EXAMINING PRE-REFERRAL INTERVENTION AND ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES FOR ELEMENTARY ENGLISH LEARNERS IN TEXAS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Student support teams (SST) are intended to develop the performance of struggling students. Both general and special education teachers generally form the SSTs. The purpose of this study was to examine SST members' perceptions related to the referral and response to intervention (RtI) processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services in a suburban school district in Texas. SST members' perceptions of their methods, special education referral process, and determining between second language acquisition and learning disability as well as familiarity of SSTs and RtI for EL students were investigated. Using a qualitative research design to capture a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perceptions of SSTs, a sample of 12 certified general education teachers, administrators, and special education representatives participated in semistructured interviews. Data were analyzed by transcribing the interviews. The analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of five themes: (a) aligning the referral process with practices and policy, (b) supports needed for appropriate referral, (c) providing appropriate RtI for EL students; interventions are the same no differentiation, (d) little knowledge of the EL student's language and (e) difficulty distinguishing language differences from learning disability.

Keywords: special education, student support teams, EL students, qualitative methodology

DEDICATION

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed (Proverbs 16:3)

I dedicate this dissertation to my late mother, Isabel Figueroa Suris, my late father, Luis E. Figueroa, my wonderful and loving stepdaughters, Chelsea D. Miller and Chimya Johnson, my adoring and endearing granddaughter, Harper R. Miller, and my loving and dearest of friends, Dr. Detra D. Johnson for always being there for me no matter the circumstances. Last but surely not least, I dedicate the work to Dr. Natalie D. Hudson for her continued support and insight; she made me keep moving forward even when I was ready to give up.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United States Census Bureau's (2021) most recent reporting indicated that the Latino population is the fastest-growing population. In 2010, 308.7-million people inhabited the United States, and 50.5 million (or 16%) identified as Hispanic or Latino. In 2020, 331.4-million people resided in the country, and 18.5% identified as Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES, 2021) reported that 9.2% of the students in public schools in the United States are English learners (EL). Teachers have become more aware of some of the difficulties that EL students can experience (del Rio, 2007; McCardle et al., 2005; Wang & Wolf, 2016). Over half of students in Texas public schools are Hispanic or Latino, and over 20% of these students are designated as EL. In 2019-2020, 1.1-million students in Texas schools participated in bilingual and English language acquisition programs, and among these students, about 900,000 students' primary language spoken at home was Spanish (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2021). Most Texas EL students represent Spanish-speaking homes. This percentage suggests that many of the Hispanic or Latino students receiving special education services are also EL students who speak Spanish at home. In Texas, 10.2% of students receiving special education services are Hispanic or Latino (TEA, 2020). Even though EL students who are placed in special education services may show improvement with English oral language and reading skills, many EL students have not closed the academic gap with their grade-level peers (Stephens, 2014).

Furthermore, the Office of Special Education Programs (2022) in the 43rd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

showed that Hispanic or Latino students ages 5 to 21 years are more likely to receive services under IDEA, Part B, than children of other racial/ethnic groups in the following disability categories: hearing impairment, intellectual disability, orthopedic impairment, specific learning disability, and speech or language impairment. Specifically, the disability category of a specific learning disability accounted for 43.9% of Hispanic or Latino students in the fall of 2019 and for 32.4% of White students under the same disability category (Office of Special Education Programs, 2022). The Office of Special Education Programs also indicated that over 320,000 Hispanic or Latino students' ages 0 to 21 years were served in Texas annually through IDEA B.

Therefore, school personnel should consider language and culture during special education testing. It is important to note that linguistic and cultural factors do not have the same effect on every subtest of an assessment protocol (Ortiz, 2019; Sotelo-Dynega et al., 2013). For instance, linguistic and cultural factors impact sub-tests that require age-appropriate vocabulary knowledge more than other test sections. As a result, a student's performance on a test could be influenced by their primary language and culture (Ortiz, 2019; Sotelo-Dynega et al., 2013).

When school psychologists assess culturally and linguistically diverse students, they tend to overlook factors such as a student's primary language and the amount of time the student has received English instruction (Sotelo-Dynega et al., 2013). School psychologists involved in the special education referral process do not have sufficient training to make informed decisions that require differentiating between the characteristics of disabilities eligible for special education and language acquisition (Huang et al., 2011). Finding a bilingual practitioner who fluently speaks the student's primary language and can conduct an assessment may be difficult (O'Bryon & Rogers, 2010; Ding, et al., 2019). Ideally, a bilingual school psychologist with training to conduct assessments with EL students should work with these students; however, just 10.8% of

all school psychologists in the United States meet these criteria (O'Bryon & Rogers, 2010). A lack of translators trained to assess EL students for special education can result in less valid assessments (Huang et al., 2011). According to O'Bryon and Rogers (2010), it can be problematic to assess EL students referred for special education evaluation due to the challenges related to identifying whether academic struggles result from language acquisition challenges or an academic disability. This difficulty leads to the use of student support teams (SST) that often consist of several school professionals, such as general education teachers, administrators, intervention specialists, special education teachers, related service personnel, and school counselors/ psychologists (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

Background of Study

Researchers (e.g., Huang et al., 2011) have demonstrated that EL students who are inappropriately placed in special education lose ground when compared to their grade-level peers. Furthermore, there are several factors that can negatively influence EL students' academic ability, such as little exposure to rich educational opportunities, including early reading and literacy interventions (Vaughn et al., 2006). In addition, many EL students may not have acquired academic language skills, which refer to the basic and cognitive language skills that are applied frequently in school settings (Cummins, 1979). Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is the type of language needed by students in school to progress successfully through the grades and is defined as those aspects of language proficiency closely related to the development of literacy skills in the first and second languages. On the other hand, basic interpersonal communication (BIC) is the type of language that students use on a regular basis in face-to-face communication (Cummins, 1979; Krashen, & Brown 2007).

Furthermore, these students may not have received intervention services prior to failing in general education, and therefore, may be viewed by the SST teams as students who should be referred for special education evaluations (Sullivan, 2011). EL students often are not afforded the appropriate amount of support needed for transitioning from their primary language to a second language, nor are they afforded the time necessary to acquire an ability to attend to the complexities of the conversational and academic skills they need to be successful students of the second language before they are referred for an evaluation to special education (Sullivan, 2011). However, if an EL student truly has a learning difficulty and does not receive services for multiple school years because teachers are simply waiting for the student to learn the second language, dire consequences that include below-grade literacy and low academic achievement can be difficult with students in early elementary grades who are slow to acquire academic skills or have difficulties with the English language acquisition process. As a result, EL students are both under and overrepresented for special education services (DeMatthews et al., 2014). DeMatthews et al. added to the knowledge base of how to best identify EL students who need special education services by examining the process of the disability evaluation.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L.94-142) mandated that schools must use prereferral teams. Batts (2013) stated that before the implementation of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, students with learning disabilities were identified for special education through the "wait to fail" (p. 29) process and the use of the intelligence quotient (IQ) achievement discrepancy model that involved norm-referenced, standardized tests in determining and comparing a student's IQ to their academic ability (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). Later, the IDEA (2004) called for a multidisciplinary team to run the special education referral and placement process at each school (Knotek, 2003). Determining

which students were eligible for special education services fell to the SST and RtI teams, who shared responsibility for diagnosing and referring students to the appropriate level of interventions.

Multiple terms have been used in the literature to identify the multidisciplinary teams that IDEA called for, such as Mainstream Assistance Teams, Instructional Consultation Teams, Prereferral Intervention Teams, Instructional Support Teams, Teacher Assistance Teams, Teacher Support Teams, Student Assistance Teams, Intervention Assistance Teams, and Child Study Teams (Burns & Symington, 2002). More recently, the teams have been referred to as Multidisciplinary Teams (MDT), Student Study Teams, and RtI Teams (Carrillo, 2015; Knotek, 2003; Ogonosky, 2011; Rich, 2014). In the present study, SST is used interchangeably with RtI teams. The term SSTs was chosen for this study as there are many terms used across the states to identify the teams that deal with student monitoring and interventions.

SST is one of the approaches that school districts utilize to determine the process and intervention designed to eventually lead to the determination of which children need to be referred to special education assessment and potential eligibility (Mobley, 2017). The team approach is beneficial for problem solving since several perceptions are thought to be less biased than one person making all decisions unilaterally (Lane et al., 2004). Additionally, legislation favors a team approach for recommendations to special education consideration and to assist with issues related to the under/overrepresentation of EL students in special education (Mobley, 2017). All the teams and their members part the mutual purpose of supporting teachers by assisting them in recognizing and resolving academic and social problems experienced by students, often within a curriculum-based measurement/response-to-intervention framework (Newton et al., 2012).

The SST's goal is to improve academic success by concentrating on interventions that can meet the needs of struggling learners to avoid initiating referrals to special education (Martinez, 2014). Park (2019) stated that the process of determining whether a student has an academic difficulty, or an academic disability is difficult to determine. SSTs use response to intervention (RtI) programs to determine if students are merely struggling with an emergent English skill or truly display a disability. EL students without disabilities have the potential to achieve at age-appropriate levels when they are provided with programs that incorporate appropriate support and evidence-based instruction (Park, 2019).

SSTs utilize the RtI documentation to provide parents, teachers, and specialists with the information needed to create evidence-based instructional and behavioral strategies for each student that is having difficulties in the classroom (Martinez, 2014). The fundamental concern behind prereferral or problem-solving teams such as SSTs is to "intervene before problems reach a level of severity that demands evaluation for special education, hence the term prereferral" (Bahr & Kavaleski, 2006, p. 2). In broad terms, RtI can be described as a multitiered approach. Tier 1 is when the students are provided with evidence-based instruction by their classroom teacher; in this tier, the progress of the students is monitored. When the students from this tier do not demonstrate progress, they are moved to Tier 2. Tier 2 is the teacher providing a different, more intense instruction to the student. Students are moved to Tier 3 when there is little evidence of progress. If the student continues to demonstrate little progress at the end of Tier 3, then the student is recommended for consideration to special education evaluation. As students move through the tiers, the intensity of the interventions they receive increases (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Office of Special Education Programs, 2013).

The SST and RtI processes have implementation shortcomings. For example, when little attention is devoted to prereferral approaches, and the teams focus on the children's academic difficulties instead of accommodating the students' needs through adjustments to classroom atmosphere and teacher instruction techniques, more students are referred for special education evaluation (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Even though the SST process is implemented to prevent inappropriate special education referrals, on occasion, it can contribute to the less intervention-oriented "wait to fail" model (Batts, 2013, p. 29) by attempting to prevent overrepresentation of Hispanic or Latino students in special education. When the SST does not monitor the student's language proficiency on an ongoing basis and does not refer the EL student even after the student has obtained proficiency in the second language, the SST has simply waited for the student to fail before intervening (Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

Problem Statement

Although research focusing on how to improve the special education identification process for EL students who need special education services has been conducted, challenges in identifying the difference between a second language acquisition difficulty versus a learning/academic disability among students identified as requiring special education services, particularly when it comes to Spanish-speaking EL students at risk of failure, continue to affect education (Stephens, 2014).

Even though data have been collected to document disproportionate representation of students from Hispanic or Latino groups in special education, little research on the educators responsible for making special education referrals has been conducted to address the problem of EL students in special education who are not English proficient (Rhodes et al., 2005). EL students continue to be placed in special education in disproportionate numbers because experts

continue to lack the knowledge necessary to differentiate between language acquisition difficulties and a learning/academic disability (Carroll, 2015; del Rio, 2007). The growth of the EL population, particularly in Texas, has brought to the forefront their disproportional representation in special education classes and to the adequacy of the process for referring students to and placing them in special education programs (Rich, 2014). The increase in the EL population and their disproportionate representation in special education programs makes it imperative that researchers investigate how to identify more effectively those EL students who would benefit from special education programs. Understanding how SST team members perceive the processes, like RtI, that they use to determine which students may benefit from special education could reduce over/underrepresentation by Hispanic or Latino as well as EL students in special education and benefit future SST teams seeking to help their EL students be academically successful.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine SST members' perceptions related to the RtI and special education referral processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. To better understand the special education identification process, it was important to investigate the collection of procedures, knowledge, and perceptions of the SST members involved in the assessment and identification of EL students referred to special education programs. The elementary school level was selected for this study because most EL students' initial referrals for special education testing originated from SST meetings at the elementary school level. The study design was qualitative, so the data collection involved emphasizing interview transcripts. The study was conducted in a mid-sized suburban school district with 16 elementary schools located in Texas to reduce variability among

the participants' experiences, namely ensuring the participants had shared experiences with the same district policies rather than collecting experiences from participants of different districts whose SSTs operated according to diverse policies between districts.

Research Questions

The following three research questions (RQ) guided the study:

RQ1. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?

RQ2. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?

RQ3. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition regarding the referral process for special education?

Significance of the Study

The most recent reauthorization of the IDEA (2004) allowed the RtI model to be implemented as an alternative means to identify students with learning disabilities. In the state of Texas, where this study was conducted, each district develops its RtI model and requires that RtI be used for progressing toward the determination of specific learning disabilities among its students. The potential success of the RtI model for EL students relies heavily on the decision-making process that occurs at the school level during the SST meetings (Gordon, 2018; Ortiz, 2008). Issues that affect the success of SSTs include teacher perceptions of the mission and purposes of the team, team membership and members' expertise specific to EL students,

professional development provided to team members, and interventions recommended for EL students (Ortiz, 2008).

The study added current information to the body of research knowledge by presenting a deeper understanding of the SST referral process, use RtI, and assessment procedures as applied to EL students. Practice changes might result from this study to contribute to the relationship between SST teams and the special education evaluation representative on the referral of EL students. It is important to understand how SST members determine that EL students qualify for special education as part of providing the services and supports needed to ensure the academic achievement of EL students. The findings might offer implications for how elementary schools use SSTs with EL students in the special education referral process. As well, the findings could influence new policies for reducing the disproportionate representation of Hispanic or Latino as well as EL students in special education. New supports may be generated at the district level to benefit the work of SST members seeking to improve EL students' academic ability through RtI with more success.

Information from campus-based staff may provide insight to central office administration regarding the improvement of the SST processes, leading to improved learner outcomes. School staff implementing SST meetings in other districts may benefit from the information provided by this study. Further, information of staff perceptions may allow for the improvement of professional development plans to provide ongoing support and assistance to districts regarding the fidelity of the implementation of an SST process specifically for EL students.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura's social learning theory (SLT) and social cognitive theory (SCT) are two useful theoretical lenses for viewing the practice of EL students and their placement into special

education programs. Bandura explained that observations, demonstrations, and imitation are foundational to the acquisition of knowledge in SLT (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Studies that analyze the identification process for special education with EL students and embrace Bandura's theories assert that the prime learning opportunities occur in the general education classroom; therefore, special education students should be in general education classes with normal peer groups for optimal learning. "In the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others" (Bandura & Walters, 1977, p. 3). Researchers have shown that these important observations should happen across content and activities at multiple times and in multiple settings throughout the school.

In the social cognitive theory, understanding, predicting, and changing human behaviors are central to understanding personalities. The overrepresentation of diverse learners in special education involves a lack of appropriate understanding by school professionals about evaluation procedures and compounds the challenge of making proper assessments and placements with the EL population (Becker & Deris, 2019). Additionally, school personnel demonstrate difficulties identifying whether a student is experiencing a second language acquisition struggle or a learning disability (Mobley, 2017). Bandura and Walters (1977) speculated that school professionals' beliefs are openly related to their practices.

Therefore, in SLT and SCT, if a person believes they are efficient at competently completing an assignment, these beliefs indicate elevated levels of motivation and allow for predicting subsequent practices. Equally, if a school professional conceals or is unaware of their inability to perform a task, according to Bandura's social cognitive theory, they do only what they know, allow someone else to address the problem, work within a group for the desired outcome, or avoid the task (Bandura, 2002). Bandura's SCT is fitting to the way SSTs function

within a school setting whereby both individual and collective decision making is affected by competencies and efficacy within the domain of intervening with EL students.

Boundaries of the Study

In qualitative research, the sample size tends to be smaller than in quantitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Since the design was qualitative, the participants were not recruited from different districts because SSTs could have operated according to diverse policies between districts. The size of the sample included 12 participants representing four of the 16 campuses. Boundaries ensured the amount of variability between participants would be reduced, but also the data collection became based on a single source of participants from one school district. I ensured the SST participants might express shared experiences by focusing on one district with all elementary schools following the same district policies.

Definitions of Key Terms

The key terms applied in this study appear in this section.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills

BICS form the type of language proficiency typically used in social or informal settings to carry a conversation between classmates on the playground or informal greetings and conversations (Cummins, 1979).

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

CALP refers to the academic language that schools focus on, and that student should acquire in order to progress successfully through the grades with the appropriate skills and aspects of language proficiency an individual needs to do schoolwork, all of which are closely related to the development of literacy skills in L1 and L2 (Cummins, 2000).

Disproportionate Representation

The literature includes many different definitions of disproportionate representation and various methods for calculating extent and thresholds, each of which has strengths and weaknesses (Countinho & Oswald, 2000). Disproportionate representation refers to the presence of students from a specific group in an educational program being higher or lower than one would expect based on their representation on the general population of students (Deveaux, 2013).

English Learner

EL is the most recent term used to identify students for whom English is not their first language and is defined as someone with sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language and whose difficulties may deny such an individual the opportunity to gain experience successfully in the classrooms where English is the language of instruction. Other commonly used terms in the literature include "limited English proficient (LEP), "second-language learner" (SLL), "English-language learner" (ELL), "bilingual," and "culturally and linguistically diverse" (CLD; del Rio, 2007).

Prereferral Intervention

Fuchs et al. (2003) defined prereferral intervention as a teacher's modification of instruction, or some other aspect of the learning environment, to better accommodate a difficult to instruct student prior to a formal referral of the student for testing and possible special education placement. An SST mediates prereferral interventions.

Student Support Team

The SST is comprised of general education teachers, administrators, special education personnel, and related service personnel that work collaboratively within a problem-solving

framework, such as RtI, to assist with determining whether a given child is eligible for a special education referral (Rhodes et al., 2005).

Response to Intervention

RtI is a problem-solving approach and practice designed to provide high-quality instruction/intervention matched to student needs and using learning rate over time and level of performance to make important educational decisions (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005). In broad terms, RtI can be described as a multitiered approach to intervention. Tier 1 is when all students are provided with evidence-based instruction by their classroom teacher; in this tier, the progress of all students is monitored. When the students from this tier do not reach expected benchmarks using an assessment instrument, they are moved to Tier 2. Tier 2 involves a teacher providing different, more intense instruction to small groups of students who have not shown progress on achieving benchmarks. Students are moved to Tier 3 when they show little evidence of progress, do not reach expected benchmarks using an assessment instrument, and could benefit from one-on-one instructional interventions. If the student continues to demonstrate little progress at the end of Tier 3, then the student is recommended for consideration to special education evaluation. As students move through the tiers, the intensities of the interventions they receive increase (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Summary and Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine SST members' perceptions related to the RtI and special education referral processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. This chapter provided the introduction to the study by conveying the background, the problem, and the boundaries of the study that support the purpose and research questions. The study offers an opportunity for significant

contributions to practice and the body of knowledge about SSTs and special education placements for EL students. Chapter II includes a review of the literature. In Chapter III, I discuss the methodology by describing research design, setting, participants, instrumentation, data collection, researcher biases, and data analysis. Chapter IV contains the findings of the semi-structured interview protocol that was used with the selected participants of the study. Chapter V includes the conclusion and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to examine student support team (SST) members' perceptions related to response to intervention (RtI) and special education referral processes used with elementary English learning (EL) students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. SSTs are designed to provide interventions and assist with the determination of whether EL students should move to special education testing. The SST is responsible for the prereferral and the decision to move forward with an evaluation for special education eligibility.

EL students continue to be a growing population in public schools throughout the United States and Texas (NCES, 2021; TEA, 2020, 2021). The growth in the EL student population presents challenges for schools needing to create adequate educational plans to meet the diverse academic needs of EL students, particularly those that may need special education services. This chapter presents the literature and models for assessing disabilities in schools as related to SST teams, at-risk EL students, the process for referring students to special education, the difference between language acquisition versus learning disability, and the training of the school psychologists who perform the evaluations of EL students to determine special education program eligibility.

Purpose of Special Education Programs

The IDEA (2004) is the federal law that governs the special education process. One of the main principles of IDEA is to guarantee that students with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that accentuates special education and related services designed to meet their exceptional needs and prepares them for further education, employment,

and independent living. Special education means specially designed instruction is delivered to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Related services are the special services implemented to support students' special education so they can make progress toward meeting their academic and functional goals (ARD Guide, 2021).

When there is a concern about a student's academic progress or behavior, the school personnel or a parent can request an evaluation to determine the student's eligibility for special education in any of the 13 eligibility areas for special education (ARD Guide, 2021). However, not all struggling learners are eligible for special education and related services. If a student's struggles are primarily from a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math or because the student is an English learner, that student must not be determined to be a student with a disability under IDEA. When considering a learning disability, it is especially significant to consider the exclusionary factors outlined by IDEA.

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA stated that a full and individual evaluation for special education must consider any areas of suspected disability as well as take into consideration any exclusionary factors. This is an important clarification because the law makes it clear that for a student to meet the criteria for a disability, the LEAs must ensure there has not been a lack of appropriate reading and math instruction and verify that a student's limited English proficiency does not represent the determining factor for the child obtaining special education under any disability category (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2019). The exclusionary factors indicate that a disability cannot be determined if it is primarily due to visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; intellectual disabilities or emotional disturbance; environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage; or limited English proficiency. These changes in the regulations were significant

to avoid disproportional special education assignments to students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2019).

Previously, the IDEA of 1997 indicated that a student classified with a learning disability shows a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement level that negatively affects educational performance. However, even when children exhibit a discrepancy between ability and achievement, they may not show a need that can be identified as a specific learning disability and may simply be underachieving (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). Klingner and Harry (2006) discussed that in many cases, the low achievement is often attributed to low intelligence, without considering the context where the student is underachieving. In addition, the intelligence-level discrepancy model fails to consider a student undergoing second language acquisition because norm-referenced assessments do not measure language completely and lack measurements for student spontaneity in conversation and academic language proficiency (Ortiz & Yates, 2001).

Differentiating Between an Academic Disability versus Second Language Acquisition and Learning

Teachers at times look at some of the behaviors that EL student's exhibit as a reason to refer students for special education through the SST. Rhodes et al. (2005) identified confusion for handicapping conditions between "the behaviors that trigger teacher referrals" and students' English-language acquisition stages in English-only programs (p. 31). Figueroa et al. (1989) mentioned that some of the behaviors that teachers see in EL students that cause them to make the referrals include students' poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, grammar misapprehensions, and problems with English articulation. Since teachers may not understand the differences in the behaviors as language is involved, the EL students' behaviors result in referrals for special education services when the issue may be related to the student learning a

new language (Figueroa et al., 1989). Gersten and Woodward (1994) called the practice of referring EL students to special education as a convenient way for educators to take action without completely comprehending their duty to meet the EL students' language needs or to manage general problems, such as SST prereferral procedures and assessment practices.

Additionally, Barrera (2006) stated that differentiating between EL students' language proficiency challenges versus specific learning disabilities is essential for two reasons. First, special education law requires this distinction (IDEA, 2004). Second, even under these national legal mandates, educators continue to misidentify EL students (Barrera, 2006). Moreover, Klingner et al. (2006) concluded that the difference between a specific learning disability and second language acquisition development in EL students is compounded by policy issues, identification procedures, and prereferral processes. Policy issues refer to the political climate that sways educational policy; for instance, bilingual programs and/or native language support have been abolished in many states. Identification procedures vary from state to state and from district to district, making data comparison difficult (Klingner et al., 2006).

Gillespie (2015) stated that many factors need to be considered by an SST when making the decision of whether an EL student presents with a language acquisition difference versus a learning disability or language disorder. Gillespie defined a language acquisition difference as "the result of the normal process of second language acquisition, and its impact on the development of the second language" (p. 1). Even if a student undergoing second language acquisition exhibits a delay in the second language (i.e., English), the EL student still may exhibit adequate language skills in their first language that are appropriate with typically developing students. For instance, a student may develop their first and second language skills simultaneously or successively and at a different rate of speed or pattern depending on their

linguistic environment. On the other hand, a language disorder is "characterized by deficits in language comprehension and /or production in both the native language and second language" Gillespie, 2015, p.1).

Farnsworth (2018) showed that various actions might be taken to answer the challenging question of whether an EL student has some type of disability or is demonstrating typical second language acquisition development issues. Farnsworth concluded that determining language proficiency requires assessments that allow for cultural and linguistic variation due to differences in EL students' language development. Additionally, Farnsworth recommended that educators need to have proficiency with the functions of language (i.e., phonetics, pragmatics, semantics, and syntax), the factors that affect language acquisition (e.g., personality, motivation, and native language skills), the appropriate behaviors EL students could demonstrate in each stage of second language acquisition, and the length of time EL students spend in each of the second language acquisition stages.

Ortíz (2011), one of the leading researchers in this field, recommended understanding students' home and past school histories (e.g., attendance and health history, significant life changes, and program placements) as particularly important to making instructional decisions, designing interventions, or deciding whether a student should be referred to special education by a prereferral team. Along the same lines, Klingner (2015) noted teachers must understand the second language acquisition process to recognize whether the possible characteristics associated with a learning disability are being demonstrated by EL students. Moreover, Klingner promoted reviewing "the quality of instruction to determine whether students truly have received an adequate opportunity to learn" (p. 1). Since it is crucial for teachers to be mindful of the characteristics associated with a learning disability and how these behaviors may be identified in

an EL student, Table 1 offers a comparison of the characteristics of second language acquisition and the characteristics that attribute to a specific learning disability (Klingner, 2015, p. 3).

Table 1

Similarities Between Language Acquisition and Learning Disability

Behaviors associated with a specific learning disability	Behaviors when acquiring a second language
Difficulty following directions	Difficulty following directions because the directions were not understood; it can be harder to remember directions in a second language
Difficulty with phonological awareness	Difficulty auditorily distinguishing sounds not in one's first language or sounds that are presented in a different order
Slow to learn sound-symbol correspondence	Confusion with sound-symbol correspondence when it is different than in one's first language. Difficulty pronouncing sounds not in the first language
Difficulty remembering sight words	Difficulty remembering sight words when word meanings are not understood
Difficulty retelling a story in sequence	Difficulty retelling a story in English without the expressive skills to do so; yet the students might understand more than s/he can convey (i.e., receptive skills in English might be stronger than expressive skills)
Confusion with figurative language	Confusion with figurative language, idioms, pronouns, conjunctions, and words with multiple meanings
Slow to process challenging language	Slow to process challenging language because it is not well understood
May have poor auditory memory	May seem to have poor auditory memory if sounds or words are unfamiliar or not understood
May have difficulty concentrating	Learning in a second language is mentally exhausting; therefore, EL students may seem to have difficulty concentrating at times
May seem easily frustrated	Learning in a second language can be frustrating

On the other hand, Harry and Klingner (2015) related that the inappropriate utilization of assessments does not account for meeting the multiple needs of EL students. For example, Harry and Klingner discovered that bilingual assessment personnel were overloaded with work and often unable to attend SST meetings. Similarly, Ortiz et al. (2011) found that the process that

schools used to identify EL students as having specific learning disabilities was problematic, implying evaluation results should not be based on the use of a single measure (e.g., evaluations made by school psychologists). Ortiz et al. further recommended multiple measures would provide more ecologically valid and comprehensive evaluation results.

Overall, the research reviewed shows that it is difficult to identify the difference between a learning disability versus a student undergoing the normal stages of the second language acquisition process. Some of the varied factors discussed by the different researchers included policy issues; poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, grammar, and problems with English articulation; identification procedures; lack of teacher awareness about EL students' stages of second language acquisition; and the process used by prereferral teams such as the SST. The article by Klingner (2015) was of most interest because of its comparisons that can be used by educators needing to determine how to look at second language acquisition processes should look versus the behaviors that represent a learning disability concern.

Models for Assessing Disabilities

The IDEA (2004) indicates 13 disability conditions under which a student can qualify for special education services, and states can elect which eligibility criteria they want to utilize to identify students as being eligible for special education services under the category of specific learning disability. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) noted that "establishing acceptable criteria for (specific learning disability) identification historically has been the single most controversial issue in the field of [specific learning disabilities]" (p. 137). Two different methods are the following: (a) IQ achievement discrepancy, also commonly known as the severe discrepancy model, and (b) RtI. Both focus on different suppositions of what constitutes a disability. The IQ

achievement discrepancy model is focused on psychometrics, while RtI is based on an educational model and focuses on academic interventions.

Severe Discrepancy Model

The severe discrepancy model has been the method of evaluating children for a learning disability (LD) since its inception with the IDEA of 1997. The IDEA (1997) guidelines required that for a student to be diagnosed with a specific learning disability, there must be a severe discrepancy between the student's intellectual ability and academic achievement along with a deficit in one or more basic psychological processes (Reeves et al., 2010). The basic psychological processes have never been specifically defined in the federal education code; however, the term means that a student has a disorder in the understanding or use of language, spoken or written, that may impact the student's ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations and may include perceptual disabilities or brain injury (Frankenberger & Harper, 1987; IDEA 1997). Given that the basic psychological process is not defined in the education code, best practices are utilized when determining a processing disorder (Frankenberger & Harper, 1987; Hale et al., 2006). A processing disorder is a score in one of the cognitive domains, such as fluid reasoning, which is significantly discrepant from the overall intelligence score (Hale et al., 2006). The severe discrepancy model requires that the special education team, which consists of a school psychologist, the resource specialist, and the speech and language therapist, evaluate a student to determine whether the student's academic achievement is commensurate with the student's IQ (Reeves et al., 2010).

A severe discrepancy is interpreted in the state of Texas as one standard deviation between intellectual functioning and academic achievement (IDEA 1997). One standard deviation is a 15-point difference between a student's intellectual functioning and academic

achievement. For example, if a student receives a standard score of 100 on an assessment of intellectual functioning and the student receives a standard score of 84 on a reading achievement test, the student then demonstrates a severe discrepancy because 16 points are higher than the 15-point minimum discrepancy needed. If there is no severe discrepancy, then the scores are said to be consistent with one another (Reeves et al., 2010).

Intelligence is measured by using valid and reliable tests of intelligence, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV (WISCIV), Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children II (KABCII), or the Woodcock-Johnson IV Tests of Cognitive Abilities (WJIV; Woodcock et al., 2018). Intelligence tests are the foundation of the evaluation process when determining eligibility for special education under the category of a specific learning disability. Intelligence tests are determined to be reliable and valid indicators of a child's learning potential (Nesbitt et al., 2012). Reliability is the ability of a test to consistently measure the variable that it claims to measure under standardized conditions over several administrations (Frey, 2019). Reliability scores range from 0 to 1; the closer the score is to 1, the more reliable a measure it is (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004). The validity of an intelligence test is the ability of the test to measure the construct that it purports to measure (Frey, 2019).

There are a variety of intelligence tests used to evaluate a child for a specific learning disability and other disabilities. The WJIV is one test of intelligence used to determine special education eligibility under a specific learning disability (Mather & Wendling, 2014). The WJIV is designed to align with the Cattell-Horn-Carroll model of intelligence, which also provides an assessment of the psychological processing areas (Mather & Wendling, 2014). The cognitive abilities measured within the WJIV include:

- Comprehension-Knowledge: The comprehension-knowledge cluster is a measure of the student's acquired knowledge, the ability to reason using previously learned experiences or procedures.
- Fluid Reasoning: The fluid reasoning cluster is an evaluation of the student's ability to reason, form concepts, and solve problems using unfamiliar information or novel procedures. It is a complex mixture of many mental operations.
- Long-Term Retrieval: The long-term retrieval cluster is an evaluation of the student's ability to store information (after it has been displaced from immediate awareness) and fluently retrieve the information at a later time in the process of thinking. It involves both the amount of information that be stored and the rate with which the information can be retrieved.
- Visual Processing: The visual processing cluster is the ability to perceive, analyze, synthesize, and think with visual patterns, including the ability to store and recall visual representations.
- Auditory Processing: The auditory processing cluster is the ability to encode, synthesize and discriminate auditory stimuli, including the ability to employ auditory information in task performance.
- Cognitive Processing Speed: The processing speed cluster the ability to quickly perform both simple and complex cognitive tasks, particularly when measured under pressure to sustain controlled attention and concentration.
- Short-Term Working Memory: The short-term working memory cluster is the ability to apprehend and hold information in immediate awareness and then use or manipulate it to carry out a goal. (Mather & Wendling, 2014, pp. 21-23)

Students with learning disabilities are typically classified using the IQ achievement discrepancy model, which uses norm-referenced, standardized tests to determine a student's IQ and academic achievement. The school psychologist or multidisciplinary team then analyzes this information to determine the presence of a severe discrepancy between the two scores (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). Before the reauthorization of IDEA, in the state of Texas, a severe discrepancy is identified as a 16-point difference between the global IQ and any achievement area.

The current law states that a student classified with a learning disability is one that shows a severe discrepancy between the student's ability and his/her achievement level that negatively affects educational performance (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). However, even when children demonstrate a discrepancy between their ability and their achievement, they may not have a learning disability; they may simply be underachieving (Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003). Klingner and Harry (2006) discussed that in many cases, low achievement is often attributed to low IQ without considering the context where the student is underachieving. In addition, the IQ-A discrepancy model fails to consider second language acquisition; according to Cummins (Ortiz & Yates, 2001), norm-referenced assessments do not assess language completely because they do not assess spontaneity in conversation, nor do they assess academic language proficiency.

It is difficult to assess the true potential of an EL using the standardized IQ test; meanwhile, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the IQ test (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The IQ achievement discrepancy model may cause school personnel to misinterpret students' linguistic and cultural differences as evidence of a disability (Chu, 2011). Thus, the role of language proficiency impacts IQ tests, and those analyzing and interpreting test results should have

knowledge of language acquisition. The continuing prevalence of this model contributes to the overrepresentation of EL students in special education (Sullivan, 2011).

Cortiella (2010) analyzed the use of the IQ achievement discrepancy approach and the use of RtI that the IDEA (2004) recommended for determining specific learning disabilities. Additionally, IDEA (2004) established that local educational agencies (LEA) no longer require an IQ achievement discrepancy for determining specific learning disabilities. Although federal law does not require the use of an IQ achievement discrepancy for determining specific learning disabilities, many school psychologists continue to use this approach for the assessment of children at risk for a specific learning disability. According to Coutinho and Oswald (2000) and Hale et al. (2006), the discrepancy model contributes to the existing disproportionality in the identification of students from minoritized backgrounds, such as Hispanic or Latino as well as EL. Moreover, the discrepancy model's reliance on teacher referrals and cognitive testing explains the relationship between referring EL students and the disproportionality in the identification of these same students.

The psychometric aspects of the discrepancy model have also been disputed. The methods by which clinicians assess differences between IQ and achievement vary widely and often affect the validity of the conclusions that can be drawn (Hale et al., 2006). Ideally, a bilingual school psychologist with training to conduct assessments with EL students should work with these students; however, only 10.8% of all school psychologists in the United States meet the criteria to be bilingual school psychologists (O'Bryon & Rogers, 2010). Finding a bilingual practitioner who fluently speaks the student's primary language and can conduct an assessment can be difficult (O'Bryon & Rogers, 2010). A lack of translators trained to assess EL students with a specific learning disability can result in less valid assessments (Huang et al., 2011).

Moreover, the discrepancy model's reliance on teacher referrals and cognitive testing explains the relationship between referring EL students and the disproportionality in the identification of these same students. Therefore, practitioners involved in the SST process should have knowledge about second language acquisition and the difference between academic and conversational language.

Response to Intervention Model

IDEA (2004) directs local education agencies to use RtI as an early approach to addressing struggling students' problems. RtI is an approach that the law has indicated should be used for identifying and helping students who are at risk for not meeting grade-level standards (ARD Guide, 2021). The basic elements of the RtI approach are the provision of scientific, research-based instruction and interventions in the general education classroom; monitoring and measurement of the students' progress in response to the interventions; and use of these measures of progress to make educational decisions.

IDEA elected to have LEAs implement the use of RtI so that instruction would be focused on learner outcomes instead of on the special education process. Therefore, utilizing RtI as a prevention model and not a wait-to-fail model implies that students with disabilities are general education students first. As a response to the legislative requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2016), and IDEA (2004), some school districts developed the SST and implemented the RtI process through the SST on each campus (Morgan, 2018).

Individual districts and their SSTs are accountable for the identification of students that are exhibiting academic or behavioral difficulties. They are also accountable for developing individually designed interventions to address academic and behavioral needs through the SST

processes. Additionally, depending on the identified needs of the student, the students are placed within a tiered intervention system, and those students who do not make significant progress, academically and/or behaviorally, may be referred to special education for evaluation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Glover & DiPenna, 2007; Hoover, 2011).

The utilization of RtI has been identified as an intervention designed to reduce academic and behavioral failures and may be the mechanism for improving the outcomes for struggling learners (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Glover & DiPenna, 2007; Hoover, 2011). In 2011, a survey of campus administrators exposed that 61% of those administrators were applying some form of RtI (Morgan, 2018), although confusion regarding the purpose and structure of the RtI process had also been observed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hoover, 2011). While RtI has been implemented, there is limited research of the perceptions of school staff regarding perceptions of the RtI implementation process (Morgan, 2018).

Even though there is an overall agreement in the discipline of what represents RtI, there is the continued belief that there are significant variances in methods and viewpoints. Researchers have agreed that RtI is a tiered structure in which interventions are provided to students who do not make significant progress in demonstrating academic or behavioral progress (Berkeley et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Glover & DiPenna, 2007; Hoover, 2011). Some local education agencies (LEA) utilize a three-tier approach of interventions prior to a referral for special education if evaluation is determined, meaning that the third tier is the referral to special education testing. Other local education agencies (LEA)s use a four-tier approach prior to special education assessment, indicating that the last tier is the referral to the special education evaluation and identification as a student with a disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hoover, 2011; Ogonosky 2018). Throughout the RtI process, there are many decision-making points regarding

the students involved in interventions. The decisions are made by the SST, which is typically comprised of a campus administrator, general education teacher, and special education representative (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hoover, 2011; Ogonosky, 2018).

Scott et al. (2014) indicated that when RtI was added to IDEA in 2004, there were few articles that addressed the successfulness or failure of the RtI model regarding EL students being identified as having a specific learning disability. The longstanding issue in EL students in special education is often blamed by many in the field on the IQ discrepancy method of identification. Researchers are concerned that IQ tests are a poor index of intelligence for all students and specifically for EL students since the test are not intended for students who are in the process of acquiring the language in which the tests are conducted. Furthermore, school psychologists continue to use this method (Scott et al., 2014).

Assessment Biases

Just as special education regulations were enacted with the best of intentions, SSTs are not absolved of setbacks. The difficulties with the team model stem from implementation. As far back as 1996, several publications produced evidence of factors and processes within these teams that contributed to system bias. These biases manifested in an increase in special education referrals and an overrepresentation of minoritized children of color and EL students (Chu, 2013; Knotek, 2003). Studies that investigated teachers' attitudes and biases about race and ethnicity in the context of referrals to special education revealed that students of color were referred more often than their peers (Times, 2016; Mobley, 2017).

SSTs design intervention plans to support struggling learners. Many of those plans fail to consider cultural differences that may be impeding the students' progress (Hernandez-Finch, 2012). Then, there is the personal bias that educators bring to the learning environment that may

impede the learning opportunities of culturally diverse students (Krummel, 2013). Without culturally responsive teaching and instructional differentiation, it is extremely difficult to meet the needs of minoritized students (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). It is important for SSTs to carefully analyze their process and procedures as well as campus data to ensure that one specific group of students are not struggling to address disproportionality in special education (Hernandez-Finch, 2012)

According to McKinney et al. (2010), RtI has the potential of providing meaningful educational opportunities to students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). There is optimism that RtI can influence the disproportionate placement of minoritized youth in special education. Traditionally, the disproportionate placement of CLD students as well is extremely troubling (Artiles et al., 2010; McKinney et al., 2010). Over the last 30 years (Klingner et al., 2005), the focus has been on appropriate and non-bias special education assessment and placement. Non-biased assessment and placement are still complicated by skewed, special education eligibility categories that involve clinical judgment such as emotional disability, specific learning disability, or intellectual disability. Although RtI might offer additional evidence, some researchers question whether RtI simply shifts children into distinct categories rather than reducing overrepresentation (Ciolfi & Ryan, 2011).

The difference in laws across states concerning the inclusion of RtI in the special education evaluations or within individual special education categories, such as referring to RtI before referring to special education, may result in different impacts on the disproportionate placement of EL students in special education (Zirkel, 2011). Educators often distort the prereferral processes and RtI (Kavale et al., 2008; Orosco & Klingner, 2010) and mistakenly

accept that the implementation of both could remove bias from assessments and special education determinations.

Per Ogonosky (2011), the prereferral process is what was referred to as the Early Intervening Services in IDEA (2004). The Early Intervening Services outlined in IDEA were designed to permit school districts to use up to 15% of federal funds designated for special education services with struggling general education students throughout K-12. IDEA of 2004 particularly encouraged school districts to use this new option in kindergarten through Grade 3. The intent of the mandate was to influence the identification of students who struggle academically or behaviorally as well as affect the amount of minoritized students being inappropriately referred for evaluation and considered for special education eligibility (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

School Psychologist Training and Assessing EL students for Special Education

School psychologists are being asked to work with CLD students at a greater requisite (Smith et al., 2016). However, there is a shortage of bilingual school psychologist; the demographics of bilingual school psychologist has not kept up with the demands of the increased Hispanic or Latino population (Smith et al., 2016). Results from the survey completed by 323 school psychologists resulted in less than 12% of the respondents indicating that they were proficient in a language other than English (Sotelo-Dynega & Dixon, 2014). Similarly, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2013) reported survey findings in which a third of their respondents had some fluency in a language other than English. However, the study did not indicate the levels of proficiency held by the respondents, suggesting the finding was less practically significant.

Even so, Curtis et al. (2004) concluded that school psychologists historically are Caucasian, and although some are proficient in languages other than English, they still are underrepresented when dealing with minoritized students in psychology. School psychologists, whether bilingual or monolingual, need schooling in unbiased procedures to include classroom instruction as well as hands-on field experience with the EL population. "The mere possession of the capacity to communicate in an individual's language does not ensure appropriate nondiscriminatory procedures of that individual" (Flanagan et al., 2000, p. 291).

School psychologists involved in the special education referral process may not have sufficient training to make informed decisions that require differentiating between the characteristics of disabilities eligible for special education and language acquisition (Huang et al., 2011). Furthermore, psychometric aspects of the discrepancy model have been disputed due to concerns with the reliability and validity of the discrepancy model used to determine a learning disability (Taylor et al., 2017). The methods by which clinicians assess differences between IQ and achievement vary widely and often affect the validity of the conclusions that can be drawn (Hale et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2017). According to O'Bryon and Rogers (2010), it can be problematic to assess EL students referred for special education evaluation, which determines the student's eligibility for special education services, due to the challenges related to identifying whether academic struggles result from a language acquisition or a language/reading disability.

Preparation, Licensure, and Certification

Sotelo-Dynega (2014) conducted a survey concerning the credentialing and training of bilingual school psychologists in 50 states and the District of Columbia. This study's purpose was focused on identifying if there were credentialing agencies for school psychologists that

provided credentials for bilingual school psychologists. Additionally, Sotelo-Dynega asked if school psychologists were considered bilingual psychologists because they spoke the second language or because they were issued credentials to be bilingual school psychologists. The interviews were conducted via the phone by five graduate-level research assistants. Only New York and Illinois provided a specific credential for bilingual school psychologists (Sotelo-Dynega, 2014). The required credentials for Illinois included a school psychologist certification, fluency in another language, and classes in the assessment of EL students and the assessment of EL students with disabilities. The program from New York similarly required a school psychologist certification and fluency in a second language. In addition, the New York program called for coursework in cultural perspectives and theory and practice in multicultural education, as well as fieldwork (Sotelo-Dynega, 2014).

Psychologist Assessment Practices

The prevailing data concerning the assessment practice of culturally linguistically diverse students showed insufficient training and apparent incompetence in the completion of assessments of CLD students (Vega et al., 2015). In the survey conducted by Ochoa et al. (1997), a school psychologist from eight states reported they believed to be deficient in the training required to administer and understand bilingual evaluations. The results of the survey indicated that the participants felt that they were less than sufficiently trained in the methods of second language acquisition, the methods utilized to complete bilingual assessments, and how to interpret the results of those assessments. Additionally, the participants of the Ochoa et al. (1997) survey expressed that they lacked the knowledge base to differentiate between a disability and second language learning concerns and to identify second language acquisition influence on an assessment.

Contrary to the findings in Ochoa et al. (1997), the results from O'Bryon and Rogers (2010) and Pena (2013) indicated that the participants surveyed indicated that they were experts or "above average" in their knowledge of language and second language acquisition. A possible explanation for these results might be that the participants from Pena (2013) and O'Bryon and Roger (2010) were identified as dominant Spanish-speaking school psychologists or bilingual school psychologists, unlike the participants in Ochoa et al.'s (1997) study who did not indicate that they were fluent Spanish speakers.

Bainter and Tollefson (2003) conducted a survey of 202 school psychologists, and their results indicated that it would be the best practice to complete the administration of assessments of bilingual students in both their native language and English. The next best practice was the use of non-verbal assessments utilizing an interpreter if the assessment required any oral instructions (Bainter & Tollefson, 2003; Vega et al., 2015).

Untimely, the review of the literature concerning bilingualism and school psychology all indicate that there is a shortage of qualified bilingual evaluators. The research also indicated there were only two programs of the 50 programs included in the research that indicated that the programs offered specific credentials for the training of bilingual psychologists. Overall, the research showed that school psychologist feels as though they have deficiencies in the appropriate training in the assessments of EL students. One area of deficiency is the acquisition of language, and a second is that they lacked the knowledge of how to differentiate between a disability and second language acquisition.

Empirical Research Regarding RtI Effectiveness with EL Students

EL students are a group of diverse students. They are continually increasing in their school representation that includes many countries, cultures, and languages. They differ in

educational background and socioeconomic levels. There has been a disproportionate demonstration of an unfair curriculum implementation with English learners in special education programs (Davis, 2017; Rivas 2019; Stapleton, 2017). Educational policies have stressed the need for schools to address EL students' academic needs (ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002) and perform unbiased assessments to ensure that disability diagnoses are not due to English language acquisition or acculturation deficits (IDEA 2004). Therefore, researchers have cautioned about the need to complete culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments to avoid giving flawed diagnoses, which could contribute to the disproportionality of diverse students, including EL students in special education (Counts et al., 2018; Harris & Sullivan, 2017; Ortiz et al., 2006).

Ruiz (2020) and Johnson et al. (2019) indicated that RtI consists of two main models: a standard treatment protocol and a problem-solving protocol. The standard protocol consists of a universal screener. The data collected from the screener on the individual students is used to compare the students to general outcome measures and their peers to identify those at risk for failing. After data review, the students are placed in RtI Tier 1, 2, or 3. Tier 1 is designed for interventions that use satisfactory tools for monitoring progress in the target area (Dougherty Stahl, 2016). Tier 2 is designed for students that need targeted interventions, and Tier 3 interventions are individualized (Mellard et al., 2010). The problem-solving protocol has four major areas: (a) to identify and define the problem presented, (b) to analyze the problem and develop an intervention plan, (c) to implement the intervention plan while monitoring the fidelity of implementation, and (d) to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and determine next steps (Fuchs et al., 2003).

Ruiz (2020) specifically studied the RtI process in a rural school district. However, the findings indicated that the framework researched in the study could be used in any school

district. The framework, which was utilized with two student case scenarios, considered the knowledge in the areas of RtI, special education, rural education, and EL education. It can be applied to any multitiered system of support (MTSS) used by school districts to provide academic and behavioral support to EL students. The framework includes three major components: (a) comparing the struggling EL to true peers, (b) considering the unique factors that may influence EL students' academic and behavioral performance, and (c) applying the framework to the RtI process. The results indicated how inadequate information about EL students and second-language acquisition might allow SSTs to miss critical information about aspects that affect EL's learning.

Johnson et al. (2019) indicated that the growing EL population does not present a problem. The concern is presented because of the different educational outcomes for EL students, the factors related to second language acquisition, and the decisions of the RtI/SST to move forward with special education evaluations. Johnson et al. used a phenomenological framework to examine the experiences and perceptions of school counselors working with EL students in the RtI process. The counselors and bilingual personnel were essential members of the SSTs and RtI teams. These individuals helped the teams decipher language acquisition and/or learning challenges. Finally, Johnson et al. revealed that regardless of the work that teachers dedicate to instruction and the RtI process, EL students are faced with both higher and lower risks of being referred to special education services. Therefore, it is imperative that the teams support unbiased results and experiences for EL students in the RtI process.

According to Rivas (2019), there is trepidation that the RtI model is being executed as a one-size-fits-all approach. This process is in direct conflict with the preventative purpose of RtI, which is to provide research-based targeted differentiated instruction to meet the individualized

needs of all students, including EL students. As a result, many SS teams prescribe the same interventions to English learners as dominant English students, ignoring the linguistic needs of EL students. The vagueness caused by a lack of culturally and linguistically responsive interventions, along with the discrepancy in implementation, reiterates the necessity for examining the effectiveness of the SSTs interventions and decision making for English learners (Stapleton, 2017).

Empirical Research on SST Members and Team Effectiveness with EL Students

Several empirical studies regarding practices used by school administrators and SSTs for identifying whether EL students should be eligible for special education are reviewed in this section. When making decisions for EL students to be placed in special education, it is necessary to focus on appropriate data suitable for interpretations (Roegman et al., 2018). As noted in earlier research for EL students, it would be beneficial if the EL committee were involved prior to the referral going to the SST, and SSTs must consist of the appropriate stakeholders (Klingner & Harry, 2006). A review of the referral process by SSTs found noteworthy inconsistency in four areas: information gathered for assessment, the validity of the data triggering the referral, the level of constructive teamwork among the SST, and the lack of involvement of the parents (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

Albarracin (2021) focused on the role of the building principal in the decision-making process when referring EL students for special education. The decision-making process for EL students indicates that principals need to be able to not only analyze data but also interpret and master how to utilize the data to increase student outcomes (Albarracin, 2021). Albarracin showed that current federal educational policy (ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 2004) should direct campus principals on how to disaggregate and interpret data to accomplish enhanced outcomes for all

students; however, it was unclear how accurately this is taking place in schools. Therefore, Albarracin conducted the study in Iowa with six participants from different schools to understand the interactions the participants had with their specific SSTs and what the principals' decision-making involvement was. One of the findings highlighted the use of the legal guidance in the Special Education Procedure Manual (Iowa Area Education Agencies, 2019) for the process and considerations that school teams should engage when determining whether a student would be a candidate for special education referral. However, Albarracin noted that it was not difficult to look at the process through a White, normative lens, especially when trying to determine who a student's "like-peers" are when norm-referencing performance. The manual made some references for special considerations when considering EL students during the referral process; however, these references were not a natural feature throughout, giving the impression of an afterthought as opposed to an intentional area of focus for consideration.

Tatum (2018) collected teachers' perceptions of the SST process as used with all students. The study was completed in a rural district in the Mid-Atlantic under a casual-comparative design to collect the perceptions of the SST framework. The sample consisted of 70 certified regular and special education teachers who completed the Bailey-Tarver SST/RtI Survey. According to Tatum, the data revealed a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of SSTs, their knowledge with sufficient training to execute SSTs, and the effectiveness of SSTs for struggling students. Results indicated that districts used various names for their SSTs, such as teacher assistance teams, RtI teams, teacher support teams, prereferral intervention teams, and problem-solving teams. The goal of the local districts that implemented SSTs was to improve student achievement. The findings supported previous evidence of the SST as an effective model for establishing interventions for EL students functioning below grade

level in the general education classroom (Brendle, 2015; Wade, 2015; Zipoli & Merritt, 2016). Tatum's findings supported Payne's (2013) observation that while SSTs can help struggling students overcome barriers to success, teachers struggle with having many other responsibilities. Therefore, the findings supported providing professional development for teachers about the SST process.

Fleming (2017) focused on SST implementation and monitoring in a dual-purpose study to identify the major factors adversely affecting SST efforts to implement and monitor student-centered interventions and to determine what SST members do to improve their capability to establish and supervise intervention plans with struggling students. Fleming used a mixed-method design to collect data and identified a number of issues associated with the SST process, poor team communication, misunderstanding of the SST process and purpose, lack of intervention fidelity, difficulties identifying intervention for EL students, and a need to understand scientifically based research interventions for all students. Fleming observed that even though SSTs experience difficulties, districts would benefit from reframing the SST process. In the discussion, Fleming agreed with Holleran (2013) that school districts might need to align their practices with the legal definition of multidisciplinary education teams in which SSTs operate as a group of educational professionals who collaborate to determine the strengths and needs of students, create plans that connect interventions to student needs, and promote continued student inclusion in their general education classes. It is necessary to have a shared understanding of the SST process so that school districts can operate a more standardized SST that has success with RtI.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature. Chapter II explored the history of SSTs known by many different terms and the function of the SSTs for struggling. The chapter contained (a) models of assessing learning disabilities; (b) RtI and EL students; (c) school psychologist training as related to EL students; and (d) determining a second language acquisition versus learning disability. The review indicated a gap in the literature. Even though RtI has been implemented as a way to reduce special education referrals, limited research of the perceptions of school staff regarding their perceptions of the RtI implementation process as a way to reduce special education referrals has been conducted (Morgan, 2018). Despite the importance of the SST process in the identification of struggling students and the creation of student-focused interventions, such as RtI, research regarding the difficulties SST teams have with the implementation and monitoring of student-centered action plans has also been limited (Fleming, 2017; Tatum, 2018).

Chapter III contains the methodology used in this qualitative study. The sections in the methodology chapter include research design, context and setting, participants, instrumentation, reliability and validity, data collection, researcher bias, and data analysis.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine student support team (SST) members' perceptions related to the referral and response to intervention (RtI) processes used with elementary English learning (EL) students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. SST members' recommendations for overcoming challenges were sought. Fleming (2017) indicated that SSTs are organized to deal with the complete needs of students, such as academic, social-emotional, and behavioral concerns, as well as to develop intervention plans for these areas of concern. A challenge that SST members face involves developing interventions for EL students while at the same time appropriately determining if the EL student's academic struggles represent a learning disability or a common difficulty with language acquisition (Mobley, 2017).

The SST often consists of several school professionals, such as general education teachers, administrators, intervention specialists, special education teachers, related service personnel, and school counselors/ psychologists (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Carrillo (2015), Long (2013), and Lynette (2015) indicated that SST members experience difficulties with the implementation and monitoring of student intervention plans for all students, not just EL students. When the team members fail to monitor the implementation of the intervention plan, inappropriate special education referrals of EL students become more likely (Carrillo, 2015; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). The inappropriate referral of a student to special education is a longstanding issue in education (Wang &Wolf, 2015; Ottinger-Owens, 2018). Understanding how SST team members perceive the process, like RtI, that they use to determine which students

may benefit from special education could reduce overrepresentation by Hispanic or Latino as well as EL students in special education and benefit future SST teams seeking to help their EL students be academically successful.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?

RQ2. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?

RQ3. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition regarding the referral process for special education?

This chapter contains the research design detailing the methodological approach for the study. Information regarding the setting and participants is also noted in this chapter. Other sections of this chapter include details noting the selected instrument, data collection, procedures, data analysis, and provisions of trustworthiness for the proposed study. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

The basic qualitative research design allowed for focusing on participants representing multiple schools' SSTs in one school district. Basic qualitative research uncovers meaning of human behavior and experience while articulating procedures and systems of the participants' SST experiences (Creswell, 2018). The primary purpose of a qualitative design applied in the

context of SSTs is to obtain an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (2009) described a basic qualitative research study as theoretically resulting from constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactions. Additionally, Merriam stated that qualitative researchers are interested in the how of people interpreting their experiences and constructing their worlds as well as the meaning they make of their experiences. For Merriam, the overall purpose of basic qualitative researcher "is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). Furthermore, the purpose of the qualitative research design is predominantly about obtain an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes (Worthington, 2013). This research directly examined the SST members' perceptions about their SST experiences as these teams were responsible for referring EL students; therefore, indicating that a basic qualitative research design was an appropriate research design for exploring people's experiences in-depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2017). This research design permitted me to understand how the participants made sense of their SST experiences. The qualitative research design allowed for engaging in semistructured inquiry that did not emphasize embedding in the field during data collection (Creswell, 2018).

Further, the qualitative research design allows researchers to understand, the participants' experiences and perspectives as well as the attributions and implications the participants assigned to those experiences (Worthington 2013). This research design enables researchers to comprehend people's perceptions and experiences related to a particular situation (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, the basic qualitative research focus was on learning the meaning making of the participants as they discussed their experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative inquiry was a suitable research paradigm to study processes, such as SST members'

experiences with identifying EL students for special education and intervention (Merriam, 1998). The members of SSTs were the appropriate target population for gaining an understanding of curricula, situational characteristics, and the special education referral and identification processes as they currently existed.

Because the design was basic qualitative researcher, as the researcher, I was the primary instrument for the collection of data and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2017). Researchers are vital elements of the research process by situating themselves close to the participants and interacting with study participants in their natural environments (Yilmaz, 2013). As the researcher, it was important that I thoroughly documented and analyzed the participants' perspectives and experiences. Creswell and Poth (2016) maintained that transparency in the researchers' values is an important feature of qualitative studies. With the interviews being a fundamental data collection instrument in this research design, rapport between researchers and participants ensures in-depth data collection and the opportunity for thick, rich thematic findings.

Setting and Site Selection

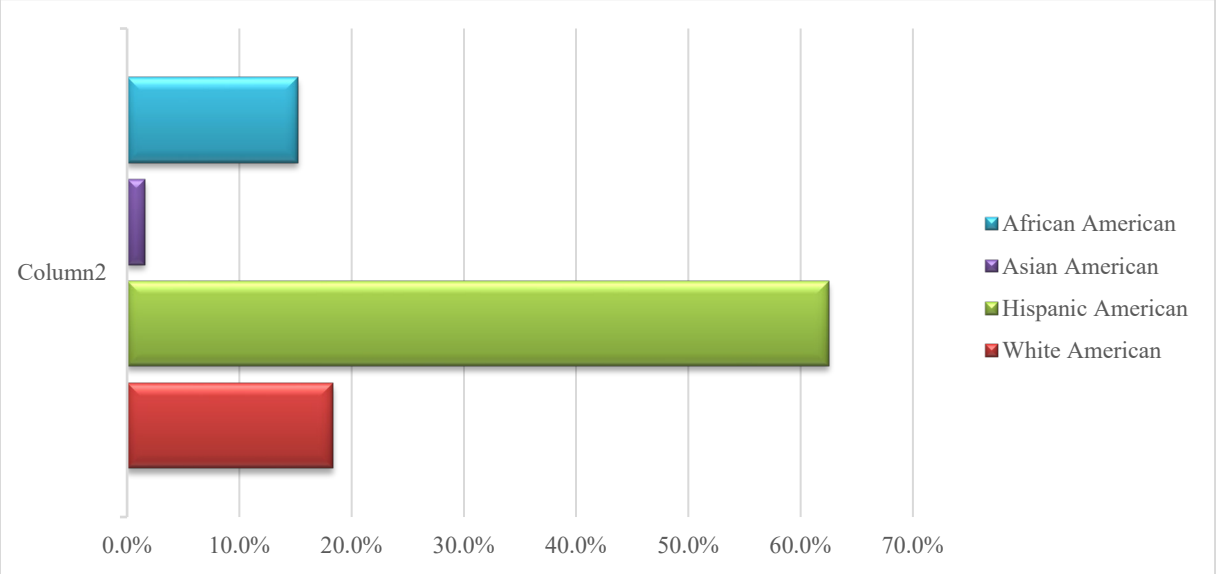
The study was conducted in a mid-sized suburban school district located in Texas. The pseudonym selected for the school district is Choice Independent School District (CISD, 2020). According to CISD's Performance Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) report in 2018, CISD enrolled approximately 26,000 students and consists of 16 elementary schools, five junior high schools, three high schools, an alternative center, and an early college campus. CISD's student population represented the following: 58% Hispanic American, 32% African American, 10% White, and 1% Asian. There were approximately 2,568 students receiving special education services, with 10% (or 256) of the 2,568 students in special education as students of color, and 11% (or 282) of the students in special education designated as EL (PBMAS, 2018). The

following CISD had 16 elementary campuses identified as potential sites: (a) percentage of identified EL students on the campus and (b) percentage of identified EL students receiving special education services. Therefore, based on the district data, I was able to recruit SST members from a minimum of 4 of the 16 elementary schools, which allowed for adequate data saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

CISD served the city of "Choice," populated by 113,700 residents and located approximately 30 miles away from a major city in Texas. The average household income was $57,765, and approximately 14% of the population lived at or below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2020). CISD (2021) was organized in 1919. The district established its first building program in 1921 when it passed a $200,000.00 bond for the purchase of land and only five schools. Later, in 1948 because of the oil industry's accomplishments, the community blossomed economically (CISD, 2013). The district served multiple outlying areas of the county and a small portion of a second county. District level racial demographics are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Choice School District's Racial Demographics



The racial demographics of the school district were slightly higher than that of the community, especially when comparing the Hispanic or Latino demographics. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the city of Choice, population in 2019 was 31.8% White, 47% Hispanic or Latin American, 17.2% African American, and 1.8% Asian. However, the district racial demographics indicated that the Hispanic American population was 62.5% (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Participant Selection

The elementary school level was selected for this study because most of the initial referrals for special education testing originate from SST meetings at the elementary school level. Once the school district request for research was approved by CISD, I gathered the electronic addresses from the district website. I then sent the recruitment letter to all 16

elementary-level school principals in the district. Four elementary school principals responded, indicating that they were interested in participating in the study and that they would forward the recruitment email to staff that were currently or who had previously been SST members. Interested participants were contacted, and consent forms were reviewed with them to clarify any questions concerning the study.

A purposive sampling technique was utilized for the selection of participants within the school district. Purposive sampling was used since it best simplifies researchers' grasp and focus of the study's aims and offers direct opportunities to answer research questions (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2017). This technique is non-random and does not require a set number of participants. First, I communicated with the principals to gain their support. The principals sent the recruitment e-mail to the individuals at their school who had previously or were currently serving on SST. I was able to identify participants who were knowledgeable about and had firsthand experience as team members of SSTs. These were individuals that had participated on the campus SST and met the SST criteria. Based on the document from the district that outlined the typical makeup of the SST, the district had 16 elementary schools that have their own school SSTs that consist of a minimum of three members. Each team in CISD was composed of four educators; an administrator, general education teacher, special education teacher, and/ or a licensed specialist in school psychologist (LSSP) or an educational diagnostician assigned to the campus. Because the typical composition of an SST in CISD was five members and the district consisted of 16 elementary schools, the SST population consisted of approximately 80 elementary level educators in CISD. Based on the responses I received from interested participants, I interviewed a total of 12 participants representing four of the district's SSTs. One general education teacher, one administrator, and one school psychologist/special education

representative from each campus agreed to participate. Based on these numbers, there were 12 participants for my study.

Creswell and Poth (2016) noted that interviews usually consist of at least 10 to 20 individuals before saturation occurs. Saturation is defined as the point at which no further themes are observed in the data (Morse, 1994). The inclusion criteria meant that all participants were members of their schools' SSTs. General Education teachers also had EL students in their classrooms. The administrator needed to have knowledge of or participate in the SST meetings. School psychologists or special education representatives needed experience evaluating students for special education eligibility and supporting both general education teachers and special education teachers and special education students. The total sample was 12 participants from four elementary schools in CISD. A concise description of their background was developed, and each was assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and provide anonymity.

Positionality

I was previously an employee in CISD, specifically working in the special education department. I had served as a bilingual classroom teacher, educational diagnostician, and coordinator of special education evaluations. Due to my experience in the district, my positionality and perspective as a researcher provided me with the opportunity to probe deeply into the research setting to garner an in-depth understanding of how my participants perceived their context in their natural settings (Merriam, 1998, 2009). As a result of my previous experience with the district, it was important for me to purposively select campuses that best aligned with the criteria. I was purposeful in selecting the district to fully probe the participants for information. However, I also maintained a journal to ensure I could bracket away my biases from affecting the data analysis.

Procedures

Once university Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (Appendix A), I sought the school district's approval. For obtaining district permission, I provided the permission letter from Texas A&M University and completed the participating district's research request application. This research application served as a document that explained the purpose of the study, the interview questions asked, and the procedures for interviewing the SST members. After receiving the signed approved research request application from the district, the district provided the electronic addresses for the elementary school principals from the district's website.

The participants were invited by an initial participant recruitment email (Appendix B). Once they agreed to participate, an email was sent that provided the consent form describing what was expected of each participant. I did not recruit enough participants from the first email; therefore, a follow-up email was sent 3 days later to the potential participants who did not respond to the initial invitation. This effort allowed for the sample to reach saturation. When I received 12 participants representing four elementary schools, I scheduled the interviews and did not need to do any further follow-up recruitment. The 12 participants were representatives of four elementary campuses and their SSTs. They included administrators, general education teachers, and special education representatives.

The identities of all CISD elementary schools and SST members were masked with pseudonyms. Participants were informed that their data would be confidential and reviewed and discussed the ethical assurances and the informed consent information (Appendix C). The participants signed the informed consent form that provided all the information about the study's purpose, the nature of the study, and the need to use an audio and video recording device for data

collection. Table 2 provided the participants' pseudonyms, their roles on their prospective campuses, and their educator experience.

Instruments

Considering that qualitative data collection by interviews was used to gather data for this study, both the researcher and the interview protocol were used as an instrument. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), I was a key instrument by using a protocol as "an instrument for recording data" and gathered all information and interpreted the data I received (p.181). According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), an interview protocol has a sequenced list of questions that researchers ask their participants during the interviews to gain focus insight into the participants' experiences and to understand how participants make sense of reality. I sought to examine SST members' perceptions related to the methods and procedures used to identify EL elementary school level students referred for special education services.

One of the main characteristics of a basic qualitative design involves data collection through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The second reason this qualitative research design was optimal concerns its opportunities for generating thick, rich descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Such depictions enable the illustration of the multiple realities of the study participants (Borrego, Douglas, & Amelink, 2009). The illustrations are immensely valuable in educational research, according to Kozleski (2017), for they produce "knowledge about perspectives, settings, and techniques" (p. 22) that, in turn, can be instructive for school leaders and policymakers as it relates to procedures for referrals for EL students to special education.

The semistructured interviews (Appendix D) were conducted using a secure, password-protected web conferencing system, Zoom. After the participants were informed and consent was received, the interviews were conducted and recorded at a mutually agreed time, ensuring

availability and minimal disruptions. Each interview was recorded using a digitized audio recording device. The web conferencing platform had the ability to digitally record the interview and provide the initial voice-to-text transcription that I used for editing the transcripts and ensuring the accuracy of the data. As a backup, I used Otter.ai, a conferencing system that provided voice-to-text through a secure, password-protected transcription service. I utilized reflective journaling during the interviews to add more context to each transcript of data (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2006).

The interview protocol for this study included semistructured interview open-ended questions so that the participant could not just answer with a yes or no. The questions were reasonable because they were clearly worded, appropriate, and not leading (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The protocol consisted of 16 interview questions to address the three research questions. Additionally, there are six demographic questions. The alignment of the interview questions with the research questions supported achieving the purpose of the study. Figure 2 shows the semistructured interview protocol used in the study.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this qualitative study, interviews were used to collect data from participants. Interview questions were open-ended and semistructured, as the questions avoided yes or no answers. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix D. Open-ended, semistructured questions allowed the study participants the latitude to expound, explain, or provide details and nuance. The questions were designed to align with the research questions.

Figure 2

Interview Protocol-Semistructured Interview Questions

RQ1. What are elementary school level Student Support Team members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?
A. What are the procedures related to the student support team process in your district?
B. **What d**o you perceive is the **biggest challenge when identifying** English Learners (EL) students for special education services?
C. What **do you perceive** of the methods and procedures used to identify the EL students that need special education?
D. What **do you observe** regarding student support team referrals of EL students versus referrals of all students? Which practices have you observed to have been effective in referring EL for special education?
E. What supports would you like to see implemented by the student support team that would ultimately contribute to the achievement for your EL students?
F. What **challenges have you encountered** with the referral process for EL students' to special education possible placement?
RQ2. What are elementary school level Student Support Team members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?
A. What percentage of EL students move on to the Student Support Team for special education testing and have waived interventions?
B. How is the **native language and the second language acquisition** taken into account during the RtI process for EL students being referred to special education?
C. How does Response to Intervention (RtI) **define and apply interventions** for EL students identified to special education?
D. **In your experience**, what activities and interventions have been most useful in addressing the needs of EL students who are experiencing academic difficulties?
E. What challenges have you encountered with the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?
RQ3. What are elementary school level Student Support Team members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition in regard to the referral process for special education?
A. **What do you perceive** is the biggest challenge in discerning the difference between language difference and disability for EL students?
B. How **do you feel** about the information you have regarding a student's linguistic/cultural/experiential profile when making a determination to recommend an EL student for Special Education assessment?
C. What is the level of understanding of second language acquisition among the student support team? How does level of knowledge and understanding impact the referral process?
D. Have you participated in a cultural competence professional development training within the past year? If so, how has that helped your understanding of language acquisition?
E. What challenges have you encountered with English Learners' language acquisition in regard to the referral process for special education?

Interviews were conducted via a web conferencing system, Zoom, with four campus administrators, four general education teachers, and four special education representatives (e.g., license specialists in school psychology, educational diagnosticians) who were elementary SST members. The focus of the study was on the SST members' experiences and perceptions and not

on any one specific member or specific position within the SST to examine the prereferral intervention and assessment procedures for elementary EL students. Individual interviews with 12 participants across four elementary schools allowed for achieving saturation in data collection.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to provide demographic data about themselves based on a short questionnaire that was used as descriptive questions prior to the semistructured interview (Appendix D). The purpose of the descriptive questions helped to relax and to develop a rapport with the participant (Merriam, 2009). Charmaz (2006) stated that an intensive interview could help create focus and invite a detailed discussion of a topic. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, according to the flexibility of each participant. On some occasions, I determined that some responses needed clarification. Permission was obtained from participants to audio-record the interviews.

A semistructured interview approach worked well with this study because it allowed me to have a set of questions derived from research questions and the flexibility to probe participants to provide additional details during the interviews (Patton, 2015). Merriam (2015) affirmed that semistructured interviews necessitate specific data from all participants. The use of the same questions was important to ensure that the wording of the questions was predetermined and consistent for each participant regardless of position in the district. In using this method, the interview instrument allowed for particular questions to be used with the respondents. However, the sequence of questions and the wording of particular questions followed a distinctive and personalized conversational channel co-constructed between me and each participant.

The data were collected through interviews with SST members who represented multiple positions and roles on the campuses that included general education teachers, special education

teachers, and licensed school psychologists (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The collection of information was used to understand what elementary SST members perceive, the processes the team followed, and the perceptions of the members when referring EL students for special education services. Some participants shared other information by following up after their individual interviews.

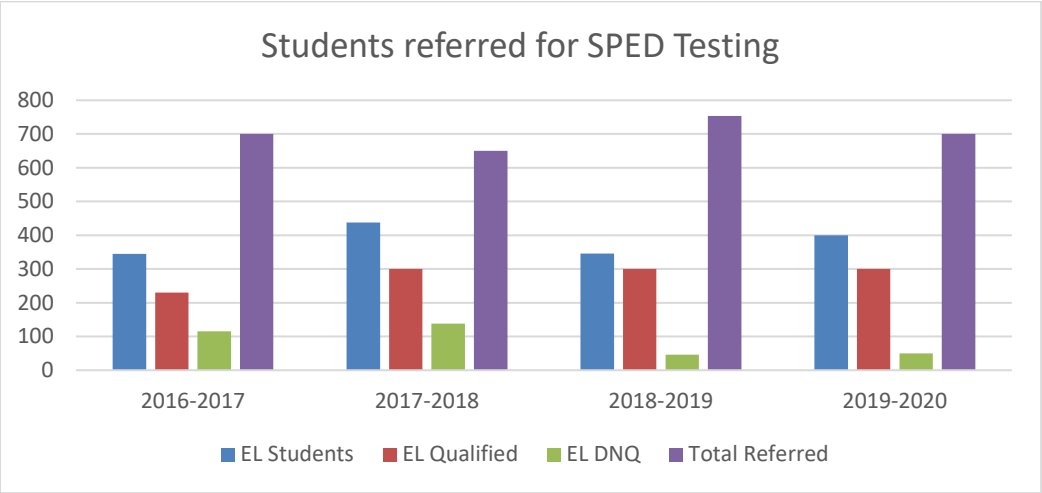
Because the study involved applying the qualitative design, the focus on data collection was on the participants' experiences and how they communicated those experiences during their interviews. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participant Holmes, a district special education representative (LSSP) and an SST member from Hudson Elementary, provided the thumb drive with the spreadsheet indicating the number of EL students referred for special education testing and the qualification rate of those students because she needed to communicate using this visual aid. Therefore, I considered the privacy and confidentiality of student information in accordance with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). I utilized critical discourse analysis to analyze the information shared by Participant Holmes.

The thumb drive outlined the referral process for the district that Participant Holmes explicated in her interview. The thumb drive contained an agenda for an SST meeting, a procedural chart that outlined the process flow for RtI, and a process chart for special education referrals, which were all issues Participant Holmes discussed with me. Furthermore, the thumb drive included data reporting the total number of students referred for special education testing by SSTs. The data were divided into total EL students and monolingual students for the 2016-2020 school years. The information was divided by elementary school and contained how many monolinguals and how many EL students had met the eligibility criteria for special education services. This information was organized by year and elementary campuses. Figure 3 illustrates

the total number of students that were referred as well as the number of EL who were considered to meet the criteria for special education services for the years 2016 through 2020.

Figure 3

EL Referral for Special Education Testing



Data Analysis

For this study, data consisted of transcribed interviews and the information provided by participant Holmes. Participant interviews were coded and sorted in a systematic and meaningful way. A critical aspect of qualitative research is analyzing the data correctly by organizing the information collected, reducing the data, and coding based on themes that help address the research question. Specific comments from the interview transcripts were noted to maintain an accurate recollection of each interview situation.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that documents provide historical and contextual data to understand the broader aspects of the SST members' perceptions related to the RtI and special education referral processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. The following documents from the thumb drive were

coded (a) agenda from SST meeting at two different elementary schools, (b) procedural flow chart concerning RtI. I remained objective and sensitive in the document analysis process for validity and credibility.

After the interviews were transcribed, their data were analyzed by hand. The coding occurred over multiple rounds of reading. According to Saldana (2016), there is no best way to code qualitative data, and coding can consist of various forms contingent on the nature of the study.

Coding Cycles

There were two cycles of coding. The initial coding cycle involved a descriptive coding of each transcript (Saldana, 2016). I started organizing and analyzing the coded data into a chart. During the first cycle of coding, each interview was coded line-by-line after it was transcribed (Saldana, 2016). Coding began after the first interview had ended and been transcribed. In this first cycle or initial coding, each line in the data was reviewed, and codes were applied to every line of data because "detailed observations of people, actions, and settings that reveal visibly telling and consequential scenes and actions lend themselves to line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50). Initial coding also allowed me to begin "to refrain from imputing your motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues to your respondents and to your collected data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 54).

Once the first two interviews were coded, the line codes were gathered and compared to reduce overlap and standardize the code numbers (Saldana, 2016). Subsequent interviews were coded from this list. When subsequent interviews led to generating new codes, the new codes were added and applied to the data found in earlier interviews. The data from each participant were revisited by reading through each response and categorizing or recategorizing data into

one or more categories. As I worked through the data, the categories began to be more defined. Since the coding became very extensive and it was becoming difficult to continue to hand-code all the information, I invested in an online password-protected program, Delve, which allowed for coding and theme development. Delve was used after uploading the transcriptions and the initial codes developed from hand-coding the data.

The second cycle centered coding data axially and based on the initial codes revealed during first-cycle coding to yield the categorizations of the initial codes (Saldana, 2016). The data from each participant were revisited by reading through each response and categorizing or recategorizing data into one or more categories. This process allowed the patterns in the data to suggest categories. The categories led to the themes and findings. The analysis process was ongoing and informed by the literature. Further, Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis was employed to reveal the nature and implications of the perceptions adopted by the participants. All data were analyzed and managed by me.

Searching for Themes

I coded the data found in the semistructured interview responses. The codes led to categories that represented patterns in the responses and led to answering the research questions with thematic findings (Braun & Clark, 2019). The discovery of themes is an inductive practice, as explained by Nowell et al. (2017). Braun and Clark (2019) likened this step metaphorically to a sculptor who "makes choices about how to shape and craft their piece of stone (the "raw data") into a work of art (analysis)" (p. 63).

I first looked for similarities and commonalities among the codes (Braun & Clark, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). I created a matrix of the codes mapped to the research questions. Although Nowell et al. (2017) noted that too much reliance on the research questions can obscure other

important impressions waiting to be found in the data, Yin (2017) reported that accessing the data pertinent to the research questions aids researchers in prioritizing the data. Subsequently, I generated a total of 11 preliminary themes.

Defining and Emergent Themes

Developing preliminary themes into final themes is a fluid process (Herzog et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Braun and Clark (2019), now, the themes should be specific and distinct enough to express in a few sentences. First, I looked for patterns, overlaps, and disjuncture among the themes, a strategy recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2016). I re-considered the themes in conjunction with the research questions by following recommendations made by Braun and Clark that caused me to ask the following: (a) could the theme be a code? (b) Was there enough data to support the theme? (c) Could the theme be a sub-theme? Next, I created short summaries of the themes in alignment with Braun and Clark's (2019) missive to do so. Specific examples of the themes contained in the data were used to expand the summaries. The thematic summaries were valuable because Herzog et al. (2019) explained that the themes should be distinct from one another. I was able to discern where themes contained overlap, preventing them from representing distinctive findings. I engaged in peer debriefing with a fellow educator who agreed with the coding and themes emerging. From this process, I proceeded to collapse the 11 themes into five themes. Two themes answered the first research question, one theme answered the second research question, and two themes answered the third research question. Those themes are presented in Chapter 4.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Gay (2010) described credibility and trustworthiness as the processes of incorporating multiple methods of data collection. Merriam (1998, 2009) reported that the process to be able to

rely on and trust research is critical to establishing trustworthiness which can be ascertained through credibility (i.e., validity) and transferability (i.e., reliability). In addition, trustworthiness in qualitative research is paramount considering the "degree to which the qualitative data we collect accurately gauge what we care trying to measure (Gay 2010, p. 403).

Creswell (2018) stated that researchers add to research credibility by including several participants' perceptions about a phenomenon, suggesting that 12 participants across four elementary campuses was appropriate. I used credibility and trustworthy techniques to demonstrate the appropriateness of the rationale the specific methods being reliable and clear. I first gained perspectives of the different SST members across several campuses. I utilized verbatim low-inference descriptors to further increase neutrality and objectivity. I also ensured trustworthiness through member checking the themes and supporting data with participants as well as by maintaining journal notes of my personal thoughts and biases to bracket away my own perceptions for ensuring they did not affect the analysis.

Next, once the interviews were transcribed, I shared a copy of the transcription along with a copy of the Zoom recording through e-mail for each participant. This transcription review represented a form of member checking (i.e., participants review and confirm the accuracy or inaccuracy of interview transcriptions). The participants were given a week to review the transcription and provide any feedback. None of the participants requested any changes to the transcription of their interviews.

During the coding process, I used peer debriefing to help me describe my thought processes, receive feedback about the evolution of the codes and categories, and make adjustments during the coding process to ensure the analysis was creditable. The reflection journal helped me understand my personal thoughts versus the participants' data. I bracketed my

thoughts away from my data analysis to ensure my thoughts about the patterns in the data reflected the participants' perceptions and experiences and accurately represented the topic of the study.

After developing the themes that emerged from the interviews, I re-engaged the assistance of a peer debriefer for reviewing the codes from which my themes were developed. The peer debriefer reviewed my codes and then provided me with clarifications or asked questions that allowed me to reflect on my codes before developing my themes. I utilized a pseudo name for the peer debriefer, Mr. West, who had been a district-level special education director with 25 years of experience in special education. Even though Mr. West was not bilingual, his extensive expertise in special education enabled him to provide suggestions as to thematic wording and explain his understanding of which research question aligned with the theme developed.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this qualitative study involved the participants representing four elementary schools within a single district. The findings might not transfer to all 16 elementary schools in the district nor to all elementary schools in Texas. Even though purposeful sampling allows researchers to select individuals who possess substantial knowledge regarding the topic or research question (Mertler, 2019), the small number of interviews with 12 staff members constituted a low percentage of the teaching staff of a single district and a much lower percentage of all teachers in the state who could be members of SSTs across all districts. The small sample of qualitative research empowers researchers to delve deeply into the SST members' perceptions and experiences and gain an in-depth understanding of a second language acquisition difficulty versus a learning disability by SST members as well as their perceptions

related to the RtI, and special education referral processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. However, the sample size and single-source district limited the generalizability, or transferability, of the findings. Readers must decide if the themes transfer to their experiences with SSTs in their school districts.

My positionality might have affected the generalizability of the findings as I have previously been an employee of CISD; however, at the time of the study, I did not work at CISD. I, as the interviewer, did not have any conflict of interest or concerns about the beneficence of conducting the study. My lack of current affiliation with CISD enabled me to avoid biases that could be related to having a conflict of interest; moreover, I maintained a reflection journal, used memoing (Bhattacharya, 2017), and engaged in peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to ensure that the data were analyzed without the influence of biases.

The single district data source was a limitation because using only interviews with 12 SST members did not allow for triangulation of data between different types of data sources (Yin, 2017). Additionally, because of the Covid-19 pandemic affecting how schools functioned, there was no opportunity to conduct observations of the SST in their deliberation meetings, which prevented further opportunities for triangulation. When considering the geographical area of the four elementary schools, the SSTs operating in the same district could reduce the transferability of the findings to other districts in different geographical areas that could have demographics that differ from the district in which the four elementary campuses were located. The experiences of SST members could be quite different in a small rural versus a large urban district. Lastly, all the participants were from four elementary schools within the district, but there was only one district that was part of the study. Therefore, the findings are limited to elementary SSTs and may not generalize to middle or high school SST members' experiences

and perceptions. Readers must determine for themselves if the findings are transferrable to their settings and contexts.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine student support team (SST) members' perceptions related to the referral and response to intervention (RtI) processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. The SST and RtI are being used interchangeably in this study are seen as an initiative-taking model, averting the over- or under-identification of EL students in special education and the tradition of delaying until students fail before interfering with differentiated, targeted support (Rivas, 2019). A qualitative research approach was used to examine elementary school SST members' perceptions related to the methods and procedures used to identify elementary school level EL students referred for special education services. A semistructured interview protocol that contained 16 questions was used with 12 participants who were SST members in Choice Independent School District (CISD). The interview data were used to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?

RQ2. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?

RQ3. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition regarding the referral process for special education?

Participant Descriptions

A total of 12 participants consented and initiated participation in the interviews. The 12 participants consisted of four elementary level teachers, four elementary level administrators, and four special education representatives who participated in the semistructured interviews. Table 2 presents a detailed overview of the 12 participants. All participants were female, and all 12 had more than 10 years of experience as educators. Additionally, the participants had been employed in CISD for 10 to 30 years.

Participant 1 was Ms. Juarez. She was a White American with 8 years as a principal but no bilingual or special education experience. She had a total of 17 years of educational experience, all in CISD.

Participant 2 was Ms. Jurillo, a White American female. She was a 19-year teacher veteran with no bilingual or special education experience. She did have 7 years of experience as a dyslexia specialist and a total of 19 years of educational experience, all in CISD.

Participant 3 was Ms. James, who was a White American female with 8 years of educational experience. She also had 3 years of experience as an educational diagnostician. Her total years of educational experience were 8, with 5 years in CISD.

Participant 4 was Ms. Suarez, a Hispanic American female. She had 7 years of experience as a principal and 12 years of experience as a bilingual teacher. All of her 24 years of education experience occurred in CISD.

Table 2

Overview of the Participants

Campus and Participant Pseudonym	Role	Years of Experience in Education	Years of Experience in SPED or BIL	Years in District
School A	Johnson Elementary			
Participant 1-Juarez	Administration	17	0	17
Participant 2-Jurillo	General Education Teacher	19	0	19
Participant 3-James	Special Education Representative	8	3 SPED	5
School B	Suris Elementary			
Participant 4-Suarez	Administration	24	12 BIL	24
Participant 5-Sanchez	General Education Teacher	30	10 BIL	28
Participant 6-Sanders	Special Education Representative	13	13 SPED	11
School C	Castell Elementary			
Participant 7-Castro	Administration	22	7 BIL	22
Participant 8-Chavez	General Education Teacher	17	15 BIL	17
Participant 9-Cooper	Special Education Representative/LSSP	23	12 SPED	16
School D	Hudson Elementary			
Participant 10-Hernandez	Administration	21	6 SPED	8
Participant 11-Henao	General Education Teacher	26	0	30
Participant 12-Holmes	Special Education Representative/LSSP	31	15 SPED	20

Note. BIL = bilingual education, SPE = special education

Participant 5 was Ms. Sanchez, a Hispanic American female. She had 20 years of experience as a general education teacher and 10 years as a bilingual educator. Of her total 30 years of experience, she had worked in CISD for 28 years.

Participant 6 was Ms. Sanders, an African American female. She had 13 years of educational experience with 7 years as a special education teacher and 6 years as an educational diagnostician. She had been in CISD for 11 years.

Participant 7 was Ms. Castro, a Hispanic American female. She had 8 years of experience as a principal and 7 years of experience as a bilingual teacher. All 22 years of her educational experience were in CISD.

Participant 8, Ms. Chavez, was a Hispanic American female. She was a 15-year bilingual education teacher. She began working in education for her first 2 years as a paraprofessional. A total of 17 years in education were all in CISD.

Participant 9, Ms. Cooper, was an African American female with 11-years of special education experience. She had 12 years of experience as an LSSP. Out of her 23 years of educational experience, she had worked in CISD for 16 years.

Participant 10, Ms. Hernandez, was a White American female. She had 6 years of experience as a principal and 6 years of special education experience. She had been in education for 21 years with 8 years in CISD.

Participant 11, Ms. Henao, was an African American female. She was a 26-year general education teacher with no bilingual or special education experience. She did have 6 years of experience as a dyslexia specialist. Out of her total of 30 years in educational experiences, 20 years were in CISD.

Participant 12 was Ms. Holmes. She was a Hispanic American female. She was a 16-year general education teacher with 15 years of special education experience. She was an LSSP as well. She also had worked 20 of her total 30 years of educational experiences in CISD. This participant provided the thumb drive with the information that allowed for triangulation between her experience as she related it in the interview and as documented in the SST-related documents she shared on the thumb drive.

Presentation of the Findings

The themes that emerged during data analysis appear in this section. Table 3 depicts the themes associated with the three research questions that emerged as a result of the data analysis process that was explicated in great detail in Chapter III. Additionally, exemplary quotes that represent each of the themes appear in the table as an overview of the findings. Each research question's findings are presented in the following three subsections.

Research Question 1 Findings

This research question was: What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement? The data yielded the following two themes:

Theme 1: Aligning the referral process with practices and policy.

Theme 2: Supports needed for appropriate referrals.

Each theme is presented respectively with quotes from the participants to support it.

Theme 1: Aligning the Referral Process with Practices and Policy

In describing how they perceived EL students and the referral process for special education placement, several of the participants thought the process was the same for

monolingual as well as for EL students. However, nine of the participants did not believe that the referral process being the same benefitted EL students.

Table 3

Themes with Quoted Evidence Presented by Research Question

Research Question	Theme	Quotes
1: What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?	Aligning the referral process with practices and policy	SSTs usually consider the students' progress on the general education curriculum rather than other measures of student progress that are designed to be used with EL students. As a result, we are often times testing children who do not have the profile of an EL with a specific learning disability.
	Supports needed for appropriate referrals	We don't have enough personnel to test these kids. And so that, that becomes an issue.
2: What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?	Providing appropriate RtI for EL students; interventions are the same, no differentiation.	Teachers don't get it! They don't understand what a bilingual student might need. More appropriate interventions for EL students
3: What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition in regard to the referral process for special education.	Little understanding of the needs and challenges of the EL student's language.	For me, it's not knowing if how to determine if it's a language thing- the team doesn't know if it is a disability or not and makes referrals difficult.
	Difficulties distinguishing between language difference and a learning disability create disproportionality.	How do you tell if it's just that they don't know English or Spanish or that it is a disability that they have with learning?

Cooper said, “Since there is not a separate EL student support team, there is a lack of knowledge about the Bilingual/EL teaching methodologies and learning characteristic of EL student by the SST.” Juarez related:

> We use the same procedures that we use with any student you know regardless of if they are EL [students] or if they are not, you know, our students in the mainstream classrooms, or we always look at the student, we look at the data, but we do not differentiate for our EL [students], and we should so that we can make better decisions.

Additionally, she mentioned the structure is “kind of left up to the campuses as far as how you want that to look and how you want that to run your SST.”

Meanwhile, James mentioned:

> Sometimes there's not accurate data, or there has not been accurate data. So, I think that sometimes the data is not accurate for those students, bilingual students when they pull them, and they just assume, “oh well, there is this, and that, and they have been here,” so it’s difficult to say it is a language difference or a disability, so you need to just test. The process has to be a different process for EL referrals.

Suarez mentioned, “The case with them is that it’s hard to know what to do if there are no procedures in place; I don’t know if both diagnosticians follow the same procedures for referral of EL students.” Sanchez offered a similar view in the following:

> I think that the bilingual student is at a disadvantage. They don’t understand what bilingual students need. The people on the SST don’t get it! They say it is just one of those things that need to be looked at. It's just surface stuff, just talking about how you might want to handle certain situations. Whether it’s an issue or not, the referral process needs to address the EL student specifically to determine if referral is right.

Cooper, Holmes, and Sanders similarly mentioned that the process, although similar, was not the same for all students. They stated that the policy and procedures differed from campus to campus. Cooper specifically says SSTs usually consider the students' progress on the general education curriculum rather than other measures of student progress that are designed to be used with EL students. As a result, we are often times testing children who do not have the profile of an EL with a specific learning disability.

On the other hand, Chavez, Castro, and Henao felt that the referral process was the same for both EL students and monolingual students and that "it was fine"; they had no concerns. Castro stated, "I think that we are in a good place now." Chavez further said, "Honestly, I do not know that there should be a difference." Henao said, "All students are equal when it comes to the SST team and testing."

Theme 2: Supports Needed for Appropriate Referrals

The second theme that emerged in reference to the first research question was that support was needed for appropriate referrals to occur. In describing how they perceived the referral process when it came to EL students to special education placement, several of the participants expressed that there were a number of supports that needed to be in place in order for EL referrals to be appropriate.

Hernandez said, "The referral process has some issues in general, but I also know that it is more difficult for EL [students] because we are very limited on bilingual diagnosticians and bilingual LSSPs." She added, "We do not have enough personnel; you know, we don't have enough personnel to test these kids. And so that, that becomes an issue."

Henao also mentioned, "Just like I said, the only thing is the matter of testers, not enough testers' bilingual ones. One of the things that's been a factor for us is we don't have enough

qualified testers coming." Jurillo confirmed that the SSTs "need more special education diagnosticians, bilingual diagnosticians; … we just need them across the board."

Research Question 2 Finding

Research Question 2 was: What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education? The data yielded the following:

Theme 3: Providing appropriate RtI supports for EL students.

In describing the RtI process when it came to EL students to special education placement, there were several participants who expressed that there were not any differences in place for RtI between EL students versus monolingual students. However, some participants did not believe that the RtI process being the same assisted the SST in making the referral process for EL students.

Cooper stated: "The methods used for native English speakers and English Language learners are the same! There are no procedures or interventions tailored to the EL student." Castro reflected:

> Before RtI really started, it was like form after form after form; it was very time consuming. I wish there was a better way to say it. I've done it in different ways. But there have never been any interventions just for our EL students, and that is not right. They don't learn the same.

Suarez related:

> They think RtI is something extra that I have to do. No, we should already have been doing RtI. Some teachers don't understand that everybody is in RtI. You should have

them in the tiers needed. The issue is I think that EL [students] are at a disadvantage because the team and teachers don't understand what a bilingual child need.

Holmes mentioned:

> Time is needed to determine if the student is making academic progress at the same rate as students with similar backgrounds. They should not be compared to the monolingual students since they are do not usually utilize the appropriate interventions for EL students.

Juarez stated the following:

> I think the biggest challenge with RtI and with our EL also is just making sure that we are providing the intervention with fidelity, making sure that we block that time out. Finding where that gap is and making sure that we use an intervention designed for an EL in RtI. I think another challenge is, you know, I think on a campus level, it's sometimes it's, really hard for your teacher your master in that area and sometimes with RtI, we may have like a para that pulls a group, but really, those kids probably need that teacher pulling them.

Hernandez provided a detailed account about the need for providing the appropriate support as follows:

> Our campus is 40% EL students; you know that is a good chunk of our campus, so we do look at that a lot of times for our EL [students] we take a lot longer through the SST process because we have to ensure that we find interventions that are good for EL [students]. But we don't have a lot of interventions for EL [students]; the district mainly expects us to use the same ones we use for the English-speaking kids.

Additionally, Hernandez mentioned, “That's an issue, and that's another barrier that I did not talk about; we don't have enough Spanish speaking at-risk specialists to really provide appropriate intervention for our Spanish speaking students.”

Research Question 3 Findings

Research Question 3 was: What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members’ perceptions of English Learners’ language acquisition in regard to the referral process for special education? The data yielded the following two themes:

Theme 4: Little understanding of the needs and challenges of EL student’s language;

Theme 5: Difficulties distinguishing between language difference and a learning disability create disproportionality.

Each theme is presented respectively with quotes from the participants to support it.

Theme 4: Little Understanding of the Needs and Challenges of the EL Student’s Language

This theme emerged because of the degree to which the participants understood their level of self-awareness and self-reflection as they discussed trying to meet the needs of their EL students and determine eligibility for special education. Hernandez made the following point: “When I started making referrals, originally, I think they weren't good referrals. You know, I do think I didn't weigh out the EL components and that second language acquisition.” Suarez pointed out that “the teacher has to know what their levels are in both languages and focus on their strengths.” Juarez explained that “there hasn’t been much of a connection between the professional developments offered and what that means for the referral process. If we had those trainings, it would provide teachers with strategies that would help with EL referrals.” Jurillo provided the following detail:

> We don't get to the depth of the problem, so we don't really talk about the language acquisition like we should. I feel like we're just looking at what the kids can't do, but how much does that have to do with their native language?

Jurillo also stated that when a referral comes to the SST, they don't have enough language information.

Chavez expressed the concern that "our teachers really don't have the knowledge, and if the principal doesn't have the knowledge, then the SST doesn't have the language knowledge either." Castro added, "We have not had an official language acquisition training. Pilar, the director of bilingual education, did one, but it was like 3 years ago." Castro concluded, "I think there is a misunderstanding about language with the SST. I think that my bilingual background helps me help them a little."

Theme 5: Difficulties Distinguishing Between Language Difference and a Learning Disability Create Disproportionality

Overall, the participants stated that determining the difference between a language difference and a language disability was an arduous task to accomplish. Some of the participants' stated that sometimes the referral is difficult because they are told that since the student is speaking Spanish at home that it can't be a disability.

Juarez, Jurillo, and James are all from the same campus and answered similarly. Juarez stated that the "biggest challenge is making sure that it's not a language issue that the student is being referred to." Juarez added that when students are immersed in English, "the students become confused and then you can't determine if it's a disability of just the confusion of another language being introduced." Jurillo further expressed the difficulty as follows:

> It's understanding the difference between those two concepts because, okay, maybe you may be using different because a language disability doesn't have to have the functioning of the brain. And that's, that's applied to the brain. So, to me, the disability comes from just like any disability in any person, you, it's not a language disability is the same for an English person.

And finally, James commented that "determining language disability or difficulty is hard, I feel we are not trained."

Castro, Chavez, and Cooper represented the same campus and commented as follows when discussing the difficulty between determining a language difference versus a disability. Castro commented that because of her bilingual background, she could determine if the EL student had q language disability and explained, "Not every intervention gets that right; it is hard to tell when the student talks to me it doesn't matter if he's got BICS he has to have CALP." Chavez posed the difficulty as a question: "How do you tell if it's just that they don't know English or Spanish or that it is a disability that they have with learning?"

Hernandez remarked, "I'm told 'let's do English' because they are speaking English in the class, but how much are they speaking English compared to Spanish? Is that how we determine difficulty versus disability? I don't know that is the case." Henao stated, "I don't know how to tell if it's a language deficiency or something else or a disability because it is so similar." Holmes noted the following:

> The biggest challenge is a lot of times, they can speak to you socially. They have the social language, but they don't have that academic language. I think that's the biggest problem is deciphering between; they don't have any problems carrying on a conversation

about what they ate for lunch. But they have problems carrying on a conversation of math vocabulary and academic language.

Suarez commented that knowing the difference is “the hardest thing for the teacher to know.” Additionally, Suarez believed this knowledge “comes with experience. The more you work with students, the more you're going to know the differences. One good thing is we have a bilingual specialist on our campus.”

Sanchez discussed the problem between disability and language difficulty in a personal context:

> I think, because children are looking so much into media, and using technology that they can speak it (English). They can speak it, but they can't always understand it. If the language is if the disability is there. And I guess I could use myself as an example. I can speak Spanish, but I can't read it, or write it, not because I am disabled, but because there's a barrier there. I'm not using it often enough; it's not being used around me.

Sanders supported Sanchez’s experience:

> If a student lacks sufficient exposure to spoken and written English, which can adversely affect the development of English literacy skills. When that is coupled with a learning disability, identification and intervention can be complex because of shared characteristics between language difficulty and disability.

Summary

The five themes discussed in this chapter illustrate how general education teachers, administrators, and special education representatives at a suburban school perceive the SST referral process when considering EL students. Five themes emerged from an analysis in the form of representations. Theme 1: Aligning the Referral Process with Practices and Policy

captured the belief of the participants in that there is no connection between what is put in practice versus the policies that exist concerning the referral process. Theme 2: Supports Needed for Appropriate Referrals represented participants' beliefs that there is a need in the district for more qualified individuals to complete the special education evaluations for EL students. Theme 3: Providing appropriate RtI supports for EL students exemplified the authentic care that Cooper, Castro, Suárez, and Holmes confirmed toward their EL students. Theme 4: Little Understanding of the Needs and Challenges of the EL Student's Language characterized the degree to which the participants understood their level of self-awareness and self-reflection. And finally, Theme 5: Difficulties Distinguishing Between Language Difference and a Learning Disability Create Disproportionality described how the participants shared their concerns with the lack of training and information made available to them to facilitate the ability to determine a language difference versus disability.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings, the implications, and the recommendations for future research. The findings from the qualitative study contributed to the SST knowledge base and benefitted administrators and SST members in the district who were working with EL students with academic or second language acquisition challenges. Additionally, the findings of this study provided essential information for educating the district's student support teams.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter contains a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusions. The chapter extends the newly generated understanding of the student support team (SST) members' perceptions about their practices for referring EL students for special education. Additionally, ideas for further research targeting understanding of the referral process for EL and distinguishing the difference between langue acquisition and disability are described.

The purpose of this study was to examine SST members' perceptions related to the referral and RtI processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services using a semistructured interview protocol. The three research questions were answered in Chapter IV:

RQ1. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?

RQ2. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?

RQ3. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition regarding the referral process for special education?

Discussion of the Findings

One topic that aroused the CISD SST participants was the district's shortage of bilingual licensed specialists in school psychology (LSSP) to deal with the amount of EL students referred for special education services in the district. Additionally, the 12 SST members who participated in the study, regardless of the campus, agreed that there needs to be more training of the SST members regarding second language acquisition. Specifically, the SSTs need to know how to properly separate a learning disability from a second language acquisition difference among their EL students. Furthermore, the SST members expressed that the interventions utilized for EL students are the same as those used with monolingual students, causing a need for more appropriate interventions.

Regarding the elementary school level SST members' perceptions of the referral process to special education for EL students, the findings indicated a consensus that the referral process for EL students was the same as those for monolingual students, which mirrored findings by Huang et al. (2011) and O'Bryon and Rogers (2010). The individual interview data suggested that SST member participation was different across the campuses. Some campuses had a bilingual member on the team while others did not, some campuses had a district instructional specialist on the team while others did not, and some had a special education representative while others did not. Some SST members on some campuses understood that the process began with Tier 1 interventions, while others did not consider Tier 1 the start of the process.

Additionally, participants discussed there was no separate SST strictly to deal with EL student referrals, nor did they have access to a bilingual specialist. The interviewees felt that the lack of a bilingual team to deal with EL student referrals was detrimental to the referral process for EL students because of a lack of knowledge during team discussions concerning EL teaching

and learning methodologies. However, some participants expressed disavowed a need for a different process or different team to deal with the EL referral process. They discussed that with appropriate data, all students were treated the same, and what needed to be observed and determined was the progress of the student.

The special education referral process is complex and multidimensional, and in CISD, the referral process followed is identical to Project IDEAL (2013), which is divided into eight phases. Phase 1 was referred to as the recognition phase, in which the classroom teacher contacts the parent and reviews data that may indicate academic and or behavioral difficulties that the student is having. Phase 2 in CISD was known as the prereferral phase when the SST becomes involved. In Phase 2, the SST begins to create a plan for interventions. In Phase 3, the student is referred for special education consideration. Phase 4 is when the evaluation is completed. Phases 5 through 8 are the phases in which eligibility to special education is determined, an individualized education plan is developed and implemented, and reevaluation is completed (Project IDEAL, 2013).

For the elementary school SST members, perceptions of the RtI process used in CISD for referring EL students to special education indicated that some of the members of the SST felt that there was no reason to use different interventions for EL students. Additionally, the findings in the form of the five themes indicated that the administrators who participated in the interviews did not believe the teachers understood the RtI process overall. Moreover, some of the SST teachers identified a great need for providing EL students with interventions specific to meeting the needs of students undergoing second language acquisition.

The ongoing educational concern is that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to be disproportionately represented in special education programs (Ittner,

2017; Stapleton, 2017; Sullivan, 2017). Failing to accurately identify a learning disability from a language acquisition difficulty can have an undesirable effect on the academic progress of EL students (Stapleton, 2017). Generally, these researchers spotlighted the need for improving RtI to support EL students taking into considerations factors such as language proficiency level, quality of intervention, and opportunities to gain experience. An implication that the current findings imply RtI generalizability is based on the determination of what works and for whom it works (Davis, 2017).

The findings regarding the elementary school level SST members' perceptions of English learners' language acquisition regarding the referral process for special education revealed an overwhelming response indicating that the respondents felt unapt when examining language skills to determine whether to move forward with referrals to special education unless they spoke the student's native language and had some comprehension and speaking ability of the student's language. The participants expressed a need for training in second language acquisition and for having bilingual educators on the SST; however, Texas has the same problem with bilingual educator and psychologist shortages that were highlighted by Smith et al. (2016).

The findings revealed that CISD's SST members experience difficulties being able to determine when EL students are experiencing a second language acquisition difficulty versus a learning disability, which is concerning because researchers have been repeating this finding for quite some time (Farnsworth, 2018; Gordon, 2018; Klingner, 2015; Ochoa et al., 1997; Scott et al., 2014). Every participant expressed that determining the difference between a second language acquisition difficulty versus a learning disability in each student was not something for which the district had provided training, or that even if there was training provided, it had occurred over 2 years prior to when these interviews took place. When clarification was asked of

the participants, 8 out of the 12 participants stated that this lack of knowledge among general educators was the reason why they encountered so many EL referrals.

Determining how to examine the difference between a second language acquisition difficulty verses a learning disability has been a long struggle for educators (Park, 2019). To comprehend the difference between a learning disability and second language acquisition, the educators must understand the processes of second language acquisition, identify traits of a learning disability, and be able to determine if a student has been provided with appropriate classroom instructions (Klingner & Espplito, 2014). The findings support Becker's and Deris' (2019) assertion that there is a need for more trained bilingual personnel to help determine second language acquisition versus disability.

All studies have limitations that reduce generalizability or transferability. The current findings may not have generalizability to all districts in the state or nation. Other districts may provide training to their SST members about second language acquisition that could cause findings to be different elsewhere. Practitioners and educators need to network between districts to gain clarity about best practices that may already be in place.

Implications for Practice

There are few studies in the literature in which researchers have provided details about SST members' perceptions about the special education referrals of English learners. This study had several implications for SSTs and EL referrals to special education. Since the 1960s, there have been thoughtful trepidations among policymakers and the general public regarding the overrepresentation of EL students in special education (Times, 2016). The disproportionate representation of minority students in special education has been an important and untiring topic since the establishment of special education. Even though state departments of education gather

data about the ethnicity of students in special education, they usually do not collect standardized evaluation information about students' language proficiency (Klingner & Artiles, 2003; Ortiz et al., 2018). Consequently, there is trivial information gathered concerning the representation of English Learners (EL) in special education programs.

At the practice level, the SST needs assistance in the form of resources and professional learning to enhance knowledge and skills in employing successful teams. Increased knowledge and skills could help prepare the team members to support and implement effective strategies and assist with the successful determinations of language differences and learning disabilities for EL students (Lopes-Murphy & Murphy, 2019). In order to reduce the number of EL students being placed into special education based on their misunderstanding of a second language, I recommend that districts implement some of the following: (a) Teachers must be trained to understand how to interpret data and how to distinguish the difference between progress monitoring and monitoring of progress; (b) All stakeholders need to have courageous conversations about disproportionate representation of EL students in special education; (c) Professional development must be focused and monitored for implementation; (d) Differentiated instruction and culturally responsive instruction with EL students must be monitored; (e) Appropriate interventions, especially when intended for EL students, must be put into place early in the academic year, such as a mentoring system to assist EL students as they acquire the new language and learn content as the same time; (f) A mentoring system that pairs experienced educators of EL students with novice teachers new to EL students' language acquisition struggles and not familiar with how language acquisition is developed and encouraged could reduce the number of students referred to SSTs. The research concerning the implementation of RtI with EL students continues to be needed (Rivas, 2019; Stapleton, 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

The study added current information to the body of research knowledge by presenting a deeper understanding of the SST referral process, use of RtI, and assessment procedures as applied to EL students. The findings of this qualitative study served to develop questions for future research. Because the study involved purposeful sampling and only 12 participants, representing four of 16 SSTs in one district, were interviewed, a recommendation for future research is to interview a higher percentage of SST staff across a school district or region or state to ensure an investigation of the perceptions of SST members that has greater transferability or generalizability. Moreover, future researchers could include a study of correctly assessing EL students referred to special education, perhaps through an intervention study involving training educators on how to assess the difference between students with learning disabilities that require special education and students just having problems as a result of second language acquisition.

More studies are needed across schools and school districts with comparable populations of EL students as well as similar SST organizations. The findings could be modified and turned into items for a survey of a larger number of participants representing elementary SSTs and more grade levels. Additional qualitative studies, such as a case study of how the SST deliberates about struggling EL students when the team composition does not have a membership that clearly understands second language acquisition or does not have bilingual education staff among its members to assist with decisions.

A mixed-method case study could be applied for understanding the difference between the perceptions of the individual SST members for addressing the differences in the experiences between administrators, counselors, diagnosticians, and teachers. Moreover, administrators, psychologists, and teachers could provide their understanding of the purpose of the SST and their

recommendations for EL students to special education because the participants in this qualitative study did not understand that struggles language acquisition was a barrier to learning for EL students. Additional research is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the way the SST process is effective at addressing low performing EL students. Expanding research to multiple schools and multiple districts is recommended. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how effective over multiple grades RtI is in supporting student performance for improving second language acquisition and preventing grade retention, and in particular, reducing special education referrals.

Conclusions

As a second language learner, a bilingual educational diagnostician, and a current director of a special education department for over 25 years, I wanted to know: Why is there inconsistencies concerning the appropriateness of refer of EL student to special education evaluation and services? This question inherently led me to conduct a qualitative study with SST members. When I first began this study, I was fueled by the national statistics on the increasing numbers of Hispanic or Latino students in the nation's and Texas's schools because of the disproportionate representations of EL students in special education (Cartledge et al., 2016).

As I continued with data collection and analysis, I became more engrossed in how my analysis could benefit those working in SSTs in my geographical area. I was surprised at how the findings supported previous researchers' findings, indicating that the participants were not comfortable with determining how to differentiate a language acquisition from a language disability for EL students (e.g., Farnsworth, 2018; Gordon, 2018; Klingner, 2015). The participants acknowledged having a need for SST member training because they had little or no second language acquisition training. Those who had received training expressed that the training

occurred several years before, suggesting they needed further professional development based on more current information about second language acquisition versus specific learning disabilities. The participants' gap in knowledge suggests that training associated with second language acquisition and learning disabilities is critical to improving the disproportional special education referral rates for Hispanic or Latino students. Also, the participants who were bilingual understood second language acquisition, however, needed guidance to understand specific learning disabilities. The 12 participants had substantial numbers of years of teaching experience yet demonstrated difficulties with distinguishing between the struggles of second language acquisition and specific learning disabilities. Consequently, the findings reinforced the frequently cited need for in-service opportunities and ongoing professional development (Calderón, 2016).

Overall, the findings of the study indicated that when examining the methods and procedures for referring EL students to special education services in CISD, additional training should be considered. The participants expressed that the SSTs were composed differently by campuses and that they had different support personnel. When asked about the interventions used for EL students, the findings showed the interventions used were the same for all students referred for special education, regardless of EL status. When implementing RtI for EL students, the SST members need appropriate resources to benefit their EL students.

The challenge of determining a language difficulty versus a learning disability is an area of much concern that may be exacerbated due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on EL students' learning losses. CISD did not have a framework in place to guide the SST members as they made critical decisions concerning EL students' language skills, which could, by the participants' admissions, result in inappropriate special education referrals and contribute to the disproportionality of EL students in special education. More research and case studies of SST

practices will be needed to general future improvement that benefits EL students and empowers SST members.

The academic needs of ELs are misinterpreted because teachers do not understand second language acquisition and cultural differences. The dedication of teachers faced with the education of all students should prompt them to ensure that EL students' learning difficulties are addressed. Things like implementing scientifically based interventions that are geared specifically to language development and understanding the intricacies of the time that it takes students to acquire a second language are imperative. In order for SSTs to be successful for English Language Learners, the team must use culturally responsive measurement tools which accurately reflect the factors needed in understanding the performance of the team as well as the EL students.

The concerns with EL students and the way in which they are referred for special education is as much an individual responsibility of the educators that these students are entrusted to as it is the law and the government. IDEA is one policy designed for ensuring that EL students are not referred to special education when the concern is with language acquisition. However, the exclusionary factors must be followed with fidelity in order to avoid disproportional referrals for EL students.

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APPENDIX A

EXEMPTION AND APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

(Common Rule –Effective January, 2018)

February 08, 2021

Any study that requires in person or face-to-face study visits may not begin or resume until your site has an approved plan that adheres to the re-opening guidelines posted on the Division of Research's VPR website: https://vpr.tamu.edu/covid-19. This plan is to be sent to your Department Chair and Dean, then forwarded to the Clinical Research, Education and Service Advisory Committee for approval.

Type of Review:	Initial Review Submission Form
Title:	Examining the SST Intervention and Assessment Procedures for Elementary ELs
Investigator:	Yolanda Padron
IRB ID:	IRB2020-0539M
Reference Number:	114780
Funding:	Internal Funds
Documents Reviewed:	Participation Consent Form-Updated 2.0 Goose Creek Research Application Signed 2.0 Recruitment Email Script 2.0 Interview Protocol 1.0
Review Category	Category 1: Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Dear Yolanda Padron:

The HRPP determined on February 08, 2021 that this research meets the criteria for Exemption in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104.

This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Please use the reviewed, stamped study documents (available in iRIS) for applicable study procedures (e.g. recruitment, consent, data

collection, etc…). If changes are needed to stamped study documents or study procedures, you must immediately contact the IRB. You may be required to submit a new request to the IRB.

Your exemption is good for three (3) years from the Approval Start Date (02/08/2021). Thirty days prior to that time, you will be sent an Administrative Check-In Notice to provide an update on the status of your study.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrative Office at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Participant,

You are being contacted to participate in a research project, which is investigating your perceptions of student support teams in elementary schools in the district. My name is Carmen M. Figueroa, and I am in the process of collecting data for my research study towards my dissertation at Texas A & M University.

The purpose of this study is to examine student support team (SST) members' perceptions related to the referral and response to intervention (RtI) processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. The research and data collection for this study will be conducted among the SST members in the district's elementary schools. Included with invitation letter is a Consent Form for you, which will provide you detailed information about this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at any time. Your response will be strictly confidential, and no participant will be named in the reporting of this research finding. Statistical information taken from the interview instrument will be reported as aggregate results only.

Upon completion of analysis, the data obtained from the interview protocol and the signed consent forms will be secured for three to five years.

Sincerely,

Carmen M Figueroa
Graduate Student

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Examining Pre-Referral Intervention and Assessment Procedures for Elementary English Learners in Texas

Members of the Research Team

Carmen M. Figueroa Office: (832) 410-7156 Email: [redacted]@gmail.com

Key Information

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. A member of the research team will explain the study to you and will answer any questions you might have. You should take your time in deciding whether or not you want to participate.

If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:

- Procedures will include interviews that will include questions about your perceptions as a member of the SST.
- Collection of any artifacts that participant would share
- There will be a 45 – 60-minute interview.
- There are no risks associated with this study that will exceed what would typically be encountered in daily life.
- You will not be paid for your participation.
- You will be provided a copy of this consent form

Invitation

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are or have been either an educator/teacher, or former educator. You must be 25 years of age or older to participate.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

The purpose of this study was to examine student support team (SST) members' perceptions related to the referral and response to intervention (RtI) processes used with elementary EL students for English language acquisition and referral to special education services. SST members' recommendations for overcoming challenges will also be sought.

What will be done during this research study?

You will be asked to participate in one interview that will ask questions about your experiences, SST strategies in elementary schools. Each interview will take 45-60 minutes

How will my [data/samples/images] be used?

Your data will be sent to researchers within and outside of the Texas A & M University for co-analysis/data triangulation. Any personal information that could identify you will be removed before the data are shared.

What are the possible risks of being in this research study?

As with any study involving collection of data, there is the possibility of breach of confidentiality of data. Other risks in this research include possible emotional and/or psychological distress because the interviews involve sensitive questions about your work habits.

There are no known risks to you for being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to you?

A benefit of participating is the opportunity to have a collegial space to share common experiences and form bonds of support and encouragement with professionals with whom you share similar identities. However, you may not get any benefit from being in this research study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?

Therefore, this study can significantly contribute to the body of research knowledge that can brings further understanding on referral process and assessment procedures for EL students. For practice will results from this study will contribute to understanding the relationship between SST teams and the LSSP on the referral of EL students. It is important to understand how EL students qualify for special education before determining what services and supports EL students with special needs should receive.

What are the alternatives to being in this research study?

Instead of being in this research study you can suggest other SST members with experience in k-12 who may be interested in participating or choose not to participate.

What will participating in this research study cost you?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

How will information about you be protected?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The data will be stored in a locked office of the researcher and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 3 years after the study is complete.

The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 3 years after the study is complete.

The only people who will have access to your research records are the members of the research team, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. Information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research subject?
You may ask any questions about this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in the study or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (979) 458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (i.e., "withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Texas A & M University. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent
You are voluntarily deciding whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered, and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____
Printed Name of Participant or Legal Guardian

_____ _____
Signature of Participant or Legal Guardian Date

AUDIO/ZOOM RECORDING:

I have received an adequate description of the purpose and procedures for audio recording sessions during the course of the proposed research. I give my consent to allow myself to be audio recorded during participation in this study, and for those records to be reviewed by persons involved in the study, as well as for other professional purposes as described to me.

_____**Yes**, I agree to allow the research team to **audio record** my interview(s).

_____**No**, I do not wish to have my interview(s) **audio recorded.**

Signature of Participant or Legal Guardian Date

VIDEO/ZOOM RECORDING:

I have received an adequate description of the purpose and procedures for video recording sessions during the course of the proposed research. I give my consent to allow myself to be video recorded during participation in this study, and for those records to be reviewed by persons involved in the study, as well as for other professional purposes as described to me.

_____**Yes**, I agree to allow the research team to **video record** my participation.

_____**No**, I do not wish to have my participation **video recorded.**

Signature of Participant or Legal Guardian Date

Investigator certification:

If applicable, include the following investigator certification clause. (Generally used for greater than minimal risk studies).

My signature certifies that all elements of informed consent described on this consent form have been explained fully to the subject. In my judgment, the participant possesses the capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research and is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate.

_____ _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant # _____

Descriptive Demographic Questions

1. What is your title/position in your school? How long have you been in your current position?

2. Do you speak a language(s) other than English? If so, which language do you speak?

4. How many years have you been working in education? Have any of those years been in Special Education?

5. How many years have you been working within your current district?

6. How many schools within your district do you serve?

7. What is the composition of your schools' SST (e.g., general, and special education teachers/service providers, parents)?

Interview Questions

RQ1. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the referral process for English Learners to special education possible placement?

A. What are the procedures related to the student support team process in your district?

B. What do you perceive is the biggest challenge when identifying English Learners (EL) students for special education services?

C. What do you perceive of the methods and procedures used to identify the EL students that need special education?

D. What do you observe regarding student support team referrals of EL students versus referrals of all students? Which practices have you observed to have been effective in referring EL for special education?

E. What supports would you like to see implemented by the student support team that would ultimately contribute to the achievement for your EL students?

F. What challenges have you encountered with the referral process for ELs' to special education possible placement?

RQ2. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?

A. What percentage of EL students move on to the Student Support Team for special education testing and have waived interventions?

B. How is the native language and the second language acquisition taken into account during the RtI process for EL students being referred to special education?

C. How does Response to Intervention (RtI) define and apply interventions for EL students identified to special education?

D. In your experience, what activities and interventions have been most useful in addressing the needs of EL students who are experiencing academic difficulties?

E. What challenges have you encountered with the Response to Intervention (RtI) process that is used to identify English Learners for special education?

RQ3. What are elementary school level Student Support Team (SST) members' perceptions of English Learners' language acquisition in regard to the referral process for special education.

A. What do you perceive is the biggest challenge in discerning the difference between language difference and disability for EL students?

B. How do you feel about the information you have regarding a student's linguistic/cultural/experiential profile when making a determination to recommend an EL student for Special Education assessment?

C. What is the level of understanding of second language acquisition among the student support team? How does level of knowledge and understanding impact the referral process?

D. Have you participated in a cultural competence professional development training within the past year? If so, how has that helped your understanding of language acquisition?

E. What challenges have you encountered with English Learners' language acquisition in regard to the referral process for special education?