisions made by school professionals (Lim & Cheatham, 2021). Families often feel insecure about their English-speaking abilities and are discouraged by the English-dominant language used in their child's eligibility and individualized education plan (IEP) meetings (Rosetti et al., 2017; Cummings & Hardin, 2017; Toribio, 2000; Macaulay, 1997).

Amendments to the IDEA in 1997 increased parental involvement in developing Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) and IEPs (Jung, 2011). Increased parental involvement made parents members of the IEP team by allowing them to provide information about the student, have input on eligibility decisions, and participate in the development of the IEP (Rosetti et al., 2017; Kalyananpur, Harry & Skrtic, 2000). Although these mandates are through IDEA, studies consistently show that parent participation in eligibility determination and annual review of IEPs are not as noticeable, influential, or equal as those professional members of the IEP team, which is especially true for minority parents and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Landmark et al. 2020; Song, Zhang, & Landmark, 2018; Jung, 201; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003).

These minority parents and caregivers show less involvement in the evaluation process and the development of IEP goals and services (Song, Zhang, & Landmark, 2018).

Factors that Impact Family Participation

Parent participation in the special education identification process is required through IDEA but is also necessary for strengthening the student's overall achievement (Burke et al., 2021). Compared to CLD families, White, upper-and middle-class families often have advantages in the comprehensive assessment process, eligibility determination, and the development of IEP goals and services (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). However, some factors identify low participation from minority families. For example, language barriers and bias against families who exhibit differences in cultural perspectives are factors that impact low parent involvement with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cioe-Pena, 2020; Landmark et al., 2020; Song et al., 2018; Blanchette, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Harry, 1992).

Since parents typically know their children better than their educators, their input could contribute significantly to determining eligibility for special education services. Unfortunately, these parents' input does not seem to have the same value as professionals (Rosetti et al., 2018). Educators may stereotype cultural groups, ignore cultural traditions or customs, assume parents do not have a complete understanding of the evaluation process, and use language that parents are unfamiliar with, which hinders parent participation in the evaluation process and places less value on the input they do provide (Chang et al., 2022; Kalyanpar et al., 2000). In addition, professional expertise is often assumed in the assessment and decision-making process when considering the need for special education services. Professional expertise adopted Western attitudes and behaviors toward CLD parents (Landmark et al., 2022; Song et al., 2018).

Language Barriers. Linguistic differences and language barriers account for a significant decrease in parent involvement throughout the special education process. Ethnic and cultural differences also impact parental perspectives on school services (Zionts et al., 2003). English-speaking parents have often felt uncomfortable during special education identification meetings due to unfamiliarity with the educators' jargon (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Families whose dominant language is not English face many more challenges during identification due to language barriers (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds report issues with not having documents given to them in their native language and not being provided with interpreters to communicate with teachers (Francis et al., 2018). Poor communication between teachers and parents often leads to parents not learning that their child is struggling until the referral is made by their teacher or receiving information that is not in their primary language (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Parents report exclusion from their child's prereferral and referral process. Before formal meetings, educators involved in the referral process have had time to discuss concerns with the student; however, the parent is typically unaware of the problems (Buren et al., 2020). Spanish-speaking parents have experienced a complete lack of communication with their child's teacher, and the teacher does not have adequate knowledge of the special education process (Burke et al., 2021; Lim & Cheatham, 2021). Many non-English-speaking families report giving consent for a special education evaluation without fully understanding the process and feeling pressure from the school system (Urtubey, 2020). Non-English-speaking parents indicate that even if a translator provides services during meetings, the review of the documentation they sign is not in their native language (Rosetti et al., 2020). School collaboration with CLD families can assist in the referral and assessment process by providing appropriate translation opportunities and by

giving families adequate opportunities to share their child's abilities and interests based on their cultural perspective (Gerzel-Short, Kiru, Hsiao, Hovey, Wei, & Miller, 2019).

Impact of Cultural Differences in Parental Involvement.

Language barriers commonly cause low parent involvement; however, educators' lack of cultural beliefs and traditions discourages parent participation throughout the assessment and IEP process (Zionts, Harrison, and Bellinger (2000). Parents can offer insight into their cultural practices with their child's teacher, promote classroom engagement and participation, and improve academic performance. Unfortunately, this parent insight is not always considered (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019). African Americans report frustration with the cultural misunderstandings by their child's predominately Caucasian teachers. As a result, they tend to offer fewer suggestions during their IEP meetings and understand less about the services they receive (Zionts, Harrison, and Bellinger (200; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). African American parents have also reported feeling disrespected by school personnel for themselves and their child, feeling a lack of assistance and support for their child, having a desire for a better understanding of their culture by school personnel, and feeling stereotyped (Zionts et al., 2003; Kiramba, Kumi-Yeboah, Smith, & Sallar, 2021).

Several minority groups struggle academically from various cultural and linguistic differences, such as varying family values, teacher perspectives and expectations, lack of parental and student guidance on educational choices, and racial/ethnic discrimination (Walker, 2008). The consequences of poor engagement by the family during the special education referral process include lesser quality of services, more segregated educational placements, and unreliable diagnostic practices, which occur due to parents being unable to share valuable information about their children by either not having an opportunity or not feeling comfortable

about sharing that information (Cioe-Pena, 2020; Rossetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, 2017; Wolfe & Duran, 2013).

All members of an IEP team, including general education teachers and evaluation specialists, are tasked with the initial decision to make a student eligible or non-eligible to receive special education services (Rossetti, Redash, Sauer, Bui, Wen, & Regensburger, 2020). Parents must have equal participation and input in initial eligibility decisions (Rossetti et al., 2020). Unfortunately, parents do not feel they have equity in eligibility decisions or the development of their child's IEP (Rossetti et al., 2020).

Summary

A review of the literature reveals the issue of disproportionality among minority students in special education. The theoretical framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory states that children's intellectual development occurs when they communicate with others, and instruction includes their natural language (Ellis, 2004; Bodrova, 2003). Schools in the US have consistently experienced demographic changes in students' race, culture, and language, which has led to disparities among minority students in special education. These disparities link cultural and language differences, which influence teacher referrals, teachers' personal beliefs and attitudes toward students with disabilities, the self-efficacy of school psychologists and speech-language pathologists' self-efficacy, and various cultural and linguistic assessment tools. Patterns occur specifically with the overrepresentation of EL students in special education who are language impaired or have a specific language disorder (NCES, 2021; Othman, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2018; Sepúlveda-Miranda., Otero & Moreno-Torres, 2018).

The sociocultural theory states that learning occurs between an individual student and their culture (Vygotsky, 1977). The theory proposes that learners acquire knowledge from each other

and peers who assist them in more complex learning through individuals in their environment (Bodrova, 2003). This theory is a way to guide educators and assessment specialists in educating, referring, and assessing diverse students by emphasizing their specific cultural interactions. Unfortunately, there is a lack of literature showing evidence that culturally diverse students are being allowed to have these interactions.

The literature is unclear on how general education teachers and assessment specialists account for cultural diversity and how comfortable they are with the referral and assessment process of minority students to special education. There is also an evident gap in the literature explaining why the issue of overrepresentation continues to occur despite evidence of disproportionality in special education, federal mandates, and numerous efforts made by various CRE organizations (Park, 2020).

General education teachers are essential in educating students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds by building strong oral-language and literacy skills, providing differentiated instruction, and creating warm and well-managed classrooms (Ramu, 2017; Banse & Palacios, 2018). On the other hand, special education referrals are primarily based on the teacher's reasons for the referral, suggesting that the overrepresentation of minorities correlates to teachers not distinguishing between cultural diversity and disability (Chu, 2011; Green & Stormont, 2018; Unmasky et al., 2018).

Teacher attitude and extent of training impact how students are taught and evaluated. Still, there is a lack of evidence identifying ways in which educators are controlling for cultural and linguistic differences in their classrooms. There are also discrepancies in how general education teachers approach culturally diverse students and their attitudes toward making special education referrals. Teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities impact how successful these

students will be academically, socially, and emotionally (Chu, 2011; Hoang & Dalimonte, 2007). Although numerous contributing factors have been identified in research resulting in the disproportionality of EL students in special education, literature has not identified educators' beliefs regarding the referral process (Park, 2020).

In addition to classroom teachers, assessment specialists such as school psychologists and speech-language pathologists can impact the disproportionality of minority students in special education. Research shows that evaluations may not accurately reflect what a student knows, but what they do to avoid disparities is unclear. A significant problem with standardized testing is that assessment items with complex linguistic concepts can potentially negatively impact assessment outcomes for ELLs (Abedi, Zhang, Rowe, & Lee, 2020). Additionally, standardized assessments often do not consider cultural and linguistic differences, and many EL students are unfamiliar with the assessment language (Abedi, Zhang, Rowe, & Lee, 2020; Harris et al., 2015). Although there are guidelines for assessment specialists to follow, there appear to be deficits among school psychologists and SLPs regarding assessment practices for EL students (Harris et al., 2015). School psychologists and speech-language pathologists often lack training in cultural issues such as second language acquisition (Harris et al., 2015).

Using culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) assessments, such as dynamic assessment, ensures that cultural and linguistic features are valued in the evaluation process (Hoover et al., 2018). Unfortunately, SLPs have reported having inadequate access to culturally responsive assessments, low confidence levels, and limited knowledge and skills (Guiberson & Atkins, 2010; Hammer et al., 2004; Williams & McLeod, 2012). Educators involved with the referral, assessment, and identification of disability provide multiple sources of information regarding culturally and linguistically diverse students. Further research is needed to address the

gap in the literature regarding the personal beliefs of general educators, parents of culturally and linguistically diverse students, school psychologists, and SLPs on when and how to best support minority students in special education through processes of identification through referral and assessment.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators in the identification process of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. Through the socio-cultural framework, this study examined educators' experiences with providing differentiated instruction and accommodations for minority students in the classroom before special education referral. This chapter outlines and provides a rationale for choosing the phenomenological design, setting, and participant criteria. Next, the study outlines procedures and the researcher's role. Data collection methods are detailed, including in-person interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing. Detailed descriptions of the transcendental phenomenological model for data analysis are in the following sections. The chapter ends with the considerations to ensure the study is trustworthy and ethical.

Research Design

A qualitative research design guided this study, which is research that is interpretive and involves a naturalistic approach to the world (Glesne, 2006). A qualitative research approach examines societal phenomena occurring in natural settings, collects data in natural environments, and uses inductive and deductive data analysis to identify themes or patterns (Balmer & Richards, 2022). Qualitative research gives participants a voice by identifying and interpreting a societal problem. The qualitative research approach enabled data collection from educators within a school setting and identified themes provided by participants.

Phenomenology is an approach to comprehensively describing individuals' lived experiences and describing their ordinary meaning (Williams, 2021; Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological study allows the researcher to analyze the essence of an

individual's experience based on how they describe, interpret, and feel about a phenomenon (Patton, 2002; Moustakas, 1994).

The transcendental phenomenological design allowed the researcher to set aside any presuppositions or biases before researching educators' experiences, known as epoche (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche requires the researcher to view a particular phenomenon in a new way and to look at things to distinguish and describe details of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental phenomenological approach informs readers about what was involved in the experiences of elementary school educators involved in the referral and assessment process.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are educators' experiences identifying minority students referred to special education in Tennessee Elementary Schools?

Sub-Question One

How do K-5 educators identify minority students for referral to special education?

Sub-Question Two

What information do K-5 educators consider besides academic performance and standardized assessment scores when determining special education eligibility for minority students?

Sub-Question Three

How do K-5 educators incorporate cultural and language differences in eligibility determination?

Setting and Participants

The study selected sites based on location, socioeconomic community, and school population diversity. Participants included teachers, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and English as a second language (ESL) teachers involved in referring and assessing students for special education.

Site

The sites chosen for the focus of this study were three elementary schools in East Tennessee. CBES, LES, and WES schools house grades K -5 and contain a principal, assistant principal, school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, and ESL teacher. In addition, the selected sites for this study employ educators with experience in the referral and assessment of students for special education.

Participants

Phenomenological research seeks to interpret individuals' lived experiences; therefore, this study aimed to describe educators' experiences in the referral and assessment process for special education. There are no sample size restrictions in qualitative research; however, it suggests that the sample size for qualitative studies should be small enough to manage collected data but large enough to provide an adequate understanding of the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1995). This study included ten participants consisting of a combination of K-fifth grade general education teachers of core content areas, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and ESL teachers with at least three years of experience, ranging in age, ethnicity, gender, and years of experience.

Researcher Positionality

As a speech-language pathologist, I need clarification from educators and specialists on when to assess and qualify students with cultural and language differences. Therefore, I was interested in identifying factors related to the overrepresentation of minority students referred for special education. Through the social constructivism framework, I studied whether minority groups are over-identified for special education. Social constructivism is a learning theory based on the ideas of Vygotsky (1978) that development occurs socially, and students acquire knowledge through interactions (McKinley, 2015). This framework helps analyze how people's ideas relate to individual experiences (Creswell, 2009).

Interpretive Framework

The social constructivism framework guided this study through understanding the world and developing meanings based on their experiences and interactions (Creswell, 2013). This research described educators' personal experiences in the referral and assessment process of minority students. Additionally, this study inquired if and how educators ensure that minority students are referred and assessed for special education in ways that consider cultural differences. The research goal was to describe the experiences of educators in the referral and assessment processes of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions reflecting the researcher's values and belief systems were the basis of this study. These assumptions enabled readers of this study to understand the researcher's worldview and the approach of this research. The researcher addressed the study's approach through ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption asks what the nature of reality is and characterizes multiple views of reality where the researcher reports on numerous perspectives (Hoijer, 2008). While I believe there is only one actual reality, I recognize that multiple perspectives exist among individuals about a specific phenomenon. I hold worldviews based on family culture and background. My beliefs result from my upbringing, cultural practices, and life experiences. When studying other cultures, I realize that others come from cultures that differ significantly from mine. This research examined the experiences of educators involved with the referral and assessment process for special education in K-5 schools.

Epistemological Assumption

The knowledge individuals obtain to help them understand the world and share it with others involves how they receive knowledge and what is true or false defines epistemological assumptions (Golden & Wendel, 2020). Through this research, I gained understanding by speaking with participants and listening to them describe their firsthand experiences, which is how I believe individuals obtain knowledge. I learned this from participants through interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. I relied on answers, quotes, and discussions to understand the perspective of the participants. To gain an understanding of the participants' views, gathering information in the field in which they work was conducted in the home schools of each participant (Mitchell & Demir, 2021). I collected data from participants to gain insight into their experiences of educators working with minority students referred to special education and identified differences in the participants' points of view, allowing me to gain insight into the background of educators. This study included gathering data from and spending time with participants, a characteristic of the epistemological assumption (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption describes the researcher's values and how they bring them to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have 17 years of experience working as a speech-language pathologist involving the referral and assessment process of children with various backgrounds. I have worked in an elementary school with a 60% Hispanic population where many students referred for a speech or language assessment were English language learners. Teachers are often uncertain about when a referral is necessary for these students compared to non-English learners. An example I have encountered is teachers needing to understand the differences between language acquisition and language disorder. Throughout this study, I identified my assumptions to the reader. There is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education due to a lack of consideration of language, culture, and racial factors in the referral and assessment processes. I bracketed my assumptions through self-reflection and set them aside to make my findings accurate (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Researcher's Role

The phrase *researcher-as-instrument* references researchers who are active respondents in the research process; therefore, in conducting qualitative research, I became the instrument (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). In addition, throughout my experience working as an SLP, I have gained an interest in other areas of special education, which led me to pursue my doctoral degree. Therefore, I chose this study to increase my knowledge of special education issues, contribute more insight into special education teams and administration in my schools, and pursue a career in higher education.

I currently have no affiliation with the three elementary schools in which I conducted my research. Although I am an employee in the same school system, I do not have any professional

responsibilities at my selected schools, nor do I have any professional or personal relationship with any of the school's employees. As the researcher, I used my prior knowledge and expertise to establish rapport with participants and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

In this research study, I provided participants with interview questions. I asked each of them in person and recorded their answers. I also conducted focus group interviews, separating participants into small, mixed groups comprised of educators, general education teachers, ELL teachers, and school psychologists/SLPs. In addition to individual and focus group interviews, I asked each participant to write a letter addressing it to themselves before beginning their educational career. Finally, I acknowledged that I have personal views, experiences, and biases toward the assessment of minority students for speech and language deficits based on my work history, and I disclosed those biases, reflected on those throughout the study, and set them aside to remain neutral during data collection and analysis.

Procedures

I began by submitting my application to the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University. See Appendix A. Along with my application, I included the permission request letter (Appendix B), response template for the school superintendent (Appendix C), recruitment materials (Appendix D), consent materials (Appendix E), interview questions (Appendix F), focus group questions (Appendix G), and letter writing prompt (Appendix H). Once I obtained IRB and site approval, I used purposeful sampling to find participants, allowing for the intentional selection of participants with similar and knowledgeable experiences (Palinkas, 2015; Patton, 2002).

Permissions

I began my research by conversing with administrators from each potential school site. I informed principles and assistant principles that I am a doctoral student seeking a school setting to conduct research. I also explained to administrators my dissertation topic and how approval to conduct my research at their school would benefit my study. Next, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Liberty University. See Appendix A for the IRB approval form. Once I received approval from the IRB, I sent a formal letter to the superintendent of schools. I explained the details of my study, the participants I would be seeking, and the activities I would be doing while at their school to obtain permission to conduct research in the selected school system and contact educators. See Appendix B for the school superintendent's letter. Finally, I gave the superintendent a permission response letter to the researcher with their decision to allow the study. See Appendix C for the response letter.

Recruitment Plan

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University and permission from the superintendent of schools, I began the participant recruitment process. I started by sending a recruitment letter (Appendix D) via email to the sample pool consisting of 125 K-5 general education teachers, 10 school psychologists, 6 SLPs, and 8 ELL teachers within the school district, stating the purpose of the study and steps to take if interested in participation. In addition, the letter described the topic of the study, participation criteria, tentative interview and focus group questions, and an explanation of the letter writing prompt. I also provided my personal contact information so that any potential participant could ask questions about their involvement in the study and attached the educator participant consent letter. See Appendix E for the educator participant consent form.

I used purposeful sampling to begin gathering participants for my study. Purposeful sampling deliberately selects participants for a study based on the researcher's knowledge of them (Polkinghorne, 2005). This qualitative study aimed to describe the lived experiences of educators working in the special education referral and assessment process for minority students. Therefore, to be selected for this study, I purposively sought 10-15 educators who met one of the following criteria: general education teacher in grades K-5th, school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, or ESL teacher. I selected each qualifying respondent interested in participating based on their professional role and interest. There are no explicit guidelines for the number of participants in qualitative research. However, smaller sample sizes allow the researcher to gain more in-depth information than larger sample sizes (Subedi, 2021; Patton, 2015). This study's sample consisted of participants from the four educator groups with a minimum sample size of 12 participants. I chose a maximum of fifteen to keep the sample size relatively small.

Data Collection Approach

I achieved triangulation through in-person interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing. I began with in-person, semi-structured interviews to establish a relationship and trust with participants and to allow them to ask questions about the study if needed (Glesne, 2006). Establishing a relationship enabled participants to understand the purpose of the research and be familiar with the researcher. Interview questions also allowed participants to elaborate on answers. See Appendix F for individual interview questions. After completing the in-person interviews, I scheduled small, mixed, focus group interviews with each group of participants from the four educator groups. Finally, I collected letters that I asked educators to write addressed to their younger selves before beginning their careers in education.

Individual Interviews

I began each interview with a formal introduction. I thanked the participants for agreeing to participate in the study, allowing them to become comfortable with the research before starting the interview questions. Qualitative interviews should encourage participation through natural conversations (Bolderston, 2012). I began each discussion by asking the participants to tell me about themselves to establish a rapport. Once participants felt comfortable, I started asking questions and guiding them to explain their lived experiences in the referral, assessment, and identification process of minority students considered for special education. I conducted semi-structured interviews to allow unanticipated answers to structured questions (Frances, Patricia, & Coughlan, 2009). I informed participants of the date and time that interviews would occur at the selected elementary school. I explained how the face-to-face interview process would proceed by giving them the total number of questions and informing them that I would record the interview but would not share it with anyone. I asked interview questions and audio-recorded through an iPhone and voice recorder. Once each interview was complete, I transcribed the audio recording to text only.

Table 1

Individual Live Interview Questions

1. How did you become interested in working in the educational field? CRQ

2. What is your educational background? CRQ

3. What is your current position, including your title and responsibilities? CRQ

4. What are your experiences in the referral/assessment/identification process of EL students considered for special education in grades k-5 in East Tennessee Elementary Schools? SQ1

5. What is your experience in the referral/assessment/identification process working with racial minorities considered for special education in grades k-5 in East Tennessee Elementary Schools? SQ1

6. What is your role in assessing students for special education (SPED) services? SQ2

7. How would you describe your comfort level with referring/assessing minority students for special education services? SQ1

8. How do language differences affect your special education referral/assessment/identification process? SQ3

9. How do racial differences affect your special education referral/assessment/identification process? SQ3

10. How do cultural differences affect your special education referral/assessment/identification process? SQ3

11. What experiences have you had with providing learning opportunities in students' native language? SQ2

12. How do you describe your understanding of developmental differences among various cultures? SQ3

13. What experiences have you had working with students in grades K-12 from diverse cultural backgrounds? SQ2

14. What experiences have you had with accommodating students from diverse cultures in grades K-12? SQ2

15. What professional development experiences have you had related to accommodating minority students in grades K-12? SQ2

16. What experiences have you had distinguishing between academic underachievement and cultural/linguistic differences in K-12 students? SQ3

17. What professional development would you benefit most regarding distinguishing between academic underachievement and cultural/linguistic differences in K-12 students? SQ1

18. What professional development would you benefit most regarding referring and assessing minority students in grades K-12 for special education? SQ1

Interview questions one and two focused on the participants' overall experiences. Questions 3 through 6 focused on the experiences of educators in the special education referral and assessment process of minority students. Questions 7-13 addressed the experiences of educators in accommodating students with diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Questions 14-17 asked educators about their experiences with professional development addressing minority students in referral and assessment for special education.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis began with epochē, or bracketing, to identify my personal bias about the study. My previous knowledge and experience relating to the study topic and my personal beliefs about the subject were recorded in a bracketing journal. This process continued during data collection, analysis, and reporting findings. Once I completed bracketing personal biases, I began data analysis of in-person interviews. After I collected in-person interview data, I used Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model for data analysis. Through this analysis model, phenomenological reduction assisted with managing large chunks of data (Jacobs, 2013). I achieved phenomenological reduction by thoroughly reviewing all transcribed interviews, generating codes, and organizing codes into themes. Researchers code data by

assigning symbols to meaningful data attributes that help with concluding (Saldana, 2013). The phenomenological reduction process began by bracketing keywords and phrases related to how educators have experienced working with minority students in special education.

I read the transcription line by line and assigned symbols and descriptive terms to meaningful data segments while utilizing the memoing process (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). I placed components of coded data into categories and added them to a log for constant comparisons, interpretation, and conceptualization (Birks et al., 2008; Glaser, 1978). I used Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to store, organize, manage, and reconfigure data using ATLAS.ti software.

After each coding cycle, I created themes relating to my research questions and labeled them. First, I gave textural and structural descriptions of the themes to obtain the essence of all reported experiences. Next, I used the process of horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994) to assign equal value to statements relating to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education to cluster the horizons into themes. Finally, I created sub-themes by removing any statements unsupported by the primary responses and assigning textural descriptions from all sub-themes about each research question. (Van Manen, 1990).

Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups are individuals selected by a researcher to discuss firsthand experiences of a selected topic. They usually involve between six and twelve participants with similar characteristics relevant to the researcher (Sagoe, 2012). Focus group interviews offer a more natural environment for participants and facilitate discussions among the group, providing more information than formal interviews (Dilshad & Latif, 2013).

I grouped participants into two groups consisting of general education teachers, ELL teachers, school psychologists, and SLPs for focus group discussions, allowing each participant to participate in a small group environment. Each focus group met in person at an agreed-upon location, and I recorded conversations using an iPhone and voice recorder. In addition, I gave participants in each group a set of guiding questions that I organized, facilitated, and controlled to promote discussion (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). Each participant could answer, comment, and expound upon each question.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

1. In what ways have you ever disagreed with minority students receiving a referral for a special education assessment? SQ1

2. How do you feel about the appropriateness of the special education referral process for minority students? SQ1

3. How do you feel about the appropriateness of the special education assessment process for minority students? SQ1

4. How would you describe your communication with other general education teachers and related staff during the referral and assessment process for minority students? SQ1

5. How do you feel about minority students with a referral to special education being equal to non-minority students with referrals for special education? SQ2

6. How have you modified classroom instruction or assessment practices for students from diverse backgrounds? SQ3

Question one asked participants to explain if they have ever disagreed with special education referrals of minority students. Questions two and three asked the participants to describe their

feelings on the appropriateness of special education referral and assessment for minority students. Question four asked about the participant's experiences communicating with other educators related to minority students during the referral and assessment process. Question five asked educators to explain how they felt about the equality of special education referrals among minority and non-minority students. Finally, question six asked educators to describe ways they have modified classroom instruction or assessment practices for minority students referred for special education.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

After the focus group interviews, I transcribed the recording in its entirety immediately after the conclusion of the discussion. Following the transcription of the recording, I read the transcripts from the focus group discussions multiple times to understand the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). First, I reviewed the transcription data, used memoing to assign symbols and descriptive terms to meaningful segments, and used coding to identify the main ideas (Anderson, 1990). Next, I grouped data into codes based on group discussion and labeled each code (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Next, I used the process of horizonalization to assign equal value to statements made about the research topic to cluster horizons into themes for interpretation and organize themes into textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Letter-Writing

Letter writing is a data collection method used in personal experience research to establish meaning from experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Letter writing allows participants to express what they wish they had learned earlier in life or in their educational experiences. I asked each participant to write a letter to their younger self using the following prompt: "As an elementary educator, what would you tell your younger self to be better prepared

for referring and assessing minority students from different cultural backgrounds to special education?" I asked participants to complete the letter and return it to the researcher within two weeks of receiving the prompt.

Letter Writing Data Analysis Plan

Once I received all the letters, I began reading each letter. First, I used memoing while reviewing the notes using coding to assign symbols and descriptive terms to meaningful segments and to identify main ideas (Anderson, 1990). Next, I grouped data into codes based on participants' information and assigned a label to each code (Birks et al., 2008). The final step was to identify themes that were interpreted and organized into textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Synthesis

I began synthesizing data with epoché or bracketing to identify my personal bias about the study. I continued to record previous knowledge and experience relating to the survey topic, along with my personal beliefs about the subject, in a bracketing journal. After collecting and analyzing data from individual live interviews, focus group interviews, and observations, I synthesized data through phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction allows the researcher to describe a phenomenon's lived experiences and features by eliminating repetitive or overlapping elements (Moustakas, 1994). Through horizonalization, I reduced the data collected from individual live interviews, focus group interviews, and observations into units of meaning or horizons.

Horizonalization allowed me to apply textural meaning to the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Following the process of phenomenological reduction, I continued to synthesize data through imaginative variation. This process relies on the researcher's imagination

to compose data descriptions through various perspectives, positions, and roles (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I reported the essential, invariant structure or essence of the phenomenon by synthesizing the experiences of different participants in the various contexts in which their experiences occurred. I reported participants' experiences and how they were experienced and related the evidence to the study's research questions.

Once I completed horizonalization and identified and clustered core themes, I compared data from all sources and constructed textural and structural descriptions of participants. The textural descriptions comprised a narrative describing the participants' experiences with referral and assessment of minority students for special education. The structural report consisted of a narrative based on how I imagined the incidents occurring through imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Researchers determine the accuracy or credibility of the study's findings to establish the study's trustworthiness (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985) showed four ways to find reliability in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which I used for this study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Additionally, I established trustworthiness by explaining the procedures chosen for the research and the justification for those procedures (Adler, 2022).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the study's findings accurately describe reality according to participants' perceptions as a proximation of the truth of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member-checking. Method triangulation is achieved by using multiple data sources to

develop an understanding of phenomena (Carter, 2014; Patton, 1999). Data collection methods included live in-person interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing. In addition, I achieved data source triangulation by collecting data from several types of participants, including general education teachers, school psychologists, SLPs, and ELL teachers, to gain multiple perspectives (Carter, 2014).

I also used the peer-debriefing technique frequently throughout my study to further support the credibility of data and establish the trustworthiness of my findings. The debriefing allowed me to consult colleagues familiar with my research to discuss data collection, data analysis, and perspectives on findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My third approach to establishing credibility was through member checking. Member checking is a method to ensure the data collected accurately represents the participant's perspective (Candela, 2019; Gliner, 1994). After I interpreted the data, I completed member checking with each participant to confirm and clarify the information provided to ensure I interpreted their responses accurately.

Transferability

Transferability reveals how a study may be applicable in other contexts by giving a detailed description of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I described the experiences of educators involved in various roles in the referral and assessment process for special education in elementary schools varying in location and socioeconomic status. While I created conditions to ensure transferability, the reader determined if the study met the criteria.

Dependability

Dependability refers to how stable a study's data is over time and different conditions, and recognizing how conditions can change throughout the setting and design is a reason for establishing dependability (Janis, 2022). Achieving dependability comes by providing precise

and comprehensive descriptions of a study's procedures, supporting evidence from literature, and establishing consistent alignment between the study's title, purpose, and research questions, allowing for replication (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, researchers can achieve consistency by tracking changes throughout the study. I used an inquiry audit through a committee and qualitative director review at Liberty University to establish the study's dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability is "the extent to which participants shape the study's findings and not by the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest" (Hagood & Skinner, 2015, p. 432). I utilized three techniques to ensure the confirmability of this study. The first technique was the use of a detailed audit trail. See Appendix I. An audit trail in qualitative research consists of data generated by the researcher that is consistently organized throughout the research process (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993). An audit trail tracked the study's procedures and raw data and analyzed and synthesized data. Second, I used method triangulation by collecting data from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing (Polit & Beck, 2012). Finally, I incorporated reflexivity throughout the study by recording potentially sensitive or ethical issues that may affect data analysis (Forero et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

I followed ethical guidelines to safeguard the rights of educators participating in this study. I obtained the approval of the Liberty University institutional review board (See Appendix A) and sought permission from the school system's superintendent (See Appendix B). After obtaining informed consent from participants (See Appendix D), I explained the purpose of my research to participants. I explained that their participation was strictly voluntary and they had

the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I treated participants fairly and equitably and informed participants that the collected data was confidential. Physical and electronic data will be secured for three years after the completion of the study per LU IRB. I secured physical data in a locked filing cabinet and secured electronic data through password-protected files. I will shred physical data and delete electronic data after three years. I reported all data honestly and used appropriate language for the research audiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I have made my report available to participants in the study.

Summary

Chapter three outlines how the transcendental phenomenological research design described the experiences of educators in the referral and assessment processes of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. I used purposeful sampling to select participants with expertise and knowledge of working with minority students in various special education roles. I collected data by conducting in-person interviews, focus group interviews, and letter writing. I completed data analysis using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological model. Finally, I used phenomenological reduction to synthesize all the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators in the referral and assessment processes of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences of a specific group and reduce their individual experiences into a common shared experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central research question allows the researcher to examine the experiences of ten educators in identifying minority students referred to special education in Tennessee Elementary Schools. This chapter provides background information for each participant in a narrative form of the data, including themes, subthemes, and codes. Themes in tables organize the data. The responses to the central research question and sub-questions concluded this chapter.

Participants

The population of this research study was ten educators, including K-12 general education teachers, ESL teachers, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists who work at East Tennessee elementary schools (see Table 1). The eligibility criteria included being a current educator within an East Tennessee school system with at least three years of experience. This study solicited participants via email (see Appendix D). Educators received an information sheet (see Appendix E) with an in-depth explanation of the study once they responded with an agreement to participate. The research tasks began with scheduled individual interviews with each educator. The interactive parts of the research tasks (individual interviews and focus group sessions) took place in person. After completing the focus group interview, the participants received the journal writing prompt and completed the prompt within two weeks of receiving it

(See Appendix H). Each educator who participated received a pseudonym.

Table 3

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years of Experience	Title
Abby	5	SLP
Beth	15	ESL Teacher
Cathy	28	ESL Teacher
Donna	10	School Psychologist
Renee	22	SLP
Sarah	8	School Psychologist
Meagan	8	Kindergarten Teacher
Tom	30	School Psychologist
Katrina	6	3rd Grade Teacher
Kim	12	ESL Teacher

Educator 01- Abby

Abby currently works as a full-time speech-language pathologist at an elementary school. She serves children in grades K-5th with various communication delays. Abby has a bachelor's and master's degree in speech-language pathology. She became interested in the field because she felt she should work in education. "I always wanted to be in education, I think that's just kind of what girls are taught as one of their options." As a school-based SLP, Abby's responsibilities include case management, reporting diagnostic evaluations to general education teachers, administrators, and families, IEP paperwork, updating progress reports, implementing IEPs, speech and language screenings, providing classroom interventions to teachers, and carrying out

therapy. Abby stated that her experiences with referral and assessment of minority students to special education have been positive. She said, "I haven't noticed any disparities in how our teachers refer. It seems to be across the board and is more data-driven rather than an opinion."

Educator 02- Beth

Beth currently works full-time as an ESL teacher for grades K-5. Beth began her career in higher education, having previously worked at two universities before her current position. Her degrees include a bachelor's degree in cross-cultural sociology and a master's in teaching English as a second language. She became interested in teaching English as a second language due to her childhood. She is a second-generation American and feels like her mother did not teach her as much as she could have, which led her to become an ESL teacher. Overall, Beth reported experiences with the referral of minority students to special education as difficult. "It is extremely difficult to get students with another language listed on their home language survey into special education services."

Educator 03-Donna

Donna is currently a school psychologist who works with students in grades K-5. She began her career as a social worker before moving into school psychology. She has a bachelor's degree in applied behavioral science and a master's in educational psychology. Donna's responsibilities include attending 504 and support team meetings where disability is suspected, completing psychological testing to determine eligibility, reviewing eligibility for special education students, and completing evaluations to determine if any programming changes may need to occur. According to Donna, she considers cultural differences each time she assesses a student for special education. "We have to consider that there may be cultural differences in the

evaluations that we use. Some of the behaviors that we in the Western world would consider atypical would be completely typical in the culture that they're being raised in."

Educator 04- Cathy

Cathy currently works as an ESL teacher for students in grades K-5. She has been an ESL teacher for 28 years, and her current responsibilities include creating and implementing lesson plans that adhere to the state standards and the ELL curriculum. Cathy stated that as an ESL teacher, it is often difficult to have an ESL student assessed for special education. She stated that the referral process is often lengthy. "We have to make sure that it's not a language barrier, and it depends on how long the student has been in the country. My experience is that they really look at those factors and a lot of other factors first. It's not just a quick process." Cathy also stated that she would like her school district to provide more training and professional development on the current laws and regulations for referrals, specifically for ESL teachers.

Educator 05- Meagan

Meagan works as a Kindergarten teacher with approximately 18 students in her classroom. Meagan holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Meagan reports that her responsibilities in the referral process for a minority student to special education are completing a referral form and completing support team paperwork. She stated that she does not always know when to refer students for special education if they come from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds. "When they come in kindergarten, depending on where they are in the English learning process, sometimes we're not sure if it's just a language barrier." Meagan stated that when she is unsure whether a special education referral is necessary, she attempts to gain as as much information from the parents as possible.

Educator 06- Renee

Renee is a full-time speech-language pathologist and a member of the Centralized Assessment Team (CAT). Her primary responsibility is administering formal speech and language assessments to students referred by school-based speech therapists and providing a written report for sharing with the IEP team. Renee has a bachelor's degree in health record administration and a master's in speech-language pathology. Renee expressed needing help with the assessment of minority students at times. She stated that she uses interpreters when available but needs help when they are not. Renee also stated that she does not consider test results valid even when using an interpreter. "We try to obtain an interpreter in the child's primary language. We realize these tests are not valid, but at least it gives us an idea of whether there is a difference between how much a child performs in their home language versus how they perform in English."

Educator 07-Sarah

Sarah is a full-time school psychologist responsible for completing evaluations for students considered for special education. Sarah has a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's in applied educational psychology, and a PhD in school psychology. Sarah said she always tries to be mindful of the student's background and culture. She also stated that she does her best to choose the most appropriate assessment instrument when considering making a student eligible for special education. Sarah reports that several assessments contain "culturally loaded" questions that may not be appropriate for a specific student and their cultural background. In those cases, Sarah says she relies more heavily on non-verbal testing.

Educator 08-Tom

Tom is a school psychologist with 30 years of experience in school psychology and who grew up as a bilingual student. Tom's responsibilities include gathering background information from referred students, administering assessments, providing written reports to the IEP team, and recommending students' primary disability. Tom stated that collecting information from families who do not speak English can be very difficult. He stated that often, the school does not provide families with all the necessary documents translated into English. Therefore, they only sometimes understand what the process is. Tom also reported that it is challenging to distinguish between an educational disability and a language difference when the student is learning two languages. Tom relies on alternative assessment practices for students with diverse language backgrounds. "I would not give those kids a typical IQ test. I'll give them what they call a culture free- language free IQ test, so it would be a nonverbal type of test to obtain an appropriate IQ."

Educator 09-Katrina

Katrina is a self-contained 3rd-grade teacher with a bachelor's degree in childhood family studies and a master's in early childhood education. Katrina has been a 3rd-grade teacher for six years and is responsible for teaching ELA, math, science, and social studies to her students. There are currently over 25 languages represented at Katrina's elementary school. Katrina reported that she has rarely been a part of the referral process for a minority student. She stated that she primarily provides information for students already referred for special education. "In the past, I have filled out some assessment screeners. Most of the questions ask how they're interacting with peers and how they are performing on certain tasks based on their peers in their classroom." Katrina expressed frustration with the overall referral and assessment process for students considered for special education because of the time it takes to complete.

Educator 10-Kim

Kim is an ELL teacher in an elementary school who works primarily with 3rd-grade students. She has a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies and Bible and a master's in holistic education. Kim stated that most students she works with are Hispanic, which requires her to find ways to provide learning opportunities in their native language. "I don't know all the languages of my students, but if I can find words that translate directly when I'm teaching new vocabulary, I'll make connections that way." Kim also reported that although she would feel comfortable initiating a conversation about concerns for a student, she would like more professional development opportunities to help distinguish between academic delays and language differences.

Results

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of educators in the referral and assessment of minority students for special education in East Tennessee elementary schools. Collected data came from ten participating educators through individual interviews, focus groups, and open-letter writing prompts. The individual interviews and focus group sessions were in person and semi-structured to establish a relationship and trust with participants and to allow them to ask questions about the study if needed. Each participant also completed a written response to a letter-writing prompt delivered to them in person. The Microsoft Word speech-to-text feature transcribed interview and focus group data. The participants responded openly about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Data analysis revealed similarities among the participants' responses. In analyzing the data, I began bracketing out my preconceptions through epoché and dividing the data into essential statements with their respective meanings to develop codes and themes.

Code and Theme Development

After data collection was completed, code and theme development was the next step completed. Coding connects collected data with their explanation of meaning (Saldana, 2013). Through descriptive coding, I analyzed keywords from all collected data and determined themes and sub-themes aligned with the study's research questions. Major themes developed once I categorized coded data based on comparisons, interpretation, and conceptualization of participant responses (Birks et al., 2008; Glaser, 1978). The analysis process continued by identifying codes from the letter-writing prompts to contribute to the development of themes. Three significant themes developed through data analysis, which answered the central research question, "What are educators' experiences in identifying minority students referred to special education in Tennessee Elementary Schools?" The following three themes were identified: the use of data, the importance of communication, and frustration among educators. Table 2 displays the three themes, subthemes, and core codes.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes

Major Theme	Subthemes	Core Codes
Use of Data	intervention data, standardized assessment, background information	RTI, WIDA, benchmark testing, progress monitoring, bilingual assessments, nonverbal assessments, rating forms, home language cultural background, exposure

Major Theme	Subthemes	Core Codes
Importance of Communication	communication with parents/families, communication with other educators, use of interpreters	parent concerns, relationship with parents, families being part of the assessment team, educating parents on the assessment process, collaboration, accommodations, use of interpreters, and lack of interpreters.
Frustration Among Educators	delay of services, inconsistency, lack of training	time constraints, professional development, school training, signs, characteristics

Use of Data

Participating educators in the research study mentioned reviewing various data sources when determining the need to refer or assess minority students for special education. Subthemes developed based on participant responses, including intervention data, standardized assessments, and use of background information. Abby stated, "In this school, I haven't noticed any disparities in how our teachers refer; it's more data-driven and less of an opinion." Additionally, all ten participants shared experiences using various data sources from interventions as part of their referral and assessment decisions. During her interview, Donna mentioned that language

differences are something to consider, but her school primarily focuses on scores. "There's protocol that we have to follow, hoops we have to jump through, and different steps we have to meet, it just depends on a certain score."

Each participating classroom teacher mentioned that they often contribute classroom data to share with members responsible for completing formal evaluations. When asked about her role in the assessment process, Meagan stated, "I am responsible for completing the initial S-team paperwork and the teacher survey, and then I share that information with the school psychologist." Every participant stated they had all been part of an S-team responsible for providing or reviewing data. Katrina, a third-grade teacher, shared, "I am involved in filling out assessment screeners and reporting how a student is performing in the classroom on specific tasks, and then I participate in the S-team meetings."

Each participating school psychologist and speech-language pathologist expressed the importance of collecting adequate information about the student referred for an assessment. Tom, a school psychologist, expressed negative experiences with teachers who have yet to use data before making a SPED referral. "Sometimes the teacher just wants to get rid of them, so I always do a pre-assessment evaluation and complete observations because the child may not need to be tested." Another participating school psychologist stated that she experienced teachers making referrals based on comparing ELL students rather than looking at data. Cathy stated, "We have a student who just hit the second anniversary, and the teachers are pushing for testing and comparing her to another student who has already been here for two years." During her focus group, Sarah shared that she feels teachers are coming from wanting to do what is best for students, but there is confusion about the process. "I run into a lot of teachers who are unfamiliar with special education eligibility and the criteria we are looking at."

Intervention Data

All ten participants mentioned using data from multiple interventions with minority students considered for special education. The most common intervention data used by participants came from RTI data, WIDA scores, and progress monitoring. When asked about their experience with referring racial minorities for special education, Donna stated, "There's not to my knowledge any racial factors that are considered; it is just their ability based on the data points from RTI." Kim, an ELL teacher, shared that she has never had to make a referral to special education, but she has been a part of the team by providing the necessary data. "I've been a part of the process and conversation about RTI; I contribute by bringing data about their background and progress." Additionally, all ten participants mentioned WIDA scores regarding the referral and assessment of ELL students.

When asked how language differences factor into SPED referrals, Donna stated, "It depends on how long they have been in the country, how long they have been in the ELL program, and their grade on the WIDA; it depends on a certain score." Each participating school psychologist shared experiences using WIDA scores to help with formal evaluations when ruling out language barriers. Tom mentioned, "Can we rule out the language issue as the primary cause of their learning disability? That's sometimes very hard to do, but we go with the WIDA scores." During their focus group, Katrina shared how she has experienced strict guidelines for referrals. "I think both of my schools are very strict where they are on the WIDA; at least they're not going to refer them if they are still scoring ones and twos on the WIDA."

Progress monitoring was another form of data shared among most participants. Kim stated, "I have had conversations with other teachers about placing students in interventions first based on their benchmark testing and progress monitoring." Donna shared that as an ELL

teacher, state standards require her to adhere to the ELL curriculum, which she uses to monitor her student's progress. "We use the benchmark advance for language learners and the advancing language learners' portion of the benchmark advance program." Beth shared that she has not always agreed with decisions not to evaluate students, even when there has not been significant data available. "We had an S-team for a student where they said there wasn't enough evidence to support a SPED evaluation solely because another language was listed, so it's really frustrating."

Standardized Assessment

Each of the ten participants stated that standardized assessment is integral to determining eligibility for special education. Classroom teachers and ELL teachers contribute to formal evaluations by providing data on performance, while school psychologists and speech-language pathologists administer and interpret the assessments and provide written reports on the findings. Sarah, Abby, Tom, Donna, and Renee stated that they have experienced challenges with assessing culturally diverse students. Each shared that they try to use standardized assessments for minority students when appropriate; however, those standardized scores are typically invalid. Each assessment specialist in this study shared similar experiences with nonverbal and bilingual assessments.

In their interviews, Tom and Sarah expressed that they are trying to choose assessment tools that are culturally sensitive but have experienced not always having that option. Tom stated, "We must take language and dialect into consideration when testing; for instance, I would not give those kids a typical IQ test. I'll give them what they call a culture-free, language-free IQ test, so it would be a nonverbal test to obtain an appropriate IQ." Sarah also shared experiences with using nonverbal assessments. "A lot of times we'll use nonverbal assessments, especially to look at cognitive skills, but we still have a lot of questions." During the focus group, Sarah

shared, "Some assessments are more culturally loaded than others." Donna also stated, "We have to be careful when looking at things like emotional disturbance or autism because some of the behaviors considered atypical in the Western world would be completely typical in the culture they are being raised in."

Participants shared additional concerns regarding the need for bilingual assessments. They shared that some assessments have Spanish versions, but many are only available in English. During her interview, Sarah stated, "best practice would be to use a bilingual assessment, but it comes down to access." Renee, an SLP responsible for evaluating students referred for a speech and language delay, mentioned she would like to help assess ELL students. When asked about her experience with the assessment process of ELL students, she said, "That is a work in progress, and I could certainly use some help with that." Renee also shared her experiences with using interpreters as part of her evaluations. "I try to obtain an interpreter in the child's primary language, but we realize these scores are not valid." Six of the ten participants shared that with a diverse school district, it is impossible to find interpreters who speak all the languages represented in their schools. Abby stated, "I've already tested a student this year whose primary language is Mandingo, and we couldn't find an interpreter for him, so it was difficult."

Use of background information

All ten participants highlighted using background information as part of their referral or assessment process for minority students. Participants mentioned the length of time spent in the country, exposure to English, and previous school experience as the most common background information collected for culturally diverse students. When asked if they had experienced differences between referral of minority students versus non-minority students, Tom shared,

"The only difference would be that there's more conversations with minority students, and asking if they're from a different country, or newer to the country, and if they speak English at home." When asked about her experiences in the referral process for minority students, Donna shared that she considers specific factors about a student before making a referral. "I ask how long they've been in the country and how long they've been in the ELL program; my experience is that we have to really look at those factors first."

Importance of communication

The participants in this research study described the importance of communication during referral and assessment decisions for minority students. Ten participants expressed the need for effective communication with parents and families, other educators, and interpreters. Participating school psychologists and speech-language pathologists stated that in addition to standardized assessment scores, they use parent input forms, parent interviews, teacher rating scales, and classroom performance data to determine eligibility for SPED services. Eight of the ten participants also mentioned using interpreters to aid in communication with ELL students and their families. When asked to describe communication with other educators, eight of the ten participants shared positive experiences. Katrina mentioned that she had only had positive experiences referring students and collaborating with other educators in her building. "I would say I feel comfortable doing that because we have a good team of people who work together; there is a big collaboration with ESL teachers."

During the focus group discussion, when asked in what ways the participants had ever disagreed with a minority student referred for a SPED assessment, Sarah shared that she has not experienced disagreeing with a decision to refer because she has always been able to communicate with teachers. She stated, "I really make sure we talk about the disability criteria

and that I get information from teachers about previous schooling; I also get the ELL teacher

involved." Tom also shared that he has mostly had positive experiences with communication as a

school psychologist. "Actually, 90% of the time, it's pretty good for me, I think, because I try to

get my report to the team at least a week ahead of the meeting so that we can discuss what I have

found."

A common experience shared among most participants was the need for interpreters to

facilitate communication with parents and families. Participants mentioned using interpreters for

parent meetings and during evaluations; however, several shared having limited availability of

interpreters. During her focus group, Katrina mentioned, "Parents are sometimes reluctant to

have somebody call or talk to them, and they have all these questions, but what we're finding is

that it's very hard to get interpreters." Renee, a speech-language pathologist, said she tries using

interpreters as much as possible during her evaluations. She stated, "I try to get interpreters to

help with testing and to ask questions in their native language, but we don't always get

interpreters."

Only one of the ten participants shared having negative experiences with communication.

Beth, an ELL teacher, explained that she has only occasionally communicated positively with

her colleagues. She explained that she has experienced not being heard when trying to

communicate concerns about her students. She stated, "I would like everyone involved in the

process to take a little more responsibility and reach out to those where the communication has

broken down and find ways to remedy situations." During her focus group, she also shared, "I

have had at least one time where I thought a kid needed some more help and had someone

absolutely bite my head off." Each participant mentioned the importance of communicating with

parents and families of minority students, especially those with language differences. Meagan

mentioned the importance of communicating the process to parents with children referred for a

SPED assessment. "The parents of some of my students do not know what their rights are, don't

know what RTI is, what kind of support they can get, or what their options are." Two

participating school psychologists mentioned the importance of communication with parents as

part of their evaluation process. Sara stated, "I want to have a parent conference and get the ELL

teacher involved to discuss the student and to get their background information."

Communication with parents

Of the ten participating educators, eight mentioned parent communication as an element

of working with minority students. Participants commonly shared the importance of

understanding parent concerns, gaining parents' trust, and educating parents on the assessment

process. When asked about the comfort level of referring a minority student for SPED, Abby

stated, "I feel like we generally confer with the parent, especially if it's an ESL student, and if the

parent has no language concerns, then we generally will wait." A participating kindergarten

teacher explained that she struggles with understanding developmental differences among

diverse cultures, so she consults with parents before making a formal referral. When asked

during her interview to describe her understanding of developmental differences among various

cultures, Meagan stated, "I'm not really sure, but I have a couple of kids in kindergarten where

I've had to have conversations with parents about understanding what they may need." Renee, a

speech-language pathologist, shared that gathering parent information for an ESL student is one

of the first steps in her assessment process, "I try to interview the parent about the concerns they

have and about their communication concerns."

Additionally, participants mentioned trust when speaking to parents and families about

the SPED referral and assessment process. During the focus group, Katrina mentioned parents'

comfort level and how that may impact conversations about their child. She stated, "Talking to parents about what a referral means can depend on parents' previous experiences with the school if they are less trusting of the school, and how comfortable they are talking about these things with the school." When asked how cultural differences affect a decision to refer a minority student, Katrina shared, "I just think about the families and getting them on board and using an interpreter to explain what is going on." Meagan shared that it can sometimes be challenging to discuss concerns about a student with their families, especially if they are not comfortable with the teachers. When asked what her comfort level was with referring a minority student from her classroom, she stated, "I think it depends on the relationship I have with the parents and explaining to them we are trying to do what is best for their child."

Parents' need for more understanding of SPED referrals and evaluations was mentioned by 8 out of the 10 participants. According to the participating educators, parents often need clarification about why the school requests a SPED assessment and what that process involves. When asked how educators felt about the equality between minority student referrals versus non-minority student referrals, Beth shared, "The parents of my students don't know what their rights are, don't necessarily know what RTI is, what kind of support they can get, or what their options are." When asked how cultural differences affected her decision to refer a minority student, Katrina responded, "Some minority families either do not know what special education is, or they might have a bad idea of it, so we just try to get parents on board." Each participating school psychologist mentioned a need for more communication regarding available resources to parents. Sarah stated, "I feel like a lot of times we're doing more education about the special education process and sort of just school in general; talking about some of those diagnostic labels can have some really different meanings culturally."

Communication with other educators

Various educators participate in evaluation decisions for students referred for special education. These decisions often require communication and collaboration among all educators involved. During the focus group, Cathy stated, "We have good communication between general education and ELL, and that's definitely very helpful." Two participants explained having negative experiences regarding communication and collaboration with other educators. Beth shared, "There have been years where I have walked into meetings, and I had just found out about it that morning because nobody realized I should have been included." Tom also stated there is miscommunication, and members get left out of meetings. Tom stated, "Occasionally, I have meetings where there is miscommunication, where they should have included the speech and language pathologists, but there was never an SLP in that report." Renee mentioned in her letter writing prompt addressed to her younger self that "classroom teachers, related arts teachers, school psychologists, and ELL teachers are good sources of information to help you piece parts of the puzzle together."

Nine of the ten participants mentioned accommodations as something often communicated between educators. Each stated they have experienced collaboration with their colleagues on ways to accommodate students through classroom instruction or alternative forms of assessment. When asked about her experience with accommodating ESL students, Cathy answered, "I have recommended accommodations to classroom teachers for my ESL students." During her interview, Meagan shared, "I have given them modified work or shortened assignments after working with their ESL teacher to make sure we are on the same page.

Use of Interpreters

Interpreters are a valuable resource for educators when working with culturally diverse students and families. Most participants mentioned the use of interpreters when discussing various communication needs. Through individual interviews and focus groups, 8 out of 10 participants discussed the use of interpreters for communicating SPED procedures with families, assisting in evaluations, and the issues that arise from a lack of interpreters. During her interview, Sarah explained that she uses multiple sources of information when assessing an ESL student for special education. She stated, "When looking at cognitive skills, there are times when I try to use interpreters for parent interviews to gain parent input and to get a picture of where the child is."

When asked how she feel about the appropriateness of assessment tools used for minority students, Cathy explained, "We don't really have anything as far as interpreters for the psychology department; we could do better with assessments." A participating SLP explained that she uses interpreters for communication and as a resource to gather student input. Renee shared, "When I use an interpreter, I like to get their feedback on the child and ask them if some things are typical for their culture." Seven out of ten participants stated they had experienced a lack of interpreters for languages other than Spanish. Cathy shared during her focus group, "I've had several children this year that I can't find interpreters for, like Igala is one language, Mandingo is another, and there's just not enough interpreters available, so that's becoming a real struggle."

Frustration among educators

Frustration was the third major theme expressed by participants in this research study. Although most participants' experiences with referral and assessment were positive, they did

mention experiencing delays or denial of services for ESL students, inconsistency with the overall assessment process, and feeling they lacked training on guidelines for referring minority students. Each participant described at least one of the previously mentioned factors as a cause of frustration. Separate groups of educators have varying responsibilities in identifying students who may require SPED services. General education teachers are responsible for identifying students struggling in the classroom with academic expectations and referring them to other designated educators. ESL teachers are also involved in identifying struggling students who come from diverse backgrounds and who are learning to speak English. School psychologists and speech-language pathologists administer formal evaluations to determine whether students qualify for SPED services.

Each of the ten participating educators mentioned feeling frustration within their various roles. Some expressed feeling unsure about the referral process for ELL students, while others experienced inconsistencies with the referral and assessment process throughout the school district. Each participating school psychologist and speech-language pathologist mentioned difficulties distinguishing between a learning disability and language difference. Tom stated in his interview, "Ruling out the language issue as the primary cause of their learning disability is sometimes very hard to do." Each general education teacher or an ELL teacher expressed a lack of confidence in knowing when a minority student needs interventions versus a referral for a special education assessment. When asked about experiences in the referral or assessment process of students considered for special education, Meagan stated, "Sometimes we're not sure if it's a language barrier, but there have been a couple of students where we know there is more going on."

Seven out of ten participants also mentioned teachers' varying expectations for students. Donna stated, "When it comes to understanding a child's learning process, general education teachers are often worried about a disability when the child is still on what we would consider a normal path." Renee shared in her focus group that she experiences general education teachers being unfamiliar with determining student eligibility. "I run into a lot of people who are unfamiliar with special education eligibility and the criteria that we are looking at." Donna, a school psychologist, expressed frustration with receiving referrals for students who do not need an evaluation. She explained, "Teachers are getting overwhelmed with the number of different needs they have to meet within one classroom." During her focus group, Renee shared similar experiences of teachers feeling pressure, often leading to more referrals. "Teachers see us as a way to take the pressure off them."

Delay of services

When asked to explain how they felt about minority student referrals versus non-minority student referrals, participants mentioned having experienced more of a delay in services for minority students. During her focus group, Katrina stated, "I know that some schools would use that as a reason to put them in SPED, but sometimes I also feel like we might be holding off a bit too long." Each general education and ELL teacher participant expressed frustration with the intervention and assessment procedures, especially for ELL students. During her focus group, Abby stated, "I have felt that some students should be assessed, but due to XYZ rules on how long they have to be in the system, they are not tested even though they are clearly not learning quickly, despite other interventions." Beth, who is an ELL teacher also stated, "having these hard and fast rules of needing to be exposed for X number of years before they can be tested is

difficult, especially if we're able to prove they are not picking up things as quickly as their peers who have been in ELL the same amount of time."

When asked about how comfortable she is with referring minority students for an assessment, Katrina shared, "I would say I feel comfortable with making a referral, but I just feel like that process takes so long, so it can be really frustrating." As part of her letter-writing prompt to her younger self, Cathy expressed the need to "research school district procedures for how and when to refer students for special education to avoid a lot of frustration." Beth, an ELL teacher, stated that her experience getting ELL students SPED services has been very difficult. "It is extremely difficult to get students that have another language listed on their home language survey into ESL or into SPED services."

Inconsistency

All ten participants expressed experiences with inconsistency regarding referral and assessment practices for minority students considered for special education. The most common experiences involved language barriers and the assessment tools for testing minority students. Abby stated that she has experienced extreme differences in how teachers refer minority students. "I would like to see more consistency within the county on how ELL students are treated. Some schools don't refer at all because they are ELL, and others think it's best to evaluate and see, so I wish it were more consistent."

Inconsistencies in understanding developmental differences among various cultures also emerged as a theme among participants. Most participants agreed that interventions were necessary before a formal assessment, but many expressed experiencing confusion about what interventions were appropriate for various cultures. All general education and ELL teachers expressed experiencing inconsistencies with incorporating developmental differences among

various cultures. When asked to describe her understanding of developmental differences among various cultures, Meagan stated, "I can't think of anything specific for that; the only thing I can think of is talking to their parents and getting an understanding of where they're coming from." Abby shared similar experiences with developmental differences, stating, "I'm not very good at it; I generally will Google it if I have a question." Beth shared that she did not think it was fair to assume there are developmental differences among various cultures. "I don't know that it's fair to say that there are developmental differences from one country to another; that sounds very racist. I think it would be circumstantial and cultural."

Lack of training

Most participants mentioned they have experienced professional development opportunities relating to the process of SPED eligibility and minority students. They each shared that their school district provides training on being culturally responsive through the Department of School Culture. Eight out of the ten participants expressed wanting more training on specific criteria regarding special education eligibility. Katrina said in her interview, "Professional development would be helpful, especially for those who work with Hispanic populations, for training on the signs or characteristics of an ESL learner with a developmental delay." Meagan, a kindergarten teacher, also shared that she would benefit from professional development focused on distinguishing between a learning deficit and a language barrier. She stated, "I would like training that would help us know where to draw the line and give us assistance in understanding what may be a language barrier or something we need to look at a little more."

Similarly, when asked what professional development she would most benefit from regarding referral and assessment of minority students, Kim stated, "I think maybe how do we identify a learning disability with a student who's still acquiring the English language; it would

be helpful to know key indicators for language acquisition." Only one participant shared that she was completely unaware of the protocol for referring students she may have concerns within her ELL class. Beth explained, "I don't really know what RTI is or how you qualify for SPED." The other nine participants wanted more training on best practices for their students in classroom instruction, interventions, and assessment. Renee, an SLP, stated, "I would like training on best practices, like what we do when we can't test in a student's native language, just having clear guidelines we can follow." Although specific training needs varied, all participants mentioned that more professional development on SPED services for minority students was needed.

Outlier Data and Findings

This study identified two outliers during the data collection and analysis phase. The first outlier finding represented important statements associated with Beth concerning negative communication experiences among educators when determining a need for a SPED referral. The second outlier finding identified a lack of acknowledgment regarding developmental differences among culturally diverse students, significantly impacting Abby's referral decisions.

Negative Communication Among Educators

While 9 of the ten participant educators reported having positive communication experiences discussing student concerns and the possible need for referral with other educators, Beth did not. Beth revealed that general education teachers do not listen to ESL teachers' concerns. She stated, "If a classroom teacher disagrees with us, then it dies there." Beth recounted when she attempted to discuss concerns about a student with his classroom teacher. She stated, "I've had at least one time where I really thought a kid needed some more stuff and had someone absolutely bite my head off. They did not refer the kid, and now he's in SPED two years later." Beth expressed how she feels that other educators do not trust the opinion of ESL

teachers, especially in the referral process. Beth said explicitly, "I don't really feel that for us ESL teachers, that's an area we're really trusted."

Lack of Acknowledgement Regarding Developmental Differences

Although ten of the eleven participants mentioned difficulty distinguishing developmental differences among students with various cultural backgrounds, they acknowledged that developmental expectations varied depending on culture. However, Abby revealed that she was unaware of developmental differences among diverse cultures and thought it was unfair to assume those differences existed. During her interview, when asked to describe her understanding of developmental differences among various cultures, Abby replied, "I don't know that it's fair to say that there are developmental differences from one country to another; that sounds very racist." During her focus group, participants discussed how developmental expectations are considered before making a referral to special education. Abby shared, "I feel like there are honestly situations where there is institutional racism. These kids should have services, and they're not getting them because it says they speak another language."

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Research Question Responses

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This study focused on educators' experiences in the referral and assessment process of minority students and answered the central research question and three sub-questions. The research questions sought to understand educators' experiences in identifying minority students for special education, the criteria used for eligibility determination, and considering cultural and language differences. This study used the themes developed in the previous section to answer each research question.

Central Research Question

The central research question of this study, "What are educators' experiences in

identifying minority students referred to special education in Tennessee Elementary Schools?" was designed to allow participating K-5 general education teachers, ELL teachers, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists to explain their experiences with referral and assessment of students from diverse backgrounds. In her interview, Donna described her experience working with minority students as the same as working with other students. "I don't think about the student's race or culture, just their ability level and if they are struggling, I will refer and do all of the steps that are required for any student no matter what their race is." When asked about her comfort level referring minority students from her kindergarten classroom, Meagan stated, "I think I'm pretty comfortable. I think it depends on the relationship I have with the parents because that can be a hard topic to broach sometimes. I always try to see what we need to do that is best for the student and then present it to the parents that way." Similarly, Kim shared that she is also comfortable with the referral process for minority students, given her 12 years of experience. Kim explained, "I've had quite a bit of experience sitting in IEP meetings and being part of the process; I've had conversations about RTI, interventions, and the progress they are making."

Sub-Question One

The details surrounding the experiences of educators and assessment specialists in the referral and assessment process of minority students considered for special education are the basis of this research study. The first sub-question, "How do K-5 educators identify minority students for referral to special education?" focused on the participants' experiences and decisions to refer students from diverse backgrounds. The primary theme relative to this question was the use of data, and intervention data was the subtheme. In this study of K-5 educators who have

experienced the referral process for minority students to special education, consideration of data was a shared experience among the participants.

Every participant mentioned data as one of the most important factors before referring a student for SPED. Each of the ten participants discussed using data from either RTI, WIDA, or background information to influence referral decisions. Kim, an ESL teacher, shared, "I've been in this position now for 12 years, and I share WIDA scores or lack of progress I've seen with the WIDA access test with other educators." Participants involved in the assessment mentioned using student's background information to help determine the need for assessment. Tom stated, "I try to get a lot of information, sort of a pre-assessment evaluation to see if we should really evaluate the child or not."

While most participants' experiences making referrals were positive, all ten educators expressed frustration with the overall referral process, especially for ESL students. Katrina, a third-grade teacher, explained that she feels comfortable making decisions to refer students for SPED but feels frustrated at the length of time it takes to get them services after making a referral. She explained, "I feel comfortable making referrals, but I just feel that process takes so long, and it is frustrating." Katrina also shared, "When a student has been in ESL classes every day for two plus years, then at that point it should be easy to get a referral, but I feel like it is challenging because people jump to say, oh well, they're not SPED because they're ESL."

Sub-Question Two

The information K-5 educators consider when determining special education eligibility for minority students varied among participants. Sub question two, "What information do K-5 educators consider besides academic performance and standardized assessment scores when determining special education eligibility for minority students?" focused on the participants' use

of information. This question allowed the researcher to understand what sources of additional information influenced their decision to make a minority student eligible for SPED services. Each participant mentioned using academic performance and standardized assessment scores as part of the decision criteria. Background information and parent input were the primary sources of additional information used by participants.

The assessment specialist included parent input and background information as part of the assessment documentation collected. Often, this information is gathered from general education teachers and ESL teachers when applicable. Additionally, assessment specialists provide parents with paperwork to document requested information. Participants reported using this information alongside standardized scores and academic performance when determining eligibility for special education. Sarah, a school psychologist, stated, "I'm pretty comfortable assessing minority students for special education, but I try to be mindful of the student's background and where they're coming from and making sure we are not over or under-identifying different populations."

Sub-Question Three

Cultural differences among minority students are often used by educators when determining eligibility for SPED services. Sub-question three, "How do K-5 educators incorporate cultural and language differences in eligibility determination?" focused on how educators used culture and language differences in the assessment process and how those factors may influence their eligibility decisions. Sarah, a school psychologist, discussed how she approaches formal evaluations of students from diverse cultures. She explained, "I think we always try to be sensitive to cultural backgrounds, especially when we're talking about special education; that can be a really big thing in my role because that can look really different

depending on what background parents are coming from." Renee also discussed cultural differences impacting how she scores articulation assessments given to minority students. She shared, "I consider what their pattern of use, not just on the test, but in conversation is; that's how I determine if I score the answer as correct or incorrect if that makes sense. What we're trying to do is be very careful and take those things into consideration because you don't want to over-identify but also don't want to under-identify either."

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and service providers in identifying minority students in special education in Tennessee elementary schools. This chapter describes the results of the analysis of ten K-5 participating educators. Collected data came from individual interviews, two focus group sessions, and written letter-writing prompt responses. Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model served as a guide for data analysis. This study identified themes and sub-themes, along with descriptions for each theme that contributed to insight.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators and service providers in identifying minority students in special education in Tennessee elementary schools. Chapter Five begins with interpreting the results discovered through data analysis and a summary of the thematic findings. The implications for policy and practice and the theoretical and methodological implications follow. The chapter concludes with the study's limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research and concludes with a summary of the study.

Discussion

The findings of this phenomenological study include the experiences of 10 educators who have experienced making referral and assessment decisions for minority students considered for special education. This section discusses the study's findings of the developed themes and sub-themes through the supporting theoretical framework. First is the summary of thematic findings, followed by the theoretical and empirical implications for policy and practice. Limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research conclude this section.

Interpretation of Findings

Ten participating educators discussed their experiences in the referral and assessment process for minority students considered for special education. The study's findings involve themes and sub-themes developed through the lived experiences of the ten K-5 educators. The data were analyzed using codes created by highlighting significant quotes and common themes or clusters of meanings. The three major themes that I identified were: (a) use of data, (b) importance of communication, and (c) frustration among educators.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The study participants shared their personal experiences with the referral and assessment practices for minority students considered for special education. Each participant was eager to share their experience and raise awareness of the need to improve policy and practice in the special education identification process of students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Participants' willingness to share their personal experiences resulted in data with thick and rich descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The theme development process began after each interview and continued after each of the two focus groups and through analysis of each participant's letter-writing prompt response.

The first central theme of the use of data has three sub-themes: (a) intervention data, (b) standardized assessment, and (c) background information. The participating educators indicated that they primarily based their decisions to qualify minority students for special education services on collected data, supporting research that states sufficient data should be collected on students considered for special education referral. This includes understanding and applying appropriate developmental milestones of English language learning and applying multi-tiered interventions such as RTI (Hoover & deBettencourt, 2018). Each participant mentioned using intervention information, including RTI data and WIDA scores, as factors considered for referrals to special education. Additionally, participants involved in eligibility decisions also identified the use of background information as a critical component of their formal evaluations. The school district's policy decides to qualify students for special education using intervention data and standardized assessment scores. However, as mentioned by participants, it is essential to consider background information, including cultural background, parent input, and exposure to English, which could influence performance on standardized assessments.

The second major theme of the importance of communication has three sub-themes: (a) communication with parents, (b) communication with other educators, and (c) use of interpreters. Research shows that inconsistent practices among educators and failure to address students' home culture often result in special education referrals (Green & Stormont, 2018; Othman, 2018; Banse & Palacios, 2018). This study's participants emphasized parent communication during SPED referral and assessment, indicating educators consider the student's home culture. The second sub-theme mentioned communication with other educators as a benefit to gaining additional information about a student's performance before making a referral to special education. The use of interpreters was the third sub-theme identified as a valuable resource for communication with students and families. However, participants stated they are a minimal resource in their schools.

The third major theme of frustration among educators also has three sub-themes: (a) delay of services, (b) lack of training, and (c) inconsistency. Overall, the participants stated they had experienced frustration with understanding the special education process regarding students with diverse cultural backgrounds. The participants' experiences in this study support research that states teachers do not understand bilingual development. Previous studies show teachers feel they do not have adequate support to assist them with bilingual students (Prezas and Jo, 2017). Each participant stated they did not understand developmental differences among various cultures to the extent they would like to.

The interpretation of the data explained the experiences of educators with their involvement in the referral and assessment of minority students considered for special education based on their responses presented in Chapter Four. Highlighting the relationship between communication referral and assessment decisions was significant. This study chose the

transcendental phenomenological design, excluding the researcher's presuppositions or biases before researching educators' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing out the researcher's personal bias was imperative to capture the participants' transcendental experiences outside their regular everyday experiences.

They wanted decisions to be unbiased. One intriguing aspect of the participating educators in this research study was that all expressed a desire for referral and assessment decisions of minority students for special education to be unbiased. Nine participants expressed concerns about misrepresentation among minorities in special education. Sarah stated, "We always have to be thoughtful of students' backgrounds and where they are coming from to make sure we are not over or under-identifying different populations." Participants expressed various experiences on best practices for avoiding misrepresentation, and most have attempted to be fair in their decisions. Through Vygotsky's (1936) sociocultural theory, I sought to understand how people link individuals to their culture (Alkhudiry, 2022; Panhwar et al., 2016). The participants dealt with trying to make decisions based on individual student needs.

The diversity in their schools created a need for educators to examine multiple aspects of a student's background and how their culture and language impact their learning. Previous researchers concluded that some teaching methods neglect to address cultural differences, and educators continue to refer students for special education (Park, 2020). The educators participating in this study explained having experience consulting other educators and parents to gain valuable information. The participants sought information about students from various individuals. General education teachers explained that they consulted with the student's ESL teacher to understand their language use better. At the same time, school psychologists and SLPs sought to understand the concerns of classroom teachers and parents. The desire to make

unbiased decisions motivated the participants to communicate with other educators and families on ways to meet the specific needs of students. It also made them more aware of their need for additional training to help make more informed decisions.

They expressed a need for more training. Although teacher preparation programs include special education and culturally diverse issues, there appears to be a need for more training in placing diverse students in special education (Hutchison, 2018). Participants stated that they would like to see a better way to distinguish if students need a referral to special education or just additional support in the classroom. Two of the educators specifically stated they would like a list of characteristics or signs to follow to help guide referral decisions. Participants responsible for administering formal assessments also expressed the need for evaluation guidelines. Renee, a speech-language pathologist, stated, "I just think clear guidelines on how we know when to re-evaluate students in their native language, the initial assessment is kind of easy, but do we review them in their native language if they've been through one re-evaluation cycle?"

While some education programs address RTI for preservice teachers, there needs to be more consistency in classroom intervention strategies. Therefore, many new teachers need to prepare to implement the components of RTI in their classrooms (Vollmer et al., 2019; Hurlbut & Tunks, 2016). The most common response from participants, when asked what professional development they would most benefit from, was the need for additional training regarding ESL students and the possible need for special education. Katrina, a third-grade teacher, shared, "We've had training on signs and characteristics of dyslexia, but what are the characteristics of an ESL learner that prove developmental delay?" Similarly, Kim, a K-5 ESL teacher, explained, "How do we identify a learning disability with a student still acquiring the English language? It

would be helpful if we had key indicators on language acquisition to determine at what point we can make a true determination if this is or isn't a problem."

They Expressed the Need for More Consistency. Each participant stated they had experienced referrals and assessments of minority students for special education in various ways. Some participants explained that their schools were extremely reluctant to refer minority students, while others experienced schools being very liberal with their referrals. This supports previous research that shows inconsistent practices among general educators and the various factors contributing to the disproportionate representation of EL students in special education. Some educators hesitate to refer until they have tried to justify the referral. In contrast, other educators feel they should guide students when they notice the student struggling (Park, 2020). According to previous research, multiple factors contribute to inconsistencies, including teachers' lack of self-efficacy, personal biases, and lack of training (Othman, 2018).

Renee, a speech-language pathologist, stated, "I don't ever want to just assume that because a student is African American or speaks a different language and uses a dialectal difference, that it is a disorder." Inconsistency is not only an issue in referral, but also in intervention and assessment (Hoover et al., 2018). Unfortunately, most standardized assessment tools used in the determination of eligibility are not available in other languages other than English. This leads to a lack of understanding on how to administer and interpret cultural and linguistic differences among assessment specialists (Cormier et al., 2022; Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022; Spinelli, 2008). Abby, a speech-language pathologist stated in her interview, "What do we do when we don't have a test in the native language? What are the best practices and what are the guidelines?" Sarah also mentioned having a need for more consistency with

referral and assessment, "I would just like to see more consistency on how ESL students are treated and if they consider a possible language delay for these students."

Implications for Policy or Practice

This transcendental phenomenological study revealed educator's experiences with the referral and assessment process of minority students to special education. Institutions, policymakers, school administrators, teachers, assessment specialists, and parents may use the results of this study. The implications revealed for policy and practice are listed below, as well as the interpretations of the study's findings using participants' quotations.

Implications for Policy

U.S. elementary schools continue to gain a more diverse community of students each year. These changes impact both general and special education teachers in how they refer and assess minority students for special education services (Sinclair et al., (2018). Educators' decisions regarding referral and assessment can result in disproportionality of minority students in special education. School districts should have clear guidelines for all educators regarding special education eligibility criteria. Professional development should equip educators with adequate training on appropriate eligibility decisions for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Education programs do not always offer instruction on the principles of classroom interventions to preservice teachers, leaving the responsibility for providing professional development up to school districts. Educators should be proficient in delivering multi-tiered support utilizing evidence-based practices, progress monitoring, and data collection (Vollmer et al., 2019).

Each participant stated that they receive regular professional development on various topics through their school district. Most stated they have been offered professional development

in multicultural learning. Educators mentioned that although they have received training in the past, it has not been enough to feel comfortable with referral and assessment decisions for minority students. Renee shared, "I have had a couple of seminars on working with ESL students in the past, but that's been several years ago, so I haven't had anything current working with minority or ESL students." When asked about professional development experiences with referring minority students for special education, Meagan, a kindergarten teacher, responded, "I cannot think of anything off the top of my head. To be honest, I'm sure there may have been something in the last ten years, but I can't think of anything; that would probably be something good to have."

Implications for Practice

Each participant stated they needed more professional development training or had experienced inconsistencies with special education decisions regarding diverse students. In her interview, Renee stated, "I know all students are different, but I feel like we should have better guidelines to follow; it would be nice to know best practices for working with minority students." Participants shared that they want to do what is best for their students, but having more training would benefit them in distinguishing between a disability and a cultural difference. During the focus group, Donna explained, "I run into a lot of people who are not familiar with special education eligibility and the criteria we are looking at, so we run into situations where we are wanting to help kids, but it's difficult to know if it really is a disability."

According to IDEA (2004), ELL students should receive prompt assessment and identification. Participants in this study expressed concern about how long it takes for these students to receive services. Participants stated that it is often difficult to distinguish between a disability and a cultural or language difference, which could be the cause for the delay in

services. Beth stated during her focus group, "My experience is that ESL students generally have to wait longer, especially at this school because we have such a high number of diverse students that we're very cautious about referring, so I'm wondering if we might be holding off a bit too long."

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This qualitative research study revealed theoretical and empirical implications. Vygotsky's (1936) sociocultural theory provides the theoretical framework for this study. This theory emphasizes cultural tools and their functions in understanding a different culture and prevents the misinterpretation of a student's ability or disability based on their cultural background (Othman, 2018). Sociocultural theory guides educators in instructing, referring, and assessing diverse students by emphasizing their specific cultural interactions (Kim et al., 2015). Theoretical and empirical implications surfaced through the lived experiences of K-5 educators involved in the referral and assessment practices of minority students to special education. This study's findings corroborate Vygotsky's theory that utilizing various tools helps educators better understand cultural differences, which can prevent misguided interpretations of a student's ability level based on their diverse background.

Theoretical Implications

This research study contributed to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This theory's principles include utilizing tools that help identify cultural differences. These tools include identifying student strengths, considering student's ability level in instruction, and emphasizing cultural interactions in instruction, referral, and assessment decisions. This study highlighted multiple factors contributing to educators' attempts to distinguish learning disabilities from cultural and language differences. The principles of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory guided this

study in examining the lived experiences of K-5 educators involved in the referral and assessment of minority students.

Identifiying Student Strengths. Identification of individual student strengths relates to this research study by highlighting how educators deliver instruction to students from diverse cultures and how they determine a need for special education referral. Participating educators shared their experiences with academic accommodations and modifications as two common ways they identify the strengths of students from diverse backgrounds. When asked to explain experiences with modifying instruction for minority students, Meagan shared, "I have a student who is SPED and ELL, and I love seeing how great he does in science and social studies when he has things read aloud to him. He gets the highest scores in the class and is really able to show his understanding when things are read aloud to him, so we do that and use a lot of pictures for him, even on tests."

When given modified assignments, ELL students performed better and demonstrated a higher understanding of the academic content. Meagan shared during her interview, "When I taught 4th grade, I made sure to give modified work for ELL students and give them shortened assignments." Katrina, a third-grade teacher, shared her experience working with a student from El Salvador. She explained it was difficult to assess his knowledge given his limited exposure to English, but recently, she has understood his academic strengths through assignment accommodations.

> I had a boy who moved here from El Salvador, and you could tell he had had a regular, 5 day a week education there. It was very difficult to assess his reading skills. Then he asked to take a picture of our reading book and the benchmark books so that he could translate the story to Spanish, because he can read fluently in Spanish. For our assessment

piece, he has to write a paragraph about something from the story, so he asks to translate the question and then he is able to write a whole paragraph. I take the paragraph and translate it into English, and now I understand that he has really strong reading skills.

Identifying student strengths was also an experience shared by participants involved in assessing minority students. All educators involved in assessment expressed the need for alternative testing practices to understand a student's strengths better. The most common assessment practices for ELL students included interpreters, nonverbal assessments, and multilingual assessments. Renne shared her experiences assessing students for speech and language delays. As a speech-language pathologist, she explained the importance of identifying a student's strengths through assessments given in their native language. "We try to obtain an interpreter in a child's native language; it gives us an idea if there is a difference between how much the child performs in their home language and how they perform in English."

Sarah, a school psychologist, explained, "A lot of times, we will use nonverbal assessments, especially to look at cognitive skills, and provide Spanish versions of rating scales. There are also certainly times where we assess using interpreters to get better information." Similarly, Tom explained the importance of considering student exposure to English during formal evaluations. "We have to take those things into consideration; for instance, I would not give those kids typical IQ tests. I would give them what they call a culture-free, language-free IQ test."

Consideration of Student Ability Level for Instruction. A common experience shared among participants was using students' ability levels to guide their instruction and referral decisions. Kathy, an ESL teacher, explained how she believes each student is different and

should have individualized instruction based on their specific abilities. In her letter-writing prompt, she stated, "Not everyone fits into a box, and not everyone can be taught the same way." Two participants specifically mentioned collaboration between general education teachers and ELL teachers on ways to differentiate instruction for ELL students. Kim stated, "We also sometimes tell teachers about things we've seen in our classroom so that we can report to them things that may work in their classroom and whether something may need to be an accommodation."

Educators said they frequently consider how long a student has been in the country and what exposure they have had to the curriculum before making a SPED referral. Sarah shared, "We always want to be mindful of access and past experiences of students' time of exposure to the curriculum." Kathy explained that the ELL teachers she has worked with try to consider student progress and time spent in the country. She shared, "Most of my students are Hispanic, so if there is a student that I would anticipate to make more progress over a certain amount of time with the experience they've had with ESL and the years they've been in the country, and they're not, I would suggest an intervention."

Most participants shared how they try to make connections to the student's native language during instruction. Donna stated, "If there is a newcomer group and they need extra help, I will throw in some Spanish to the best of my ability, and that helps them to connect because if they're not understanding, how are they learning?" Other participants explained that a student's ability level is often the only factor they consider prior to differentiating instruction or making a SPED referral. Katrina stated during her interview, "I don't think about a student's race, just their ability level, and if they're struggling, then I would implement partner work, peer tutoring, teacher tutoring, and small groups."

Emphasis on Cultural Interactions. The sociocultural theory states that children learn through the connections between their culture and environment (Azadi et al., 2018; Subero et al., 2018). Most participants stated they typically consider environmental factors that may contribute to the academic achievement of minority students. In addition to identifying a student's strengths and ability level, they reported consideration of family history, cultural practices, and effects moving may have on a student. A common concern shared by participants was not always knowing how environmental factors may impact learning. During the letter writing prompt, Cathy wrote to her younger self, "Read more literature about immigration and how children are impacted by both voluntary immigration and transferring to a new country as refugees, learn about sub-cultures and the communities which support their members."

Among the participating educators, gender, social status, and economic status were barriers they have seen impact minority students' learning. Each participant mentioned the importance of understanding a student's cultural background as part of their instruction, referral decisions, and assessment practices. Nine out of the 10 participants stated they relied on parent communication to inform them about cultural differences. During the focus group, Sarah explained the steps she had taken during the assessment to learn more about the student's background. She explained, "I try to use as many different sources as I can and interview the parents to find out what their concerns for the child are; I try to do a more in-depth interview with them."

The general education teachers who participated in this study shared how they introduced new vocabulary to their ELL students by presenting it in English and their native language when possible. Megan, a kindergarten teacher, shared, "I do have a student this year who is learning English, and I try to translate as much as possible; I will say it in English, point to a picture, and

say it in English again, then say it in Spanish." When asked about experiences with providing

learning opportunities in a student's native language, Kim explained, "As far as direct

instruction, I do support their learning by making connections to their native language; if I can, I

find words that translate directly when I'm teaching new vocabulary."

Although each participant mentioned how they attempt to incorporate cultural and

language differences into instruction, they also mentioned that it is difficult to achieve.

Identifying student strengths, considering students' ability levels, and emphasizing

cultural interactions were experienced by all participants in many ways. Renee stated during her

interview, "The bottom line is we have to learn all we can, consult others, and use all available

information to make the best decision possible for the student; treat families and students with

respect and remember to not make assumptions."

Empirical Implications

Empirical implications were evident through the experiences of the participants in this

study. Previous studies have consistently shown ambiguity in how educators accommodate

minority students in their instruction, referral, and assessment methods for special education.

Although literature documents minority overrepresentation in special education, there continues

to be limited information regarding how educators address this issue (Chow et al., 2021;

Cavendish et al., 2020; Hoover et al., 2018; Skiba et al., 2006; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

Conducting empirical peer-reviewed research revealed no previous studies that explored the

lived experiences of K-5 educators and assessment specialists in the referral and assessment

process for minority students considered for special education. This research study supported

existing literature that reports inconsistency in the referral and assessment practices for minority

students considered for special education.

Among the inconsistencies in referring EL students for SPED, previous researchers identified two approaches educators typically follow. The research identified the "wait to be sure" and "the sooner, the better" approaches primarily followed by educators (Park, 2020, p.1). During her interview, Abby described her experiences in two separate elementary schools, "Each school had a vastly different view on whether these children could qualify for services, with the first, the ELL teachers thought that none of the students should have a SPED referral, and the other school has the philosophy of wanting to get everyone help and are much more likely to refer." Classroom teachers and ELL teachers participating in this study experienced more of the "wait to be sure" approach with their students. Katrina shared, "It is really frustrating because people jump to say they're not SPED because they're ESL." The school psychologists and SLPs experienced general education teachers taking "the sooner, the better" approach. Cathy stated, "teachers are worried about a disability when the child is still on what we would consider a normal path."

Participants in this study also confirmed previous research that shows a delay in special education services for minority students, especially ELL students. School referral policies created to avoid overrepresentation have resulted in either delayed or avoided referrals by teachers (Unmasky et al., 2017). During her focus group, Abby shared, "Having these hard and fast rules of how long they have to be exposed, or a number of years we have to wait before we can refer is frustrating when we feel like we can rule out ELL as the true learning deficit." In her letter writing prompt, Katrina wrote to her younger self, "There are two equally dangerous pitfalls you will encounter; one is the delay or denial of identification of children with disabilities because of language differences, and the other is identifying a learning disability that is actually due to a need for further language acquisition." Similarly, Beth shared her experiences with the

referral of ELL students to special education, "It is extremely difficult to get students that have another language listed on their home language survey into SPED services." This study extended previous research by providing the experiences of K-5 educators involved in the referral and assessment process of minority students considered for special education.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses of a study that are uncontrolled. There were two limitations in this research study. One limitation was the number of participants. Although there are no sample size restrictions in qualitative research, the sample size for qualitative studies should be small enough to manage data but large enough to provide an adequate understanding of the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1995). This study aimed to use between 10 and 15 participants. However, the sample size only consisted of 10 participants. The recruitment process began by emailing recruitment letters to 149 K-5 general education teachers, school psychologists, SLPs, and ELL teachers within the school district. Responses were received from five educators stating they were willing to participate in the study. The ten-participant minimum was met by emailing individual educators asking for their participation. Although the study met the minimum participant requirement, having only ten educators for the study threatened the validity and generalizability of the study's results.

The second limitation was the diversity of participant demographics. 125 K-5 general education teachers, 10 school psychologists, 6 SLPs, and 8 ELL teachers received recruitment letters. This study aimed to collect equal participants from each educator group to ensure the findings represented each group. The study consisted of two general education teachers, two ESL teachers, two speech-language pathologists, and three school psychologists. Therefore, the small number in each participant group limits the representation of each educator population.

Limitations placed on a study by the researcher to limit its scope are known as Delimitations. This qualitative research study contained three delimitations. The first delimitation required participants to have at least three years of experience working in a public school system. This requirement aimed to ensure that each participating educator had experience with either the referral or assessment of minority students for special education. The second delimitation required each participant to be either a K-5 general education teacher, an ESL teacher, a speech-language pathologist, or a school psychologist. This requirement ensured that each educator participating in the study had a specific role in special education eligibility decisions. The final delimitation required participants to currently work in one of the three elementary schools chosen for this research study. This study chose elementary schools based on student demographics. The cultural diversity represented in these schools provided more experiences for participants to share.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has contributed to the understanding of the lived experiences of educators in the referral and assessment process for minority students considered for special education. Throughout this study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, two areas surfaced as suggested areas for future studies. The first recommendation for future research studies relates to this study's sample size limitation. More studies using the same qualitative phenomenological approach could use a larger sample size to better understand educators' experiences with minority students and special education. Future researchers may want to conduct studies using a broader demographic of participants to gain a more profound representation of each educator population. Previous literature has revealed the issue of disproportionality among minority students in special education (Park, 2020). There is still an evident gap in the literature

explaining why the issue of overrepresentation continues to occur among minority students in special education. It may benefit future researchers to conduct a case study to compare various experiences among specific educator groups with ways they have addressed the issue of disproportionality of minority students represented in special education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of educators in the identification process of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools. This study examined educators' experiences providing differentiated instruction and accommodations for minority students in the classroom, special education referral decisions, and assessment practices. Additionally, this study sought to understand the experiences of four separate groups of educators, including K-5 general education teachers, ELL teachers, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists. This research study focused on the following research questions:

What are educators' experiences in identifying minority students referred to special education in Tennessee Elementary Schools? How do K-5 educators identify minority students for referral to special education? What information do K-5 educators consider besides academic performance and standardized assessment scores when determining special education eligibility for minority students? How do K-5 educators incorporate cultural and language differences in eligibility determination?

Research data collected from the ten educator participants representing three elementary schools in an East Tennessee school district supported each research question. Data collection included individual interviews, focus group sessions, and letter-writing prompts. A review of collected data revealed three major themes, including the use of data, the importance of

communication, and frustration among educators. The use of data as a theme described the various sources of data educators used when determining the need for a referral or assessment of minority students for special education, including intervention data, standardized assessments, and the use of background information. The importance of communication was the second central theme that emerged from the collected data. This theme referred to how participants described the importance of communication with parents, other educators, and interpreters during referral and assessment decisions for minority students. Frustration was the third central theme expressed by participants in this research study. This theme referred to participants expressing frustration with delays or denial of services for ESL students, inconsistency with the overall assessment process, and feeling they lacked training on guidelines for referring minority students.

The theory that guided this research study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The principles of this theory guided this study in examining the lived experiences of K-5 educators involved in the referral and assessment of minority students. The two primary findings of this study revealed that educators want special education referrals, assessments, and eligibility decisions to be unbiased, and they desire additional training on making special education decisions for minority students. Participants in this research study described their experiences with making appropriate special education decisions and expressed concern for misrepresentation among minorities in special education.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Application

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IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-29
Title: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Educators and Service Providers in the Identification Process of Minority Students for Special Education in East Tennessee Elementary Schools Creation Date: 7-8-2023
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Paula Jones
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History Submission Type Initial

Key Study Contacts

Review Type

Limited

Decision

Contact Contact Contact

Exempt - Limited IRB

Member: ███████████████

Member: ██████████████

Role Co-Principal Investigator

Role Principal Investigator

Role Primary Contact

Appendix B: Permission Request Letter

May 21, 2023

Dear School Superintendent,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is "A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Educators in the Identification Process of Minority Students for Special Education in East Tennessee Elementary Schools", and the purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of educators in the referral and assessment processes of minority students to special education in Tennessee elementary schools.

 I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in elementary schools within the school district.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an individual, in-person interview, focus group interview, and letter writing. The data will be used to synthesize for the purpose of exploring the lived experiences of educators working with minority students.
Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Paula Jones
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix C: Response Template

Date

Paula Jones

Dear Paula Jones,

After a careful review of your research proposal entitled, "A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Educators in the Identification Process of Minority Students for Special Education in East Tennessee Elementary Schools", I have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty and invite them to participate in your study and to conduct your study in elementary schools within the school district.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ I grant permission for Paula Jones to contact ██████ County educators to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ I will not provide potential participant information to Paula Jones, but I agree to provide her study information to educators on her behalf.

☐ I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or completion.

Sincerely,

School superintendent

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter

Sept 25, 2023

Dear Educators:

As a graduate student in the School of Education, at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of educators (general education teachers, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, and ELL teachers) in the referral and assessment process of minority students referred to special education in grades k-5 in East Tennessee Elementary Schools, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be full-time employees within the school district in one of the following positions: K-5 general education teacher, School Psychologist, Speech-Language Pathologist, or ELL teacher. Additionally, you must have at least one student in your classroom or whom you are assessing that is considered a minority student. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an in-person, one-on-one interview with the researcher which will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Next, you will be asked to participate in an in-person, focus group interview. Participants will be broken into three groups consisting of general education teachers, ELL teachers, and school psychologists/SLPs who have completed an individual interview. Each group interview will consist of 5 total questions and will be conducted in a small group discussion format. Focus group interviews will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete and will be audio recorded. Finally, you will be asked to participate in letter writing where you will write a letter addressed to your younger self using the writing prompt provided by the researcher. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at ███████████████████████ for more information.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Paula Jones
Doctoral Candidate
███████████████████████

Appendix E

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Educators in the Identification Process of Minority Students for Special Education in East Tennessee Elementary Schools"

Principal Investigator: Paula Lovegrove-Jones, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a full-time employee in one of the following positions: K-5 general education teacher, School Psychologist, Speech-Language Pathologist, or ELL teacher. Additionally, you must have at least one student in your classroom or whom you are assessing that is considered a minority student. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the personal experiences of educators and the roles they play in the special education referral and assessment process, particularly pertaining to minority students.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person, one-on-one interview with the researcher. A list of 17 questions will be asked and will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The interview will be audio recorded. Interviews will be held at an agreed-upon time and location that is convenient for the participant.
2. Participate in an in-person, focus group interview. The focus group interviews will consist of 3 groups of educators divided by general education teachers, ELL teachers, and school psychologists/SLPs who have completed an individual interview. The group interview will consist of 5 total questions and will be conducted in a small group discussion format. Focus group interviews will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and will be audio recorded. Focus group interviews will be held at an agreed-upon time and location that is convenient for participants.
3. Participate in letter writing where you will write a letter addressed to your younger self using the writing prompt provided by the researcher.
4. Finally, once all individual interviews, focus group interviews, and self-addressed letters have been completed, you will contribute to the study's credibility through member-checking. Member checking is a method used to ensure the data collected accurately represents the participant's perspective by sharing conclusions with participants and

allowing them to confirm or deny the accuracy of data interpretation. Conclusions will be shared with participants via email.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include identifying potential factors leading to the disproportionality of minority students receiving special education services and potentially decreasing the overrepresentation of these groups in special education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

 I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or ████████████████. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Paula Jones. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Vonda Beavers, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

_____
Printed Subject Name

Appendix F: Individual Interview Questions

1. How did you become interested in working in the educational field? CRQ

2. What is your educational background? CRQ

3. What is your current position, including your title and your responsibilities? CRQ

4. What are your experiences in the referral/assessment/identification process of EL students considered for special education in grades k-5 in East Tennessee Elementary Schools? SQ1

5. What is your experience in the referral/assessment/identification process working with racial minorities considered for special education in grades k-5 in East Tennessee Elementary Schools? SQ1

6. What is your role in assessing students for special education (SPED) services? SQ2

7. How would you describe your comfort level with referring/assessing minority students for special education services? SQ1

8. How do language differences affect your special education referral/assessment/identification process? SQ3

9. How do racial differences affect your special education referral/assessment/identification process? SQ3

10. How do cultural differences affect your special education referral/assessment/identification process? SQ3

11. What experiences have you had with providing learning opportunities in students' native language? SQ2

12. How do you describe your understanding of developmental differences among various cultures? SQ3

13. What experiences have you had working with students in grades K-12 from diverse cultural backgrounds? SQ2

14. What experiences have you had with accommodating students from diverse cultures in grades K-12? SQ2

15. What professional development experiences have you had related to accommodating minority students in grades K-12? SQ2

16. What experiences have you had distinguishing between academic underachievement and cultural/linguistic differences in K-12 students? SQ3

17. What professional development would you benefit most regarding distinguishing between academic underachievement and cultural/linguistic differences in K-12 students? SQ1

18. What professional development would you benefit most regarding referring and assessing minority students in grades K-12 for special education? SQ1

Appendix G: Focus Group Questions

1. In what ways have you ever disagreed with minority students being referred for a special education assessment? SQ1

2. How do you feel about the appropriateness of the special education referral process for minority students? SQ1

3. How do you feel about the appropriateness of the special education assessment process for minority students? SQ1

4. How would you describe your communication between other educators during the referral and assessment process for minority students? SQ1

5. How do you feel about minority students who have a referral to special education being equal to non-minority students with referrals for special education? SQ2

6. How have you modified classroom instruction or assessment practices for students from diverse backgrounds? SQ3

Appendix H: Letter Writing Prompt

Formulate a letter addressed to your younger self using the following prompt:

As an elementary educator, what would you tell your younger self to be better prepared for referring and assessing minority students from different cultural backgrounds to special education?"

Appendix I: Audit Trail Form

<u>Textural Material (Raw Data)</u>   **<u>Thematic Analysis</u>**

<u>Codes & Selections from Raw Data</u>
<u>Thematic Structure</u>

<u>Phenomenological Description</u>   **<u>Other</u>**
<u>Textural Material</u>