

EXPLORING PUBLIC SCHOOL K-12 EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE SPECIAL  
EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY PROCESS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN/BLACK AND  
HISPANIC/LATINO STUDENTS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of  
The College of Graduate and Professional Studies  
at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

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10/05/2023  
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ABSTRACT

Rural school districts often face unique challenges such as limited resources, attracting and retaining qualified teachers, and varied offerings of professional development opportunities and training. This study substantiated these challenges and revealed the challenges presented when educators do not consider the cultural and linguistic factors that exist among the student population when considering academic and behavioral interventions. This qualitative investigation explored how general education teachers in a public school district in the northeastern United States experienced the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in a rural community. Guided by the theories of intersectionality and systems view of school climate, and employing a phenomenological analysis, this study addressed the lack of professional development training programs related to academic and behavioral interventions as part of the special education eligibility process and gaps in literature related to African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural communities. Analysis of semi structured interviews with eight public school general educators who had experience in working with African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students yielded three findings. The research questions focused on the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students, their understanding of the function of academic and behavioral interventions in the eligibility process, and the role that cultural factors within a rural community serve in determining special education eligibility. The participants' answers revealed (a) the need for increased professional development and training

in academic and behavioral interventions, (b) consistent application of these interventions as part of the prereferral process in special education eligibility, and (c) the need for increased awareness of school personnel about cultural factors that impact African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students' academic and social-emotional progress. The findings of the current research study suggest that changes must be made in how teachers are trained in academic and behavioral interventions and how to create a culturally responsive educational learning environment for students who are historically overrepresented in receiving special education services.

***Keywords:** cultural factors, disproportionality, rural communities, special education, special education eligibility*

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Ruth Forbes Gately, and my father, Robert P. Gately (1938-2023). Individually, and as partners, they have been my greatest source of motivation, support, and unconditional love through the completion of my doctoral coursework, my dissertation journey, and my entire life. They instilled in me the importance of hard work, compassion, empathy for others, and to enjoy life to the fullest. Everything that I can count as an accomplishment in my life is because of their unwavering encouragement and faith.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of the doctoral program process and dissertation is the culmination of 27 years of continuous graduate education. Seven and a half years after attempting to complete a doctoral program, with an equal number of years of sobriety, this process was part of a personal journey of affirmation and growth.

To my family and many friends who have been my greatest supporters each time I announced I was going back to school, thank you. You can be confident, without hesitation on my part, I am finished with school.

To Dr. Andrea Disque, my lead advisor, thank you for your support, empathy, motivation, and candor. There were several times in this journey when I believed I'd never finish, and I sincerely appreciate your talents, perspective, and patience as I found my way back.

To my secondary advisor, Dr. Chad Wallis, thank you for your participation in this journey and for your thoughtful feedback.

To the students, teachers, and administrators with whom I've worked over the past 30 years in public education, your influence and collaboration are what continues to motivate me in my daily professional practice. No matter the role I have served, my objective remains the same: keep students at the center of the work and everything else will work out.

To my island family, Kimberly Kubisch and Andrea Maher, there is little chance that I could have completed this program and project without your daily encouragement. Thank you for being my sounding board, my cheerleaders, for laughing with me every day, and reminding me to always dance.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Disproportionality of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education has been a recurring issue of concern in the United States for several decades (Artiles et al., 2011; Barrio, 2017; Cavendish et al., 2014; Sullivan, 2011). Recurrent federal citations for racial inequity in special education among rural districts provide evidence that stratification in special education outcomes persist (Aylward et al., 2021). There is a growing body of research indicating that social contexts, sociocultural, and historical conditions of schools and districts relate to special education classifications and outcomes (Brown et al., 2018; Farkas et al., 2020; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Recent scholarship has documented links between school-level factors, student-level race, and student-level risk of special education classifications (Fish, 2019). In addition, school characteristics related to student and teacher demographics have also been identified as significant contributors to racial disproportionality (Elder et al., 2019; Fish, 2019; Shifrer, 2018).

Federal legislation provides guidelines and regulations designed to promote equitable assessment practices during the comprehensive evaluation and eligibility determination process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). Despite these efforts, children from culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and economically diverse backgrounds continue to be disproportionately (both under and overrepresented) in several of the special education disability categories (Raines et al., 2012). Disproportionality has been linked to categories that rely more on clinical judgment for making a classification decision (Overton, 2016). Many African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino children are classified as mildly disabled (Overton, 2016; Skrtic et al., 2021). Although this makes special education services available to these and other children who need them, contention endures as to whether disability classification also is racially

(and ethnically) biased (Overton, 2016; Skrtic et al., 2021). Data gathered during this study may contribute to assisting public K-12 educators in rural school districts in identifying the characteristics and actions that may lead to increased identification of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services. This research examined the personal experiences of teachers in rural school districts in working with students who struggle academically and, in the process, explored factors teachers use to refer students to undergo the special education eligibility process.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The following terms and concepts are defined for the purpose of clarification for this study:

**Cultural Factors:** Culture encompasses the set of beliefs, norms, values, traditions, language, and laws (or rules of behavior) held in common by a nation, a community, or other defined group of people (Artiles, 2015; Kozlowski, 2015).

**Disproportionality:** Disproportionality is the overrepresentation of minority students identified with a learning disability (LD) or other type of disability under the IDEA (2004).

**Rural Communities:** The United States Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) define a rural community to include all people, housing, and territory that are not within an urban area. These areas include micro areas with a population of 10,000–49,999 people and counties outside of urban and micro areas (United States Health Resources and Service Administration [USHRSA], 2020).

**Special Education:** The IDEA (2004) defines special education as specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability—including instruction conducted in the classroom, the home, hospitals and institutions, and other settings—and instruction in physical education. Special education includes each of the following:

speech-language pathology services, or any other related service, if the service is considered special education rather than a related service under state standards; travel training; and vocational education (IDEA, 2004).

**Special Education Eligibility:** Eligibility for special education and related services involves the following processes: referral, evaluation planning, evaluation, and determination of eligibility in which a student is identified and qualified for services (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MADESE], 2022).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The disproportionate representation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education and their overrepresentation in more restrictive placements and in discipline are important and unresolved issues in the United States system of public education (Strassfeld, 2017). Disproportionate identification of children of color results from problems in both general and special education (Morgan, 2020). Studies have examined disproportionate representation in special education and identified various factors to explain the presence of disproportionate representation including teachers' race and ethnicity bias, school-level characteristics such as student population size, and rural/urban school district classification (Kozlowski, 2015; Shifrer, 2018; Strassfeld, 2017; Woodson & Harris, 2018). The disproportionality research on practice-based factors maintains two theoretical arguments. One is a cultural mismatch between the middle class, White teachers, and school administrators with low-income and/or racial and ethnic minority student populations (Frey, 2019; Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014; Kozlowski, 2015). Another is based on gaps in the development and implementation of interventions, which cause disproportionate outcomes (Berkeley et al., 2020; Farmer, 2020; Maydosz, 2014; Voulgarides et al., 2017). As the number of minority students

accessing special education services rises, there is a negative disproportional impact on the quality of education received (Farkas et al., 2020; Fish, 2019). The problem this study explored was African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts may be disproportionately referred for special education services compared to peers (Farkas et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Eligibility for special education and related services involves the following processes: referral, evaluation planning, evaluation, and determination of eligibility in which a student is identified and qualified for services (MADESE, 2022). Upon completion of the administration of assessments and other evaluation measures, a group of qualified educators and the parent of the student determines whether the student has a disability. The resulting assessment data inform the decision-making team if the student has one or more of the qualifying disabilities of autism, developmental delay, intellectual, sensory (hearing, vision, deaf-blind), neurological, emotional, communication, specific learning, or health (IDEA, 2004). Racial/ethnic disproportionality within special education refers to the over or underrepresentation of a racial/ethnic group in an educational category, program, or service in comparison to the group's proportion in the overall population (MADESE, 2022).

The educational equity implications of disproportionality have been discussed in multiple studies, and schools may risk receiving federal citations and sanctions in significant instances of disproportionality (Albrecht et al., 2012; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Maydosz, 2014). However, disproportionality in special education is rarely examined within rural settings,

despite demographic change leading to more racially and ethnically diverse rural schools (Aylward et al., 2021). Exploring the cultural factors that exist in rural school districts, which may influence the over or under identification of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education programs, was also part of this study. These cultural factors may lead to a disproportionate representation of these students participating in special education (Grindal et al., 2019; Tefera & Fischman, 2021).

The research questions are consistent with and align to the problem statement and purpose, title, and literature review themes. The terminology used will be consistent. Also included in this section is an overview of the research design. The research design is detailed in Chapter 3.

As a review, research questions “narrow the purpose statement to specific questions that researchers seek to answer” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 110). Multiple research questions can be used to explore a topic; these questions often start with “how” or “what.” These questions must directly relate to the purpose statement that identifies the central phenomenon of the study. For a qualitative study, these questions should be open ended and use words such as explore, understand, generate, describe, and discover (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Research Questions and Design**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Recent research has suggested that disproportionate representation of these students in special education can be reduced through the appropriate use of academic and behavioral intervention models such as Response to Intervention (RtI), evidence-based practices, and Multi-Tiered System of Supports



(MTSS) (Voulgarides et al., 2017). Research suggests that the recursive nature of most cultural processes leads to the expectation that behavior reinforces the mechanisms by which culture influences individual-level psychological mechanisms (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this research are:

**Research Question 1:** How do public K-12 educators perceive the special education eligibility process?

**Research Question 2:** How do public K-12 educators describe their understanding of the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process in determining special education services?

**Research Question 3:** How do public K-12 educators describe the cultural factors within their rural school districts when referring African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services?

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

A conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). There is a lack of identified factors related to discriminatory practices, procedures, or racial, ethnic, and gender bias in the referral and evaluation process of students for special education services (Barrio, 2017). The intended contribution of this study was to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators in determining eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education. The unique factors and characteristics that exist in rural school districts may contribute to the disproportionate identification of students for special education (Hott et al., 2021). Although the research has documented the practices of teachers in identifying

African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in urban and suburban school districts for special education services (Farkas et al., 2020; Fish, 2019), there is an absence of substantial evidence of the experiences of teachers and students in rural school settings.

The conceptual framework on which this study was based is the theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a framework, first introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a few discriminations and disadvantages (Cavendish & Samson, 2021). It considers people's overlapping identities and experiences to understand the complexity of prejudices they face. Intersectional theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers (Cavendish & Samson, 2021). Studies related to disproportionate special education eligibility determination of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students have analyzed the interplay of factors that cause and maintain disparities (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Frey, 2019; Losen et al., 2014). Inequities that emerge at the intersections of age, race, and perceptions of students' abilities by educators must be considered in the analysis of special education eligibility determination (Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical frameworks are developed from empirical or quasi-empirical theories of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels, that can be applied to the understanding of a phenomena (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, such as the scaffolding or frame, of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The theoretical lens through which this study was examined is systems view of school climate (SVSC). School climate is defined as the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff

within a school (Rudasill et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, this framework was used to examine experiences of public K-12 teachers in determining eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education. The SVSC is situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. First published in 1979, ecological systems theory views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs (Paat, 2013). In a study of teacher perceptions about the eligibility process for special education services, ecological systems theory explains how educational or social structures affect individual students (Ruppar et al., 2017). An ecological model places individual students at the center and identifies overlapping and interrelated systems, which influence the individual. Within the ecological systems model, teachers are categorized within a microsystem. In determining special education eligibility, members of various microsystems incorporate their own experiences and knowledge (Ruppar et al., 2017).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

Assumptions in qualitative research are based on certain premises that may either hold up or be shown to be unwarranted. These statements reflect what the researcher considers to be true and from which conclusions may be drawn (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). For this study, it was assumed that the educators who volunteered to participate in the interviews possessed an understanding of the special education eligibility process. It was also assumed that each educator had different experiences working specifically with students from diverse backgrounds. There was also an assumption that the feelings, perceptions, and responses received through interviews and questionnaires are representative of the larger population of educators within the school district.

Limitations of the study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impact or influence the interpretation of the findings from the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Limitations may address problems in the data collection, unanswered questions by participants, or recommendations for further research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The method of data collection for this study was conducting semi structured interviews. In this type of interview, either all the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The scope of a study explains the extent to which the research area will be explored in the work and specifies the parameters within which the study will be operating (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Over a 1-month period, I conducted individual semi structured interviews of general education teachers in a rural school district. From the responses to these interview questions, I identified common themes. I am employed in a supervisory position that oversees the department of special education in the school district in which the study was conducted. As the scope of the study is limited to one rural school district, it is necessary to avoid overgeneralization when analyzing results and to be mindful when providing results to rural school districts that extend outside of the district studied.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Although the equity implications of disproportionality have been acknowledged by multiple studies (Artiles, 2015; Aylward et al., 2021; Cruz & Rodl, 2018), the phenomena are

rarely examined within rural settings (Barrio, 2017). Nearly 20% of students in the United States attend school in a rural community and over a million of these children receive special education and related services (Aylward et al., 2021). As evidenced by the research, the number of students qualified for special education services in rural school districts has incrementally increased over the past 20 years (Aylward et al., 2021; Provasnik et al., 2007; Showalter et al., 2019). Although studies have demonstrated underrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students prior to school enrollment, few studies have examined categorical eligibility identification of these students living in rural communities as they progress through grade levels in public schools (Cruz & Firestone, 2021; Morgan et al., 2020). Understanding the culture of the educational environment and community in which educators work and live is a critical component of understanding the disproportionality within the eligibility identification process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students (Artiles, 2013; Morgan, 2020; Tefera & Fischman, 2021).

The disproportionate representation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education is an unresolved issue in the public education system (Ford, 2012). Studies have examined disproportionate representation in special education and identified various factors to explain the presence of disproportionate representation including teachers' race and ethnicity bias, school-level characteristics such as student population size, and rural/urban school district classification (Cavendish et al., 2014; Farkas et al., 2020; Ford, 2012; Strassfeld, 2017). Even though the representation of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds in special education has been identified as a significant problem, research is in nascent stages regarding understanding the interplay of factors that may cause and maintain disparities (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). The IDEA, Part B, passed in 2017, required states to address

issues related to significant disproportionality in the eligibility identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities based on race and ethnicity (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2017). The passage of this federal legislation in 2017 prioritized the need for state and local educational agencies (LEAs) to rectify disproportionate representation of racial or ethnic minority students (Strassfeld, 2017).

The findings of this study may be used to raise the cultural awareness of teachers when considering student characteristics and the eligibility identification for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services. The findings may also identify teachers' perceptions and understanding about the effectiveness of implementing academic and behavioral interventions prior to referring students to the special education process. To best address disproportionate representation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education, it was necessary to learn more from the educators who are directly involved in the process of identifying eligibility and qualifying these students for special education services.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. The purpose of phenomenological research is to investigate the meaning of the lived experiences of people to identify the essence of human experience or phenomena as described by research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). As rural communities continue to become less racially and ethnically homogeneous, educators must consider the ways African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students can be appropriately supported in schools (Barrio, 2017; Voulgarides et

al., 2017). Disproportionality in special education is rarely examined within rural settings, despite demographic change leading to more racially and ethnically diverse rural schools (Aylward et al., 2021). The examination of existing literature serves as a starting point to engage in further research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the U.S. public education system, African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students may be identified as being eligible for special education at higher rates than White students (Grindal et al., 2019; USDOE, 2021). In 2016, 12% of African American/Black children across the nation received services at school for disabilities ranging from emotional disturbances to physical disabilities to intellectual impairment. Only 8.5% of White children received those services. The disability rate for Hispanic/Latino students, at 9.4% nationally, is only slightly higher than for White students and the disparity has not been as contentious as the disproportionality for Black students (Morgan et al., 2020).

Previous qualitative evidence indicates that African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students experience racial discrimination in United States schools (Cherng, 2017). African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students may be referred for special education evaluation because teachers inappropriately perceive them to have more inherent difficulty behaving or have lower academic skill levels and thus need special education services (Cherng, 2017; Fletcher & Navarrete, 2011; Gilliam et al., 2016). These perceptions of students may not be malicious or negative, and teachers may view special education as an opportunity to provide extra help to students in need (Harry & Klingner, 2014). If part of this perception of need is based on race/ethnicity, however, inappropriate disability identification for students of color could arise (Conroy, 2012; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). For students of color to benefit from special education, they must be identified accurately and placed in effective programs (Morgan, 2020). Placing these students in special education may lead to less-than-optimal results (Grindal et al., 2019). A study of over 1,000 children who were predominantly African American/Black revealed that those receiving special education services tended to experience lower rates of high



school completion and higher rates of depression, incarceration, and substance misuse (Morgan, 2020).

Along with urban and suburban districts, rural schools continue to experience a shift in demographics, especially in the past decade with more African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students arriving in rural communities (Brendle, 2015; Conroy, 2012; Hott et al., 2021; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). According to the 2020 United States census, rural America became more racially and ethnically diverse between 2010 and 2020 (Johnson & Lichter, 2022). Today, 32.5% of all rural children come from racial or ethnic minority populations, compared to 28% in 2010 (Johnson & Lichter, 2022). White population decline coupled with widespread minority population growth has gradually transformed the racial and ethnic composition of rural America (Aylward et al., 2021). The Hispanic/Latino population represents the largest share of the rural minority population, with a population of 4.1 million or 9%. The 2020 census also enumerated African American/Black people representing 7.7% of the rural population (Johnson & Lichter, 2022). Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, Johnson et al. (2018) found that from 1999–2000 and 2014–2015, there was an overall increase of 45.6% of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural settings. Though federal and state agencies have identified overrepresentation of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds in special education as a significant problem in the field, research around disproportionality has presented inconsistent findings (Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

The scholarly articles in this literature review were identified using the keywords disproportionality, special education eligibility, special education in rural school districts, and academic and behavioral interventions. The databases used for the identification of the peer-reviewed articles were Google Scholar, SAGE, ERIC, Gale OneFile, and ProQuest using these

keywords and limiting the research to the past 10 years. When establishing historical significance of disproportionality in special education, some studies were written before 2012.

This chapter provides details about the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the study. The conceptual framework of intersectionality and the theoretical framework of SVSC within ecological systems theory is aligned to the existing literature. This literature review examines current research to attempt to identify gaps in understanding how the perceptions of educators within rural school districts contribute to disproportionate findings of eligibility of students for special education services.

The review begins with an overview of special education legislation, which was passed in the United States to address inequities in working with students with disabilities. Next, the special education eligibility process is reviewed with emphasis on the role of the educator. Another aligned theme to the role of the educator is examining RtI and MTSS as academic and behavioral interventions prior to determining eligibility. As both a preventative early intervening approach by teachers and an alternative to special education eligibility determination, RtI and MTSS have impacted whether and how special education is provided in schools (Berkeley et al., 2020). The review includes a discussion of the role of students' socioeconomic status in the process of determining eligibility for special education services. Finally, the review examines the sociodemographic context of rural versus urban school districts in qualifying students for special education services.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

A conceptual framework makes the case for why a study is significant and relevant and for how the study design (including data collection and analysis methods) appropriately and rigorously answers research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). One consideration that should be

made when examining the issue of teachers' perceptions of the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students is the interaction between the conceptual blocks for these students including demographic, economic, and academic variables (Barrio, 2017). The intellectual goals of this research were rooted in my daily practice as the director of special education in a rural school district. The state board of education identified the district as significantly disproportionate in the identification of African American/Black students with intellectual disabilities and Hispanic/Latino students with communication disabilities for 2020, 2021, and 2022 (MADESE, 2022). As a result, 15% of the federal grant funding given to the district annually for special education services must be allocated to addressing this finding (MADESE, 2022). I have a personal interest in exploring how general education teachers perceived the special education eligibility process as a possible cause of the district being identified as significantly disproportionate. The conceptual framework for this study is supported through the framework of intersectionality.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality as a conceptual framework was first introduced by Crenshaw in 1991. This framework accounts for complex, overlapping, and cumulative effects associated with having more than one identity marker that can lead to systematic exclusion or added marginalization within institutions and structures even when they claim to be advancing equity (Cavendish & Samson, 2021). An intersectionality-based framework is used as a specific analytic tool for understanding and examining the complex social conditions and experiences in education to potentially identify steps in practice (Collins, 2015; Hankivsky et al., 2014). In the instance of this study, this framework was used to examine individual educators' understanding and experiences in the eligibility determination process within special education. The use of

intersectionality as a conceptual framework in this study was founded in its allowance of an ecological lens and the ability for research participants to identify themselves in varied ways. The use of this framework, in conjunction with the research questions, helped identify links between the teachers as individuals and their understanding of the special education eligibility process.

The synthesis, integration, and methodological understanding of various literatures come together to make up the theoretical framework of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The theoretical framework is the underlying structure, such as the scaffolding or frame, of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The disproportionality of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students qualifying for special education services was supported by the theoretical framework of SVSC within ecological systems theory.

### **Systems View of School Culture and Ecological Systems Theory**

Ecological systems theory, first introduced by Bronfenbrenner in 1979, describes human development as a joint function of the person in context and emphasizes the interactive, reciprocal effects of the characteristics of the individual and multiple contexts in which development occurs (Paat, 2013). This theory also supports the perspective that teachers may be influenced by other factors than educational data to formulate an opinion about students' needs (Paat, 2013). According to Farmer (2020), the environmental contexts around the individual are nested and interactive. Systems range from proximal to distal, starting with the direct influences of the microsystem, then moving to interactions in the mesosystem, indirect influences of the exosystem, social and cultural norms of the macrosystem, and finally maturation and other time-based events of the chronosystem (Farmer, 2020). The microsystem is the first level of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory and includes individuals who have direct contact with the child

in their immediate environment, such as parents, siblings, teachers, and school peers.

Relationships in a microsystem are bidirectional, meaning the child can be influenced by other people in their environment and is also capable of changing the beliefs and actions of other people. Furthermore, the child's reactions to individuals in their microsystem can influence how they treat them in return (Paat, 2013).

SVSC as a theoretical framework places individuals or students at the center of a series of nested and interactive contexts that work synergistically to support or detract from students' experiences in school (Rudasill et al., 2018). Applying SVSC within ecological systems theory, the school is the microsystem in which school climate is created through the combined perceptions of its members (Rudasill et al., 2018). The levels of conflict or cooperation among teachers and students, academic expectations for students, and the sense of collaboration between teachers are examples of contributing factors to the formation of school climate in the microsystem (Rudasill et al., 2018).

The mesosystem is created when two microsystems interact, such as during a parent-teacher meeting (Rudasill et al., 2018). The exosystem regards contexts students experience, whereas the macrosystem involves the beliefs, policies, and normative influences of the community and culture in which teachers work (Rudasill et al., 2018). The chronosystem includes the time, life events, and era in which the student lives (Rudasill, et al., 2018). Beliefs developed within a school climate may influence teachers' perceptions when engaging in the special education eligibility process for students (Woodson & Harris, 2018). Determination of special education service eligibility is an important component of the school microsystem. School context, structure, and processes may be the objective basis of some perceptions that contribute to school climate (Rudasill et al., 2018). Each level has the potential to contribute to

aggregated perceptions of school climate, which is depicted as a characteristic of the microsystem. The subjective and collective school climate is rooted in the objective realities at the base of the SVSC (Rudasill et al., 2018).

### **Historical Context of Disproportionality in Special Education Legislation**

Trends in equality law can deeply impact education, with a potentially attenuated focus identity in ways that undermine commitments to equal educational opportunity (Cavendish & Samson, 2021). Historically, the findings or guidelines introduced in response to existing inequities in education resulted in increased equity and access for students with disabilities (Albrecht et al., 2012; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Losen et al., 2014). In 1954, the United States Supreme Court decided in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* that African American children had the right to equal educational opportunities and that racial discrimination in public schools was unconstitutional. Parents of students with disabilities began to bring lawsuits against their school districts for excluding and segregating their children with disabilities (Cavendish et al., 2014; Strassfeld, 2017). The *Brown* decision laid the foundation for accountability provisions in the IDEA in 1997 and 2004, which require reporting of overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Cavendish et al., 2014). Following the *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* (1954) decision, two pieces of legislation were voted on to increase educational opportunities for all students.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; 1965) provided resources to school districts to help ensure that students with disabilities had access to quality education. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) introduced the terms least restrictive environment (LRE), free and appropriate education (FAPE), and an individualized education plan (IEP). Since 1975, commencement of legal protections for students identified as having

disabilities, issues of overidentification through potentially biased assessment procedures, and exclusionary placement practices have been prevalent in the reports of disproportionate representation of Black and Hispanic students in special education (Cavendish et al., 2014).

The issues of bias in assessment and the recognition of consistent overrepresentation have been addressed through amendments made to IDEA in 1990, 1997, and 2004. These amendments have included the requirement of multiple assessments to be used for identifying and developing individualized education programs (IDEA, 1990); emphasizing parent involvement, providing procedural safeguards, prioritizing general education access for students with disabilities, and reporting disproportionality by race/ethnicity (IDEA, 1997); and in 2004, the IDEA requirement that states must develop and implement policies and procedures to prevent disproportionate representation. The requirements outlined by these legislative updates have caused school districts to identify strategies and interventions that must be implemented prior to referring students for special education services (IDEA, 2004).

#### **Academic and Behavioral Interventions Prior To Determining Eligibility Summary**

Research suggests that disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education has been a recurring topic of concern in the field of special education within the United States (Barrio, 2017; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Tefera & Fischman, 2021). This concern has shifted to focus on the disproportionate representation of Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino English language learners (ELLs) in the categories of mild to moderate disabilities, specifically within the category of learning disabilities (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Frey, 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). Recent research has suggested that disproportionate representation of these ELL students in special education can be reduced through the appropriate

use of models such as RtI, evidence-based practices, and MTSS (Berkeley et al., 2020; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Frey, 2019; Voulgarides et al., 2017).

### **Response to Intervention (RtI)**

RtI is a multitiered approach to early identification of students with learning and behavior needs (Barrio, 2017). The RtI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom (RtI Action Network, n.d.). Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning. These services may be provided by a variety of personnel, including general education teachers, special educators, and specialists. Progress is closely monitored to assess both the learning rate and level of performance of individual students. Educational decisions about the intensity and duration of interventions are based on individual students' responses to instruction (RtI Action Network, n.d.).

The RtI framework uses a multiple-tier structure of identifying students with challenges in learning and educators identify and implement interventions for those challenges. Tier 1 involves the provision of high-quality classroom instruction and screenings for students. In Tier 2, those students who were identified in Tier 1, but did not make adequate progress, are provided with targeted interventions in a small group format. Tier-3 students are those who continue to struggle towards making effective progress in accessing the curriculum and are referred for further evaluation through the eligibility determination process for special education (RtI Action Network, n.d.). RtI frameworks have been well-documented in multidisciplinary education research and have been the subject of scrutiny with regard for their adequacy in addressing issues of inequity in general and special education, including disproportionate representation of racial,



ethnic, and linguistic nondominant students (Barrio, 2017; Berkeley et al., 2020; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015).

A study by Brendle (2015) on RtI emphasized the use of multidisciplinary teams to problem solve and identify instructional interventions that addressed educational deficits and curtail the need for special education services. This process presents a challenge for rural schools to develop effective team practices with limited resources and staff. Brendle surveyed general and special education teachers to examine perceptions of team membership practices and effectiveness based on quality indicators of effective intervention team practices as identified in literature. The study indicated most rural schools represented by the teachers surveyed were implementing the team process. The findings identified team practices, such as problem-solving, teacher support, developing interventions, and implementing interventions, as more effective than ineffective. Quantitative results from Brendle's study indicated that special education teachers reported a higher degree of knowledge of intervention practices and the team process than general education teachers reported. In addition, the special education teachers reported a higher rate of student referrals to the team for intervention than general education teachers reported. The findings suggest the need for rural schools to consider ongoing professional development for both general and special education teachers regarding effective team intervention practices to refine the process (Brendle, 2015).

A systematic review (Berkeley et al., 2020) of all 50 state education agency websites was conducted to provide an updated "snapshot" of states' interpretations of RtI a decade after IDEA regulations were finalized. Findings revealed substantive progress towards developing approaches to systematic supports to students, with a major trend in the adoption of MTSS models. Findings also documented continued variation in how states are communicating about

tiered systems on such matters as the roles of tiered systems in schoolwide prevention frameworks, meeting special education requirements, and aligning multiple systems within schools.

### **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)**

MTSS is a framework that helps educators provide academic and behavioral strategies for students in need (Hurst, 2014). According to Hosp and Reschly (2004), there is little evidence that addresses the issue of disproportionality through RtI. On the contrary, MTSS incorporates RtI but extends the focus of support to students' social, emotional, and behavioral development (Hurst, 2014). MTSS is a framework that not only provides support for students but also is intended to provide support for teachers and administrators through professional development and coaching (Frey, 2019). The foundations of this model focus on a school-wide or district-wide shift that can be sustainable, incorporating shifts in policies and practices (Barrio, 2017). MTSS takes a proactive approach to identifying students with academic or behavioral needs (Berkeley et al., 2020). The key components of MTSS include universal screening of all students early in the school year, tiers of interventions that can be amplified in response to levels of need, ongoing data collection and continual assessment, schoolwide approach to expectations and supports, and parent involvement (Farmer, 2020; Hott et al., 2021).

Several variations exist across the application of RtI frameworks; the first is in the number of framework tiers. This variation is reflected in a recent vernacular shift to the term MTSS (Jimerson et al., 2016) as both a synonym for RtI, and inclusive of students' social and emotional functioning, intervention, and special education determination (Voulgarides et al., 2017). Second, RtI frameworks vary in relation to whether instruction and interventions are standardized in selection and application with students across similar performance profiles such

as standard protocol models or selected by educators as they interpret a student's individual performance using problem-solving models (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Within Tier 1 across all RtI framework variations, students are to experience evidence-based general education instruction and have their progress monitored by educators for expected rates of improvement in relation to peers (Grindal et al., 2019; Ruppert et al., 2017). Also common across all iterations of RtI is a reliance on instruction and intervention assessed in experimental research, as well as reliance on monitoring students' progress using curriculum-based measures (Fuchs et al., 2010).

Finally, across RtI frameworks, the intensity of interventions and supports increases as the number of students expected to require such supports because of failure to respond to less intensive intervention decreases; students who reach the top, are considered Tier 3 (Fuchs et al., 2013). These students are considered for special education eligibility based on failure to respond adequately to all previous interventions and on the assumption that poor instruction as the reason for failure has been ruled out (Artiles, 2015). Several researchers and policymakers have expressed hope in the potential for RtI to address the disproportionate representation for nondominant racial, ethnic, and linguistic students in special education on the basis of redistributing quality opportunities to learn earlier and more intensively on the basis of assessed student need (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Morgan, 2020); yet, these scholars have also cautioned that such approaches must account for multilayered and nuanced understandings of culture, which shape how RtI is conceptualized and enacted locally (Artiles, 2015; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). The reauthorization of the IDEA (2004) created a shift in thinking and procedure from a "wait-to-fail" model to a system that focused first on quality interventions within the regular education environment. These suggested interventions are part of the prereferral process for special education eligibility (Fish, 2019; Hoover & Erickson, 2015).

In a study on tiered interventions in the United States, Berkeley et al. (2020) found 21 of the 50 states included in the study were classified as having MTSS models that were referenced as being different than RtI. Kansas was the first state to move toward this approach and was cited often in other MTSS states' professional development materials (Berkeley et al., 2020).

Underlying principles and practices of the Kansas model included (a) evidence-based practices, (b) differentiated instruction, (c) classroom management, (d) early intervention, (e) a multitier model, (f) fluid groups, (g) data-based decision-making, and (h) a problem-solving process (Berkeley et al., 2020). Kansas also clearly distinguished their MTSS model from special education: Tier 3 is not special education, nor does student success/failure at Tier 3 determine eligibility for special education. In the trends in the relationship between special education and tiered models, the timing of referral for special education within tiered models varied across states as well (Berkeley et al., 2020). Illinois, for example specified eligibility decisions typically occur within Tier 3 when students do not respond to the most intensive interventions but may occur at any tier. Tiered systems of intervention are now widely adopted across the United States. Data from the Berkeley et al. study show that states have made advancements in their conceptualization of RtI and other tiered systems since the first decade of implementation, and that tiered models are practiced not only more often but differently from when they began to be adopted. Ongoing philosophical and pragmatic differences about the role(s) that tiered models should play in school in relation to special education were uncovered in Berkeley et al.'s study. All these variations signal ongoing uncertainty about what is appropriate practice.

RtI and MTSS are part of the prereferral process in which educators engage prior to the eligibility determination process (Berkeley et al., 2020). As both a preventative early intervening approach and an alternative route to LD identification, RtI and MTSS have impacted whether

and how special education is provided in schools (Barrio, 2017; Berkeley et al., 2020; Farmer, 2020). The evolution of tiered models has also increased the level of collaboration between the special education teacher and general education teacher (Farmer, 2020). Special educators are expected to work with their general education colleagues to support any student in need of intervention at any tier (Hott et al., 2021). Increased engagement of general education teachers in administering interventions may influence how general education teachers perceive the special education eligibility process.

### **Special Education Eligibility Process**

To be eligible for special education services, a child must be classified within one of the 13 disability categories delineated in IDEA (2004). The 13 categories are autism spectrum disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairments, specific LD, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment, including blindness (IDEA, 2004). Prior to formal referral of students for special education services, educators engage in the prereferral process in which students are engaged in the MTSS and RtI protocols (Berkeley et al., 2020). Within these protocols, academic interventions are implemented and monitored for a period of 6 to 8 weeks as part of the prereferral process (RtI Action Network, n.d.). Data collected on a student can then be forwarded for referral for special education services if the interventions were deemed unsuccessful (RtI Action Network, n.d.). Although some students are identified in need of services through early intervention programs prior to entering kindergarten, the disability identification process typically begins with a referral from a classroom teacher (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

## Referral

Several researchers have documented bivariate relationships between student variables such as race and gender with teacher referrals to special education evaluation (Kozlowski, 2015; Shifrer, 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Eiland (2009) reported that male students were referred for special education evaluation at slightly higher rates than female students, and that African American/Black males were referred at higher rates than students of other races. Codrington and Fairchild (2012) noted that African American/Black students were frequently misdiagnosed and referred to special education because of general education classroom behaviors that teachers considered disruptive.

Several teacher-related variables such as gender, race, teaching experience, and attitudes toward inclusion have also been linked to teacher referrals for special education evaluation (Alter et al., 2013). Much of the literature has examined the bivariate relationships between variables related to the disproportionate referral of students belonging to minority groups, particularly African American/Black males, for special education evaluation (Ellmer, 2012). However, there has been limited research examining how student and teacher demographic variables combine to predict teachers' decisions to refer students for special education (Woodson & Harris, 2018).

In the referral process related to Hispanic/Latino students, research indicates that educators have found difficulty in distinguishing linguistic difference from disability, particularly an LD (Beaujean et al., 2018; Skrtic et al., 2021). Students identified as ELLs and students identified with an LD tend to perform poorly on academic tasks with high language demands. This factor may make ELLs even more vulnerable to misclassification as having a disability (Abedi, 2006). The large proportion of ELLs who struggle academically suggests that many of the difficulties are not likely due to an educational disability (Lesaux, 2006). Instead,

these students may be inappropriately routed into special education as a convenient way to address the issue without considering programmatic limitations, or when teachers are at a loss about how to provide effective instruction (Harry & Klinger, 2014).

### **Identification**

After being referred, a student is evaluated, culminating in a meeting where educators, other professionals, and the child's parents collaboratively determine whether the student meets the IDEA (2004) eligibility requirements. Once an official referral for special education services is made, the school must follow up. Every student identified as possibly needing special education services is entitled to a timely (within 60 days from the date the parent or legal guardian signs the consent form) and appropriate evaluation (IDEA, 2004).

Comprehensive evaluations have been the traditional method for determining special education eligibility since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or PL 94-142 in 1975 (Frey, 2019). This legislation guaranteed a FAPE to each child with a disability in every state across the United States. Based on the referral information, school personnel will determine the types of assessment data that must be collected and who will be responsible for collecting these data (Lerner & Johns, 2012). These assessment data, also referred to as evaluations, may include direct observations of the student; administration of standardized norm-referenced tests; completion of criterion-referenced tests; parent- and/or teacher-completed rating scales and checklists; parent, teacher, and/or student interviews; and educationally relevant medical information (Frey, 2019).

Although federal legislation does not dictate the methods or specific tests to use in an evaluation, the IDEA (2004) provides guidelines for how to collect evaluation data. More specifically, the evaluation team must represent multiple disciplines (e.g., psychology, speech-

language pathology, health, education) and include at least one teacher or specialist in the potential disability. In addition, the tests used must be designed to assess the area(s) of concern, administered in the student's native language, validated for the purpose in which they will be used, and free from cultural or racial bias, and eligibility for services must be determined using multiple measures (IDEA, 2004; Lerner & Johns, 2012; Overton, 2016). The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014) clearly state that scores from psychoeducational assessments alone should never be used as the sole basis for including any student in special education programming or excluding any student from such programming. Psychoeducational test results may provide an important basis for determining whether a student has a disability and what the student's educational needs are, but psychological testing is only one component of the evaluation process (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014).

The IDEA (2004) provides guidelines and regulations designed to promote equitable assessment practices during the comprehensive evaluation and eligibility determination process. Children from culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and economically diverse backgrounds continue to be disproportionately (both under and over) represented in several of the disability categories (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Raines et al., 2012; Samuels, 2005), and disproportionality has been linked to categories that rely more on clinical judgment for making a classification decision (Overton, 2016). A pattern of overrepresentation and underrepresentation exists in the United States because both under-referral and overdiagnosis occur because of misunderstanding the educational needs of students identified as ELLs, poorly designed language assessments, and



weak psychoeducational assessment practices (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Morgan, 2020). Lack of effective instruction negatively influences assessment results, which are further confounded by the fact that tests designed for native English speakers may lack reliability and validity with students identified as ELLs (Strassfeld, 2017; Tefera & Fischman, 2020).

### **Eligibility**

To be determined eligible for special education services, the evaluation team must find that the student has a disability and is not making effective progress in regular education due to the disability and requires either specially designed instruction or a related service that is necessary to allow the child to access the general education curriculum (Frey, 2019). Under IDEA (2004), students may be identified under the categories of autism, developmental delay, intellectual impairment, hearing impairment, sensory impairment, neurological impairment, emotional impairment, communication impairment, physical impairment, health impairment, and specific LD.

In identifying African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students qualified for special education services, the racialization of disability is of concern because disability diagnoses for racial minorities often have concomitant negative consequences, such as educational segregation, limited access to the general education curriculum, and a host of negative long-term outcomes (Artiles, 2013). This problem is connected to poverty, geographical location, cultural practices, and ideologies of difference (Albrecht et al., 2012). Cruz and Rodl (2018) indicated that evidence has consistently shown that African American/Black learners have higher probabilities than their counterparts to be diagnosed with high-incidence disabilities. At the national level, these students are three times more likely to be diagnosed as intellectually disabled and over 200% more likely to be diagnosed with emotional-behavioral disorders (Artiles et al., 2011).

Hispanic/Latino students are also overrepresented in some disability categories in certain regions, states, and school districts, specifically with specific learning disabilities, though not at the national level (Artiles et al., 2011; Kozlowski, 2015). Despite the disproportionate poverty rate among African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students, racial inequities are not observed in disability categories associated with biological causes linked to poverty, such as sensory and orthopedic impairments and multiple disabilities (Losen et al., 2014). After controlling for poverty, race still makes a significant contribution to predicting a disability diagnosis (Skiba et al., 2008).

### **Educational Placement of Students**

If a student is deemed eligible for special education, their parents, teachers, and other school officials meet to determine the special education services the child needs. This group of individuals are collectively identified as the special education team (IDEA, 2004). The team determines the child's placement, or where the child will receive such services (IDEA, 2004). In determining placement, the IDEA (2004) requires that students with disabilities be educated in the LRE, where they are educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. As what is appropriate varies from disability to disability and student to student, what the appropriate LRE looks like also varies, from full participation in general education classrooms to attending a specialized school that serves only students with disabilities (Grindal et al., 2019). The USDOE (2014) requires that states collect data on the amount of time students with disabilities are educated in classes with their nondisabled peers. Students' educational placements are then categorized as included in general education classrooms for 80% or more of the day as a full-inclusion placement, included 40%–79% of the day as a partial-inclusion

placement, or included less than 40% of the school day as a substantially separate placement (USDOE, 2014).

### **Increased Opportunities for Students who are Found Eligible**

Special education can provide students with beneficial services, supports, accommodations, and legal rights that help them succeed in school (DeMatthews et al., 2014; Frey, 2019). At the same time, special education identification can result in lowered expectations from teachers, limited access to the general education curriculum, and stigma (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Losen et al., 2014). It is therefore critical that special education teams appropriately identify students who have an identified disability and need special education services while not misidentifying students who would be better served by general education (Grindal et al., 2019).

The negative consequences of misidentification may be exacerbated when students are segregated from their nondisabled peers (Fish, 2019). Prior research indicates that students with disabilities who are educated in general education, or inclusive settings, tend to outperform similar students in separate placements on measures of academic achievement, even when controlling for a variety of factors, such as type of disability (Hehir et al., 2012; Schifter, 2016). Students educated in inclusive settings also have higher rates of attendance and a higher probability of on-time graduation than similar students in substantially separate classrooms (Schifter, 2016). In addition to suboptimal academic outcomes, inappropriate placement in a segregated classroom can limit students' access to challenging curricula, high-quality teachers, and social interactions with nondisabled peers (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008), all of which are important resources for students' socioemotional and academic development (Frey, 2019). In addition to appropriate identification, educators must also work to ensure that students with disabilities are appropriately educated in the LRE (IDEA, 2004).

### *Disproportionality in the Placement Process*

Given the importance of accurate identification and placement of students who qualify for special education, researchers and policy makers have expressed concern over the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education and the subsequent placement of these students in substantially separate educational environments (Losen et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). A substantially separate educational environment, also known as a self-contained classroom, is a classroom environment outside of the general education setting for children with significant learning needs (Morgan, 2020). These classrooms serve students who require a highly modified curriculum, smaller class size, and lower student/teacher ratio (Hott et al., 2021; Morgan, 2020; Ruppert et al., 2017). In 2019–2020, 17% of African American/Black students nationwide were identified as students with disabilities, and 14% of Hispanic/Latino students were identified as students with disabilities, compared to 15% of White students (USDOE, 2021).

The differences in identification rates between African American/Black and White students vary by disability category, with some categories, including emotional disability, intellectual disability, and LD, exhibiting larger proportional differences. For example, 1.5% of African American/Black students in public education were identified with an intellectual disability, compared to 0.8% of White students (USDOE, 2021). Once identified, students of color are also more likely to be placed in substantially separate classrooms (USDOE, 2014). For example, 17% of African American/Black students with disabilities were educated in substantially separate classrooms, compared to 10.7% of White students with disabilities (USDOE, 2021). This double disproportionality may exacerbate the negative consequences of misidentification.

### **Significant Disproportionality Policy Guidelines**

Monitoring requirements in the 1997 amendments and 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA acknowledged the existence and extent of racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education, especially when, in 2004, Congress designated this concern among the top three priority areas for monitoring and enforcing the law (Albrecht et al., 2012). Sullivan and Bal (2013) examined special education disproportionality by examining both univariate and bivariate risk across multiple disability categories, sociodemographic characteristics, and individual and school predictors of individual student identification for special education. Their findings support the conclusion of researchers that disability identification is socially (Shifrer et al., 2011) and contextually (Hibel et al., 2010) based. The results call attention to the need to examine the mechanisms by which sociodemographics, school policy, and educational practices affect disproportionality to foster appropriate educational opportunities for all through systemic solutions focused on enhancing access to quality educational services and supports within both general and special education. The increased policy regulations enacted because of IDEA (1997; 2004) set a framework for states and districts to change practice. It is in the actual enactment of the policies in IDEA that inequities are often perpetuated, and lack of educational opportunity reinforced (Tefera & Fischman, 2020).

### **IDEA Compliance and Disproportionality**

Studies have had inconclusive or contradictory findings as to which of these factors account for disproportionality within a district (Aylward et al., 2021; Tefera & Fischman, 2020; Voulgarides et al., 2017). A criticism of studies about significant disproportionality is that some studies are only correlational in nature or have not adequately addressed causal factors such as discriminatory practices, procedures, or racial, ethnic, and gender bias in the referral and

evaluation process (Strassfeld, 2017). Because of the uncertainty regarding the underlying causal factors for disproportionate representation within special education, federal law has required that LEAs monitor, report, and identify ways to address disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minority students in special education (IDEA, 2004). The reauthorization of the IDEA of 2004 recommended that states use a risk ratio as a means for comparing the probability for special education placement (Cavendish et al., 2014). Broadly, a state uses risk ratios to measure risk for disproportionate representation by examining the probability that a racial or ethnic minority student with a disability will receive special education and related services, in relation to the size of the overall risk for special education placement within the state or district (Strassfeld, 2017).

A risk ratio compares the relative size of two risks by dividing the risk for a specific racial/ethnic group by the risk for a comparison group (Bollmer et al., 2011). For example, if a district reports that the risk for African American/Black children of receiving special education and related services for Autism was 3.25 times the risk for all other children, then the district is reporting that African American/Black children were 3.25 times as likely to receive services for autism than all other children. The use of risk ratios combined with the federal reporting of disproportionality contribute to problematic procedures and protocols that create unintended consequences that potentially legitimize the racialization of disability (Cavendish et al., 2014).

### **Interpretation of Risk Ratios**

According to Grindal et al. (2019), risk ratios can be difficult to interpret when there are small numbers of students at the district level in either the racial and ethnic group or the comparison group. By using a weighted risk ratio based on standardized state data, however, states can have similar weighted ratios for both large and small districts (Bollmer et al., 2011).

For small districts, this means small enrollment changes can impact the direction of overrepresentation or underrepresentation. This can lead to small districts being misidentified as having underrepresentation or overrepresentation, depending on the state-level data (Albrecht et al., 2012).

### **Federal Regulation of Disproportionality**

In December 2016, the Office of Special Education in the USDOE developed new and revised regulations pertaining to Part B of IDEA. The new guidelines addressed the effects of disproportionate identification, both over and under-identification, of racial or ethnic minority students who receive special education and related services and are intended to promote equity within IDEA enforcement (USDOE, 2016). The regulations are further intended to increase state accountability for the effects, if any, of being placed in more restrictive environments or in settings that lack academic rigor (USDOE, 2016). Specifically, the new regulations under IDEA required that states and LEAs take steps to determine the presence of significant disproportionality and to address and remedy disproportionate placement, if found (USDOE, 2016). The regulations also established a standard methodology that states must use to determine whether significant disproportionality occurred within the state and in LEAs.

### **Significant Disproportionality and Disability Identification**

Researchers have examined many factors implicated in the disproportionate representation of racial minority students in special education and demonstrated that no one factor explains disproportionality (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Maydoz, 2014). Demographic factors (e.g., minority enrollment, proportion of teachers from minority backgrounds) have historically been strong predictors of overrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education programs (Skrtic et al., 2021). Disproportional representation is

identified when students of certain ethnicities appear in special education programs or disability categories in greater percentages than they occur in the general population of students (Harry & Klingner, 2014). In a multiyear disproportionality analysis conducted by the USDOE (2016); researchers indicated risk ratios are the best way to define the potential of disproportionality within special education eligibility determination. The example provided in the analysis indicated that for every 100 White students who are referred, 132 African American/Black and 106 Hispanic/Latino students are referred for special education evaluation. In contrast, for every 100 White students who are found eligible for special education, 118 African American/Black and 89 Hispanic/Latino students are found eligible (USDOE, 2016).

### **Variables That May Influence Disproportionality**

Research has acknowledged that disproportionality is a complex, multiply determined problem shaped by a variety of interpersonal, social, environmental, cultural, and institutional forces (Artiles et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2008). The guidelines as outlined by IDEA (2004) are clear on what inclusionary and exclusionary factors must be considered when determining eligibility for special education services. Recent studies indicate that special education eligibility is based on factors beyond students' medical, developmental, or cognitive functioning and is widespread, reflected in the focus on the high-incidence, or subjective, disability categories rather than the more physically based disabilities (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Morgan, 2020; Skrtic et al., 2021; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Many African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino children are classified as mildly disabled and are overrepresented in low-status categories of intellectual disability, emotional disability, and LD (Skrtic et al., 2021). A central element in the overidentification of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students is the potential bias in assessments and how they are used (Morgan, 2020). The use of IQ and achievement tests,



which have the tendency to be biased towards White culture, have been questioned as an assessment method for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Fish, 2019). The role of subjectivity underpins another factor that can perpetuate racialization, which is professional bias by regular classroom teachers and special educators (Morgan, 2020; Skrtic et al., 2021). Research indicates that predominantly White, relatively affluent teachers can misperceive minority attitudes and behaviors as problematic or even oppositional, associating them with low-status disability categories (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

### ***Implications of Bias***

Some researchers suggest that White teachers may be the primary culprits of contributing to the disproportional referral of minority students for special education services (Farkas et al., 2020). Warikoo et al. (2016) argued that social-psychological research on implicit racial associations and relatively unconscious associations based on race is a fruitful area to explore for a greater understanding of how racial bias affects children in schools. This research supports a new perspective for understanding why and when teachers and other school personnel engage in behaviors that reproduce racial inequality, often despite best intentions and commitments to racial equity (Warikoo et al., 2016). Because teachers can be prone to biased perceptions of students' classroom styles and behaviors, it is also possible that teachers might similarly perceive minority students' classroom efforts (Kozlowski, 2015).

One of the most important factors within the school system that can contribute to racial disparities in referrals for special education eligibility is the teacher's role in the process of identifying students (Cooc, 2017). The identification of students for special education starts with a teacher's belief concerning whether a student has a disability (Cooc, 2017). Although teachers of the same race as their students are more likely to be aware of the cultural characteristics of

their pupils, there is a lack of teachers of color in public schools (Morgan, 2019). One study by Weir (2016) involved a sample of 57 female teachers, most of whom were White, and explored how teachers would react to misbehavior. Although the researchers found that the teachers, who represented grade levels from across the country, did not respond stereotypically after a student's first infraction, they were more likely to stereotype Black students as troublemakers after a second infraction (Weir, 2016). Cherng's (2017) study indicated that English teachers underestimate the academic abilities of Black students and other students of color and that math teachers hold similar perceptions of these students. This study revealed that teachers' underestimation of students' academic abilities in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade is linked to lower 12<sup>th</sup>-grade expectations (Cherng, 2017). Cherng concluded that teachers' perceptions may be racially biased and that these biases are associated with lower student expectations and achievement. Cherng's findings are consistent with the belief that low expectations are harmful to students' self-conception and associated with poorer academic outcomes.

### ***Assessment Bias***

Researchers have investigated many variables as potentially related to racial disparities in eligibility identification of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services (Cherng, 2017; Dever et al., 2016; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). Early research examined potential implications of bias in teacher ratings of performance and referral patterns for special education services, but results were mixed (Cullinan & Kauffman, 2005). A general finding of the Cullinan and Kauffman (2005) study is that teachers' perceptions of students' emotional and behavioral problems varied across different areas. For the characteristics of emotional impairment as one of the 13 disability categories under IDEA (2004), the ratings showed no differences by student race, school level, or rater race. Others have studied

educational processes, including referral and multidisciplinary teaming (Kozlowski, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2006); and though scholars have identified shortcomings, particularly frequent disregard for legal disability criteria, researchers have not established links and causal relations to disproportionality. Three trends suggest systematic bias in identification: (a) There is a consistent pattern of overrepresentation of students of color in special education among non-low-income students; (b) Patterns of overrepresentation are not present in sensory disability categories that are typically identified by a healthcare provider; and (c) For students of color, the magnitude of the difference in probability of identification between non-low-income students and low-income students was smaller than the magnitude of the difference for White students (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Grindal et al., 2019; Morgan, 2020).

### ***School-Based Datasets***

Most studies of disproportionality have relied on school- or district-level datasets to explore variables to group-level risk (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Maydoz, 2014; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Researchers have studied variables such as enrollment, the student body's racial and linguistic makeup, per-pupil expenditures, student–teacher ratios, teacher credentials, teacher demographics, discipline patterns, mean academic performance, dropout rates, and the proportion of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch (Barrio, 2017; Morgan, 2020; Strassfeld, 2017; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Losen et al. (2014) suggested other variables to be analyzed include the percentage of novice teachers employed in schools with an overrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students being referred for special education services and that all school-based and socioeconomic variables should be analyzed by grade span and not as a whole district. Understanding the nature of the relationship between race and educational disability has important implications beyond the question of

whether schools are inappropriately determining children as eligible for special education services due to racially biased practices or whether they are responding to the broader racial inequalities that increase the need for special services among children of color (Shifrer et al., 2011). The question of inappropriate eligibility determination also has the potential to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the intersection of race and disability (Fish, 2019). Examining racial disparities in special education provides an understanding of categorical inequality in which schools sort children into different categories of disability and services (Domina et al., 2017).

### ***Socioeconomic Variables***

Researchers have also considered the influence of community socioeconomic variables on disproportionality, such as median housing value, median income, and mean educational attainment of adults (Farkas et al., 2020). Findings across studies are inconsistent, particularly regarding economic variables, which are differently related to the identification of racial and linguistic minority groups across disability categories (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Some researchers propose that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education is a natural consequence of the poverty levels associated with minority status (Maydosz, 2014). Poverty is correlated with disability: 24%–27.8% of students with one disability live in households with incomes below the poverty level (Heward et al., 2022; Linan-Thompson, 2004). However, Losen et al. (2014) challenged this correlation with data that showed Hispanic/Latino students are identified at a lower rate than African American/Black students, yet many face the same environmental and schooling risks associated with poverty as that of African American/Black students. Losen et al. recapped research that attempted to separate ethnicity and poverty as variables to determine their relationship. This research uncovered disparities between

the identification of White and Black students in the intellectual impairment and emotional disturbance categories and found far less disparity in identification for learning disabilities. Further, medically diagnosed disabilities—such as hearing or visual impairment—evidenced less disproportionality than those determined by a subjective body, like a child study team, who would be responsible for analyzing data in choosing to refer a student for a special education evaluation (Aylward et al., 2021).

Existing research shows that racial bias affects teachers' decisions to refer students for special education services (Fish, 2019). Teacher biases carry substantial weight in eligibility determination for special education services. Errors in special education identification and eligibility have been well documented (Grindal et al., 2019; Morgan, 2020; Skrtic et al., 2021). This is because it can be difficult to clearly connect specific behaviors in distinct categories due to symptom overlaps. Special education eligibility begins with a referral by a teacher who perceives the students as struggling in comparison with their expectations of the student and their peers' performance (Morgan, 2020). Fish (2019) suggested that teachers' evaluations of students' skills may be based on demographic statuses linked to achievement that act as the trigger for comparison processes. The racial biases that unintentionally affect teachers' suspicions of exceptionality may become more salient when a student stands out racially among their peers (Frey, 2019; Grindal et al., 2019). Racial distinctiveness might enhance racial bias in teachers' perceptions of students, exacerbating biased perceptions of students of color as having lower-status disabilities (Fish, 2019).

### **Special Education in Rural Communities**

Racial/ethnic disproportionality within special education refers to the over or underrepresentation of a racial/ethnic group in an educational category, program, or service in

comparison to the group's proportion in the overall population (Barrio, 2017). The educational equity implications of disproportionality have been discussed in multiple studies, and schools may risk receiving federal citations and sanctions in significant instances of disproportionality (Aylward et al., 2021; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). However, disproportionality in special education is rarely examined within rural settings, despite demographic change leading to more racially and ethnically diverse rural schools (Aylward et al., 2021). As rural communities continue to become less racially and ethnically homogenous, scholars and educators must consider the ways in which African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students can be appropriately supported in schools and the important variation across rural spaces (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Hott et al., 2021).

### **Rural Communities**

The United States Census Bureau (2020) defined rural as any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area. The census defined urban as urbanized areas (UAs) of 50,000 or more people and urban clusters (UCs) of 2,500–49,999 people. In addition, the United States OMB identifies counties in the United States as metropolitan or micropolitan. Based on these criteria, a metropolitan area with an urban core of 50,000 or more people is considered not rural. A micropolitan area with an urban core of 10,000–49,000 people is considered rural and counties outside of the metropolitan or micropolitan areas are considered rural (USHRSA, 2020). The census and OMB definitions present measurement challenges in identifying how people are counted in rural areas. The census overcounts the number of people in rural areas, whereas the OMB undercounts them (USHRSA, 2020). To overcome the challenges presented by these definitions, the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service creates Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes that classify United States census tracts of land using

measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting (United States Department of Agriculture, 2022). For the purposes of this study, the rural area in which the research was conducted is classified as a micropolitan area with an urban core. Rural schools have long struggled with poverty levels of the families they serve, and rural schools often do not have the required resources to adequately serve students with disabilities (Johnson, Showalter, et al., 2018). The geographic distances between rural schools affect their ability to provide efficient related service delivery and research indicates a lack of attention to rural issues by national legislators as an area that creates challenges for rural school districts (Johnson & Howley, 2015).

### **Racial Inequities in Rural Communities**

Although the equity implications of disproportionality have been acknowledged by multiple studies (Artiles et al., 2011; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Skiba et al., 2008), the phenomena are rarely examined within rural settings (Ault et al., 2019; Barrio, 2017; Hott et al., 2021; Morgan, 2020). Yet 20% of students in the United States attend school in a rural community and over a million of these children receive special education and related services (Aylward et al., 2021). According to Showalter et al. (2019), nearly one in five students in the United States attends a rural school, which means more students in the United States attend rural schools than in the nation's 85 largest school districts combined. In 2003–2004, of the 9,583,000 rural public-school students, 1,262,000 students (13.2%) had IEPs (Provasnik et al., 2007). In 2007–2008, among the 12,089,000 rural students, 12.6% had IEPs (Provasnik et al., 2007), and in 2016–2017, this percentage increased to 13.8% (Showalter et al., 2019). Furthermore, there are complexities within the rural space and unique dynamics of race and racial inequality in the rural United States—which is becoming less racially and ethnically homogenous—that cannot be captured in national-level studies (Aylward et al., 2021). Problematically, the long-standing presence and

contributions of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students and their families to rural spaces are often overlooked (Kozlowski, 2015). Persistent patterns of their exclusion, discrimination, and disenfranchisement exist to date, despite variation in institutional, social, and economic rural contexts (Aylward et al., 2021). Thus, it is important to understand how the unique context of rural districts and the increasingly changing demographic makeup of rural communities relate to the over and underrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education.

### **Contributing Factors to Underrepresentation**

Rural school districts often are referred to as underrepresented communities, especially in reference to education (Barrio, 2017). Geographical isolation and lack of support and access to professional development, materials, and supplies directly affect students (Aylward et al., 2021). This is especially important in terms of support for ELL students (Hoover & Erickson, 2015). Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Johnson and his colleagues, reported that an average of 3.5% of the K–12 population in rural settings and 21% nationwide were ELLs. This was an increase of almost 80% in the past decade (Johnson et al., 2018). In some rural areas where farming is the focus of their economy, these numbers may be higher (Barrio, 2017). Furthermore, the American Council on Rural Special Education (n.d.) suggested that students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (i.e., minority status) were most likely to be placed in special education (20%–24%) than those from White backgrounds (18%). In rural settings, for example, the lack of professional development for teachers focusing on evidence-based practices to support ELL students can fuel the disproportionality of this population in special education (Barrio, 2016; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). In addition, lack of funds to travel to obtain professional development can be a great challenge in remote rural



settings (Hoover & Erickson, 2015). Teachers may not be prepared to work with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Shim, 2013), especially as it refers to culturally responsive practices (Hoover & Erickson, 2015). Similarly, there is a lack of data focusing on ELL students in special education. Rather, reports focus on ELL student numbers and special education numbers separately (Barrio, 2017).

### **Stratification in Special Education Within Rural Communities**

The need for educators to be culturally responsive and have the capacity to educate all students has only become more acute with the rapid demographic changes in rural contexts (Barrio, 2017). Persistent and recurrent federal citations for racial inequity in special education among rural districts provide evidence that stratification in special education outcomes persists (Aylward et al., 2021). There is a growing body of research indicating that social contexts and sociocultural and historical conditions of schools and districts relate to special education classifications and outcomes (Aylward et al., 2021; Barrio, 2017; Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Hott et al., 2021). Recent research has documented links between school-level factors, student-level race, and student-level risk of special education receipt (Barrio, 2017; Hott et al., 2021). Fish (2019) found that a student's race and the racial composition of a student's school relate to special education classifications. Specifically, Fish found that an increase in the population of White students increases the risk of classification for special education programs for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. Aylward et al. (2021) demonstrated how the unique context of rural districts and changing demographic makeup of rural communities relate to the over and underrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education. The researchers concluded that future research would benefit from using an intersectional lens of race, ability, and place that qualitatively examines how stakeholders

respond to changing demographics within their communities (Aylward et al., 2021).

Intersectionality refers to an approach to conducting research that foregrounds the interactions of categories of social difference, such as disability, race, class, and gender (Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). Scholars in education have drawn from intersectionality theory to understand the interactions of disability and race (Annamma et al., 2018; Artiles et al., 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. The theoretical framework identified from the examination of the literature included ecological systems theory, with an emphasis on SVSC. School climate is defined as the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school (Rudasill et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, this framework was used to examine experiences of public K–12 teachers in determining eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education. The conceptual framework for this study is intersectionality. Ecological systems theory supports the perspective that teachers may be influenced by other factors than educational data to formulate an opinion about students' needs (Paat, 2013). Cultural beliefs may influence teachers' perceptions of student behavior in the classroom, which, in turn, may affect teachers' decisions to refer children for evaluations for special education (Woodson & Harris, 2018). As part of the conceptual framework, intersectionality accounts for complex, overlapping, and cumulative effects associated with having more than one identity marker that can lead to systematic exclusion or added marginalization within institutions and structures even when they claim to be

advancing equity (Cavendish & Samson, 2021). Examples from scholarly literature were provided on the historical context of disproportionality in special education legislation and to explain procedures educators adopt in the prereferral, referral, and eligibility determination processes when considering the need for special education services for students. Additional research-based studies were referenced to provide a contextual background on the guidelines and variables related to the identification of significant disproportionality and the racial inequalities in special education within rural contexts. The focus of the federal government in requiring state and LEAs per the guidelines set forth in IDEA (2004) and revisions to IDEA in 2016 to address the factors related to overidentification of minority students in special education prompted further examination of the origins of disproportionality. Civil rights legislation in special education is inextricably linked to the civil rights struggle to secure education rights for racial and ethnic minority students across the United States (Strassfeld, 2017). Much of the literature presented supported bivariate relationships between variables related to the disproportionate referral of students belonging to minority groups, particularly African American/Black males, for special education evaluation (Ellmer, 2012).

To date, few scholars have examined the needs of rural educators to support IEP development and none of the previous studies examining IEP development have included rural districts (Hott et al., 2021). This is an integral step at the conclusion of the eligibility determination process for special education. Several teacher-related variables such as gender, race, teaching experience, and attitudes toward inclusion have been linked to teacher referrals for special education evaluation (Alter et al., 2013). Studies have had inconclusive or contradictory findings as to which of these factors predominately account for disproportionality within a district. A criticism of studies in this area is that some studies are only correlational in nature or

have not adequately addressed causal factors such as discriminatory practices, procedures, or racial, ethnic, and gender bias in the referral and evaluation process (Strassfeld, 2017). Aylward et al. (2021) demonstrated how the unique context of rural districts and changing demographic makeup of rural communities relate to the over and underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students in special education. The researchers concluded that future research would benefit from using an intersectional lens of race, ability, and place that qualitatively examines how stakeholders respond to changing demographics within their communities (Aylward et al., 2021).

The guidelines issued to state education agencies by the federal government allow for individual states to determine when significant disproportionality exists and to set forth a plan to attain reasonable progress in lowering the risk ratios associated with disproportionality (Strassfeld, 2017). The individual state also determines what constitutes reasonable progress (Barrio, 2017). Exploring the experiences of the educators who work in a rural school district may yield additional insight of the perceptions held by these educators regarding the eligibility process of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. The problem this study explored is that African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts may be disproportionately referred for special education services as compared to peers (Farkas et al., 2020). The following research questions guided this research:

**Research Question 1:** How do public K–12 educators perceive the special education eligibility process?

**Research Question 2:** How do public K–12 educators describe their understanding of the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process in determining special education services?

**Research Question 3:** How do public K–12 educators describe the cultural factors within their rural school districts when referring African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services?

Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, life experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The

final written report or presentation includes the participants' voices, the researcher's reflexivity, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Phenomenology is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. Van Manen (2014) explained phenomenology as the way of access to the world as experienced prereflectively. Prereflective experience is the ordinary experience that is lived through for most, if not all, of our day-to-day existence (Van Manen, 2014, p. 28). This description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection. Prior to interviewing those who have had direct experiences with the phenomenon, the researcher explores their own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A phenomenological study develops textual descriptions ("What happened?") and structural descriptions ("How was the phenomenon experienced?"), as well as descriptions of the essence of the experience, with narration of the essence being presented by way of discussion and visual representation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). From a phenomenological perspective, the process of making meaning of these experiences is intersubjective; that is, their significance is shaped through the interaction and mutual influence of individual, subjective impressions of shared experience (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The phenomenon explored in this study was the experiences of public K–12 educators

when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts.

The participants for this study were educators who have experienced the phenomenon of determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. The state board of education identified the study site as significantly disproportionate in the identification of African American/Black students with intellectual disabilities and Hispanic/Latino students with communication disabilities for 2020, 2021, and 2022 (MADESE, 2022). As a result, 15% of the federal grant funding given to the district annually for special education services must be allocated to addressing this finding (MADESE, 2022).

The intended contribution of this study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators in determining eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education. The unique factors and characteristics that exist in rural school districts may contribute to disproportionate identification of students for special education (Hott et al., 2021). Although research has documented the practices of teachers in identifying African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in urban and suburban school districts for special education services (Farkas et al., 2020; Fish, 2019), there is an absence of substantial evidence of the experiences of teachers and students in rural school settings.

### **Site Information and Demographic/Setting**

The site for this study was a school district in the northeastern United States. The school district is composed of four schools with a population of approximately 1,700 students in grades pre-K to age 22. The IDEA of 2004 is the federal law ensuring services to students with disabilities. IDEA provides eligible students from ages 3 to 22 a FAPE (IDEA, 2004). In 2000,

the population of the community in which the site is located was identified as approximately 88% White, just above 9% Hispanic/Latino, and approximately 7% Black/African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The 2020 U.S. Census recorded the current population of the community as almost 85% White, approximately 15% Hispanic/Latino, and just above 11% African American/Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

### **Participants and Sampling Method**

Purposeful sampling was used to identify research participants who engaged in a semi structured interview with myself. Purposeful sampling assumes the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to the study, I obtained the approval from the superintendent of schools to gain access to the site and study participants. This included writing a letter to the superintendent of schools of the school district that specified the research's extent of time, potential impact, and outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A letter was secured from the superintendent that indicated approval for the study to be conducted in the school district. This research study was presented to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as one that posed minimal risk to human subjects, and a research proposal was developed and presented for exempt projects involving interviews and surveys. In accordance with IRB guidelines, an application for exempt research projects was completed along with a Principal Investigator Certification and Participant Information Sheet (University of New England [UNE], n.d.). Once site and IRB approval were secured, both school district administration and potential study participants received a copy of the IRB approval letter and a written explanation of the intended study. Any study designed to research human subjects, interact with human subjects, provide interventions for human subjects, obtain identifiable information about living subjects, or observe and record private



behavior of human subjects must come under the jurisdiction of the governing board of institutional research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

I sent a recruitment email that included the Participant Information Sheet as an attachment using my UNE email to each of the four building principals for distribution to general education teachers. The Participant Information Sheet identified the purpose of the research project; described the target population and selection criteria for participants; detailed the steps that would be taken to complete the interview, including a review of transcribed interviews and completion of member checking; outlined the possible risks or discomforts involved as a participant in the project; explained the benefits of being involved in the project; and offered a statement that participation in the study would not be compensated. Additional information about maintaining privacy and confidentiality was also included (UNE, n.d.). Participants were asked to self-identify as 18 years of age or over, a public K–12 educator, and having previously been involved in the special education referral process of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

Participants contacted me via my UNE email to schedule an interview. Semi structured interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time to me and participants. A password-protected Zoom link was sent to the participants. Recruitment remained open for 2 weeks. If 2 weeks had passed and eight participants had not been interviewed, I resent the email and recruitment remained open until a minimum of eight interviews were completed. All participants responded within the 2 weeks.

The sample size for this study was eight public K–12 educators. To best explain the phenomenon of identifying students for special education services, it was best to do so within a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. Thus, a heterogeneous group

was identified, which may vary in size from three to four individuals to 10 to 15 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). If more than eight potential participants indicated interest, only the first eight to complete an interview were chosen for this study and the others received a nonselection email thanking them for their interest in the study. Eight potential participants responded to the request to participate.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

To establish credibility to the findings of this qualitative, phenomenological study, data were collected and coded for themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Data were collected through semi structured interviews of the participants. I conducted the one-on-one interviews using Zoom as an online meeting platform with the participants and included semi structured questions that intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The intended benefit of the study was to explore factors teachers use to refer students to undergo the special education eligibility process. During recruitment, a master list was created to record personally identifiable information collected about participants and each participant was assigned a unique pseudonym. The use of a master list is deemed a best practice in research when personally identifiable information is collected from or about participants or subjects (UNE, n.d.). The master list included the participants' names and emails and unique pseudonyms were used on the master list and interview transcript. The master list was stored securely and separately (e.g., in a completely different location) from the study data to prevent a loss of participant or subject confidentiality. Each interview was conducted using the Zoom online meeting platform and participants provided their verbal consent to be recorded prior to the interview beginning. Based on the number of respondents, it was anticipated that eight interviews, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes each, were to be completed. I ensured the

interviews were conducted in a private and confidential setting. Participants were reminded that they may have their camera off or skip questions. Interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview protocol. Following the completion of the interviews, I transcribed each interview using the auto-transcription feature on Zoom. Transcribed interviews were coded and kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office accessible only to me. Electronic data were secured through password-protected files on a password-protected computer used only by me. The transcribed interviews were stripped of personally identifiable information and the participants were referred to by their unique pseudonyms as noted on the master list. Participants were provided with a transcript and recording of their individual interview through email and asked to validate the transcript as accurate within 5 days of receiving the transcript. If the transcript was not validated within 5 days of receipt, the transcript became invalid. When the master list is in existence, the data are deemed as coded. The study data are not deemed deidentified until the master list has been destroyed because the master list allows an opportunity for the participant or subject to be reidentified (UNE, n.d.). The master list and recordings were destroyed after all individual transcripts were verified for accuracy by each participant.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interview transcripts were member checked and deidentified, several steps were taken to conduct a thorough analysis. A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of individuals related to a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I collected and analyzed data for the purpose of narrowing the study and discovering ongoing themes or categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi structured interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions of public K–12 general education teachers regarding the eligibility determination process for students who receive special education services.

To analyze qualitative data, I engaged in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach. Within each spiral, I used analytic strategies for the goal of generating specific analytic outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first step in this five-step process for data analysis, as identified by Creswell and Poth (2018), was to manage and organize the data. Following the transcription of each recorded interview, I identified a file-naming system and organized a database of files and units of text and recordings. These files were password protected and stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to me. At the same time, printed transcripts were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office. In a phenomenological approach, researchers reduce data by eliminating repetitive statements and data irrelevant to the phenomenon being examined (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The next step was reading and memoing emergent ideas, which involves taking notes while reading the transcripts and developing written memos, which lead to code development. This took place manually on the printed transcripts. The third step in the data analysis process was to describe and classify codes into themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coding is a process of assigning meaning to data and can be a word or phrase that explains or describes what is going on in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and assigning a label to the code (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finalizing codes and creating descriptions provided the foundation for a codebook, which articulates the distinctive boundaries for each code and includes the name of the code, a description of the code defining boundaries using inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples of the code using data from the study to illustrate the theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data reviewed from the interview transcripts were coded by hand in identifying common themes that emerged from the interviews.

The fourth step in data analysis was developing and assessing interpretations of the data. Interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out beyond development of the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data. The process begins with the development of codes, the formation of themes from the codes, and the organization of themes into larger units of abstraction to make sense of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I engaged in an approach called lean coding in which transcripts were coded using five or six categories with codes and then I expanded the codes as a review and rereview of the database continued. A final code list of no more than 25 to 30 codes was developed, which were used to identify five or six themes that would be used to write the narrative description of the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The fifth step in the data analysis process was to represent and visualize the data. I packaged the information in text, tabular, or figure form. In representing and visualizing the data, my point of view and an account of the findings was created (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues**

Limitations of a research study are those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). These are the constraints regarding transferability, applications to practice, and/or utility of findings that are the result of how the study was designed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Delimitations refer to the initial choices made about the broader, overall design of a study and are those characteristics that define and clarify the research's conceptual boundaries. They are a way to indicate to the reader how the scope of the study was established (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Ethical issues may arise in all phases of the research process: data collection, data interpretation, and dissemination of research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research project was guided by the ethical guidelines as denoted by the UNE IRB. Issues of ethics focus

on establishing safeguards that will protect the rights of participants from harm, and ensuring confidentiality (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

### **Limitations**

Qualitative studies in general are limited by researcher subjectivity. An overriding concern is that of researcher bias, framing as it does assumptions, interests, perceptions, and needs (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Limitations may address problems in data collection, unanswered questions by participants, or better selection of purposeful sampling of individuals or sites for the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection. The phenomenon explored in this study was the experiences of public K-12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Limitations that may arise in conducting interviews include acquiring indirect information filtered through the interviewees' views, the researcher's presence may bias responses from participants, and not all people are equally articulate and perceptive (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to the initial choices made about the broader, overall design of a study and are those characteristics that define and clarify the research's conceptual boundaries. They are a way to indicate to the reader how the scope of the study was established (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Disproportionality in special education is rarely examined within rural settings, despite demographic change leading to more racially and ethnically diverse rural schools (Aylward et al., 2021). Exploring the cultural factors that exist in rural school districts, which may influence the over or under identification of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino

students for special education programs, was also part of this study. The phenomenon explored in this study was the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts.

### **Ethical Issues**

On July 12, 1974, the National Research Act was signed into law, thereby creating the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. One of the charges to the commission was to identify the basic ethical principles that should underlie the conduct of biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects and to develop guidelines that should be followed to assure such research is conducted in accordance with those principles (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). As noted in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979), three basic principles are particularly relevant to the ethics of research involving human subjects: the principles of respect of persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons incorporates at least two ethical convictions. Individuals should be treated as autonomous agents and that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). In this study, consideration was made about respecting potential power imbalances. Interviews began from the premise that a power imbalance exists between the participants and I (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Prior to the data collection phase, I met in person with each individual and explained, in detail, the purpose of the study and the role of each participant, along with specifics about the how interviews would be conducted and the follow up that would occur through transcript review and member checking.

The principle of beneficence addresses treating human research participants by respecting their decisions and making efforts to secure their well-being (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The provision of a Participant Information Sheet provided research participants with a written explanation of the study, a full description informing participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, methods to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality, and expectations of possible benefits that could result from the individuals' participation in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The eight individual teachers selected for this study were treated with respect and care when considering their rights as study participants. In alignment with the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), the principle of justice and treating participants equally were outlined in both the participant identification process and in the research process. The only criteria of a study participant were that they were 18 years of age or older and a public K–12 general education teacher who had previous experience in referring African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students to the special education eligibility process. Otherwise, the first eight respondents who met the criteria were selected to participate and I maintained individual personal contact with each participant to ensure they understood that participation was voluntary and withdrawal from the study could take place at any time until the master list was destroyed.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a concern that can be approached through careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In determining the trustworthiness of this study, I enacted the strategies of transcription, coding, and member



checking to check the accuracy of the qualitative account of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) originally made the argument for the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research as a means for reassuring the reader that the study was of significance and value (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In evaluating the trustworthiness of the qualitative data collected, I reviewed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to whether the participants' perceptions match the researcher's portrayal of them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The participants in this phenomenological study were asked to provide personal perceptions of the process in determining eligibility for special education services based on their lived experiences. The answers the participants provided were recorded and transcribed using the Zoom meeting platform and coded by hand by categorizing patterns and analyzed for themes. I identified and clarified the existing personal bias I brought to the study. Negative instances or discrepant findings were also presented to offer variation in the understanding of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

I emailed each of the participants the uniquely identified transcript of the interview conducted and participants were asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy. The participants were given 5 days to review the transcript. If after 5 days passed and there was no communication from the participant, the transcript was considered accurate.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is about how well the study has made it possible for readers to decide whether similar processes will be at work in their own settings and communities by understanding how they occur at the research site (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This study focused on individual teacher perceptions of the special education eligibility determination

process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students and may be considered transferable in a similar demographic. The analysis of the data may yield further understanding of teacher perceptions of special education eligibility identification of students, which is a federally mandated process in the United States (IDEA, 2004).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data and the extent to which research findings can be replicated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I sought to conduct eight interviews, lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. The semi structured interview protocol included a mix of more and less structured interview questions in which some questions elicited specific data required from all respondents. Following the completion of each interview, I used Zoom to transcribe each interview. The transcribed interviews were stripped of personally identifiable information and the participants were referred to by their unique pseudonym as noted on the master list. Participants received a transcript of their individual interview and were provided with the opportunity to verify their transcript for accuracy before data analysis began. Data were further analyzed through the coding process, focusing on patterns and insights related to the purpose of the research and guided by the theoretical framework (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Once the codes of data were identified, categories were established that were responsive to the research's purpose. These categories should be exhaustive, in that all data can be categorized. Additionally, categories should be mutually exclusive as a particular unit of data should fit into only one category. Categories should also be sensitive to what is in the data and conceptually congruent with the same level of abstraction characterizing all categories at the same level (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An audit trail should be created in making available to

researchers the instruments used in data collection and the subsequent analysis of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). An audit trail in a qualitative study describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry. I also maintained a research journal to memo the research process. I recorded reflections, questions, and the decisions made regarding problems, issues, or ideas that were encountered in collecting data. A running record of my interaction with the data during the analysis and interpretation process was also maintained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability implies the findings of a study are the results of the research, rather than an outcome of the researcher's biases and subjectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In establishing confirmability, qualitative researchers must be reflexive and illustrate how the data can be traced back to their origins (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The recognition of my existing bias related to the topic of study was addressed through the processes of bracketing. Epoché, or bracketing in phenomenological research, is described as a process involved in blocking biases and assumptions to explain a phenomenon in terms of its own inherent system of meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is a general predisposition one must assume before commencing a phenomenological study. In conducting the analysis of the data collected, I bracketed myself out of the study by discussing my personal experiences with the phenomenon. Janak (2018) noted that researcher involvement with their topic can alter the study's motive. These potential biases, and the possible evolution of them, require researchers to be reflexive in their practice and undergo a continual process of self-examination as part of the research process (Janak, 2018). The use of member checking to verify participants' responses for accuracy and the

identification of an audit trail in providing a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study was also used in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. The problem this study explored is that African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts may be disproportionately referred for special education services as compared to peers (Farkas et al., 2020). The following research questions guided this research:

**Research Question 1:** How do public K–12 educators perceive the special education eligibility process?

**Research Question 2:** How do public K–12 educators describe their understanding of the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process in determining special education services?

**Research Question 3:** How do public K–12 educators describe the cultural factors within their rural school districts when referring African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services?

Potential participants in this study were asked to self-identify as being over 18 years of age, a public K–12 educator, and having previously been involved in the special education referral process of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. The study participants for this phenomenological study were identified through purposive sampling. The semi structured interviews were conducted with eight participants using Zoom as an online meeting platform and included semi structured questions that intended to elicit views and opinions from

the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The intended benefit of the study was to explore factors teachers use to refer students to undergo the special education eligibility process. The data yielded from this study were coded and transcribed and themes were identified to develop a narrative of the study. Researcher reflexivity and epoche, member checking, and ethical considerations for participants were used to ensure the study's credibility, trustworthiness, dependability, and confirmability.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Eligibility for special education and related services involves the following processes: referral, evaluation planning, evaluation, and determination of eligibility by which a student is identified and qualified for services (MADESE, 2022). In this study, I used a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Semi structured interviews were conducted with public school educators to identify their perceptions regarding the special education eligibility process related to African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. This study was designed to fill the gaps in the literature and examine factors teachers use to refer students to take part in the special education eligibility process. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

**Research Question 1:** How do public K–12 educators perceive the special education eligibility process?

**Research Question 2:** How do public K–12 educators describe their understanding of the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process in determining special education services?

**Research Question 3:** How do public K–12 educators describe the cultural factors within their rural school districts when referring African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services?

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants based on specific criteria. This study's inclusion criteria included participants who were age 18 or older and a public K–12

general educator who has participated in the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

Recruitment materials were sent via email from my UNE email to each of the four building principals at the identified study site. The recruitment materials consisted of a Participant Information Sheet, the IRB approval letter, a letter addressed to principals explaining the study, and a recruitment letter to potential participants. Each principal included the Participant Information Sheet and recruitment letter in a weekly staff newsletter. I received a copy of each staff newsletter through the district superintendent to verify that the information was sent by principals. Participant recruitment efforts were focused on all four district schools within the study site to identify general educators in kindergarten through Grade 12.

The recruitment period was open for 6 weeks from the date principals shared recruitment materials with the educators in their schools. Initial identification of participants was delayed due to an issue with my recruitment email being filtered into the spam folder of the study site's email server and principals identifying that they did not receive the recruitment materials. When the email server issue was discovered, I communicated with the university's IRB to determine if an alternate email address would need to be used to send materials to principals. During this 2-week period, the problem with my original email address was resolved and materials were received by all building principals. In the following 4 weeks, potential participants responded indicating their interest or to request additional information. Two questions asked of each respondent were related to the time commitment of the interview and whether the interview could be completed during the school day. I responded that the time commitment of the interview would be 45 to 60 minutes and interviews would be scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time between myself and the participant. Interviews were completed over a 4-week period.

The eight participants who volunteered for this study included seven elementary and one middle school general educator. The participants in this study shared their experiences with the special education eligibility process, specifically involving African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. The interview questions were categorized within the general category of teacher perceptions about special education eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. Specific areas of focus included the role of race and language in determining special education need, parent participation in the special education eligibility process, academic and behavioral interventions prior to the special education process, the use of data collection in determining levels of student academic and behavioral need, accessibility of general education curriculum, the impact of culture and climate within a school, and the impact of living in a geographically isolated area in accessing academic and behavioral resources.

This chapter is comprised of three sections. In Section 1, I provide an overview of the analysis methods. In Section 2, I examine the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Lastly, in Section 3, the findings of the study are summarized.

### **Analysis Method**

Semi structured interviews were conducted and recorded individually with each participant over Zoom with the participant's approval. Each interview was conducted within a 60-minute period. After each interview, the recorded interviews were transcribed using the Zoom auto-transcription feature. I proofread each written transcript before it was sent to each participant to be member checked for accuracy. I also edited each transcript to delete any interruptions that were not pertinent to the interview. During one interview, the Internet connection was weak and Zoom froze two times. I deleted the "Are you there?" conversations. Additionally, one interview was slightly interrupted by dismissal at one of the schools where a



participant worked. The written transcripts were sent to each participant via email, and each participant was provided 5 calendar days to review, retract, or withdraw information. Each participant responded to me, verifying the transcript, within 3 days of receiving the interview transcript. None of the participants requested edits to the transcripts.

Coding involves assigning codes, which can be words or phrases, to chunks of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Each of the eight interview transcripts were reviewed and manually coded in a Microsoft Word document using a process called lean coding in which transcripts were coded using five or six categories with codes and codes were expanded as data were reviewed and rereviewed. A final code list of 25 codes was developed, which were used to identify four themes that were used to write the narrative description of the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I reread the transcripts and codes several times to ensure nothing was missed or coded inappropriately, as recommended by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016). As codes were edited, reapplied, and reorganized, they were codified to create further meaning from the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Presentation of Results and Findings**

I collected data from eight general education teachers who all described varied experiences with the special education eligibility process in a school district in the northeastern United States. Seven educators were from the district elementary school. These educators were identified as Charlotte, Ann, Mary, Karen, Bonnie, Paula, and Jane. One educator was from the district middle school and was identified as Carol. Each participant engaged in a semi structured interview in which I used the developed interview protocol to organize and guide each interview. The wording of specific questions and subsequent subquestions followed a unique and customized conversational path that was co-constructed with each participant (Ravitch & Carl,

2021). From the conversations between myself and each participant, information about each participant's personal, lived experiences as an educator were identified. Descriptive information about each participant's experience is included as a participant vignette and themes related to the identified research questions were developed.

### **Participant Vignettes**

The primary goals of qualitative interviews are to gain focused insight into individuals' lived experiences; understand how participants make sense of and construct reality in relation to the phenomenon, events, engagement, or experience in focus; and explore how individuals' experiences and perspectives relate to other study participants and perhaps prior research on similar topics (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To best understand the perspectives held by each participant, it is necessary to understand the experiences of these individuals and identify similarities and differences that are derived from comparing the experiences. In the section below, information is provided about each participant to contextualize their lived experiences as general educators and their experiences with the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

#### ***Charlotte***

Charlotte has been an educator for 8 years. Before becoming certified as an educator, she received special education training through her undergraduate and graduate programs focused on the special needs of students. She explained that the classroom to which she was assigned for her teaching practicum had students qualified for services under an IEP. Her mentor teacher worked with her to explain the process of servicing students on IEPs, but she did not attend any IEP meetings. She worked in a private school before transitioning to her current district. She has been in the current district for over 5 years. As a classroom teacher, she is assigned a small group of

students each year who have IEPs and other students who are qualified as ELLs. Each year she has been employed at the school she has referred students to the MTSS at her school, following a time period of data collection and review.

***Ann***

Ann has been employed by the current district for over 10 years and has engaged in coursework in special education through her undergraduate and graduate programs. She explained that she has worked only in her current district, in the same school, and has learned about the special education eligibility process by participating in professional development workshops in Responsive Classroom, RtI, MTSS, and behavioral analysis of students. She also stated that the most she has learned about the special education process is by working directly with students, special education liaisons, her school administrators, and parents. During her time as a teacher, she has consistently had at least five students in her classroom on an IEP, an equal number of ELLs, and she has referred at least one or two students each school year to the MTSS team for review to see if additional special education testing is needed.

***Mary***

Mary has been in her current teaching position for close to 10 years, at the elementary level. Her undergraduate program in education included only two courses related to special education. She believed her first year teaching was impacted by her lack of knowledge about special needs and challenging behaviors as she had not received much in terms of prior coursework. Her graduate program was focused on early childhood education, and she indicated that the program did not include any focus on special education. She believed her knowledge of special education came from working in the district and from the couple of years she worked with students in IEPs in her classroom. While employed in her current position, she has also

completed courses on students with high-incidence disabilities, attention-deficit disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and students with challenging behaviors. She explained that she referred students as part of the MTSS and special education eligibility process, but she spends a lot of time implementing interventions for students before choosing to refer them. She noted that she has benefitted from having administrators and behavioral specialists observe students in her classroom to provide her with feedback to inform which interventions she should use with individual students.

***Karen***

Karen has worked for the district for 14 years. She holds teaching licenses in elementary education and early childhood education. She transitioned to the district upon graduation from her undergraduate program and has worked at the same school. She explained that she had some coursework related to special education in her undergraduate program and she also completed graduate classes in special education. For the past 10 years her early childhood classroom has been identified as an inclusive setting for students in the school. She has worked extensively with students who have been previously qualified for special education, and she explained that she works with colleagues who instruct ELL students to support language acquisition and readiness skills. She has engaged in multiple professional development opportunities related to trauma-sensitive schools, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Within the school, she has collaborated with other early childhood educators in curriculum and program development for special education with an emphasis on early literacy skills, and social emotional learning.

***Bonnie***

Bonnie has worked for the district for over 15 years. She holds an undergraduate degree in elementary education and a graduate degree in reading. She transitioned to the district upon

graduation from her undergraduate program and has worked at the same school. She explained that she had some coursework in her undergraduate program related to special education but has taken advantage of professional development opportunities over her time in the district to learn more about students with disabilities. She spent 5 years as a general education classroom teacher and then transitioned to being a general education support interventionist. During her time in the district, she has attended several IEP and MTSS meetings each year to offer data analysis and input on students. Within the district, she has collaborated with other educators in curriculum and program development for ELLs and special education.

***Paula***

Paula has been employed as a general education classroom teacher and support teacher in the district for over 25 years. She holds an undergraduate degree in special education and was employed in the district as a special education teacher for her first 2 years of employment. She then became a classroom teacher. She noted the extensive changes implemented to the special education eligibility process since she first became certified as an educator. She also completed a graduate degree in reading and has been working since then to provide direct support to students in general education classrooms at the elementary level. She explained that she has observed a significant increase in the number of students who have qualified for special education services during her tenure in the district. She also noted that the community has drastically changed the number of students enrolled in the school district and its demographic makeup. She indicated that when she first started teaching in the community, there were very few students of color and class sizes were notably smaller than they are now. She further explained that she has noticed this shift in population in the past 10 years. Paula participates each year in the MTSS team process when a student with whom she has worked is referred for further review.

***Jane***

Jane has been employed for over 25 years as a teacher in special education and general education in the district. She was trained in her undergraduate program in early childhood education and in her 10th year of teaching she earned a graduate degree in special education. Her first teaching assignment was in an alternative classroom in which she instructed students with significant social-emotional needs and behaviors. She explained that it was during this assignment where she received practical experience in working with students on IEPs. When she transitioned to general education, she discovered there was a lack of on-site professional development training for teachers in how to read and interpret IEPs. When she attended her first IEP meeting as a general education teacher, she recalled feeling overwhelmed by the technical language used in the IEP and the data included in it. She explained that if she felt that overwhelmed at IEP meetings, parents must have similar experiences. She has spent many years seeking professional development opportunities to better understand the community's changing population and how she could best address students' needs. Each year she has students in her classroom who are on IEPs and are qualified as ELLs.

***Carol***

Carol has been a public-school general educator for over 20 years and worked for other school districts prior to transitioning to her current district. She engaged in special education coursework and training as part of her graduate program and through subsequent professional development opportunities in various school districts. She also has pursued additional professional development workshops independently to learn more about the needs of special education students and how to effectively implement interventions and strategies in her classroom. She discussed that prior to arriving to her current position, she engaged in several

coteaching partnerships in other districts where she worked with a special education teacher and paraprofessionals in her classroom to increase inclusion opportunities for students who may otherwise be taught in substantially separate classroom settings. She noted that much of her prior teaching experience was in working with students who are dually identified as multilingual learners and special education students. She also explained that in her previous districts there were many more multilingual faculty members who could provide direct support to these students.

### **Emerging Themes**

During data analysis, an initial code list of 164 codes was generated and reduced to a final code list of 25 codes, which was used to identify four themes. The overarching themes provided an understanding of the participants' experiences with the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and/or Hispanic/Latino students. These themes are discussed in detail in this section. The themes that were developed during the analysis process were: (a) inconsistent general education measures in addressing needs of all students; (b) importance of understanding a student's cultural background; (c) relationship building between students, teachers, and families; and (d) lack of educator training in behavioral interventions. Each of these themes emerged as participants were asked open-ended questions related to the identified research questions.

#### ***Theme 1: Inconsistent General Education Measures in Addressing Needs of All Students***

Eligibility for special education and related services involves the following processes: referral, evaluation planning, evaluation, and determination of eligibility in which a student is identified and qualified for services (MADESE, 2022). Prereferral intervention is designed to identify, develop, and implement alternative education strategies for students who have

recognized problems in the classroom before the student is referred to special education. Prereferral intervention is typically conducted by student support or the MTSS team.

When asked about responding to when a student experiences academic or behavioral difficulties, all research participants indicated that they believed a clear process was defined in the district in providing students with academic interventions prior to the special education eligibility process. Each participant cited the existence of a student support team and data-driven process for MTSS that their individual schools follow when identifying students in need. A research-based protocol outlining the existing academic data for each student as well as strategies used by classroom teachers prior to the prereferral process was used at each school. At each participant's school, the student support team comprised of a building administrator, guidance counselor, special education teacher, and general education teacher collectively reviewed the data presented by the referring teacher and an intervention plan was developed, which would be implemented for a 4- to 6-week period. Each participant was able to explain RtI academic strategies that are practiced in providing students with tiered levels of support prior to completing a referral for special education evaluation. All participants cited that there is not a consistent protocol to follow when addressing students with only behavioral needs. When asked about the process of implementing behavioral interventions in a tiered format, each participant indicated that the process at their individual school was unclear, confusing, and inconsistent. Every participant at the elementary level identified that they were aware of existing support personnel, such as a school counselor or behavioral analyst, to assist in addressing student behavioral needs but they could not articulate a formal process for accessing support. The educator from the middle school indicated that she understood the connection that may exist



between academic and behavioral needs, but she could not articulate how behaviors were addressed outside of administrative disciplinary intervention.

In referencing specific interventions for reading and math, Bonnie explained that all elementary students are assessed three times a year using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment. The MAP assessment is designed to measure a student's academic achievement and growth over time in reading and mathematics. Together with other classroom-based information, teachers use MAP results to make instructional decisions that match the needs of each child. MAP is a computer-adaptive assessment. In a computer-adaptive assessment, as a student responds to questions, the test responds to the student, adjusting up or down the difficulty of the questions presented to the student. This creates a personalized assessment for every student (Northwest Evaluation Association [NWEA], 2023). Bonnie reflected on the use of this assessment as establishing a baseline for student performance to identify what interventions may be used with a student.

Bonnie also described a second data point that is used to measure students' academic progress: the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment for reading, which was administered by the classroom teachers three times each year. The Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment is a series of texts that can be used to identify a student's current reading level and progress along a gradient of text levels over time. As a universal screening tool, meaning it was used with all students, a student's instructional level for reading would be identified for guided reading texts. The reading level is identified once the assessment is completed and compared to the Fountas and Pinnell text-level gradient (Fountas & Pinnell Literacy, 2023). The Fountas and Pinnell assessment was identified as a benchmark assessment, but Bonnie was not able to articulate clear interventions that would result from establishing a student's text level.

For ELL students, the ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS) assessment is administered as a summative assessment annually for students in kindergarten through Grade 12. This assessment was developed in 2003 as part of an educational grant awarded to the states of Wisconsin, Delaware, and Arkansas and the acronym WIDA was developed. WIDA was then changed to World Class Instructional Design and Assessment and several states, including the one in which the study site was located, joined to form an educational consortium. WIDA is a consortium of 36 states/territories dedicated to the design and implementation of high standards and equitable educational opportunities for ELLs (WIDA, 2023). As Bonnie explained, educators used ACCESS results, along with other WIDA resources, to make decisions about students' English academic language and to facilitate their language development. Students' scores reflected proficiency levels ranging from Level 1 (entering) to Level 6 (reaching). Five of the seven elementary participants referred to the MAP, Fountas and Pinnell, and ACCESS assessments as three sources of data that provide a baseline for teachers at the elementary school to identify students who may need additional academic intervention.

In considering the need for data collection as a step in the prereferral process, four of the eight participants explained that much of the data they analyze originate from the kindergarten student screening process. These four elementary teachers specifically referred to the assessment results, which allow educators to proactively support students. Paula noted,

Our (student) population has grown and with that our population of various cultures and races. We have grown as a district in using better assessments for kindergarten screenings which include bilingual assessments and assessors. For a very long time, we did not assess these incoming students properly.

The same four elementary participants also referred to the use of MAP testing data, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) data as a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of literacy skills and Aims Web (2023) in which the data are used to identify students who may need additional support or diagnostic assessment. The DIBELS assessment is a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of literacy skills. They are designed to be short (1 minute) fluency measures that can be used to regularly detect risk and monitor the development of early literacy and reading skills in kindergarten through eighth grade. The research-based subtests form an assessment system of early literacy development that allows educators to readily and reliably determine student progress (University of Oregon, n.d.).

Aims Web (2023) is a benchmark and progress-monitoring system based on direct, frequent, and continuous student assessment using brief, accurate measures of reading, math, spelling, and writing. It is an assessment system used in kindergarten through Grade 8 in the district and it supports RtI and tiered instruction (Pearson, n.d.). Each of these four teachers referred to the DIBELS and Aims Web as universal screening assessments, meaning they are administered to all students. These assessments are used three times per year and students are measured as being on or near grade level or in need of additional intervention to support individual progress in reading. In addition to the data yielded from the universal screening assessments, Mary indicated that she uses writing samples and recorded videos of students as data sources when examining the need for additional academic intervention. She explained,

I try and gather lots of different work samples. I collect student writing samples that have been developed with teacher support and some writing samples that are developed without teacher support to show what they (students) can do. I also record videos of

students reading a new read or a fluid read of a text sample that they've already read.

That also helps with gathering data for speech and language if I have a concern there. I also use scores from pre- and post-tests for math which show overall progression or lack of progress.

Participants Ann, Charlotte, and Jane clearly articulated their understanding of the process for collecting data and conducting progress monitoring as part of the RtI and MTSS processes in determining the need for additional intervention, but each also referenced the challenges that exist in conducting the data collection without the support of additional personnel in the classroom. Ann explained,

Challenges would be managing the data collection and then following the procedures in order to get those kids what they need in order to be successful. It feels like it takes a long time, and it doesn't always feel like we have the support of other staff to assist us in collecting the data.

When asked about providing supports to students following data collection, Carol indicated that the most significant issue in identifying academic need is the lack of ELL teachers available to instruct students. She also referenced the use of MAP data, yearly state assessment data in reading and math, and formative as well as summative assessments that measure student progress in the classroom.

Each participant shared a common perception of the functions of MTSS and RtI in each of the schools in which they work. The key components of MTSS include universal screening of all students early in the school year, tiers of interventions that can be amplified in response to levels of need, ongoing data collection and continual assessment, schoolwide approach to expectations and supports, and parent involvement (Farmer, 2020; Hott et al., 2021). All

interview respondents explained the process that is followed when a student is presented to the MTSS team at each school. The MTSS teams at the two schools represented by the participants are comprised of educators including a building administrator, a school counselor, a special education teacher, and grade level teachers. Once the data are collected by an individual teacher, a presentation of the data is made to the team to solicit additional suggestions for interventions that can be implemented for the student in need. Three of the participants expressed their concern about the amount of time the MTSS process takes as a students' progress is tracked for 6–8 weeks once academic interventions are implemented.

One participant, Jane, was the only respondent who could articulate the process of presenting a student to the MTSS team when working with a student who presented with behavioral concerns. She noted,

Behavior is tricky because it is more situational. It might not be as long term, so sometimes it can just be a situation where there could be a change in the home, which can be more of a short-term behavior. If it is more long-term behavior, you would follow the same procedure where you collect data in the classroom. If there are signs of attentional issues you keep track of their moods, look at what they are eating for food, ask them if they are getting sleep at home, connecting with parents, and then bring the data to MTSS to identify strategies or interventions. This may include having the school psychologist or behaviorist come in to observe them. Convening the MTSS team allows us to identify suggestions and plan to move forward in assisting the student.

The other six participants from the elementary level identified specific behaviors such as task avoidance, lack of social skills, explosive behaviors such as property or classroom destruction, and language barriers for students whose first language is not English. Each

elementary participant noted that students who did not understand expected behaviors and routines often engage in disruptive behaviors to gain attention. The participants from the elementary level emphasized the benefit of collaborating with colleagues outside of the MTSS process to identify strategies that could be used with students. Carol, the participant from the middle school, indicated,

I'm not necessarily sure the MTSS process is streamlined for behavior concerns when we talk about meeting the need for a student. The MTSS process is lengthy because it is geared toward academic need. If we had another MTSS process, where I need to brainstorm with other colleagues, the need could be quickly addressed.

Each participant identified specific practices they engage in by providing tiers of instruction when addressing students' academic and behavioral needs.

The RtI framework uses a multiple-tier structure of identifying students with challenges in learning and educators identify and implement interventions for those challenges. Tier 1 involves the provision of high-quality classroom instruction and screenings for students. In Tier 2, those students who were identified in Tier 1, but did not make adequate progress, are provided with targeted interventions in a small group format. Tier-3 students are those who continue to struggle towards making effective progress in accessing the curriculum and are referred for further evaluation through the eligibility determination process for special education (RtI Action Network, n.d.). All eight participants identified a Tier-2 process they each followed in providing instruction to ELL students who were primarily identified as originating from a Spanish-speaking country. When asked about the curriculum used in their specific classrooms, participants from the elementary school referenced the use of programs and lessons related to phonemic awareness and language development. Mary explained that in working with ELLs in

her class, it is necessary to create small learning groups and integrate as many visual cues as possible. Karen, Bonnie, and Paula noted that some ELL students are placed in RtI groups that focus on phonemic awareness to learn letters and sounds. Karen explained,

I've seen huge progress in some students who receive a double dose of phonemic instruction, and it has made a huge difference. The gaps and scale deficits go across every subject. Keeping the ELL students in a small group as much as possible gives them the extra attention needed before referring them to special education.

Charlotte, Ann, Karen, and Carol referenced that although some curriculum materials are provided with Spanish language supplements, these resources are not often useful as students may not be literate in their home language, which makes it difficult to access the content. Each of these participants expressed that there are very few resources to support math instruction and the most success they find in their instruction is when they can pair students with limited English language with students who speak Spanish but are able to interpret the content or expectations of a task. As a fluent Spanish-speaking educator, Mary explained that she can modify her curriculum to gradually build on the skills of Spanish-speaking students.

Each participant interviewed stated that due to the lack of resources and materials to effectively instruct ELLs within their classrooms, the time period between administering Tier-2 interventions and following up with Tier-3 interventions, when students are formally referred to the special education eligibility process, seemed to be much shorter and not always followed with fidelity.

Each participant was able to identify the data sources they rely on to determine if a student needed to be referred to the student support or MTSS team. A gap existed in how the benchmark assessment results were used in identifying specific interventions. Each participant

was asked about a specific student who they referred to the student support team so that intervention strategies could be identified and implemented. Paula, Mary, Charlotte, Ann, and Karen articulated that when they have referred students to the student support team at their school, each received suggestions to be implemented but they also expressed that they found the process to be frustrating because each felt that the students they were referring needed immediate specialized instruction, which could only be obtained through a formal special education evaluation.

Each participant expressed their experiences of the special education eligibility process and the practices associated with varied perspectives about acquiring academic and behavioral assistance for their students. Four of the eight participants identified that they felt the only way to secure help for a student was to develop an IEP. Charlotte stated,

When a student isn't receiving services, it puts a lot more pressure on me as a teacher and while I am working with a small group to address student needs, the students who are on or above grade level do not get my attention. The only way I can get extra help in my classroom is to have students on IEPs.

In reference to whether race plays a role in educators referring students to the special education eligibility process, Ann identified the need to provide students with increased time in a classroom setting before making a referral. Ann further stated,

If I bring a student to MTSS who I feel needs additional support or testing I am told I need to do more in the classroom because the student may have not spent enough time in the country, or they have gaps in their learning. Having a student tested shouldn't depend on how long they have been in the country or if they have missed school.



The remaining four participants believed that more training must occur about how to support students in the Tier-2 level of academic and behavioral intervention before referring students to special education services. One participant shared that this belief has been reflected in shaping the school's culture and climate. In reference to students' academic readiness, Mary indicated,

I know that teachers always blame the year before them. There are teachers who just blame the fact that "they" don't speak English. "They" didn't go to preschool. "Their" parents can't help them and rely on these stereotypes and excuses. This is a common belief held by many because it is repeated often rather than looking for a solution of how we can help these students while we have them.

Another participant shared her perception about behavioral intervention. Carol responded, "Disruptive behaviors do not impact my perception that additional supports through special education are needed. Often, the behavior is attention seeking or it's really a matter of identifying an academic need that is not being met." Beyond the perceptions of the processes and practices used in identifying the need to engage a student in the special education eligibility process, several participants shared their perceptions of the role that culture and race serve in addressing the needs of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. To understand more about the reasons why this process between Tiers 2 and 3 seemed to be abbreviated, I asked specific interview questions about the importance of understanding cultural differences among African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students within their classrooms.

### ***Theme 2: The Importance of Understanding a Student's Cultural Background***

Disproportionate identification of children of color results from problems in both general and special education (Morgan, 2020). Studies have examined disproportionate representation in

special education and identified various factors to explain the presence of disproportionate representation including teachers' race and ethnicity bias, school-level characteristics such as student population size, and rural/urban school district classification (Kozlowski, 2015; Shifrer, 2018; Strassfeld, 2017; Woodson & Harris, 2018). The disproportionality research on practice-based factors maintains two theoretical arguments. One is a cultural mismatch between the middle class, White teachers, and school administrators with low-income and/or racial and ethnic minority student populations (Frey, 2019; Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014; Kozlowski, 2015). The more relevant theoretical argument is based on gaps in the development and implementation of interventions, which cause disproportionate outcomes (Berkeley et al., 2020; Farmer, 2020; Maydosz, 2014; Voulgarides et al., 2017).

In interviews conducted with eight general education teachers who work in a rural community setting, respondents identified that students' interrupted education, the impact of personal trauma on students, and parent involvement in the education of their children all served as reasons why these students may be referred for special education services more often than those of their White peers. The student population discussed by the participants in this study experienced significant cultural differences from those of their White peers. The participants cited the students' abilities to access consistent educational experiences throughout their time of enrollment in school as a major difference. The students discussed experienced challenges traveling from their home countries to the community and the parents or extended family members with whom the students resided were limited in their own education and experienced significant language barriers in communicating to the school about the needs.

Each participant was asked about the role of culture and race in determining the need to engage students in the special education eligibility process. The consensus among the

participants was that certain barriers exist in the community based on race and that language was the driving factor behind that perception. All of the participants cited the growing diversity within the community's population and the fact that they believed the school district continued to be challenged by meeting the needs of students who are classified as multilingual. The lack of acknowledgement and preconceived notions held by some participants about individual cultural beliefs among families were cited as issues. As an educator with many years in the district, Ann noted that she does not let the opinions of others influence her beliefs. She stated, "Things are brought up within the community, within the school, with the growing diverse population. I wish things were embraced more and acknowledged and taught about other cultures, more than they actually are." Another participant, Jane, indicated that most educators in the community have the belief that all students have the right to the same education, but there are those who have conflicting beliefs, which she believed were not reflective of the community.

In referencing her interactions with families, Mary noted that, in her experience, there were populations who think differently about the label of special education, and she needed to be conscious of how to approach parents and guardians with concerns of students not achieving grade-level expectations. An example provided an insight to the perceived cultural understanding among families about the label associated with requiring extra support in school. Mary explained,

We had a student who was El Salvadorian, and the parents were embarrassed that their child was perceived as being different. It was clear that he needed more support than the general education classroom could give him. We had to really help the parents understand that their child had more needs than we were able to address with the standard approach in the classroom.

Mary further disclosed that a focus on engaging the parents from the beginning of the process was integral in gaining trust and support from the family towards the staff at school and having an interpreter who spoke their language at each meeting or sent an email to the parents in the target language was equally as important in providing the support the student needed. Another prominent reflection that emerged when discussing teacher perceptions related to educational access versus educational disability.

Each participant described that their students came from Hispanic/Latino families who are employed in the seasonal hospitality, landscaping, and contractor service industries. The educators interviewed cited interrupted education as being a leading cause for the lack of academic and behavioral progression of many of their Hispanic/Latino students. One participant, Karen, indicated that significant gaps in student learning occurred when students left for the 4 months in which families do not have employment due to businesses closing for the off-season. These families returned to their home countries to work, and students were often not enrolled in a school while they are absent from their school in the United States. She noted,

The gaps and scale deficits are so large that you have to address them in every subject.

These kids become frustrated when they can't do a skill that other kids have mastered.

This causes the students to become academically and behaviorally frustrated.

Bonnie explained that language is also impacted when students live in two different countries but are primarily educated in English for 5 months out of the school year. She explained,

Some words and idiomatic language do not culturally translate. Sometimes the kids don't understand terms or slang, and other words that some view as common cause me to have to often think on the spot on how to best be able to explain the terms. I start with students

in September and then have to start from the beginning again in April of the same school year.

Three participants indicated that the need for families to return to their home countries to find employment was reflective of the culture of the families and the economic limitations that existed in the community during the off-season. When asked about the impact living in a geographically isolated area had on their perception when considering interventions for Hispanic/Latino students, the three participants cited that families are economically challenged to stay in the community due to lack of employment and lack of sustainable housing. The three participants cited that interrupted education does not always lead to special education referral, but student absences could often lead to the retention of students in a grade level until mastery of academic skills was achieved. In her experience, Jane indicated that students who miss a significant amount of time in school are considered for retention as these students do not achieve the expected progress when assessed near the end of the year. She further explained that even when students complete the required work in the classroom, they are considered as nonachieving because of the months of absences accrued. She concluded that it is only when an ELL is retained do they become considered in need of additional supports and services. Another factor, as Mary noted, was that there are not enough enrichment programs after school or in the summer for multilingual students in the district. In referring to multilingual students, she included Spanish-speaking students as well as African American/Black students who speak Haitian Creole and Jamaican Patois (Patwa). She stated,

I think multilingual students come in with less education than a child who is White and are below level from the beginning. While the child is exposed to English while enrolled in my classroom, they go to their home country on extended breaks and speak their native

language. This factor creates an interruption in their education and retention due to lack of progress.

Paula explained that interrupted education can negatively impact not only academics, but also behaviors. She noted that when students are not exposed to a consistent routine throughout the school year, behaviors are affected and students are perceived as needing services. She stated,

The students get categorized as a non-achieving student, but they may be very smart. Not learning boundaries because they may have not been in school consistently is viewed as them not being mature enough to be promoted to the next grade.

A second factor that was identified within the theme of the importance of understanding a student's cultural background related to the trauma some students encountered in the journey they made in traveling from their home country to the United States. When asked about a student for whom she directly participated in the special education eligibility process, Ann referenced a student who traveled with his family from El Salvador and experienced a traumatic border crossing. She explained,

He had a lot of family trauma and it continued when he enrolled in school here. As teachers, we were all in survival mode with him. He was really smart but was so tainted by his experience, he couldn't access the curriculum. I feel like in some of these cases, a lot of the trauma-based kids who come into our system from other countries are allowed to do what they need to do carry on through the day. We don't actually take the time to really figure out what they are capable of doing. This approach affects how quickly a student is referred to testing for an IEP.

In working directly with a student prior to referral, Charlotte explained that she worked with a student who had been exhibiting academic and behavioral issues following his arrival from El Salvador. She further revealed that this student had been educated in a half-day school program while in El Salvador, and he and his family spent time in a detention center when they arrived in the United States. When this student was presented to the MTSS team in her school, Charlotte was told the student had not spent enough time in school and needed to receive Tier-1 instruction in the general education and ELL classrooms before he would be considered to receive extra support for academics and counseling. The IDEA (2004) explicitly identifies that LDs do not include learning problems that are primarily the result of limited English proficiency or lack of exposure to instruction. In both of these instances, the participants interviewed highlighted the need to collaborate with parents or other family members to learn more about the students' needs.

Each participant interviewed referenced the varied level of engagement parents have in supporting their children in school and, subsequently, the special education eligibility process. The perceived cultural factors expressed by the participants that attributed to this variability included parent work schedules, parent lack of understanding of what they needed to do to support their child at home, and lack of effective communication due to language barriers between school and home. Three participants cited examples of providing enrichment materials for students to take home to practice skill building in word recognition and reading. In each instance, there was no literate adult to assist the students while the parents were at work and often the children would not see their parents before bedtime to share what occurred in their day. Five participants discussed the language barriers that contributed to ineffective communication between school and home about student progress. Bonnie revealed,

I try not to get too technical with what I'm saying, because I'm never sure if what I am saying is being interpreted correctly through the interpreter to the parent. I try to gauge their understanding. I ask myself, is the message getting across? I've found with non-English speaking parents that you can definitely tell when they are frustrated when the message they are trying to communicate isn't getting across.

Both Carol and Charlotte indicated that as a school district, more needed to be done in educating parents on how to best support their children. Each participant had very similar views on the impact of parent involvement in the overall academic and behavioral progress. These perceptions are discussed in more detail within the next theme.

### ***Theme 3: Relationship Building Between Teachers, Students, and Families***

Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualized children's development within nested systems related to their lives and posited that a child is not only influenced by the microsystem-level interactions of close relationships, such as those with parents, teachers, and peers, but also by mesosystem-level relationships that occur between microsystems (Paat, 2013). Interviews conducted with general education teachers in a rural school district revealed perceptions that were influenced by relationships with colleagues, students, and parents.

Four participants identified the need to effectively collaborate with colleagues in general and special education to address the academic and behavioral needs of their African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. A prominent perception of the participants was the need to work closely with colleagues who supported ELLs in a separate classroom setting. Carol emphasized the importance of the relationship she had with the ELL educator with whom she shared students in adapting curriculum and building vocabulary. Paula noted that in her role, she works with students in a small group setting outside of the classroom and can sometimes be



challenged by a student's behavior. She explained that she viewed her role as supportive to the work being done in the classroom and would need to collaborate with the classroom teacher to address any behavioral concerns that arose. Charlotte and Jane noted that they relied on the support of general education and special education teachers affiliated with their grade level to brainstorm ideas in addressing student needs prior to making referrals to the MTSS team or for special education services.

Teachers who foster positive relationships with their students create classroom environments more conducive to learning and meet students' developmental, emotional, and academic needs (Cristine et al., 2022). Each participant interviewed emphasized the importance of developing a relationship with students while considering their individual circumstances associated with their home lives, language barriers, and resources available in the district. Three participants cited their ability to have strong relationships with students based on having taught siblings in previous years. Another participant, Carol, reflected on the fact that the geographic isolation of the community influenced her perception of the availability of interventions and resources to her students. She noted that this perception impacted her desire to be more focused in building stronger relationships with her ELL students to provide them with the supports they needed. Three participants, Jane, Bonnie, and Charlotte perceived their role as one of advocacy in building and maintaining relationships with students. Each noted the importance of engaging in individual check-ins with students to gauge student understanding. Charlotte provided an example of how she addressed a multilingual student who presented disruptive behaviors in her classroom:

I start by asking the student 'did you have a good night's sleep? Did you eat breakfast this morning?' If the student continues to have tricky behaviors, I will have them go for a

walk, provide them with fidgets, or suggest they take a break on an alternative seat, such as a wobbly stool. I usually use Google translate to make sure that a student is understanding what I am saying.

When presented with a language barrier, all participants identified the use of a translation app on their phone or the use of nonverbal cues such as “thumbs up or thumbs down” or the use of colored pieces of paper to measure comprehension. All participants also indicated that establishing and maintaining a sense of community and belonging, as well as fostering peer relationships, also attributed to the progress of their students who were identified as needing academic and behavioral supports.

Research shows that teachers’ relationships with students’ parents impact outcomes across domains. This relationship is impacted by many factors as well, including teachers’ attitudes towards working with certain students and families (Grace & Gerdes, 2019). In establishing a strong teacher–parent connection, each participant expressed a perceived need for the school district to do more in engaging parents and families of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. In reflecting on her own perceptions of how parent–teacher relationships impact the progress of ELL students in her classroom, Karen explained,

My students come from different cultures and share their experiences. They want to learn a new language because it is something they can teach their parents. When their siblings pick them up from school because their parents are working, they share what they learn with them. It’s been a beautiful thing to learn about many cultures and I think if we celebrated it more, the parents would probably feel more included to come into the school. I think sometimes they don’t realize how much we are celebrating their kids at school.

In addressing school–home communication, Jane expressed a perceived need to provide parents with more frequent updates of their child’s progress in their target language during the school year. She cited an example of a parent of a Hispanic/Latino student who was informed at the end of the school year that his child would be retained due to lack of progress and attendance. The student’s retention came as a surprise to both the teacher and parent. She also explained that even though the student had completed the work required, there were perceptions held by others, based on standardized test scores, that the student was not prepared to advance to the next grade.

In addressing the need for cohesive home–school communication, Charlotte, Ann, Mary, Bonnie, and Carol indicated that they consistently engaged in communication with parents in an effort to have support at home for their students. Each explained that they developed modified resources and games in which students could engage with their parents or family members to practice skills. Each participant expressed that if academic or behavioral concerns existed with individual students, parents were included in the initial communication to school personnel.

One participant discussed her interaction with a parent of an African American/Black student and how she collaborated with the parent to address the academic concerns she held for her child. Paula explained that a classroom teacher alerted her to the concerns that a parent had for her child related to his overall progress in school. As a White parent of an adopted Black child, the parent explained that she wanted to make sure he would be provided an equitable education. Paula noted that although she was providing the student with academic supports, she was also supporting the parent who, according to Paula, frequently asserted that she needed to do everything she could to support her child because opportunities afforded to him would not be the same as those provided to White children. Paula concluded by stating that even after providing the student with 10 weeks of intervention, additional support was needed, and she used the data

collected during the intervention period to assist in the development of the IEP. None of the participants cited interactions with parents of African American/Black students who were Black.

#### ***Theme 4: Lack of Educator Training in Behavioral Interventions***

Recent research on creating safe, inclusive, supportive, and fair school climates indicates that many schools and districts across the country have taken steps to implement fair student discipline approaches that keep students safely in learning environments. Yet nationwide data continue to suggest that some school practices, such as suspensions, expulsions, and the use of corporal punishment, harm or unnecessarily push students out of school for behavior that does not pose a threat to others or the student themselves. These practices often disproportionately affect students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities (Nese et al., 2021). Research continues to demonstrate the harmful effects of high rates of exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., office discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions) on students (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). For example, students who experience high rates of exclusion are more likely to have future behavioral problems, drop out, and be involved with juvenile justice systems than students who experience none or low rates (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). When students are removed from the educational environment, they miss critical academic and social content, and unwanted behavior may be reinforced by escaping aversive interactions or unwanted tasks. As a result, it is clear that exclusionary discipline is ineffective in improving student behavior and instead exacerbates behavioral and academic skill deficits (Morris & Perry, 2016).

The eight general education teachers interviewed as part of this study provided their perceptions on the issues they encounter in addressing behaviors of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. The participants were asked about the value their school community

placed in proactively supporting students of color and/or bilingual students who experience behavioral challenges. Each of these participants stated they believed the only way they could effectively address recurring behaviors was to refer students to the special education eligibility process. The participants cited a lack of teacher preparation through professional development, the use of positive behavior intervention, and the intervention of administrators in addressing student behaviors.

A significant finding identified through the interviews conducted was the need for more training in providing behavioral interventions for students who may not be making academic progress due to interfering behaviors. Each participant identified tiered strategies that are used in their classrooms to address disruptive student behaviors including de-escalation techniques, the use of behavior-intervention plans, positive reinforcement through the use of earned rewards, and the use of school counselors to address long-term issues with students. With the exception of one participant, all participants explained that the only clear professional development in behavior management received was initial training provided about Responsive Classroom. Responsive Classroom is an evidence-based approach to teaching and discipline that focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness (Responsive Classroom, 2022). Strategies used as part of Responsive Classroom include a morning classroom meeting, taking a break, using a buddy classroom to provide students with another space to process, and consistently using positive language in focusing the student to alter their behavior. It is a Tier-1 program identified within RtI and is used with all students at the school where seven out of the eight participants teach. RtI is a multitiered approach to the early identification of students with learning and behavior needs (Barrio, 2017). The RtI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general

education classroom (RtI Action Network, n.d.). Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning. These services may be provided by a variety of personnel, including general education teachers, special educators, and specialists. Progress is closely monitored to assess both the learning rate and level of performance of individual students. Educational decisions about the intensity and duration of interventions are based on individual student response to instruction (RtI Action Network, n.d.).

As educators who infrequently experienced behavioral issues, Bonnie and Paula noted that they were unsure about what the school does for behavioral interventions. A common belief that counselors directly address these issues existed but only for students with identified social-emotional needs. Each participant articulated that a code of conduct exists at each school and when behaviors become unsafe to the individual student or to other students, building administrators intervene.

As administrators, school principals and assistant principals help improve the educational experience for students and staff. Student success depends largely on the development of a positive school climate, in which each student learns and grows academically, socially, and emotionally (Veletić et al., 2023). The participants of this study were unanimous in their assertion that they feel professionally supported by building administration but perceive a disconnect in the role the administrators have in assisting them with disruptive behaviors in their classroom on a daily basis.

Four participants indicated that they would not engage the support of the building administrators in addressing disruptive behaviors unless a student was being harmful or dangerous to themselves or others. The perception held by these teachers was that the building administrators were too busy attending to their duties and meetings to be called in to classrooms

for behavior issues. Carol noted that when she felt targeted by the behaviors of an individual student, relevant information regarding the student was not shared with her by the administration and the student eventually engaged in property destruction within her classroom. Carol also expressed that she was unsure if the student was assessed as a consequence by the administration. This participant also perceived that the code of conduct was inconsistently administered to students across the student population.

All participants expressed that building administrators were proactive in communicating with parents and guardians by utilizing appropriate translation and interpretation supports once a serious behavioral infraction occurred. Half of the participants articulated that administrators should engage in proactive and positive communication with families to address a larger behavioral issue from developing.

A prevalent perception expressed by each of the participants who taught at the elementary level revealed that language was a significant barrier in addressing student behaviors among the Hispanic/Latino students. In referencing African American/Black students, these same participants cited the connection between individual students and their siblings, and the perceived lack of support received from the home, as the reason why the students were not making behavioral progress. Each participant interviewed articulated that there is a system in place to address student behaviors by administration, but each participant also indicated that additional training is necessary to learn how to apply behavioral strategies throughout the school day.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African

American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Eight participants from the same school district in the northeastern United States shared their lived experiences with the special education eligibility process involving African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. The interview questions were categorized within the general category of teacher perceptions about special education eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. Specific areas of focus included the role of race and language in determining special education need, parent participation in the special education eligibility process, academic and behavioral interventions prior to the special education process, the use of data collection in determining level of student academic and behavioral need, accessibility of general education curriculum, the impact of culture and climate within a school, and the impact of living in a geographically isolated area in accessing academic and behavioral resources.

Upon completion of the interviews, an initial code list of 164 codes was generated and reduced to a final code list of 25 codes, which was used to identify four themes. The overarching themes provided an understanding of the participants' experiences with the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and/or Hispanic/Latino students. The themes that were developed during the analysis process were: (a) inconsistent general education measures in addressing needs of all students; (b) importance of understanding a student's cultural background; (c) relationship building between students, teachers, and families; and (d) lack of educator training in behavioral interventions.

The following chapter offers the conclusion to this study. Chapter 5 discusses the interpretation and importance of findings as they relate to the research questions. It also discusses the implications of the results and recommendations to inform teacher perceptions of the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino



students. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for further study, linking conclusions and how the information may be disseminated.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. Federal legislation provides guidelines and regulations designed to promote equitable assessment practices during the comprehensive evaluation and eligibility determination process (IDEA, 2004). Despite these efforts, children from culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and economically diverse backgrounds continue to be disproportionately (both under and overrepresented) in several of the special education disability categories (Raines et al., 2012). Disproportionality has been linked to categories that rely more on clinical judgment for making a classification decision (Overton, 2016). Many African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino children are classified as mildly disabled (Overton, 2016; Skrtic et al., 2021). Although this makes special education services available to these and other children who need them, contention endures as to whether disability classification also is racially (and ethnically) biased (Overton, 2016; Skrtic et al., 2021). The problem explored in this study was African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts may be disproportionately referred for special education services as compared to peers (Farkas et al., 2020).

This study focused on three research questions aimed at guiding this study following a comprehensive review of the existing literature as it relates to the special education eligibility process, participant perceptions of the use of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process, and whether cultural factors influenced participant perceptions when referring African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students to the special education eligibility process.

The following research questions were developed to examine the participants' lived experiences with the special education eligibility process:

**Research Question 1:** How do public K–12 educators perceive the special education eligibility process?

**Research Question 2:** How do public K–12 educators describe their understanding of the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process in determining special education services?

**Research Question 3:** How do public K–12 educators describe the cultural factors within their rural school districts when referring African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services?

Although multiple studies have acknowledged the equity implications of disproportionality (Artiles, 2015; Aylward et al., 2021; Cruz & Rodl, 2018), the phenomena are rarely examined within rural settings (Barrio, 2017). Nearly 20% of students in the United States attend school in a rural community and over a million of these children receive special education and related services (Aylward et al., 2021). As evidenced by the research, the number of students qualified for special education services in rural school districts has incrementally increased over the past 20 years (Aylward et al., 2021; Provasnik et al., 2007; Showalter et al., 2019).

The theoretical lens through which this study was examined was SVSC. School climate is defined as the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school (Rudasill et al., 2018). For the purposes of this study, this framework was used to examine experiences of public K–12 teachers in determining eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education. The SVSC is situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological

systems theory. First published in 1979, ecological systems theory views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs (Paat, 2013). A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, such as the scaffolding or frame, of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research conducted in this study addressed the gaps in the literature, which included identifying participant perceptions about the special education eligibility process for students living in a rural environment and the experiences in applying consistent academic and behavioral interventions prior to referring a student for special education services.

Qualitative data were collected through semi structured interviews conducted with participants to understand the lived experiences of the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in a rural community. Participants interviewed for this study included eight public school general educators who self-identified as having experience working with African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in the special education eligibility process. All participants were part of the same rural school district in the northeastern part of the United States and worked in kindergarten–Grade 8. After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, each of the eight interview transcripts were reviewed and manually coded in a Microsoft Word document using a process called lean coding in which transcripts were coded using five or six categories with codes, and codes were expanded as data were reviewed and rereviewed. A final code list of 25 codes was developed and used to identify four themes that were used to write the narrative description of the data analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The four emergent themes were: (a) inconsistent general education measures in addressing needs of all students; (b) importance of understanding a student’s cultural

background; (c) relationship building between students, teachers, and families; and (d) lack of educator training in behavioral interventions. This chapter discusses the interpretation and importance of the findings, implications, and recommendations for action and further study.

### **Interpretation and Importance of Findings**

Data were collected throughout this research from eight participants using semi structured interviews. The interview questions were categorized within the general category of teacher perceptions about special education eligibility of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. Specific areas of focus included the role of race and language in determining special education need, parent participation in the special education eligibility process, academic and behavioral interventions prior to the special education process, the use of data collection in determining level of student academic and behavioral need, accessibility of general education curriculum, the impact of culture and climate within a school, and the impact of living in a geographically isolated area in accessing academic and behavioral resources. Participants were asked to describe individual lived experiences of the special education eligibility process by providing examples and details as well as how the process could be improved within their school district.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question, “How do public K–12 educators perceive the special education eligibility process?” was developed to explore the lived experiences of public-school general education teachers with their engagement in the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. Eligibility for special education and related services involves the following processes: referral, evaluation planning, evaluation, and determination of eligibility in which a student is identified and qualified for services (MADESE,

2022). Each participant articulated that they had a clear understanding of the processes in establishing special education eligibility for students. Each participant focused only on the prereferral process when sharing their perceptions of when a student may require special education services. Prereferral intervention is designed to identify, develop, and implement alternative education strategies for students who have recognized problems in the classroom before the student is referred to special education (Fish, 2019; Hoover & Erickson, 2015). Prereferral intervention is typically conducted by student support or the MTSS team (Berkeley et al., 2020). Recent research has suggested that the disproportionate representation of students in special education can be reduced through the appropriate use of academic and behavioral intervention models such as RtI, evidence-based practices, and MTSS (Voulgarides et al., 2017).

Inconsistencies emerged among the eight participants when each shared their experiences with prereferral intervention. When asked about responding to when a student experiences academic or behavioral difficulties, all research participants indicated that they believed a clear process was defined in the district in providing students with academic interventions prior to the special education eligibility process. Each participant cited the existence of a student support team and data-driven process for MTSS that their individual schools follow when identifying students in need. All participants cited there was not a consistent protocol to follow when addressing students with only behavioral needs. When asked about the process of implementing behavioral interventions in a tiered format, each participant indicated that the process at their individual school was unclear, confusing, and inconsistent. The seven participants at the elementary level identified that they were aware of existing support personnel, such as a school counselor or behavioral analyst, to assist in addressing student behavioral needs, but they could not articulate a formal process for accessing support. The one educator from the middle school

indicated that she understood the connection that may exist between academic and behavioral needs, but she could not articulate how behaviors were addressed outside of administrative disciplinary intervention.

The key components of MTSS include universal screening of all students early in the school year, tiers of interventions that can be amplified in response to levels of need, ongoing data collection and continual assessment, schoolwide approach to expectations and supports, and parent involvement (Farmer, 2020; Hott et al., 2021). Five of the seven elementary participants, Bonnie, Mary, Paula, Ann, and Charlotte, referred to the MAP, Fountas and Pinnell, and ACCESS assessments as three sources of data that provide a baseline for teachers at the elementary school to identify students who may need additional academic intervention.

In referencing specific interventions for reading and math, another participant, Bonnie, explained that all elementary students are assessed three times a year using the MAP assessment. The MAP assessment is a universal assessment designed to measure a student's academic achievement and growth over time in reading and mathematics (NWEA, 2023). Bonnie further explained that this assessment adjusts questions and prompts based on student answers, which further identifies skill level. From the results of the MAP assessment, educators can identify specific individual or small group interventions associated with reading comprehension, phonemic awareness, or reading fluency. The Fountas and Pinnell assessment as a universal screening tool established a student's instructional reading level, which informed which guided-reading texts would be appropriate for each student (Fountas & Pinnell Literacy, 2023). Bonnie was not able to articulate clear interventions that would result from establishing a student's text level. As a summative assessment, ACCESS was referenced as a measure to determine a student's level of English language acquisition and proficiency. None of the participants were

able to establish a clear connection between the use of ACCESS scores in informing the need for specialized instruction, through special education eligibility, for a student whose primary language is not English. Each participant was able to identify the data sources they rely on to determine if a student needed to be referred to the student support or MTSS team. A gap existed in participants' responses in how the benchmark assessment results from the Fountas and Pinnell and ACCESS testing were used in identifying specific interventions for students.

According to Preast et al. (2023), assessments for screening and intervention planning have traditionally been separate procedures in school-based practice, with the former used to identify general problems and the latter used to inform treatment approaches for those identified through screening (Preast et al., 2023). Research suggests that effective academic interventions are matched to students based on assessment data (Preast et al., 2023). A variety of different models can guide intervention selection and the instructional hierarchy represents one such model for use in academic screening (Preast et al., 2023). However, there is very little research that uses a screening model to differentiate between behavior and academic difficulties and their appropriately matched interventions.

Each participant described their lived experiences of the special education eligibility process and the practices associated with varied perspectives about acquiring academic and behavioral assistance for their students. Four of the eight participants identified that they felt the only way to secure help for a student was to develop an IEP, which is a plan developed for students who complete the entire special education eligibility process. The steps of this process include referral, evaluation planning, evaluation, and determination of eligibility in which a student is identified and qualified for services (IDEA, 2004).



Participants were asked about whether a student's race plays a role in educators referring students to the special education eligibility process. In reference to whether race plays a role in educators referring students to the special education eligibility process, Ann identified the need to provide students with increased time in a classroom setting before making a referral. Ann further stated,

If I bring a student to MTSS who I feel needs additional support or testing I am told I need to do more in the classroom because the student may have not spent enough time in the country, or they have gaps in their learning. Having a student tested shouldn't depend on how long they have been in the country or if they have missed school.

Four of the eight participants believed more professional development training for general educators must occur in supporting students in the Tier-2 levels of academic and behavioral intervention before referring students to special education services. One participant, Mary, shared that this belief has been reflected in shaping the school's culture and climate. She explained that the teachers with whom she works often place blame on the classroom teachers from the previous year regarding academic readiness. She further explained that some teachers account for the lack of academic progress on students' inability to speak English or the perception of some educators who believe parents do not want to, or are unable to, assist their children in academics.

Understanding students' cultural background emerged as a significant perception among the eight participants in engaging in and experiencing the prereferral component of the special education eligibility process. The participants identified that African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students' interrupted education, the impact of personal trauma on these students,

and parent involvement in the education of their children all served as reasons why these students may be referred for special education services more often than those of their White peers. The consensus among the participants was that certain barriers exist in the community based on race and that language was the driving factor behind that perception.

All of the participants cited the growing diversity within the community's population and the fact that they believed the school district continued to be challenged by meeting the needs of students who are classified as multilingual. The lack of acknowledgement and preconceived notions held by some participants about individual cultural beliefs among families were cited as issues. Ann noted that she does not let the opinions of others influence her beliefs: "Things are brought up within the community, within the school, with the growing diverse population. I wish things were embraced more and acknowledged and taught about other cultures, more than they actually are." Another participant, Jane, indicated that most educators in the community have the belief that all students have the right to the same education, but there are those who have conflicting beliefs, which she believed were not reflective of the community. Understanding the culture of the educational environment and community in which educators work and live is a critical component of understanding the disproportionality within the eligibility identification process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students (Artiles, 2013; Morgan, 2020; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). When asked about a student for whom she directly participated in the special education eligibility process, Ann referenced a student who traveled with his family from El Salvador and experienced a traumatic border crossing. She further stated that she felt the school and district could do a better job in taking the time to determine a student's level of need based on their experienced trauma.

The perceptions of these participants align to recent research that indicates youth from socially disadvantaged and racially marginalized groups report disproportionate exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Bernard et al., 2020; Sacks & Murphey, 2018). ACEs are a broad set of childhood adversities that can be potentially traumatic (Plumb et al., 2016). In a nationally representative sample, 61% of African American and 51% of Latinx youth reported at least one ACE, in contrast with 40% of White and 23% of Asian children (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students may have cultural and racial differences when compared to their peers, which may cause educators to interpret their educational needs as being higher and therefore increase the likelihood of referring them for special education services (Morgan, 2020). Failure to consider racial bias and racial and stress trauma experiences could lead to altered perceptions regarding students' academic engagement, behaviors, abilities, or interests (Saleem et al., 2022). For example, adults may mislabel behaviors as disengagement or an inability to perform academically (Saleem et al., 2022).

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question, “How do public K–12 educators describe their understanding of the implementation of academic and behavioral interventions as part of the eligibility process in determining special education services?” was developed to understand participants' lived experiences of how academic and behavioral interventions are initiated and implemented at the individual schools prior to referring and engaging students in the special education eligibility process. All participants expressed an understanding of the processes their school followed for academic intervention. Participants from the elementary level clearly articulated the steps they needed to take to engage with the MTSS. Carol explained that she was aware of the process at her school but believed she was clear on implementing interventions

without having to engage in the MTSS process. All participants indicated that they were unclear about how to use the MTSS process for behavioral interventions.

Four participants identified the need to effectively collaborate with colleagues in general and special education to address the academic and behavioral needs of their African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. A prominent perception of the participants was the need to work closely with colleagues who supported ELLs in a separate classroom setting. Charlotte and Jane noted that they relied on the support of general education and special education teachers affiliated with their grade level to brainstorm ideas in addressing student needs prior to making referrals to the MTSS team or for special education services.

Each participant interviewed emphasized the importance of developing a relationship with students while considering their individual circumstances associated with their home lives, language barriers, and resources available in the district prior to identifying academic and behavioral interventions. Three participants, Jane, Bonnie, and Charlotte perceived their role included being an advocate in building and maintaining relationships with students. Each noted the importance of engaging in individual check-ins with students to gauge student understanding.

The eight general education teachers interviewed as part of this study provided their perceptions of the issues, they encounter in addressing behaviors of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students. The participants were asked about the value their school community placed in proactively supporting students of color and/or bilingual students who experience behavioral challenges. Each of these participants stated that they believed the only way they could effectively address recurring behaviors was to refer students to the special education eligibility process. The participants cited a lack of teacher preparation through professional

development, the use of positive behavior intervention, and the intervention of administrators in addressing student behaviors.

Fallon et al. (2021) claimed implementation of a multitiered system of supports for behavior (MTSS-B) has not consistently identified and addressed the root causes of discipline disparities (Gregory et al., 2017). Cook and colleagues (2018) synthesized research related to root causes of discipline disproportionality including (a) historical racial oppression, (b) teacher–student racial mismatch, (c) teachers’ implicit bias, (d) teachers’ use of reactive classroom management, (e) lack of effective teacher professional development, (f) lack of teachers’ multicultural awareness, and (g) poor discipline policy. Consideration of these root causes is not expressly included in guidance from researchers or policymakers about how to conceptualize and implement MTSS-B to support behavior (Briesch et al., 2020). For instance, policy emphasizes engaging in systematic screening procedures to identify “at risk” students, but policymakers do not typically offer guidance about how to identify the systemic inequities that may contribute to a student’s “risk” status (e.g., Briesch et al., 2020). This lack of guidance has perpetuated inequities, causing harm to Black youth.

According to Preast et al. (2023), schools need useful tools and systems that will support feasible problem-solving efforts to quickly and accurately identify the category of problem and type of Tier-2 intervention needed (Volpe & Briesch, 2018). Many experts suggest the need to develop integrative academic and behavior systems and specifically recommend integrating academic and behavior-screening data to improve efficiency and promote a whole-child approach (Preast et al., 2023). Through integrating academic and behavioral screening data, schools may improve Tier-2 intervention decision-making as they can rule out causes for problems. For instance, if a student is not meeting academic expectations based on academic

screening data, but has no academic behavioral concerns, a school can rule out that a behavioral skill deficit is causing the academic difficulty and assume that an academic intervention is needed. Despite the calls for an integrative system, there is a lack of research validating an integrative academic and behavior intervention decision-making model. To support effective, integrative decision making, practitioners need tools that correctly identify the appropriate students for an intervention and target the appropriate skill deficit (Prest et al., 2023).

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question, “How do public K–12 educators describe the cultural factors within their rural school districts when referring African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students for special education services?” was developed to identify how educators perceive the cultural factors in a school district and how these perceptions may influence educators in referring students for special education services. Each participant was asked about the role of culture and race in determining the need to engage students in the special education eligibility process. The consensus among the participants was that certain barriers exist in the community based on race and that language was the driving factor behind that perception. All of the participants cited the growing diversity within the community’s population and fact that they believed the school district continued to be challenged by meeting the needs of students who were classified as multilingual. The lack of acknowledgement and preconceived notions held by some participants about individual cultural beliefs among families were cited as issues.

Each participant described that their students came from Hispanic/Latino families who were employed in the seasonal hospitality, landscaping, and contractor service industries. The educators interviewed cited interrupted education as being a leading cause for the lack of academic and behavioral progression of many of their Hispanic/Latino students. One participant,

Karen, indicated that significant gaps in student learning occurred when students left for the 4 months in which families do not have employment due to businesses closing for the off-season. These families returned to their home countries to work, and students were often not enrolled in a school while they were absent from their school in the United States. Bonnie explained that language is also impacted when students live in two different countries but are primarily educated in English for 5 months out of the school year. She explained,

Some words and idiomatic language do not culturally translate. Sometimes the kids don't understand terms or slang, and other words that some view as common cause me to have to often think on the spot on how to best be able to explain the terms.

Three participants indicated that the need for families to return to their home countries to find employment was reflective of the culture of the families and economic limitations that existed in the community during the off-season. When asked about the impact living in a geographically isolated area had on their perception when considering interventions for Hispanic/Latino students, the three participants cited that families were economically challenged to stay in the community due to lack of employment and sustainable housing. The three participants cited that interrupted education does not always lead to special education referral, but student absences could often lead to the retention of students in a grade level until mastery of academic skills was achieved. In her experience, Jane indicated that students who missed a significant amount of time in school were considered for retention as these students did not achieve the expected progress when assessed near the end of the year. She further explained that even when students completed the required work in the classroom, they are considered as nonachieving because of the months of absences accrued.

Hoover and Erickson (2015) conducted a study examining the frequency of special education referrals of ELLs in a rural school district in the midwestern United States. The results of this study align to the perceptions of the participants of this study in supporting the assertion that specific cultural factors must be examined when working with African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students whose first language is not English. Though most diverse learners, including ELLs, are situated in urban communities and schools, over the past decade, rural schools have seen significant increases in the numbers of this population.

Across the United States, nearly 9.3 million, or almost one out of five students, are enrolled in a rural public school (McCabe & Ruppap, 2023). More students attend rural schools than the combined enrollment of the United States' 85 largest school districts (Showalter et al., 2019). About a quarter of rural students are of a racial minority and fewer than 4% of rural students are ELLs (Showalter et al., 2017). Recently, rural schools have experienced changing student demographics, especially in the increase and concentration of racially and linguistically diverse students (Johnson et al., 2018). Poverty rates have increased in rural areas; currently about half of rural students report eligibility for subsidized lunch programs (Showalter et al., 2017). Scholars have noted the impact of demographic shifts in rural areas and the increased challenges for rural schools to provide appropriate special education services for students with disabilities (Johnson et al., 2018). About one out of seven rural students qualify to receive special education services in the United States (Showalter et al., 2019).

In addition, rural children aged 3–17 are more likely to be diagnosed with a developmental disability and less likely to receive special education or early intervention services compared to children living in urban areas (Zablotsky & Black, 2020). Nevertheless, attributes of rural schools facilitate or hinder schools' efforts to meet the needs of students with



disabilities. These and similar research findings reflect the ever-increasing growth of the numbers of diverse learners in rural educational communities. This increase, in turn, highlights a particular challenge confronting many rural school systems regarding contemporary knowledge and skills of the educators responsible for instructing ELLs.

### **Implications**

The findings of the current research study suggest modifications must be made in how public-school educators are better informed about how to effectively support students prior to engaging them in the special education eligibility process. The results of the study support the findings of other studies that have explored teacher perceptions of the special education eligibility process, the role of race and language in determining special education need, parent participation in the special education eligibility process, academic and behavioral interventions prior to the special education process, the use of data collection in determining level of student academic and behavioral need, accessibility of general education curriculum, and the impact of culture and climate within a school.

The context of this study was different from other related studies in that the focus of this study related to exploring teacher perceptions of the special education eligibility process of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in a rural school district. The study was further differentiated as the study site was based in a geographically isolated community. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, Johnson and Lichter (2022) found that from 1999–2000 and 2014–2015, there was an overall increase of 45.6% of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural settings. Though federal and state agencies have identified overrepresentation of students from racially and ethnically

diverse backgrounds in special education as a significant problem in the field, research around disproportionality has presented inconsistent findings (Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

Rural school districts often face unique challenges such as limited resources, attracting and retaining qualified teachers, and varied offerings of professional development opportunities and training. This study substantiated these challenges and revealed the challenges presented when educators do not consider the cultural and linguistic factors that exist among the student population when considering academic and behavioral interventions. A large portion of rural students must deal with a lack of access to quality reading materials and instruction at an early age (especially preschool), a lack of consistent access to medical care, the impact of opioid abuse, and child homelessness in low-income and rural communities. For rural students, it can be difficult to connect to new learning with prior experiences. Often, rural students lack life experiences that other students may have because of the isolated nature of their families and communities, which can limit their ability to fully benefit from a diverse curriculum (Bailey, 2021).

Problematically, the long-standing presence and contributions of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students and their families to rural spaces are often overlooked (Kozlowski, 2015). Persistent patterns of their exclusion, discrimination, and disenfranchisement exist to date, despite variation in institutional, social, and economic rural contexts (Aylward et al., 2021). Thus, it is important to understand how the unique context of rural districts and the increasingly changing demographic makeup of rural communities relate to the over and underrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education. The need for educators to be culturally responsive and have the capacity to educate all students has only become more acute with the rapid demographic changes in rural contexts (Barrio, 2017).

Persistent and recurrent federal citations for racial inequity in special education among rural districts provide evidence that stratification in special education outcomes persists (Aylward et al., 2021). There is a growing body of research indicating that social contexts and sociocultural and historical conditions of schools and districts relate to special education classifications and outcomes (Aylward et al., 2021; Barrio, 2017; Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Hott et al., 2021).

The findings of this research study are important because nearly 20% of students in the United States attend school in a rural community and over a million of these children receive special education and related services (Aylward et al., 2021). As evidenced by the research, the number of students qualified for special education services in rural school districts has incrementally increased over the past 20 years (Aylward et al., 2021; Provasnik et al., 2007; Showalter et al., 2019). Although studies have demonstrated underrepresentation of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students prior to school enrollment, few studies have examined categorical eligibility identification of these students living in rural communities as they progress through grade levels in public schools (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Morgan et al., 2020). Understanding the culture of the educational environment and community in which educators work and live is a critical component of understanding the disproportionality within the eligibility identification process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students (Artiles, 2013; Morgan, 2020; Tefera & Fischman, 2020).

### **Recommendations for Action**

The research presented in this study is a sampling of the perceptions and lived experiences of public-school general educators related to the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in a rural school district. As school districts across the United States become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse in their

student populations, the need for research-informed practices regarding special education service eligibility must be integrated in educators' instructional and pedagogical practices (Sullivan & Osher, 2019). For public-school general educators who work in rural school districts, continued examination of how these educators perceive African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students culturally, academically, and behaviorally is necessary.

Professionals who work with African American/Black families should understand the strengths of African American/Black communities, including their funds of knowledge. They should also understand the challenges these students face, such as overrepresentation in special education, harsh punishment, and under identification for advanced placement and gifted and talented programs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). A goal or outcome of a dual-capacity-building partnership can be to mutually problem-solve and together advocate for better policy and practice related to addressing the challenges facing African American/Black students with special and exceptional needs (Clark-Louque & Latunde, 2019).

It is becoming more common for educators to encounter students who, in addition to needing linguistically responsive teaching, may also require additional learning supports. Accordingly, teachers and other school professionals must be aware of how a disability may impact the learning of a student who is an ELL (Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022). At the intersection of ELLs and special education, there is an even more complex process to become a dually identified student (Umansky et al., 2017); furthermore, practitioners struggle with distinguishing between ELLs who need language support and ELLs who have a disability. When teachers must consider the possibility of both, it becomes very difficult to parse out the causes of learning difficulties. This often leads to seeking out a primary cause, either an LD or English proficiency, to better address student needs. School professionals may focus on the identification

of a student as an ELL and the consequent need for language development, postponing the referral for assessment by a multidisciplinary team (Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022). There is also the risk of misidentifying students with disabilities as being ELLs based on teachers' perceptions of learning difficulties (Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022).

Distinguishing between language acquisition and language-based learning difficulties or disabilities continues to be a challenge for educators (Ortiz et al., 2018). This can be explained, in part, by the fact that ELLs are a heterogeneous group, representing diverse racial and ethnic groups and more than 400 languages, although the majority, 76%, are Spanish speakers (U. S. Office of English Language Acquisition, 2019). Moreover, they are served in different types of language instruction programs. When considering the native language of ELL students and special education eligibility determination, educators must be better trained in the administration of appropriate assessments within the general education classroom. There is considerable evidence that providing instruction in the student's home language improves their academic outcomes (Bialystok, 2018). Assessing students in their home language in addition to English also provides more accurate estimates of their ability levels and reduces the risk of underestimating their knowledge (Baker et al., 2022). Therefore, in some cases, their performance on home language assessments will need to be considered when making data-based decisions. Districts and schools must invest in professional development to build cultural competency across all the staff, and more research is needed to find out how schools and special educators are doing this to meet the needs of dually identified students.

Consequently, the language and literacy skills of ELLs vary in each language and change over time (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022). Assessment in MTSS or RtI, including universal screening and progress monitoring, must effectively identify ELLs at risk of reading failure as

well as those who respond and those who do not respond adequately to instruction or intervention (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022).

Schools have an obligation to support all students with academic and behavioral needs to ensure students have the skills to be successful (USDOE, 2023). Using a multitiered model of academic and behavioral supports for students, schools can work towards effectively meeting this goal through emphasizing universal prevention, early targeted intervention, and intensive individualized interventions for select students. In a MTSS framework, a critical component is the accurate identification of students who would benefit from early Tier-2 intervention (Lane et al., 2014).

To support effective, integrative decision making, practitioners need tools that correctly identify the appropriate students for an intervention and target the appropriate skill deficit. Educators must consider the implementation of culturally and linguistically appropriate learning and assessment environments. Schools need useful tools and systems that will support feasible problem-solving efforts to quickly and accurately identify the category of problem and type of Tier-2 intervention needed (Volpe & Briesch, 2018). Many experts suggest the need to develop integrative academic and behavior systems and specifically recommend integrating academic and behavior screening data to improve efficiency and promote a whole-child approach (Preast et al., 2023). Through integrating academic and behavioral screening data, schools may improve Tier-2 intervention decision-making as they can rule out causes for problems. For instance, if a student is not meeting academic expectations based on academic screening but has no academic behavioral concerns, a school can rule out that a behavioral skill deficit is causing the academic difficulty and assume that an academic intervention is needed. Despite the calls for an integrative

system, there is a lack of research validating an integrative academic and behavior intervention decision-making model.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The lack of literature associated with the experiences and perceptions of public-school educators related to the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in a rural school district is a potential barrier to the effective implementation of research-based strategies appropriate to the context of similar communities (Morgan, 2020). This study only explored the experiences of eight public school teachers within a public, rural school district in the northeastern United States. Demographic, economic, and cultural factors may differ for rural school districts in other geographic regions of the United States. Further qualitative research is needed to fully understand how public-school educators experience the various factors of the special education eligibility process across the United States. The perceptions of public-school educators in rural school districts should be further documented using narrative and case study designs to offer additional perspectives of the experiences of these educators in working with African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

School climate has been associated with numerous student emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes; however, little is known about how it can be improved through intervention and prevention programming. Further qualitative research, using a grounded theory model, is recommended. It is important to examine the experiences of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students prior to the special education eligibility process. Within this research, individual student experiences, including interrupted education, environmental or economic disadvantage, and limited English proficiency, must be more closely examined. Additional

qualitative analysis, through a focus group study or ethnographic study, is also needed to examine how educators respond to changing demographics within rural communities. Using a lens of intersectionality, researchers should examine race, ability levels, and the languages spoken by students to identify academic and behavioral interventions.

Hott et al. (2021) indicated that, to date, few studies have examined the needs of rural educators to support IEP development and none of the previous research reviewed for this study focused on examining IEP development have included rural districts. This is an integral step at the conclusion of the eligibility determination process for special education. Additional quantitative analysis measuring identified variables of African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students as individual groups should be conducted to understand differences between staff and students' perceptions of school climate as well as understanding the role of individual differences in perception of climate.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are closely linked values that have become guiding principles for school districts to establish a framework in building stronger organizations. The recognition of imbalanced approaches in addressing academic and behavioral interventions for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students through this study warrants a need for additional research to be conducted. The over or underrepresentation of these students in receiving equitable supports is largely grounded in the lack of training provided to educators related to culturally and linguistically diverse practices.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of public K–12 educators when determining special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. The problem this study explored was African



American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts may be disproportionately referred for special education services as compared to peers. Specific areas of focus included the role of race and language in determining special education need, parent participation in the special education eligibility process, academic and behavioral interventions prior to the special education process, the use of data collection in determining level of student academic and behavioral need, accessibility of general education curriculum, the impact of culture and climate within a school, and the impact of living in a geographically isolated area in accessing academic and behavioral resources.

Semi structured interviews were conducted using questions designed to address three focused research questions pertaining to individual perceptions and lived experiences of public-school general educators in a rural school district related to the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students, their understanding of the function of academic and behavioral interventions in the eligibility process, and the role cultural factors within a rural community serve in determining special education eligibility. In analyzing the data gathered through semi structured interviews, findings pointed to the need for increased professional development and training in academic and behavioral interventions, consistent application of these interventions as part of the prereferral process in special education eligibility, and increased awareness of school personnel about cultural factors that impact African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students' academic and social-emotional progress. The findings of the study fill a gap in the existing academic literature on the perceptions that public school teachers have through their experiences with the special education eligibility process in a rural school district.

The implications of this study are that although public-school general educators in rural school districts possess some of the prerequisite skills needed to effectively instruct African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students, there are existing limitations to their scope of understanding for the need to implement academic and behavioral interventions with fidelity over a sustained time period. The perceptions and experiences of educators in a rural setting may be varied depending on the resources available in the school district, professional development opportunities and training offered, and teacher preparation through formal educator programs or experiences. As trained practitioners who are committed to their craft, some educators are influenced by a student's personal circumstances and can be influenced by the empathy they feel for the student without closely analyzing the student's academic and behavioral data before making the decision to refer them to undergo the special education eligibility process. Effective change in how educators perceive and experience the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students will need to be grounded in adherence to systems and processes that focus on tiered academic and behavioral interventions. This can only occur through increased training by the school district in these processes and opportunities for educators to engage in periodic self-reflection about their progress, which will ultimately create an equitable climate and learning environment for students who are historically overrepresented in receiving special education services.

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## APPENDIX A

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Version Date:	February 17, 2023
IRB Project #:	0223-10
Title of Project:	Exploring Public School K-12 Educators' Experience with the Special Education Eligibility Process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino Students in Rural Communities
Principal Investigator (PI):	Debra Gately
PI Contact Information:	dgately@une.edu (339) 933-0095

**INTRODUCTION**

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?**

The purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators who determine special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. This project is being conducted as part of a dissertation which will examine the perceptions of general educators, Pre-K to grade 12 related to the eligibility determination process for special education. Eight participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator's dissertation research.

**WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?**

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are a public K-12 general education teacher, age 18 or older who has previously participated in the special education eligibility determination process of African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students.

### **WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?**

- You will be asked to participate in one semi structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 45- 60 minutes over Zoom.
- A pseudonym will be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have five calendar days to respond, or the Principal Investigator (PI) will assume that you have no comments, and the transcript will be assumed to be accurate.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. This risk will be minimized by using pseudonym for each of the participants names and by eliminating any identifying information from the study. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and will be given the choice to have their cameras off during the interview. Participants have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the ‘WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?’ section below for additional steps we will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help the PI understand the experiences of K-12 general education teachers who participate in the special education eligibility process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

### **WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?**

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

### **WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board. No data, deidentified or in aggregate, will be shared with site (school district) leadership. There will be no impact to your employability should you decide to engage/not engage in this research study.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one-on-one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without participant consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by participants for accuracy before they are added to the study.
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- Participants are given the option to turn off their camera during Zoom interview.
- Once member checking of the transcribed interview is complete the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

#### **WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

#### **WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

#### **WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?**

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

## APPENDIX B

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity  
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus  
11 Hills Beach Road  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207) 602-2244 T  
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103

**DATE OF LETTER:** February 17, 2023

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Debra R. Gately  
**FACULTY ADVISOR:** Andrea Disque, Ed.D

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 0223-10  
**RECORD NUMBER:** 0223-10-01

**PROJECT TITLE:** Exploring Public School K-12 Educators' Experience with the Special Education Eligibility Process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino Students in Rural Communities

**SUBMISSION TYPE:** New Project  
**SUBMISSION DATE:** February 15, 2023

**ACTION:** Determination of Exempt Status  
**DECISION DATE:** February 17, 2023

**REVIEW CATEGORY:** Exemption Category # 2ii

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

**If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.**

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu) and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Kennedy".

Bob Kennedy, MS  
Director of Research Integrity

## APPENDIX C

## RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

**Letter to Principals of School District to Accompany Recruitment Letter**

March 6, 2023

Dear School Principal,

My name is Debra Gately and I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled Exploring Public School K-12 Educators' Experience with the Special Education Eligibility Process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino Students in Rural Communities for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of public K-12 general educators who determine special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. I am seeking eight volunteers to participate in my doctoral research study.

Eligible participants in this study are:

- Over 18 years old
- A general education teacher
- A teacher who has prior experience in the special education eligibility determination process for African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students

Educator participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one interview of approximately 45- 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of the educator's convenience, and outside of the contractual school day. If there are more than eight people who express interest, only the first eight will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be deidentified. This doctoral project proposal has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the University of New England and the research study is endorsed by the superintendent's office.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

It would be appreciated if you could please distribute the attached letter to your general education staff, along with the participant information sheet. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [dgately@une.edu](mailto:dgately@une.edu).

Sincerely,

Debra Gately  
Doctoral Student  
University of New England

## Doctoral Study Recruitment Post

Dear Public Schools General Educators,

My name is Debra Gately and I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled Exploring Public School K-12 Educators' Experience with the Special Education Eligibility Process for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino Students in Rural Communities for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of public K-12 educators who determine special education eligibility for African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in rural school districts. I am seeking eight volunteers to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:

- Over 18 years old
- A general education teacher
- A teacher who has prior experience in the special education eligibility determination process for African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one interview of approximately 45- 60 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than eight people who express interest, only the first eight who interview will be selected. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be deidentified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience with the special education eligibility process for African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino students, please contact me via email at [dgately@une.edu](mailto:dgately@une.edu) and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Debra Gately  
Doctoral Student  
University of New England  
February 2023

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What previous training or education have you received about working with special education students?
2. How do disruptive behaviors displayed by an individual student influence your perception that additional support may be needed?
3. How does race play a role in accessing parent participation in the special education eligibility process?
4. What value does your school community place in proactively supporting students of color and/or bilingual students who experience academic and behavioral challenges?
5. Can you describe an instance you have experienced where a student has been found eligible for special education services even though the data may not have clearly supported the decision?
6. How does the curriculum (in your grade level/subject area) address the academic needs of students who are identified as bilingual?
7. What are the challenges you experience in working with students who have academic and/or behavioral issues who have not yet qualified for special education services?
8. Can you describe the process that is followed in your school to provide students with academic interventions? Behavioral interventions?
9. When a student experiences academic or behavioral difficulties what is your first response to address such issues?
10. In considering a students' level of academic or behavioral need, how have you used data in informing your decision making during the special education eligibility process?
11. Can you describe the role that language plays, specifically in bilingual students, when you are responding to academic and behavioral needs?
12. How does race play a role in accessing parent participation in the special education eligibility process?
13. What is the impact of other teachers' beliefs towards African American/Black and Hispanic/Latino students in shaping the culture and climate of the school?

14. Can you describe the impact that living in a geographically isolated area has on teacher perception when considering academic and behavioral interventions for students in need?
15. Can you tell me about an African American/Black or Hispanic/Latino student who you were concerned about and believed needed additional interventions for whom you participated in the process to determine special education eligibility?