Whiteness: influence, decision-making, and cultural-linguistic disproportionality in special education placements

by

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B.A., Wichita State University, 2006
M.A., Wichita State University, 2008

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Disproportionate representation of culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education has been well documented. Existing research has largely focused on the attitudes and beliefs of classroom teachers and the processes that lead to these placements. Few studies have examined how the perspectives of child study team (CST) members contribute to placements in special education.

CSTs are involved in interventions, referrals, evaluations, and placement decisions. The purpose of this study was to identify how unspoken epistemological, sociolinguistic, and psychological perspectives rooted in the dominant White culture explain their actions and decision making. Data sources included observations of meetings, written record reviews, and individual semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data gained from these sources were analyzed to identify themes in CST members' discourse which were then compared to perspectives based in Whiteness.

Results indicated participants felt an urgency to evaluate to provide students support, focusing on completeness, not quality, of intervention data. Once referred, intervention data and student background information were ignored in favor of standardized evaluations. Data in conflict with quantitative measures were dismissed and parent input was disregarded with criticisms of their abilities. Findings were consistent with the dominant culture's beliefs in meritocracy and its perceived neutrality or universality, and disregard for contradictory data sources may reflect resistance to challenges to these beliefs.

The perspectives rooted in the dominant culture held by CST members may explain their actions and decision making with CLD students that lead to inappropriate referrals to and

placements in special education. More research is needed to determine how directly addressing these perspectives can influence outcomes for CLD students.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my brother, Trenton, without whom I would have never pursued a career in education.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Disproportionate identification of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students for special education has been well documented in the literature (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Barrio, 2017; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Sullivan, 2011). Students tend to be either over- or under-identified for special education, depending on the exceptionality (Barrio, 2017). Often, they are over-identified as having learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and intellectual disabilities (Bal et al., 2014), but under-identified as gifted (Allen, 2017). Special education serves an important purpose for students with true disabilities, but inappropriate placements can be detrimental (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Child study teams (CSTs), also known as multidisciplinary teams, student study teams, student support teams, and other names (Klingner & Harry, 2006), are often integral parts of evaluation processes and placement decisions. They may also be involved during problem solving or general education intervention processes, suggesting strategies to support learners (Klingner & Harry, 2006) or assisting in gathering data. Descriptions of the membership of these teams vary throughout the literature. In the experience of this researcher, CSTs generally consist of a school psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, a social worker, a counselor, a nurse, and an administrator, with special education teachers involved as well. Others, such as audiologists or occupational/physical therapists, are sometimes involved depending on individual student needs. CST members have significant responsibility for special education referrals and evaluations that contribute to disproportionality.

Statement of the Problem

CST members often rely on English-language standardized assessments to determine the presence of disabilities in CLD students (Hoover et al., 2018; Orosco & Klingner, 2010), despite

such assessments being inappropriate for those populations (Abedi, 2008; Blatchley & Lau, 2010). Once instructed in better methods for evaluation, some CST members continue to rely on the same standardized tools (Kraemer et al., 2013). CSTs depend on data from these instruments for decision-making, without consideration for student background (Orosco & Klingner, 2010) beyond language acquisition. Evaluators often focus exclusively on English-language acquisition to refer for evaluation or to justify testing only in English (Klingner & Harry, 2006). The reasons for this dependence on inappropriate methods and lack of consideration for cultural and linguistic diversity are not well researched.

More information exists on the training and perspectives of classroom teachers (Allen, 2017; Bonner et al., 2018; Hoover, 2012) than CST members. Educators, in general, make assumptions that the assessments and tools they use are universal and applicable to all learners (Castagno, 2014). Educators seem to lack awareness of how classroom performance is affected by culture and language (Hoover, 2012). They often do not recognize how the dominant White culture shapes education and informs curriculum and instruction (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Castagno, 2014; Tanner, 2018). Instead, they see the system as universal or neutral (Giroux, 1997; Leonardo, 2009) and hold deficit perspectives towards CLD students (Jupp et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2016), justifying goals of assimilation to the dominant culture (Tanner, 2018).

The dominant White culture controls the education system, and CLD students are often expected to match their expectations without validation of home language or culture (Nganga, 2015). The education system is based in the standards of this dominant White culture, which determines academic and social expectations (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Tanner, 2018). These standards are treated as normative (Thomas, 2019) and universal for all students. Because CLD students' language, culture, and experiences differ from the dominant White culture, deficit

perspectives towards them are reinforced (Tanner, 2018). Schools often work towards goals of assimilation for CLD students (Garza & Garza, 2010; Tanner, 2018), failing to see the value in or the impact of their languages, cultures, and experiences in education.

Students attending public schools in the Unites States (U.S.) continue to become more diverse. In fall 2009, more than half of students in U.S. public schools (54%) were White, but less than half (47%) were White by fall 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Students identified as English-language learners (ELLs) have seen a relative increase as well, from 9.2% in fall 2010 to 10.2% in fall 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). African American and Native American students are often overrepresented at the national level, while Latino and Asian students are underrepresented (Sullivan, 2011). At the state and local level, however, Latino and Asian students can be overrepresented (Sullivan, 2011). For ELLs in particular, substantial variation exists. One study reported that 35% of the students in one district were considered ELL and identified as having learning disability, despite ELL students representing only 12% of the student population (De Valenzuela et al., 2016, as cited in Barrio, 2017). Another report indicated that 14% of ELL students were in special education in another district, despite ELLs only constituting 11% of the student population (Pennucci & Kavanaugh, 2005, as cited in Barrio, 2017).

Although the student population is changing, those working in education continue to be predominantly White. In the U.S., 79% of teachers were White during the 2017-2018 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Similarly, 81% of speech-language pathologists certified through the American Speech-Language Hearing Association are white (ASHA, 2020) and 85.9% of the members of the National Association of School Psychologists are White (NASP, 2021). Social workers are 68.8% White (Salsberg et al., 2017) and American School

Counselor Association members are 76% White (ASCA, 2020). Demographic differences between students and staff represent a potential mismatch of language and culture which have effects on the quality of instruction and opportunities to learn (Sirota & Bailey, 2009). As demographics change, it is increasingly imperative for CST members to be culturally responsive, which may mean challenging underlying beliefs and assumptions.

Conceptual Framework

Key tenets of Whiteness Studies and Transformative Learning Theory served as a framework for this study. Whiteness Studies seeks to address inequality/inequity by turning the focus from White-dominant *systems* towards the *people* who construct, maintain, and benefit from them (Applebaum, 2016). Myths of meritocracy and beliefs in color-blindness maintain inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 2016; Zamudio et al., 2011). Whiteness creates a system that is perpetuated by the views of those who benefit from it as being neutral and color-blind, while also being an invisible yet universal standard against which others are compared (Applebaum, 2016). When applied to education, Whiteness Studies provides a lens for understanding how the education system is constructed and how those within it operate (Matias & Liou, 2015; Thomas, 2019).

Elements of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) further inform understanding of the importance and impact of underlying beliefs, knowledge, and experiences on the ways people see the world and their openness (or resistance) to change and learning. These *meaning perspectives* are shaped by experience, beliefs, and expectations, and serve as a filter for acceptance or rejection of new information. Meaning perspectives are divided into three types: epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological. Combining these perspectives with elements of Whiteness Studies, this study used three broad tenets to answer the research questions: beliefs

in normative Whiteness (epistemic perspectives), beliefs in meritocracy (sociolinguistic perspectives), and fragility/resistance (psychological perspectives).

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to address how (1) unspoken beliefs in normative Whiteness and meritocracy and (2) how resistance to discussions related to Whiteness explain the actions and decision making of child study team (CST) members that contribute to disproportionate and inappropriate special education placements for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do child study team members' use of data and decision making for culturally-linguistically diverse students reflect perspectives based in normative Whiteness and an ideology of meritocracy?
2. In what ways, if any, do child study team members' explanations for and defense of their decision making reflect perspectives based in White fragility and resistance?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to help clarify the context of each in this study.

Child Study Team: A group of professionals responsible for accepting referrals for and completing special education evaluations for students. Often, these teams contribute to problem-solving or general education intervention discussions as well. In the school district in which this study was conducted, team members generally include a psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, a social worker, a counselor, a nurse, and an administrator.

Culturally-Linguistically Diverse: "The favored term to refer to individuals whose culture and language are different from those of the dominant group" (Herrera, 2016, p. 152). For the

purposes of this study, the dominant group is understood to be monolingual English speakers of a western European cultural background.

General Education Interventions: Accommodations and modifications to curriculum and instruction to meet individual needs.

Special Education Evaluation: Evaluations conducted to determine the presence of disability and the need for special education.

Special Education Referral: A decision made by the classroom teacher(s) and the CST to evaluate a student for special education.

Standardized Assessment: An evaluation tool that is standardized with a particular population to assess specific skills, generally with a scripted administration procedure.

Whiteness: Schooley et al. (2019) define whiteness as "a multidimensional construct that envelops racial attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and experiences most prevalently, but not exclusively, related to White people and the privileged position White people embody in a racially hierarchical society. More specifically, Whiteness is a set of often unnamed and unmarked cultural and racial practices (e.g., customs, traditions), values, and attitudes that signify what is considered normative, thus privileging White skin and naturalizing systems of White supremacy (Helms, 2017). Whiteness is transmitted and continually reproduced at individual, cultural, and institutional levels (Twine & Gallagher, 2008)" (p. 532).

Procedures

To answer the research questions, this study used a mini-ethnographic case study design. Sources of data included observations, written records (general education intervention forms and evaluation reports), and semi-structured interviews with individual CST members. Analysis was ongoing throughout the study, using a constant comparative method (Bogden & Bilken, 2007).

Initial and ongoing coding and analysis used both the researcher's (*etic* perspective) and the participants' perspectives (*emic* perspectives). Member checks, triangulation of data, and thick description confirmed the validity of findings and enhanced credibility.

Significance of the Study

Disproportionality in special education placements continues to be a well-documented problem in the United States public school system. Child study team (CST) members' contributions are less well researched than those of classroom teachers, and the existing literature often focuses on considerations of language acquisition or CST members' espoused comfort treating, screening, and evaluating culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Guiberson & Atkins, 2012; Kraemer et al., 2013). Limited research exists about the underlying perspectives of CST members, or how those perspectives inform their work with CLD students and why they resist alternative and more culturally responsive methods to instruction, intervention, and evaluation.

DiAngelo (2011) writes that "while anti-racist efforts ultimately seek to transform institutionalized racism, anti-racist education may be most effective by starting at the micro level" (p. 66). Learning and change at the micro or individual level can help build towards change at the macro or structural level (DiAngelo, 2011). Mezirow (1991) describes how experiences and understanding of the world create preconceptions, and people often reject new learning that is incompatible with those perceptions. Understanding the perspectives of CST members is the first step to critical reflection and transformation (Mezirow, 1997) of those beliefs and attitudes at the individual level to work towards system-wide change. Although this qualitative study focused on a single CST, it might serve as a model for future research. The

insights gained can inform future methodologies/methods and application of Whiteness Studies as a framework for understanding the work and perspectives of CSTs.

Limitations of the Study

This study represents the work and perspectives of just one child study team (CST) at a single elementary school. Information gathered likely will not be generalizable to other schools or districts with different student populations, different district/state procedures and laws, and different experiences/identities of individual CST members.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic presented an interesting challenge. Schools have either been closed or have had instruction provided remotely, which has impacted students' academic performance. Perspectives towards CLD students and their abilities may have been altered by this situation, due to missed instructional time. Staff absences due to the pandemic also limited opportunities for observation and interview, reducing the amount of data available for analysis.

This study focused on the perspectives towards only CLD students, so comparisons to their monolingual peers can not necessarily be made. It may be difficult to separate out what perspectives are exclusive to CLD populations or representative of more general beliefs about education, including the curriculum, intervention, and evaluation. Regardless, CST members' perspectives impact student outcomes through the work they do.

Positionality and Subjectivity

Our identities are created through both our external appearance and our culture, experiences, beliefs, and behaviors, creating the horizons (Alcoff, 2006) through which we see the world. These serve to structure our epistemologies, the assumptions we make, and how we interpret the world around us. Bhattacharya (2017) writes that "it is important to discuss these assumptions, beliefs, and values that inform the way you make meaning of your research topic"

(p. 36). We cannot remove our identity from any work we do, as we are bounded by our positionalities and subjectivities as human beings.

My identity as a white, heterosexual male from a middle class, protestant background placed me in a unique position to conduct this study through a lens of Whiteness. I was raised in the dominant culture, with its notions of meritocracy, individualism, and color-blind neutrality. My experiences (both with other people and my own thinking) have shown that these beliefs often serve as the lens through which expectations for and estimations of individuals are structured. As I continue to learn and work to further diminish my own ignorance, I can reflect on my previous thinking and knowledge to try to make sense of both how they were originally constructed and the ways in which I have been able to change them.

I work on a team of speech-language pathologists who consult for problem solving and evaluation of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The advice and information we give is often ignored or dismissed as "opinion," if ever even sought for consideration. There is an apparent resistance to qualitative and biography-driven methods of understanding students and measuring progress, a misunderstanding of the purposes of special education, and a tendency towards deficit-based thinking about students. Despite our efforts to explain both the processes of and rationale behind culturally responsive, biography-driven instructional and evaluation approaches, educators continue to inappropriately refer, evaluate, and place students in special education. Even with the ongoing dismissal of our advice, I remain hopeful and am constantly disappointed in each new interaction.

Organization of the Study

The following chapters provide more in-depth discussion of the study. The existing literature on the research problem and theoretical frameworks are discussed in chapter 2, and the

methodology and methods that were employed to answer the research questions are described in chapter 3. Findings from the study are then detailed in chapter 4, and conclusions, implications, and questions for future research are discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

This chapter explores the existing literature related to the topic of this study. It begins by explaining disproportionality related to cultural-linguistic diversity and why it is a problem. Next, the make-up of child study teams (CSTs) and the ways in which they might contribute to disproportionality through involvement in interventions, referrals, evaluations, and placement decisions are described. Training, perspectives, and attitudes towards change are discussed as possible issues. Finally, key tenets of the theoretical frameworks that this study used for understanding the actions and perspectives of CST members towards culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students are introduced. The chapter concludes with the research problem and the research questions this study addressed.

Disproportionality and Why It Matters

Disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education, otherwise known as disproportionality, is a well-documented problem (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Sullivan, 2011). These students tend to be either over- or under-identified for special education, depending on the exceptionality (Barrio, 2017). Often, they are over-identified as having learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and intellectual disabilities (Bal et al., 2014), but under-identified as gifted (Allen, 2017).

Special education can serve an important purpose for students with true disabilities, but inappropriate placements can be detrimental. Access to quality instruction may be restricted (Artiles et al., 2002), and placement may stigmatize students through lowered expectations and assumptions about abilities (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Despite the intention to meet needs and accelerate academic gains, students in special education often continue to perform below general education peers (Aron & Loprest, 2012) and services may not be truly individualized (Harry &

Klingner, 2006). Rates of exit from special education are low (Harry & Klingner, 2006), and students' graduation rates and long-term outcomes may not be as good as their nonexceptional peers (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Hernandez Finch, 2012). Removal from the language-rich general education setting is detrimental as well, as students lose interaction with peers and miss out on direct language instruction, including grade-level vocabulary.

Child Study Teams

Child study teams (CSTs), also known as multidisciplinary teams, student study teams, student support teams, and other names (Klingner & Harry, 2006), are often integral parts of evaluation processes and placement decisions. They may also be involved during problem solving or general education interventions, suggesting strategies to support learners (Klingner & Harry, 2006). There does not seem to be consistent definition of CST membership or description of their responsibilities across the literature.

In Klinger & Harry's (2006) study, CSTs consisted of general education and special education teachers, administration, and parents, with occasional involvement of counselors, psychologists, and social workers. This team was supposed to look at interventions and suggest strategies, and they were responsible for decisions to refer students for evaluation. Evaluations were completed primarily by the psychologist, who also "clearly" (p. 2268) had the most authority and influence on the process. Meetings to determine placement/eligibility were attended by the psychologist, a district-level staffing specialist, an administrator, the general education teacher, and the parent, and sometimes by a special education teacher, a counselor, a social worker, or "other support person" (p. 2250).

Overton et al. (2004) studied the decision making of "assessment personnel" which included only educational diagnosticians and school psychologists. Another study, by Schoorman

et al. (2011), looked at the placement decision making of a CST and described the team as consisting of a psychologist, teachers, social workers, bilingual assessors, and special education staff.

In the experience of this researcher, CSTs generally consist of a school psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, a social worker, a counselor, a nurse, and an administrator, with special education teachers involved as well. Others, such as audiologists or occupational/physical therapists, are sometimes involved depending on individual student needs. CSTs participate in general education and prereferral intervention discussions, providing suggestions and sometimes conducting screenings (of speech-language skills, academic skills, behavior, etc.). CSTs ultimately, with the input of teachers and parents and based on intervention data, make the decision to refer students for special education evaluation. Each CST member then contributes to evaluations and attends eligibility/placement meetings, where decisions are made about eligibility and need for special education services.

The psychologist and the speech-language pathologist (SLP) are often central to evaluations, conducting most of the assessments that determine students' eligibility and need for services. The psychologist completes cognitive and academic standardized testing, and the SLP assesses communication and its impact on student achievement. These assessments are completed in English, using tools standardized with monolingual English speakers. The school district has SLPs and psychologists who can assess students in Spanish, but only if a request is made by the CST. The social worker is often the primary contact for parents, explaining the referral and evaluation processes and collecting home and background information. Other team members contribute health/medical information (nurse) and social-emotional information (counselor), with others (e.g., fine motor skills) included as needed. The lines of responsibility

can be blurred; for instance, the social worker and speech-language pathologist may both discuss communication and social skills with families. Through their involvement in referral decisions, evaluations, and placement decisions, CSTs carry much of the responsibility for inappropriate special education placements. Although there is variation in the membership and responsibilities of CSTs throughout the literature, a positive school environment for all learners should have shared responsibility amongst all staff, including teachers, CSTs, and administration (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006).

Interventions, Referrals, and Evaluations

Although much research exists on the causes of disproportionality, the current study focuses on child study teams (CSTs) and their contributions. Situated within the context of this study, those processes with which CSTs are involved will be discussed to understand the ways previous studies have described their specific contributions to disproportionality. CSTs in this study are involved in pre-referral and general intervention processes, referral decisions, evaluations, and special education eligibility/placement determinations.

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 sought to address concerns with disproportionality by requiring schools to work towards its elimination. Discrepancy requirements for determination of disability (i.e., a student is determined to have a disability if there is a significant difference between standardized cognitive and achievement scores) were removed. Instead, determinations could be made based on students' response to academic interventions and different types of instruction, in a process known as Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI usually occurs within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), where instruction and interventions are adjusted until students' educational needs are met (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Problem solving and individualization can help

separate those students who have received inadequate instruction from those with true disabilities (Orosco & Klingner, 2010) and prevent inappropriate referrals (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Hoover, 2012). For CLD students, teams should draw on what they know about students' histories, interests, strengths, and weaknesses to make individualized instruction and intervention more contextualized and relevant for students, building on prior knowledge and experiences (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). Data from RTI provide the best information in determining whether referrals to special education are appropriate (Blatchley & Lau, 2010).

Research-based approaches for engaging with students and making content relevant, such as Biography-Driven Instruction (Herrera, 2016) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), can be applied to RTI and evaluation processes. Attending to students' backgrounds during these processes can help teams better identify where differences in knowledge might exist, so they can make more informed determinations between cultural-linguistic difference and disability/disorder (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006), including how students' experiences and culture might be impacting progress in the general education curriculum or performance on assessment tools.

Klingner & Harry (2006) found that the CSTs in their study would immediately refer students to evaluation without prior intervention, sometimes (but not always) beginning interventions at the same time. Intervention processes are often seen as barriers to having students evaluated for special education (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006), and teams often conflate general education interventions, in which the goal is to meet student needs in the classroom, with pre-referral interventions, which are often done to justify evaluation (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Implemented interventions may not be individualized to student background and need, but educators will assume that data from evidence-based and/or norm-referenced tools are both valid

and sufficient for decision making (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). These tools and the larger curriculum are perceived to be neutral and applicable to all students (Castagno, 2014; Hairston, 2013), without consideration for how the system is designed by and for the dominant White culture (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). When progress is not made in general education and with the application of such interventions in RTI, educators assume that CLD students have deficits rather than looking more closely at the environment and instruction (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

Once referred, evaluators often rely on English-language based, standardized testing to determine the presence of disability (Hoover et al., 2018). Klingner & Harry (2006) and Orosco & Klingner (2010) both found that teams overestimated and relied on the diagnostic capability of intelligence testing, without considering other factors that might impact performance. Kraemer et al. (2013) reported that speech-language pathologists in their study relied on English-language standardized tests to determine the presence of speech-language impairment. When cultural-linguistic diversity is considered, there can be a focus on English-language acquisition to justify testing only in English. Klingner & Harry (2006) described one school district's use of bilingual assessors and sorting of students into levels of English proficiency to determine whether they could be tested only in English. They described one primarily Spanish-speaking student whose IQ was determined to be 51, based on English-only evaluation results. Another student was evaluated in both languages, but only English scores were used and reported because he was determined to be proficient in English. The goal for CLD students seems to be assimilation (Garza & Garza, 2010; Tanner, 2018), with assumptions that the language, culture, and experiences of the dominant White culture are universal (Applebaum, 2016).

Standardized or norm-referenced assessments of intelligence, academic achievement, and speech-language can provide valuable information about what skills and knowledge students have, but they cannot be used to determine the presence of disabilities with CLD students (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). Most standardized tests, including non-verbal tasks, are designed using cultural-linguistic standards of the dominant White culture (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). As such, they provide neither valid nor complete understandings of CLD students' functioning and ability (Abedi, 2008; Blatchley & Lau, 2010; Klingner & Harry, 2006). Similarly, standardized tests in Spanish are also often normed with monolingual populations (Kraemer et al., 2013) and do not allow students access to their complete, combined language systems.

Standardized scores alone are not sufficient to determine special education eligibility, because evaluations need to have multiple measures of ability and need to be culturally sensitive (Allen, 2017). Data obtained through informal measures/activities (including dynamic assessment), curriculum-based measurements, observation, and from parents/families can often yield more valuable and robust information about students' academic strengths/weaknesses and knowledge than standardized or norm-referenced assessments (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). When English-language assessments are used, results need to be interpreted in the context of the student's culture and language (Blatchley & Lau, 2010). Data from RTI can provide the foundation for interpreting evaluation results (Hoover et al., 2018), because areas of strengths and needs will be clearly identified and can be used for comparison to test performance. When RTI is not implemented effectively, such triangulation of data cannot happen and it cannot be determined that students have had appropriate and adequate opportunities to learn (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

Placement decisions following the results of evaluations are then based in subjective standards that rely on the clinical expertise of those involved (Hernandez Finch, 2012). If evaluators rely on inappropriate evaluation methods and interpret results through the lens of the dominant White culture, they will likely apply the same standards to their eligibility and placement decision making.

Training and Perspectives

Educators, in general, may lack training or experience or hold misconceptions that prevent them from providing quality education to diverse students (Bonner et al., 2018). There may be an inability to see beyond students' language proficiency, which negatively impacts teachers' perceptions of abilities (Allen, 2017) and results in lowered expectations (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). These lowered expectations may only be for certain groups, like Spanish-speaking students, while there may be higher expectations for others, like Asian-American students (Sirota & Bailey, 2009). Educators may not consider students' home language and culture in instruction and intervention, and they may be unaware of the impact language and culture have on classroom performance (Hoover, 2012). Educators often lack understanding of second language acquisition and cultural differences in general (Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Klingner & Harry, 2006). Educators' inability to meet student needs leads to inappropriate referrals, evaluations, and placement in special education (Sorrells, Webb-Johnson, & Townsend, 2004). Much of the existing research on training and experience in the literature has focused on classroom teachers, as opposed to CST members, but some relevant studies exist.

Guiberson & Atkins (2012) surveyed speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in Colorado about their experiences and perceptions of their abilities to work with CLD students. Their findings focused on preparation and practices without examining attitudes or beliefs about

students. Of their respondents, 72% reported having received some training specifically in working with CLD students, either in graduate school or through continuing education (Guiberson & Atkins, 2012). Respondents reported that they were "comfortable" (Guiberson & Atkins, 2012, p. 174) treating and evaluating racially and culturally diverse students, but they felt less capable with linguistically diverse students. It is unclear if these clinicians' confidence in evaluating racially/culturally diverse students is due to a lack of considerations of the ways culture is involved in education, but the authors speculate that it may be because "SLPs are becoming more knowledgeable and comfortable with cultural aspects of their caseloads" (Guiberson & Atkins, 2012, p. 172). Could it also be that these SLPs are relying on English-language acquisition with a goal of assimilation to the dominant White culture, without considering the cultural biases in assessments? Interestingly, the authors reported that only 24% of the SLPs in their study reported using English-language standardized tests with CLD students. It is unclear what evaluation methods they use instead, but several respondents reported the lack of appropriate assessment tools for CLD students as a concern.

Educators and evaluators need to be culturally competent to accurately distinguish difference from disorder (Crowley et al., 2015). In teacher preparation programs, cultural-linguistic diversity is often separate from the rest of the coursework and covered in just one or a few courses (Sleeter, 2017). Reviewing the required coursework of nearby speech-language pathology masters' programs for comparison reveals that only one out of four has any cultural-linguistic diversity coursework. Recent graduates from one nearby program reported to this researcher having received little to no mention of cultural-linguistic diversity in their coursework. For educators and CST members working in schools, there is continued need for

professional development (PD) to build capacities for understanding and educating CLD students (Hernandez Finch, 2012).

PD, however, does not always change the ways teachers and CSTs work with and evaluate CLD students. Kraemer et al. (2013) reported that even after training in conducting non-standardized evaluations, SLPs continued to rely on scores from standardized assessments because it was "easier" (Kraemer et al., 2013, p. 96) and provided technical/objective information they felt gave their diagnoses credibility. The importance of cultural and linguistic factors is ignored or dismissed in favor of using known instruments and tools. Again, there is an assumption that the skills and knowledge that these known tools probe are universal for all students. Similarly, Marx and Saavedra (2014) describe how "differing epistemologies, ours critical and aimed toward social justice, theirs built on what we describe as neoliberal educational discourse and deficit constructions of ELLs and Latinas/os, inevitably led to the collapse of our collaboration" (p. 418) when they were asked to help a local district improve ESL education. In their reflections, they describe how teachers and district leadership failed to see the value both in what they were proposing and in families' perspectives and cultural assets. There is an apparent resistance to or denial of the importance of considering students' language, culture, and experiences in education.

Such resistance does not appear to be as simple as overt racism. Cooc (2017) analyzed national data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 to examine teachers' perceptions of disability in students of color (for high school students). In general, teachers were more likely to perceive students of color as having disabilities. But, when controlled for "background factors, especially student achievement and behavior," the disparity was closed or even reversed: African American students became less likely to be perceived as having a disability. The reason for this

reversal is unclear, but a set of factors may have contributed: possibly fear of being racist or lowered expectations for these students. Standards for achievement and behavior are often tied to the structures and expectations in place, without consideration for cultural and linguistic differences. However, it is impossible to factor out the effects of background factors, including language, culture, and previous educational experience, when instructing or evaluating students. So why do schools and evaluators seem resistant to changing their methods to be more culturally responsive and inclusive?

Theoretical Frameworks

Educating child study team (CST) members and educators on more appropriate strategies often does not result in meaningful change. Adherence to inappropriate instructional and evaluation methods and the cooccurring decision-making processes, as in studies by Klingner & Harry (2006) and Orosco & Klingner (2010), result in disproportionate/inappropriate special education placements for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Although some research exists to explain CST members' involvement and contributions to these placements, much of the existing literature has not looked specifically at CST members' perspectives towards CLD students or how those perspectives inform assessment and decision making. This study will utilize elements of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and Whiteness Studies to create a framework for understanding the ways CST members contribute to disproportionality through their actions and unspoken assumptions/beliefs about CLD students and education.

Whiteness Studies

Racism is described as endemic to American society and its institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Picower, 2009), through the myth of meritocracy and beliefs in color-blindness that maintain inequality/inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 2016; Zamudio et al.,

2011). These concepts are embedded in education (Annamma et al., 2017; Sleeter, 2016) and manifest as reliance on standardized data and disregard for students' cultural-linguistic backgrounds to achieve assimilation for CLD students (Zamudio et al., 2011). The goals and values of the education system may help explain the perspectives and actions of CST members.

Whiteness Studies seeks to address issues of inequality/inequity by turning the focus from White-dominant *systems* towards the *people* who construct, maintain, and benefit from them (Applebaum, 2016). Applebaum (2016) argues that "Whiteness involves a culturally, socially, politically, and institutionally produced and reproduced system of institutional processes and individual practices that benefit white people while simultaneously marginalizing others" (p. 3). Whiteness Studies problematizes White cultural dominance and the ways in which Whites "deflect, ignore, or dismiss their role, racialization, and privilege in race dynamics" (Matias et al., 2014, p. 291). White-dominated systems are reinforced and maintained through the actions and beliefs of those who benefit from them.

Rationalizations of color-blindness justify beliefs in meritocracy, individualism, and neutrality and are central to the defense and maintenance of inequity (Applebaum, 2016; Castagno, 2014; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Ullucci & Battey, 2011). White people both contribute to and are complicit in maintaining inequity through subconscious beliefs and attitudes as well as through their actions (Applebaum, 2008). The privileges that come with Whiteness are denied with claims of color-blindness and neutrality (Sleeter, 2017). Whites further refuse to acknowledge Whiteness as problematic by ignoring, deflecting, or rationalizing (Matias et al., 2014). Whiteness is a neutral and universal standard against which others are compared, while remaining unacknowledged and unspoken (Applebaum, 2016; Lynch, 2018). Whiteness sets standards for all people, regardless of culture or language.

An Education System Based in Whiteness

The education system in the Unites States is created and maintained by the dominant White culture (Nganga, 2015). White culture sets the bar for educational standards, for academic and social expectations, and for student advancement (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Tanner, 2018). The standard of Whiteness is enacted through a curriculum that is both Eurocentric (Castagno, 2014) yet perceived to be "race-neutral" (Hairston, 2013; p 128), as well as a hidden curriculum of White values (Hairston, 2013). Clearly, CLD students are at a disadvantage in this system, since their backgrounds and experiences do not match those of the dominant culture (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). Together, these curricula of Whiteness work to diminish CLD students' languages and culture and make them more like the dominant culture (Castagno, 2014) through goals of assimilation (Garza & Garza, 2010). For instance, schools described by Castagno (2014) focused on language services like ESL supports as tools for students to "get up to speed" (p. 66) with monolingual English speakers. This is further reflected in the focus on English-language acquisition for assessment, as previously discussed.

Predominantly White educators are trained to work in and sustain this system, basing decisions about students on those experiences, beliefs in color-blindness, and in the larger White culture (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Matias & Liou, 2015). Since CLD students typically do not meet these White educators' expectations (cognitively, linguistically, culturally, or academically), they often hold deficit perspectives about them, their parents, and their families (Garza & Garza, 2010; Castagno, 2014). Standards of achievement, goals of assimilation, and beliefs in normative Whiteness justify deficit thinking (Tanner, 2018; Thomas 2019), or what Whites see as *the way things ought to be*.

These perspectives are reinforced by standardized testing and assumptions that knowledge valued by the dominant White culture is universal for all learners (Leonardo, 2009; Garza & Garza, 2010). Lack of equality and inequity, in the forms of deficit perspectives and inappropriate special education placements, becomes rationalized and closed-off from examination because these standards of knowledge that create what is effectively White dominance also work to maintain it (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Hairston, 2013). These structures and beliefs create an education system that is set up to produce and justify inappropriate and disproportionate special education placements.

Child Study Team Member Demographics

CST members are predominantly White, at similar rates as classroom teachers (who have been the focus of much existing research). In the U.S., 79% of teachers were White during the 2017-2018 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Similarly, 81% of speech-language pathologists certified through the American Speech-Language Hearing Association are white (ASHA, 2020) and 85.9% of the members of the National Association of School Psychologists are White (NASP, 2021). Social workers, in general, are 68.8% White (Salsberg et al., 2017) and American School Counselor Association members are 76% White (ASCA, 2020). Demographic differences between students and staff represent a potential mismatch of language and culture which have effects on the quality of instruction and opportunities to learn (Sirota & Bailey, 2009). This mismatch may be further reflected in beliefs and perspectives based in the culture of Whiteness.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory informs understanding of the importance and impact of underlying beliefs, knowledge, and experiences, on the ways people see the world and their

openness (or resistance) to change and learning. Experiences and understanding of the world create preconceptions and assumptions, and new learning that is incompatible with those perceptions is often rejected (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow uses the term *meaning perspectives* "to refer to the structure of assumptions within which one's past experience assimilates and transforms new experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). These meaning perspectives serve to "form, limit, and distort" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 34) learning, leading to individual change or rejection of the new information (resistance). Mezirow describes three types of meaning perspectives: epistemic (assumptions about and use of knowledge), sociolinguistic (such as language, culture, and ideology), and psychological (including self-concept, defense mechanisms, and prohibitions/inhibitions). CST members in the U.S. are overwhelmingly White and work in an education system based in Whiteness. The demographics and experiences of CST members may create meaning perspectives based in Whiteness, which impact their perceptions of CLD students. This study will use Mezirow's conception of meaning perspectives to organize and frame key tenets of Whiteness Studies.

Key Tenets of the Frameworks

Whiteness Studies can serve as a framework for understanding both how education is structured and how those within it operate (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matias & Liou, 2015; Thomas, 2019)**.** However, it has not been used specifically to investigate the work of CSTs. The three types of meaning perspectives described by Mezirow were used to organize and frame key elements of Whiteness Studies that informed this study's data collection and analysis. These tenets are the normative status of Whiteness (an epistemic perspective), beliefs in meritocracy (a sociolinguistic perspective), and White fragility and resistance (a psychological perspective). These tenets were used to structure and answer the study's questions.

Normative Whiteness (Epistemic Perspectives)

Epistemic perspectives relate directly to knowledge, including what knowledge is valued and how knowledge is used (Mezirow, 1991). Whiteness operates through assumptions about the universality and neutrality of the dominant culture (DiAngelo, 2011; Lynch, 2018; Sleeter, 2017). Whiteness functions as a normative standard, with its experiences, language, values, and beliefs considered universal for and representative of all people (DiAngelo, 2011). Curriculum and instructional strategies in education are perceived to be universal and neutral as well, so they are believed to be appropriate and work for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Similarly, the primary focus of educators is often English-language acquisition, which reflects beliefs in the normativity of White culture. Discussions are frequently centered on whether students are believed to have acquired sufficient English-language proficiency to be evaluated, such as in the study by Klingner et al. (2006). Similarly, educators are often unaware of the influence culture and language have in the classroom (Hoover, 2012). Assumptions of neutrality and universality ignore differences in background knowledge and experiences, so CLD students are, again, put at a disadvantage. This disadvantage supports and perpetuates deficit perceptions of CLD students as being *needy*, *disadvantaged*, or *behind* (Garza & Garza, 2010). When CLD students' cultural and linguistic differences are considered, they are often treated as deficits by the dominant White culture (Artiles, 1998; Jupp et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2016). In these ways, the normativity of Whiteness is upheld and treated as a standard to which others are compared. In fact, Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) describe Whiteness as a property that CLD students can earn through education. Education benefits CLD students by making them more like the dominant White culture (McIntosh, 1989), since they are viewed as underprivileged or even uncultured (Giroux, 1997; Garza & Garza, 2010).

Whiteness, through assumptions of neutrality, attempts to assimilate CLD students to the dominant culture while also denying that Whiteness is dominant (Matias & Liou, 2015; McIntosh, 1989). Diversity is reduced to token acknowledgements of differences (such as through multi-cultural literature or initiatives to appreciate but not understand culture), while systemic issues (such as the perpetuation of White ways of educating students) are largely ignored (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Castagno, 2014). Again, students are expected to conform to Whiteness, since it is treated as both neutral and universal.

Methods of teaching are treated as universal for all learners (Giroux, 1997), so there is no attempt to look deeper at the ways such assumptions of knowledge are produced. Any questioning is reduced to a matter of opinion (Giroux, 1997). Mills (1997) describes such ignorance (i.e., what he and others refer to as White ignorance) as an "inverted epistemology" (p. 18) in which White people are unable to see the world they have created. More generally and applicable to education, there is simply a "failure to ask certain questions" (p. 73) because existing societal and educational structures are taken for granted, or seen as neutral, universal, or normative. Research- or evidence-based and norm-referenced curricula, interventions, and evaluation tools are perceived to be objective and universally applicable in the education system (Ladson-Billings, 1998). With CST members, this may be represented in dependence on standardized assessment without reflection on their inappropriateness seen in previous studies and may reflect educators' lack of consideration for language and culture in the classroom.

Educators may espouse cultural responsiveness, but, at the practical level, many continue to operate from White normative and deficit perspectives and seek to assimilate students to the dominant culture (Garza & Garza, 2010; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Adair (2013) found that teachers maintained their deficit perspectives of immigrant students while also being

grateful to have them at their school (in what amounts to a superficial celebration of diversity). Sleeter (2017) reports an unpublished study of teachers in two large urban districts who both claimed to be familiar with culturally responsive pedagogy while also attributing low achievement primarily to student-centered factors such as attendance, motivation, families, and language, instead of to their own instructional practices. Similarly, Rodriguez et al. (2010) researched changes in teachers' perceptions towards educating English Language Learners after a course in instructional strategies (not necessarily culturally responsive teaching) and found that teachers recognized the importance of appropriate instructional strategies, but their estimations of student ability did not change. In one of the limited number of studies that examined the perspectives of CST members, Orosco & Klingner (2010) found that CSTs were unable to shift towards asset-based views of students that instead looked to the quality of instruction to explain academic progress. Beliefs in normative Whiteness might help explain continued dependence on standardized scores in evaluations, as Kraemer et al. (2013) saw in their work with speech-language pathologists.

Meritocracy (Sociolinguistic Perspectives)

Sociolinguistic perspectives include the ways culture and language affect understanding, including through theories, philosophies, and ideologies (Mezirow, 1991). The dominant White culture's belief in the ideology of meritocracy is supported by the perceived neutrality or universality of Whiteness. Meritocracy assumes that everyone is given an equal opportunity for success, and failure is due to a lack of individual effort or talent (Castagno, 2014; Zamudio et al., 2011) This leads to a lack of contextualization to cultural-linguistic differences, with problems are approached as if they exist in isolation (Giroux, 1997). Deficits are assumed to lie within the individual instead of in the system.

When students do not respond to instruction, they are more likely to be referred for special education evaluations (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Hoover, 2012). Schools not infrequently place students in special education to *get them help* because educators often believe that CLD students will only be successful when their language and culture match the dominant norms (Hernandez Finch, 2012; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). This perception of need and desire to *help* or *save* CLD students further entrenches Whiteness and keeps the blame on the students instead of the system (Hernandez Finch, 2012; Matias & Mackey, 2016). By blaming the student and referring them for special education evaluations, educators avoid questioning the education system or the quality of their instruction.

With these assumptions and beliefs in meritocracy, categorizing students by perceived skills and deficit (e.g., considered in need of special education or not) is justified (Castagno, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This categorization further invalidates individual identities and encourages efforts by schools to work towards assimilation of students to the dominant White culture (e.g., through questions of whether students have enough English for assessment). Categorization into simplified, all-encompassing groupings also encourages generalizations about people based on characteristics shared with others, leading to universal claims about individual aspects of identity (e.g., assumptions about all ELLs). In these ways, belief in meritocracy is supported by beliefs in normative Whiteness.

Standardized testing perpetuates inequality through the ways it also puts students into categories (Au, 2009), separating the *deficient* and *disadvantaged* CLD students from members of the dominant White culture. Deficit perspectives allow for dismissal of the conditions of education (quality, appropriateness of instruction, for example, or racism). Instead, White educators too often attribute CLD students' failure to match their expectations as deficits to be

remediated (Garza & Garza, 2010; Hernandez Finch, 2012). CLD students are then trapped in a cycle of remediation, lower-level instruction, and lowered expectations that further perpetuates deficit perceptions and perceived gaps in their achievement (Garza & Garza, 2010; Sirota & Bailey, 2009). The data and tools used by CST members to make decisions about students may reflect beliefs in meritocracy.

Fragility and Resistance (Psychological Perspectives)

Psychological perspectives include self-concept and psychological defense mechanisms (Mezirow, 1991). Resistance and fragility are methods of denial and defense for Whites. White people reject the notion of their own roles in maintaining inequal and inequitable systems. Through denial, they do not have to confront the ways in which they might perpetuate them (Applebaum, 2016) and the ways in which they benefit from them (Sleeter, 2017). Understanding Whiteness in education is important because it shifts the impetus for change from the students to the systems and people that perpetuate it (i.e., inappropriate instruction and evaluation) (Applebaum, 2016; Leonardo, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 2000). Unfortunately, bringing White educators' attention to Whiteness is often met with resistance (Levine-Rasky, 2000).

Much of the existing literature on educators' denials and resistance focuses on pre-service teachers, as opposed to in-service teachers or CST members. Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2005), for example, studied the changes in attitudes of pre-service teachers towards CLD students after a multicultural education course. Most students had a positive reaction to the course but were resistant to blaming the system instead of the students. According to Sleeter (2016), White people often perceive potential changes to the system or acknowledgement of privilege, racism, etc. as personal threats.

DiAngelo (2011) argues that because White people live in a White dominated society, they lack the experience and knowledge of racism that would equip them to talk or think critically about it. Instead, racial stress triggers “defensive moves” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). When confronted with racism, these reactions occur as both resistance and a function of “reduced psychosocial stamina” (p. 56) that she calls *White Fragility*. Reactions include “anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance” (p. 55) and they work to “reinstate white racial equilibrium.” (p. 57). The disequilibrium that occurs from racial stress is a result of perceived challenges to White beliefs in normative Whiteness and meritocracy. Similarly, beliefs in individualism cause Whites to distance themselves from the role they play in maintaining racism (DiAngelo, 2011). Lack of interest in and consideration of their roles “leads Whites to claim that they disagree with perspectives that challenge their worldview, when in fact, they don’t understand the perspective” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 61). This fragility may help explain why CST members adhere to known tools even when given training on better methods, but this has not been researched. Additionally, the ways CST members *react* when their methods are challenged is also not known. Some studies have looked at the ways pre-service teachers (who, again, are similar demographically to CST members), react to conversations about race and Whiteness.

Picower (2009) looked at pre-service teachers’ reactions to course content specifically addressing issues of racism, privilege, and assumptions about students. Students denied racism and oppression, by relying on stories centered in White deficit ideologies, meritocracy, and claims of White victimhood. She described three different sets of “tools of Whiteness” (p. 204) used by the White teacher candidates to deny, deflect, and resist issues of White supremacy: emotional tools (defensiveness, anger), ideological tools (color-blind and other claims of

equality), and performative (silence, claims of wanting to help minorities). Similarly, Matias et al. (2014) directly applied whiteness studies and critical race theory to help pre-service teachers understand racism and Whiteness and their potential influences on their teaching. Students were resistant to talking about race and refused to admit that Whiteness is positioned as universal or normative. Many acknowledged their Whiteness but denied that had any influence on their experiences or privilege. They would engage in discussions about Whiteness but shifted away from centering on themselves; instead, they spoke in a generalized third-person perspective. It is unclear how CST members might react to such discussions and perceived challenges to their beliefs. The study by Kraemer et al. (2013) may represent resistance by CST members. The SLPs in their study continued to rely on standardized assessment scores after being instructed in more appropriate methods, possibly representing a reaction of denial.

Research Purpose and Questions

Child study teams (CSTs) play an integral role in disproportionality. There is existing research on how the education system is built in and reinforces Whiteness and how teachers react to discussions about race and Whiteness. However, little is known about the perspectives of CST members and the ways they are influenced by aspects of Whiteness in education. Although CST members are demographically similar to classroom teachers, differences in roles and responsibilities might lead to different meaning perspectives about students, knowledge, and the tools used in their areas of expertise.

This study sought to discover how unspoken beliefs in normative Whiteness and meritocracy and how resistance to discussions about Whiteness explain the actions, beliefs, and decision making of CST members that result in disproportionate and inappropriate special education placements for CLD students. Two questions were answered by this study. In what

ways, if any, do child study team members' use of data and decision making for culturally-linguistically diverse students reflect perspectives based in normative Whiteness and an ideology of meritocracy? In what ways, if any, do child study team members' explanations for and defense of their decision making reflect perspectives based in White fragility and resistance?

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter describes the design of the research used to address the study's purpose and questions. The following will be discussed: (1) pilot study findings, (2) the research questions to be answered by this study, (3) study design, (4) site and participant selection, (5) data collection tools, (6) data management, (7) data analysis procedures, and (8) the trustworthiness of this study. A summary concludes the chapter.

Pilot Study

A pilot study examining the general education intervention (GEI) process for CLD students at one elementary school was completed prior to this study. Data from the three most recent school years, 2020-2021, 2019-2020, and 2018-2019 were requested from a single elementary school, and only those forms created for CLD students (determined by ESOL status and/or presence of a home language different than English) were chosen for analysis. Minimal information on actual interventions and decision making was received, and not for all students. Instead, analysis focused on the student background information and descriptions of strengths and weaknesses that were used to explain initiation of the GEI process and to determine interventions.

Two tenets of Biography Driven Instruction (BDI) (Herrera, 2016) served as a theoretical framework to guide the pilot study: (1) the importance of attending to students' biopsychosocial histories (biological, psychological, and sociological aspects) in planning effective instruction, and (2) the importance of considering different sources of knowledge beyond standardized tests to determine levels of development/ability. The discourse of the GEI process as it relates to CLD students was analyzed to address the following questions:

1. How is cultural-linguistic diversity considered in baseline data and background information in the GEI process (attending to biopsychosocial histories)?
2. What sorts of data are included to describe students and their academic performance in the GEI process (sources of knowledge)?

Findings revealed a general lack of consideration for cultural-linguistic differences or student background and a dependence on data from standardized or universal tools and supports.

Consideration of Cultural-Linguistic Diversity

Four of the students' data in the pilot study included only statements about ESL status. Two simply stated that students had been exited from ESL services. Remarkably, one of the forms simply stated that "ESOL will not necessarily be needed for this process" since the student was being looked at for enrichment, and another made a comment about what a student could do "even being ESL" to justify enrichment.

Comments related to cultural-linguistic diversity (CLD) were included in data for 16 of the 40 students. Of those, eight included only information from a speech-language pathologist, consisting of home language survey information, bilingual screening results, and/or statements about the need to consider cultural-linguistic diversity. The other eight appeared to have been included by general education teachers, and generally included statements about home language use (e.g., to say that Spanish is spoken in the home or to compare language proficiencies). Three students' data included statements about home countries, with one of those centering on gender differences in education (the other two just mentioned students moving from or visiting home countries).

Similarly, data about family perspectives were inconsistent and limited, with only 26 of the 40 students' data including any information. However, 15 of these only talked about whether

parents agreed with the school's academic concerns or not. The others talked about family history/status, past traumas, or other details about family structures and events. None of the statements looked any deeper at families' cultures, experiences, expectations, or other aspects of students' lives.

Sources of Data

Academic information in the pilot study data was much more focused on quantitative data for those areas with universal and benchmark screeners (math and reading) than in those areas without (such as writing and language skills). Of the 40 forms, only quantitative screening data were included in explanations of reading performance on 10, and for explanations of math performance on 12. Social, behavior, memory, sensory, and motor comments were almost entirely without quantitative data. Interestingly, descriptive, qualitative information was much more common in the seven forms that were for enrichment students. One comment stressed how the student's performance on a screening tool may have been impacted by other factors and "not to let this number scare you." In general, qualitative data were often superficial, brief, and based in existing expectations for academics and behavior (e.g., comments about students being able to write their names).

Almost entirely, data included did not deviate from screening data, state standards, grouping and physical support (e.g., one-on-one or small group, level of prompting), and commonly used strategies, supports, and tools (e.g., number lines, sentence starters, fidgets). The data revealed no attempts to look at skills and abilities in the different areas through alternate forms of knowledge (e.g., not meeting standards for math, but able to balance the checkbook at home). Similarly, there were no connections made between concerns in one area and strengths in another. At least one student did well with language skills when screened in Spanish by the

speech-language pathologist, but the teacher reported comprehension and expression as concerns. Lack of specificity to student need and lack of deviation from a *standard treatment protocol* made it unclear why many students were in the GEI process, which is intended to be more intense than standard interventions.

Similarly, data included about students' strengths and interests were often related to the school setting (e.g., which subjects they like, what they do well, etc.). Only 16 of the students' data included any kind of information about interests/experiences outside of school, and usually consisted of bullet-point style lists of interests and favorite things. For example, one student's strengths included that he "loves video games and pizza. He loves anything related to the ocean -- sharks, fish, turtles. Blue is his favorite color."

Relevance to the Current Study

Although the data analyzed for this pilot study were limited, findings indicated a lack of consideration of cultural and linguistic diversity throughout the GEI process, possibly reflecting beliefs in the universality or normativity of the dominant White culture. Further, the included data and the skills described reflected a dependence on meritocratic, color-blind application of dominant cultural academic standards. Unfortunately, documentation of CST members' participation in the GEI process was limited. Only speech-language pathologist contributions were apparent, through inclusion of home language information or bilingual screening results. Connections made between data points were unclear, and each piece of information appeared to exist in isolation from others. For example, at least one student did well with language skills when screened in Spanish by the speech-language pathologist, but this was not directly compared to or considered in teacher concerns about comprehension and expression. It is also possible that

discussions about students, with verbal connections made between data points, were not reflected in writing.

Research Questions

Disproportionate identification of CLD students for special education often results from deficit perspectives towards students and dependence on norm-referenced and English-language tools (Hoover et al., 2018; Klinger & Harry, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010), but the contributions of CST members have not been clearly identified in the literature. Using tenets of Whiteness Studies and Transformative Learning Theory as a framework to interrogate this issue, this study asked the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do a CST's use of data and decision making for CLD students reflect perspectives based in normative Whiteness and an ideology of meritocracy?
2. In what ways, if any, do CST members' explanations for their decision making reflect perspectives based in White fragility and resistance?

Study Design

Answering this study's questions required a qualitative research design. Qualitative approaches are interested in understanding meaning making from experiences, as opposed quantitative approaches which are interested in "…determining cause and effect, predicting, or describing the distribution of some attribute among a population" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Using qualitative inquiry for this study was necessary for *describing* the participants' perspectives. An epistemology of constructionism informed the mini-ethnographic case study design of this study.

Epistemology

Constructionism, as defined by Crotty (2015), "is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (p. 42). As opposed to an objectivist/positivist epistemology where a concrete and universal meaning exists before and outside of human interaction, constructionism holds that meaning is not innate, but instead created by people. These meanings are social and entangled with culture, and people are born into a world that is "already interpreted" (Crotty, 2015, p. 57). Established ways of knowing (interpretations, meanings) both shape and limit the sense people make of phenomena (experiences, objects, etc.).

Because epistemology is bound within culture, meaning creates and is created by the beliefs, experiences, and behaviors of people. These experiences create our frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991) from which we see and interpret the world, creating assumptions and preconceptions that often resist challenge (Mezirow, 1991). This study was concerned with how CST members perceive and work with CLD students, which, in this constructionist view, is inextricably linked to their experiences and to the larger White culture.

Case Study

Definitions of CSTs and their roles vary throughout the literature (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Overton et al., 2004; Schoorman et al., 2011). Because of the wide range of possibilities for CST membership and responsibilities, it was important to bound this study within a limited, contextualized, and predetermined scope to create a case study (Bhattacharya, 2017). More specifically, this was a single instrumental case study, because the issue in question potentially occurs at multiple sites (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A single instrumental case allows for deeper

analysis of CST perceptions, beliefs, and ways of knowing than working with large amounts of participants across multiple settings (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Using Merriam's (1998) definition of case study as methodology, the case can be seen as "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). Creswell & Poth (2018) also describe a case as potentially being "a decision process, or an event" (p. 155). In this study, the case describes the limited participants: a child study team in an elementary school in a large midwestern district. This case was further limited by the issue of interest: the perspectives held towards CLD students by that CST, and how those perspectives might be framed in Whiteness.

Ethnography

Ethnography studies people in their cultures (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam & Tisdell (2015), writing about ethnography, define culture as "essentially refer[ring] to the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people" (p. 29). Extended observation and immersion *within* the culture are important for ethnographic studies to develop complete, detailed understandings and descriptions of the group (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These understandings and descriptions are based on the perspectives of the members of that culture (the emic view) but are interpreted through the viewpoint of the researcher(s) (the etic view) (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In this way, the researcher becomes part of the study.

Mini-ethnography

Mini-ethnographic design is similar to other ethnographic research designs. It is useful for studies in which time (or other resources) are a constraint and the focus is on a narrow topic or aspect of culture (Fusch et al., 2017; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This study focused on a single

aspect of the larger culture of the child study team: their actions and perceptions towards CLD students. A mini-ethnographic design also requires some existing familiarity with the setting and culture to be studied (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This researcher has extensive experience at other school buildings in the same district as the selected site, bringing familiarity with procedures, roles/responsibilities, and academic and behavioral expectations to the study. In this way, the researcher brought an outsider (etic) view with some knowledge and understanding of the insider (emic) view.

Site and Participant Selection

This study was conducted in a large midwestern school district with a diverse student population. In the school year prior to this study, just under 16% of enrolled students received ESOL services and just under 16% received special education services. Of the total student population (n = 47,263), 30.8% were identified as Caucasian, 36.1% as Hispanic, 20% as African American, and the remaining 13.1% as Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or Multi-Racial. Students come from 100 different countries of birth with 104 different languages spoken in homes, reflecting the growing diversity of the district. Additionally, this district has a protocol and specific procedure for general education interventions, making it ideal for collecting data through all stages of addressing concerns with student learning to answer the study's questions.

The specific site and participant sample were chosen purposefully, with criterion-based selection based on those attributes needed to conduct this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Two features were most important when selecting the site for this study: (1) an elementary school site (because most interventions and initial referrals for evaluation occur at the elementary level), and (2) a site with a large proportion of CLD students.

The chosen site is a larger elementary school in the district, with classrooms from Pre-K through fifth grade and a full-time child study team. It is also the same site in which the pilot study was completed. In the school year prior to this study, this building had an enrollment of over 600 students, with a majority (82.13%) identifying as non-White. 54.85% were Hispanic, 12.88% were African American, 8.45% were Asian, and 5.4% were multi-racial. 26.15% of students were considered English Language Learners (ELLs). In addition to ESOL services, this building has a Newcomers' program. 16.07% of students were identified as special education students, and this building also has self-contained classrooms for students requiring support throughout their day. During this most recent school year, this site had multiple students in the general education intervention process in the previous school year and completed several initial special education evaluations, evidencing a site with active general education intervention processes as well as referrals for evaluation, both important factors for answering this study's questions.

The child study team at the site is comprised of a principal, psychologist, social worker, counselor, nurse, and two speech-language pathologists (SLPs). Special education teachers contribute to intervention problem solving and initial evaluations. These members are representative of typical CST membership in this district. Data collection and analysis focused on three key members of the team: the psychologist, the social worker, and one SLP. Participants were limited to only these three for two reasons: they agreed to participate, and they are involved in the processes for CLD students in particular.

At this site, the psychologist and social worker attend grade-level general education intervention discussions, with grade levels divided between them. The speech-language pathologist is generally not involved in these discussions but completes screenings of speech-

language skills as needed. All three participants are central to evaluations: the psychologist completes cognitive and achievement assessments, the speech-language pathologist completes speech and language assessments, and the social worker serves as a contact of the parents, assisting with paperwork and gathering information about students' home lives and histories. All three participants are White and native English speakers. The SLP is fluent in Spanish, having learned it as a second language.

A second level of sampling within the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was necessary to ensure data collection specifically related to the research questions. These criteria helped the researcher "purposefully select whom to interview, what to observe, and which documents to analyze" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 100). This study was interested in the perspectives of a child study team towards *CLD students*, so observations of discussions and documents related to these students were the focus of data collection. Herrera (2016) defines culturally-linguistically diverse as "the favored term to refer to individuals whose culture and language are different from those of the dominant group" (p. 152). For the purposes of this study, the dominant group is understood to be monolingual English speakers of a western European cultural background. Thus, any student who is not a member of the dominant group could be considered culturally-linguistically diverse. ESOL designation and home languages were the primary attributes used to identify students as CLD at the study site.

Data Collection Tools

The researcher's role as participant observer is often a primary method of data collection in ethnographic studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Observations, interviews, and artifacts, along with field notes collected through immersion in the site are common sources of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). CST members at the research site are involved in

multiple stages of the processes that may contribute to disproportionality. They attend meetings and discussions with teachers, parents, and other CST members, assist with screenings and conduct evaluations, and write reports with their findings and conclusions. Each of these processes contribute to decision making and had the potential to reveal insights into perspectives towards CLD students. Interviews with individual participants provided insight into their thinking through direct questioning of their actions and discussions.

Data representing the participants' viewpoints were obtained primarily from three types of sources, as they relate to CLD students: (1) observation of problem-solving and child study team meetings, (2) written records, including evaluation reports and general education intervention forms, and (3) semi-structured interviews to gain further insight into CST members' perspectives and to confirm/disconfirm ongoing analysis.

Direct Observations

Observation provided an opportunity to collect data in a setting where the discourse of CST members naturally occurs, providing context and informing interview questions/structure (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Relevant to this study were discussions involving CLD students, which occured during problem-solving (GEI) process meetings, CST meetings, and evaluation eligibility/placement meetings. The researcher observed and interacted with participants, as a participant observer (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The collection of field notes, based on non-verbal contextual and behavioral elements in the environment and on the researcher's thoughts and feelings, served as a data source for the researcher's perspective. Discussions during observations were recorded for transcription and analysis.

Written Records

GEI forms and special education evaluation reports for CLD students were collected. The content of these written artifacts was important for answering the study's questions because they serve as representations of data collection and decision-making processes for CST members. Written records contain both demographic data (e.g., age, ethnicity, ESL status) and general considerations (e.g., hearing and vision screenings, attendance data). Demographic information was excluded from analysis, except for features that were deemed relevant to analysis (e.g., home language). Individualized quantitative and qualitative data, included in both GEI forms and evaluation reports, were the primary focus for collection and analysis.

Standard scores, criterion-based scores, and other numerical data were coded and included in analysis to understand the kinds of data that are collected and how they are used for decision making. The quality of these numbers (e.g., what they measure, how they measure it) was also be considered in analysis. Similarly, the specific tools (e.g., intervention programs, evaluation procedures) were analyzed for their appropriateness for CLD students and the apparent value CST members placed on these sources of data.

GEI Forms

GEI forms include documentation of student strengths and weaknesses/needs, specific interventions/supports provided, and details about student response to those interventions and decisions made by teams based on the data. Student interests, histories, and family information are also included on these forms, providing opportunity to create more complete understandings of students beyond immediate academic performance. Only data/narratives written by CST members on these forms were included in analysis, but their discussions or use of the information entered by others was included.

Evaluation Reports

Evaluation reports include the rationale for referral, pre-referral data, and the results from testing procedures to determine the presence of disability. They conclude with justifications for eligibility and explanations of student need for special education. The data on these reports include both descriptive (qualitative) information about students and quantitative data.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with individual child study team members who participated in this study. These interviews were semi-structured and follow from questions raised, insights gained, and potential findings from ongoing analysis of data. By maintaining a semi-structured format, interviews had some guidance for addressing the research questions while allowing for unexpected discussions that may also be relevant to the study (Bhattacharya, 2017). Although the focus of these interviews was to build from ongoing analysis of observational and written data, additional questions specifically asked about participants' perceptions of CLD students (particularly in how *culture* is considered or how processes differ for these students). The questions, analyses, and potential findings presented during the interviews served as a form of member check to verify and expand on findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interviews were particularly helpful in answering the second research question, which sought to identify potential psychological perspectives based in Whiteness (e.g., resistance).

Data Management

This study was subject to approval from a doctoral committee, as well as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at both Kansas State University and the school district in which the study was conducted. Data collection was not started until approval was received by both IRBs. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were given assurances that data will be kept confidential and that findings were anonymized. During collection of field notes and

transcriptions of recordings, pseudonyms were used to identify participants. Similarly, students were given pseudonyms to be used primarily for organization and connection of data for analysis, since the focus of this study is on the CST members.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collection and analysis were ongoing and occurred simultaneously, using the constant comparative method (Bogden & Bilken, 2007). Additionally, this ongoing analysis informed the content of questions during semi-structured interviews. Data representing the participants' views, or the *emic* perspective (Darling, 2016), were coded and analyzed through the lens of the researcher's perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Then, coding and analysis occurred using the researcher's perspective, or the *etic* perspective (Darling, 2016), informed by the theoretical framework. Through constant comparisons of emerging codes and categories throughout analysis and comparisons of the etic and emic perspectives, an interpretation of the participants' words and actions was gained through the lens of the theoretical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to answer the study's questions.

Emergent analysis was also guided through *thick descriptions* of data, analysis, and findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). As an analytical and interpretive tool, thick description not only describes the participants' and researcher's words and actions in detail, but also seeks to "explore deeper meaning structures" (Van Maanen, 1990, p. 178) that may be unspoken or unacknowledged. In this study, these meaning structures are potentially based in assumptions and beliefs in Whiteness.

Discourse Analysis

Gee (2014) describes language use as not just for *saying* something, but also *doing* and *being* something. Discourse analysis looks not only at what is said, but what actions are taken

and what is created through language use (Gee, 2014). As an analytical tool, discourse analysis helped answer the study’s questions through consideration of potential intentions and actions beyond the words themselves. The discourse of CST members relevant to this study included (1) how they use language, verbally and in writing, to understand students and make decisions, and what their language use might reveal about their perceptions and attitudes towards those students, and (2) how they use language to describe their actions, and what that might reveal about psychological perspectives. The *doing* and *being* of discourse had the potential to reveal further insights into participants’ perspectives.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Qualitative research requires standards of rigor to ensure trustworthiness that are different from those for quantitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) offer criteria for ensuring validity and reliability in a qualitative study, consisting of three primary categories: credibility (internal validity), consistency (reliability), and transferability (external validity). Strategies they describe for ensuring trustworthiness will be applied to this study.

Credibility

Qualitative research investigates peoples’ understandings of the world, so credibility is determined by the extent to which data and findings correspond to reality and those understandings. The most common method for establishing credibility is through triangulation of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, triangulation was achieved primarily through collecting data from multiple sources: written records, observations, and interviews. Interviews also served as member checks of preliminary and ongoing analysis to further ensure credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), through discussions of findings with the participants in the study.

Consistency

Consistency in qualitative research is defined as the extent to which the findings agree with the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Triangulation of data enhances consistency, but additional strategies for further ensuring consistency will be used in this study. Data and findings were subject to a peer examination (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), with another researcher familiar with the topic and the site reviewing the data and evaluating the plausibility of the findings. Consistency of the findings was also maintained through the use of journaling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These reflections included detailed explanations of the data collection and analysis processes, as well as descriptions of the researcher's thoughts, questions, problems, and decision-making. This audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) served as a record of the research process.

Transferability

Findings in qualitative research are not often generalizable to other settings or samples, because research often focuses on single cases or small purposefully selected samples (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher needs to provide enough detail for others to compare a study to their own contexts. The use of rich, thick descriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) provides highly detailed descriptions of the setting and findings of a study. Both the site and participants in this study have been described in detail, and the findings are described and justified based on detailed description of the data collection and analysis processes.

Summary

This chapter described the mini-ethnographic case study design that was used to answer the study's questions. The site and sample were described: the child study team at a single elementary school. The case sample was further delineated to include only those discussions and artifacts related to culturally-linguistically diverse students. Data sources were detailed, and

include written records and interview and observation transcripts, as well as field notes taken during observation. Analysis was explained as ongoing, using a constant comparison method that considers researcher and participant perspectives. Trustworthiness of the study and data management were also discussed.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Disproportionate identification of culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students for special education has been well documented in the literature (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Barrio, 2017; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Sullivan, 2011). Child study teams (CSTs), also known as multidisciplinary teams, student study teams, student support teams, and other names (Klingner & Harry, 2006), are often integral parts of evaluation processes and placement decisions. They may also be involved during problem solving or general education interventions, suggesting strategies to support learners (Klingner & Harry, 2006) or assisting in gathering data. Because of their involvement in these processes, CST members have significant responsibility for special education referrals and evaluations that contribute to disproportionality.

CST members often rely solely on English-language standardized assessments to determine the presence of disabilities in CLD students (Hoover et al., 2018; Orosco & Klingner, 2010), even though such assessments are not appropriate for those populations (Abedi, 2008; Blatchley & Lau, 2010). The reasons for this dependence on inappropriate methods and lack of consideration for cultural and linguistic diversity are not well researched, but cultural beliefs and assumptions may contribute.

Demographically, CST members are predominantly White. Not only might there be a cultural mismatch between evaluators and CLD students, but CST members may hold unspoken or unacknowledged perspectives based in experiences and beliefs in the dominant White culture. These perspectives may explain CST contributions to disproportionality, but this has not previously been explored in the literature. Identifying these perspectives may help create meaningful change to CST practices that contribute to disproportionality. Understanding the

perspectives of CST members is the first step to critical reflection and transformation (Mezirow, 1997) of their contributions to disproportionality.

This study explored how CST perspectives towards CLD students might reflect assumptions and beliefs based in the dominant White culture, specifically assumptions of the neutrality/universality of the dominant culture's knowledge and expectations (epistemic perspectives), beliefs in meritocracy and individualism that invalidate individual experience and background (sociolinguistic perspectives), and adherence to known tools and resistance to considering language and culture (psychological perspectives). The following questions were asked:

1. In what ways, if any, do child study team members' use of data and decision making for culturally-linguistically diverse students reflect perspectives based in normative Whiteness and an ideology of meritocracy?
2. In what ways, if any, do child study team members' explanations for and defense of their decision making reflect perspectives based in White fragility and resistance?

To answer these questions, data were gathered over a month and a half for this mini-ethnographic case study. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and inclement weather posed unique challenges during the study, with multiple absences and cancelled school days which limited occurrences of meetings and availability of participants for interviews. The site was welcoming, with participants espousing a desire for advice to improve their processes. However, the building administrator was concerned from the beginning that the study would be critical of the team's work and stressed a desire that it not be overly negative or tell them they're "doing things wrong." When participants were contacted to schedule interviews, a complaint was made by at least one. The claim was made that participants had not been informed interviews were part of

the study. The issue was clarified with the administrator and the participants, who were reminded that interviews were discussed when the study was introduced (and were described on the informed consent form). The child study team members were reminded that participation was voluntary, and eventually three agreed to be interviewed and were included as participants in the study: a speech-language pathologist, the psychologist, and the social worker.

Three separate meetings were attended: a weekly child study team meeting, a monthly general education intervention (GEI) discussion, and a reevaluation staffing. Field notes were collected and audio was recorded during observed meetings and individual interviews. Audio was transcribed for inclusion in analysis. Written records were collected for three students discussed at the child study team meeting and for the five most recently evaluated CLD students (all from the spring semester of the previous school year). Written records included GEI documentation and evaluation team reports.

Multiple students were discussed during the observed general education intervention meeting, without clear indication of which might fit the study's selection criteria. Discussions were determined, however, to reflect understandings and attitudes towards the process itself, which, when paired with interview questions specific to CLD students, yielded more useful information for addressing the study's questions.

Analysis began by coding the words and phrases participants used (the *emic* perspective) in spoken and written communication. Data were then recoded using tenets of the theoretical framework, through the researcher' lens (the *etic* perspective). Codes were then combined and consolidated to identify themes in the data. Four general themes emerged during analysis that reflected the participants' perspectives towards CLD students in these processes: *the need for evaluation*, *reliance on standardized data*, *lack of consideration for student background,* and

negative perceptions of parents. Themes will be discussed in the following sections with connections made to the study's theoretical framework.

Need for Evaluation

Existing research describes how educators often view linguistic and cultural differences as deficits in need of remediation (Garza & Garza, 2010; Hernandez Finch, 2012). Evidence of deficit perspectives towards CLD students were found in comments about the need to "get some services in place" (when talking about prioritizing evaluations) and disappointment in not evaluating students sooner. One participant described a fourth-grade student who was "so low…I don't remember if he came out [as intellectually disabled] or not, but we felt like we'd kind of really let that kiddo down." Talking about another, the participant said that "his data is leaning toward [an intellectual disability] as a fourth grader, and that's heartbreaking." Had interventions been individualized to meet these students' needs, the appropriate supports and instructional strategies could have been in place without need for or at least prior to evaluation. Instead, a need was seen for evaluation to get students help, placing the blame on *them* instead of questioning or changing the *system* (Hernandez Finch, 2012; Matias & Mackey, 2016). The quality of instruction is not considered; if students do not respond to instruction as it is, they must need *help*.

In fact, this district's general education intervention (GEI) process occurs within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), in which students' interventions are supposed to be adjusted until their needs are met; the goal of this process is to find *success* through problem-solving without necessarily resulting in special education evaluation and placement. Although, as described in chapter two, special education services serve an important purpose for students who need them, participants' discussions were not necessarily centered on intervention data that

supports evaluation. Findings representing understandings of this GEI process indicated that participants' goals were for detailed completion of forms to document interventions and students' *lack of success* with them to justify referral for evaluation. By looking for failure, deficit perspectives of students as in need of help are reinforced.

At the study site, the psychologist and the social worker attended GEI discussions as representatives of the child study team. The grade levels were divided between them. According to the participants, they were the ones who started GEI documentation forms for students, and they decided when students needed referrals for evaluations. During individual interviews, both were asked how and when they decide to refer. Both responses reflected deficit perspectives and a failure to question the quality of interventions, one through the example of a student not making progress and the other with the focus entirely on making sure documentation is complete.

Using a student as an example, one of the two participants said:

> At the beginning of this year, whenever we started talking about him and everything, I said, 'hey, let's keep an eye on him because he was remote last year. We don't want to jump the gun on it.' So now, it being second semester and kind of having a comparison of other students who were remote and the progress that they're making and where he's at, and *he is not making that growth and everything. So, we are recommending to go ahead and move forward with an evaluation on him.*

The other participant focused on the paperwork and documentation involved in the process. She described efforts to ensure that "focus areas" (specific areas of concern) were matched with interventions in documentation and explained:

> getting those to align and then making sure that whatever those interventions are that we do have some data to support…This is what we're trying and we checked data here and we check data here to see that that's not working or it is working. So, that's one of the areas that we're trying to focus. The strengths and needs are great and we get a lot of information for that. But when you're actually talking about what are we doing and are we ready for a comprehensive, that's where we're really focusing on.

Similarly, during the general education intervention meeting, there was little discussion about how to *change* interventions to find success; conversations instead centered on making sure interventions and accompanying data were *documented*. The CST member participant who attended provided one teacher with a suggestion to collect data on the effectiveness of having text read aloud for one student by comparing performance when it is not. This participant's goal seemed to be for completeness of documentation and describing failure, and not to determine appropriate modification of intervention strategies. When explaining the importance of documenting that a student did not complete any work when given this specific intervention, she said

> then that is an outcome. …So, if he does nothing on that read aloud? …Like he sat for 70 minutes to do a test. And he worked for three different adults. And he still did nothing. Was that because he chose to do nothing? Or was that because he just did not have a flippin' clue?

Comprehensive documentation is an important part of the process but seemed to be the only consideration during the meeting. Possibly, this reflected assumptions that students have deficits and are in need of special education services, so complete and persuasive documentation is needed to move forward with evaluations: "I know I'm being nitpicky, but this is what's

coming down on us. So, in order to even say, ‘yes, this kid needs an evaluation,’ based on what we have right now, the answer would be no.”

A focus on deficits and lack of success was evident in other comments made by the participants. One referred to “processing concerns” described by a teacher as “a big red flag as far as when a kid needs to be tested.” Processing was discussed as a concern for other students, and the participant emphasized the importance of documenting responses to interventions: “that gives us something that's measurable that we can see with him going into going into fifth grade. We really by the end of this year want to be able to see, is this a kid who's low and slow? Or is this a kid who really has some kind of a potential processing issue that we probably should be testing?”

Along with looking for *lack* of success, length of time receiving interventions in the GEI process seemed to be another important consideration for this team when determining that evaluation was necessary. In one student’s evaluation report, the reason for referral was that the student had

> *been receiving interventions for reading and math for years*, including small group instruction with an ESOL teacher. In the classroom, all text is read aloud, he has additional time to complete tasks, is provided with additional think time when asked to answer a question, receives frequent checks for understanding, receives frequent redirections, and preferential seating. [The student] *has made some progress with his reading but continues to struggle.*

Another participant, speaking more generally of the process, remarked that, “if you've been in [the general education intervention process] for three years, then aren't we good to go [with evaluation]?” Another emphasized how the team had usually “met and talked about the

student as a whole grade level team…at least three or more times" before referring for evaluation. The goal of intervention appeared to be testing, with perception that identified needs were not able to be met any other way (as in disappointment already described about students not being tested until fourth grade). If students were in the process too long, they were not getting the services they were perceived to need to remediate deficits.

Disregard for the process and movement to evaluation without identifying appropriate supports and instructional strategies was particularly evident in one student's referral for evaluation. He was originally referred for a speech-only evaluation by the speech-language pathologist (SLP). She was instructed to wait until consent could be obtained for a comprehensive evaluation. She said, "he stutters… and he also has L errors. I can do the evaluation…it's clear cut. …So, I started doing that and then it got stopped. 'Did you know the student is in [the GEI process]? We need to do a comprehensive evaluation.'" Speaking more generally of the intervention process, she said, "it feels like there's a lot of kids in [the GEI process]. And maybe not all of them that are in [the GEI process] need to be evaluated, but they get evaluated anyway."

The original intent of this general education intervention process, as described by the district team who developed it, is to problem-solve until appropriate supports and instructional/intervention strategies are identified for students to be successful. This did not seem to be how the team understood and implemented the process, as reflected in participants' comments and answers to questions about the process. Participants demonstrated a lack of consideration for trying *different* interventions. Instead, the focus on describing lack of success reflected perspectives that a *deficit* lay within the student ("red flags" for testing) rather than looking to the quality of instruction. The students were blamed instead of the instruction

(Hernandez Finch, 2012; Matias & Mackey, 2016). Such lack of consideration for the quality and appropriateness of interventions may reflect assumptions that the tools used in education are appropriate for all learners, grounded in epistemic perspectives of Whiteness as a universal standard for all learners (Castagno, 2014). Similarly, assumption of deficit may also reflect the dominant culture's belief in meritocracy and value for individualism (sociolinguistic perspectives), in that failings are the result of individual deficit and lack of effort and the system or instruction are not questioned.

Reliance on Standardized Data

As described in previous research (such as Kraemer et al., 2013, or Hoover et al., 2018), participants in this study demonstrated a reliance on standardized evaluation data for decision making. Once referrals were made, data from the general education intervention (GEI) process seemed to be disregarded and eligibility was determined solely by scores from standardized assessments.

One participant said she does not share scores with parents. "I don't talk about scores." As she explained her results to the parent during the reevaluation staffing that was observed, however, she spoke in terms of the *range* in which the student scored without using numbers. She described the visual aid she prepared by saying that "the way the graph is set up, anything in this green area would be considered in the average range. So, anything above would be above average and below the green would be below average." She then proceeded to talk about each area on the assessments she administered and described the student's performance relative to scores, using phrases like "this is one of the areas that she scored the highest" or "she scored lower on that." Even without *saying* the scores, her discussion and interpretations seemed to *rely* on scores.

Explaining her evaluation procedures, one participant said that "my testing is very different from what they do in the classroom because I'm looking at what [the student] is able to do independently without me providing her manipulatives or anything." Although this participant had the potential to gain more detailed information and richer descriptions of student abilities by not following standardization procedures, she instead chose to maintain standardization in order to obtain scores. Alternatively, skills could have been probed again using non-standardized tasks to find what supports could help the student be successful with the tasks, but there was no evidence this was done.

The written report for this student listed scores along with a statement that the student "earned a Full-Scale IQ of 76, falling within the Very Low range," while also including a caution that the scores were "likely an underrepresentation of her cognitive functioning due to her need for additional think time and her distractibility." The participant recognized the potential lack of validity and accuracy in her scores, but decided to report and use them for determination and description of this student's ability. The choice was also made not to request Spanish cognitive testing for this student. When comparing results to the SLP's, she noted that "based off of my testing and [the SLP]'s information and everything, I'm not recommending any Spanish cognitive assessments. Her language is actually the area that she scores the highest." Although she had the potential to look more broadly at the student's individual background, she instead focused on English-language acquisition as the only cultural-linguistic consideration. This may reflect beliefs in the neutrality of the dominant culture. If students are proficient in English, then English-language assessments, being universal for all learners, are perceived to be appropriate. This district also has a tool used to analyze English-language standardized testing results for CLD students that considers the cultural-linguistic loading of different subtests, helping teams to

interpret results through that lens. Participants appeared not to have considered this, as no mention of having used this tool to judge the validity of results was mentioned either verbally or in the student's written report.

Dependence on obtaining scores may reflect cultural assumptions about the universality of the tools, while the adherence to standardization procedures may reflect beliefs in individualism. If the student fails, it must be due to lack of effort or internal deficit, a key feature of a belief in meritocracy (Castagno, 2014; Zamudio et al., 2011). Reporting scores without reporting *numbers*, along with cautionary statements, further reveals a *dependence* on scores even when limitations are recognized. This might reflect a psychological perspective of *resistance* to changing methods when inappropriate for CLD learners.

One participant, however, chose not to use any standardized assessment with either student whose evaluation reports were analyzed. As she explained during the reevaluation staffing, "we did not do a standardized evaluation that gives me a number, but it was more informal tasks looking at her communication. And these results also include all the data we have collected together in therapy." She also noted that "it's important for us to consider when looking at her language skills, that she does have two languages. So, we gave her access to Spanish and English." Throughout her written report, she gave examples of the student's performance in the context of social interaction and structured activities to describe her skills and knowledge. During the evaluation meeting, this participant also referred to the comments and findings of other team members, referencing the teacher's comparison of the student's performance in small group and whole group settings. There seemed to be more consideration from this participant for previously acquired data and a lack of dependence on obtaining numbers.

Interestingly, there was a difference in what another participant wrote in her report and what she said during the staffing. Her written report described performance on cognitive assessments through a series of statements describing each subtest or cognitive area followed by a score:

> The Sentence Composition subtest is designed to measure sentence formulation skills. Responses are scored based on semantics, grammar, capitalization, and the use of internal and ending punctuation. [The student] performed in the Very Low range on this subtest with a standard score of 76. [The student] did a little better when she was provided with two sentences and instructed to combine them into one complete sentence. However, she still struggled with using capitalization, punctuation, and making sense of the words.

But, when talking about the student during the staffing, she chose to add more *qualitative* information, saying that the student "has good ideas and if she can just give you the answer orally, she's usually able to answer it and give you information. She's just struggling with getting it on paper." There seemed to be a disconnect between the information and data reported in writing and the information shared verbally, potentially reflecting certain types of data being valued over others. Written records reflect data points that are deemed valuable for decision making; one participant, talking about intervention documentation, explained the need for detail and clarity "to be able to pass that test of if you moved, and somebody looked at this, how would they be able to really tell what the outcomes are from these interventions?" If qualitative, descriptive information is not included in written records, then it must not be considered relevant for decision making. Again, a dependence on standardized, quantitative data was apparent with participants.

Eligibility for special education services should be determined by both the presence of an exceptionality and demonstration of a need for services. Student success was not found during the general education intervention (GEI) process, so the specific supports and individualized instruction students needed to be successful were unknown.

> Overall, the data would support eligibility under [other health impairment, for attention concerns]. I don't believe that he would need pull out for anything. I think primarily it's just providing some of that additional support in class.

Had success been found with interventions during the GEI process, the individual instructional needs of this student would have been known. Unfortunately, participants instead chose to make decisions without such data. In fact, GEI data did not appear to be considered during special education evaluations. When asked specifically how data from the GEI process is used during evaluations, one participant explained that it helps "to fill out the first two boxes of the [evaluation report]" that explain the reasons why students were referred. Triangulation of multiple data sources, including results from general education intervention processes, is key to making appropriate evaluation decisions (Allen, 2017). One specific case discussed by participants seems to be indicative of how multiple, and sometimes conflicting, data sources were or were not considered.

During the observed child study team (CST) meeting, the psychologist talked about a student for whom the evaluation process was starting. She said that "he comes across as low cognitively…I am concerned that we may be looking at [an intellectual disability]." She also said that the speech-language pathologist (SLP) "did a Spanish-English screening with him. She's not doing standardized testing with him, because she says he's right where he needs to be as far as a CLD student." The SLP described his expressive and receptive language skills as "within normal

limits," and also reported that his mother has no concerns for his communication or development and that he "sometimes interprets for mom in public."

The SLP was not present at that CST meeting, but the comments from that meeting were shared during her interview. She appeared surprised, asking, "are you serious? Why has that not been communicated to me?" It was explained to her that the testing had not yet been completed, but the psychologist was concerned because he was appearing to have an intellectual disability. The SLP said, "to who? Not to his mom!" She said that "he's straight out of newcomers. Everything is hard for him." She described him as having "really strong emotional reactions to things being difficult. And then he will literally just say, no I'm not going to do it. So, I'm sure on a standardized evaluation that's just zeros down the board because he's refusing to do it."

By the time the psychologist was interviewed, she had completed her testing and her cognitive results were in the range for intellectual disability. She had requested Spanish-language cognitive testing, "just to make sure that everything is consistent across the board and everything." She was asked about the apparent discrepancy between her results and what the SLP reported, but she dismissed the concern because of "the difference of just everyday language versus the academic language piece of it." In this case, it appears that a lack of certain language content (academic language) based in the knowledge standards of the dominant culture, was appropriate for determining the presence of an *intellectual disability*. The student's background may have been viewed as a deficit since it did not match the expectations of the dominant culture (an epistemic perspective).

Another attendee of the meeting, when the possibility of intellectual disability was mentioned, also seemed to consider a distinction between social/functional and academic language and asked in which area the psychologist was seeing the deficit. The psychologist then

clarified that "if he is scoring in the intellectual disability range, we would need to complete [an adaptive behavior scale]. And I'm gonna be honest, I don't think he's going to come out low on the [scale]. I think he has a lot of self-help skills and street smarts, because he has had to do a lot for himself." To qualify for special education with an intellectual disability exceptionality, a combination of cognitive scores and adaptive skills must be considered. She seemed to recognize the possibility that he may not meet criteria for an intellectual disability, yet still seemed to think her results reflected that exceptionality. Statements about “street smarts” reflect some awareness of student ability and knowledge.

The need for triangulation was dismissed since Spanish-language cognitive assessment is available. When asked about how conflicts between data sources are resolved, one participant explained that

> Before we had three psychologists that could do Spanish testing…SLP would do their testing in English and then if they scored in the average range in English then we wouldn't necessarily request Spanish testing. Since we have more people and everything, now that's not necessarily the case. We do have conversations at child study team as well as outside of child study team about going over the data and, ‘are my results consistent with what you got? …So, we do really try to look at a lot of that, and we definitely look at the information that we get from the parent.

This might further reveal a dependence on standardized data. When asked if certain data sources are valued above others when different results are obtained, the participant said that “it depends on the exceptionality.” However, based on information in the written records, data shared at meetings, and the lack of triangulation between sources, there seem to be some sources

of data that were privileged above others. Decision-making appeared to be driven by standardized scores.

Lack of Consideration for Student Background and Experience

The team tries to involve the speech-language pathologist (SLP) to screen Spanish and English language skills whenever a Spanish-speaking student is in the general education intervention (GEI) process. But, when asked how cultural-linguistic diversity is considered during intervention processes *in general*, participants' responses focused on making sure English language learner and newcomers' programs were documenting interventions:

> For those kiddos, that would be where we're trying to get those teachers that are working with them getting that stuff in there…*The process doesn't necessarily look different. It's just the information is being put in by whoever is providing that intervention.*

As noted in the first theme (the need to evaluate), the focus for the team seemed to be getting forms completed instead of providing individualized interventions. For CLD students, this meant getting teachers besides classroom teachers to document interventions. The team's organization and diligence in having the SLP look at *language* for each student is commendable but may further reflect a focus on English-language acquisition since the process "doesn't necessarily look different" for CLD students otherwise. Students' backgrounds, experiences, and cultural differences were not considered.

The student for whom an intellectual disability exceptionality was being considered, for instance, was in the fourth grade and had only been in the U.S. since sometime in kindergarten. Spanish is the only language spoken in the home and he was only recently dismissed from the newcomers' program. As the SLP said, "he's straight out of newcomers. Everything is hard for him." The team did describe his interactions with other Spanish-speaking students and how the

use of Spanish impacts his work completion. Again, considering language is important, but the move to evaluation without consideration of his background and limited English exposure, along with disregard for conflicting information, reflects assumptions of neutrality, universality, and meritocracy/individualism in the processes.

Similarly, even discussions of academic performance were limited, with only the three core areas of instruction, math, reading, and writing, discussed or assessed. Discussions and documentation did not include description of or data for performance in other subjects (such as science, social studies, or art). Included student perspectives were about the educational environment (e.g., the student "enjoys school") or related to tools used to assess behavior and attitudes; almost no information was included or discussed about students outside of the school context (e.g., their talents, interests, or experiences)

Although English-language was a focus for the team, it was not always. For one student who was evaluated, one participant shared at the child study team meeting that "English is the primary language and there are no language concerns." Another reported that English is the primary language. The team chose to complete his evaluation entirely in English, with standardized scores reported and used for eligibility and placement decisions. According to a parent interview, however, this student *only* heard and used Spanish until he was three and still hears both in home, although mom said that "Spanish is difficult" for him. One participant described the importance of considering cultural-linguistic diversity, writing that "his dual language background may cause his development to look different than that of his monolingual peers, and therefore should be taken into consideration throughout interpretation of test results, planning of any services, and inside of his general education classroom." He was also identified as an English-Language Learner (ELL) and received ELL services.

In this case, cognitive scores were all within the average range even when compared to monolingual students from the normative sample. But, as with another report already described in these findings, scores were reported as representative measures of his cognitive functioning without mention of the impact of cultural-linguistic factors on his performance.

Negative Perceptions of Parents

During the observed evaluation meeting, participants frequently asked the student's father if he had questions. Outside of that, little involvement from him was expected and little discussion was involved. Participants took turns going over their results, without interruptions or consideration of others' information, with few exceptions. One participant, while talking about attention concerns, asked the father, "is that still what he's seeing at home as far as that she gets distracted easily, has a hard time focusing and completing tasks?"

During the general education intervention (GEI) process and while collecting data for the evaluation, one participant interviewed parents and included their information in her reports. She stressed that the mother of the student being considered for an intellectual disability did not see him that way. Unfortunately, other comments about parents were not as positive.

When asked about how differences in what parents see and what is seen with testing are resolved, one participant said,

> We try to triangulate the information as much as possible. But at the same time, we also, and this might sound bad, but it's not meant to, we also know that sometimes we have to take the information that the parent provides with a grain of salt. Especially depending on what is the parents' educational level and what has their experience been, as far as being a parent. Are we assessing an only child and they don't have access to other students in order for the parents to even necessarily recognize that there's something not quite right?

The question came up again as triangulation of data continued to be discussed. She added to her previous comments that

> we definitely take those things into consideration…Even taking into consideration what did the parents' education look like because sometimes I feel like with some of our families, there is a disconnect because for them, they were in Mexico. They went through the 8th grade and then it was, I got a job, I help support the family. So, we do try to look at all of that information and everything. But also looking at it from the standpoint that, now you're enrolled in the United States. You're enrolled at [this school]. This is what the expectations are for here."

Another participant, when asked about how parent information and concerns are considered during general education intervention and problem-solving processes, shared similar thoughts about CLD students' parents:

> many of our parents that are bilingual or monolingual but they're Spanish or another language, they are very undereducated. …They completed 6th grade or maybe 9th grade and so there's that language gap between them and their kiddos at home…

Comments such as these reflect not only deficit perspectives of families, but lack of consideration for parents' experiences as well. The dominant culture is the universal standard, and experiences outside of that standard did not seem to be valued. If parents do not have formal education, they were perceived to not have the knowledge or skills to understand the school's concerns or assist with their children's education. However, this participant also made an interesting point about trauma:

> Parents sometimes feel like they're just so thankful to not be in those awful circumstances that they were in, that the concerns that we have aren't really that big of a concern to

> them. They're like, hey, I'm just thankful to not be living in fear. I'm just thankful that my kids have access to an education…to them it may not be as concerning as it would be to us because of the circumstances in which they came from. A lot of times…they don't have any concerns. They're like, 'oh no, we're not concerned.' And whether that's the difference between they don't speak English and that gap in understanding of what we're trying to communicate to them, and they can't really help their kids with their homework. So, they're trusting that their kids are doing their homework and doing what they need to do, and so there I think there's lots of things to consider in that area.

This reveals some insight into parent perspectives, but it appears her intention was to demonstrate how *unaware* of the concerns parents are. Again, it reinforces deficit perspectives of parents who do not share the school's concerns. These comments may also parallel findings from the pilot study: included parent information was either agreement with the concerns or comments about how parents do not seem to understand the concerns.

Summary of Findings

Findings in this study were obtained through analysis of three sources of data: observation, interviews, and written records. Observations provided examples of the discourse teams use to share information about and discuss students. Written records revealed the assessment tools used, the data that was deemed relevant to include in the report, and the decisions made from the data. Comparisons of written data to what was said in meetings provided both confirmation for findings as well as a contrast in information shared in writing and verbally. Interviews assisted in gathering information specifically about participants' perspectives towards students, processes, and decision making.

Through analysis combining both the participant (emic) perspective and the researcher (etic) lens, four primary themes emerged in this qualitative study. The first, *the need for evaluation*, reflected participants' deficit perspectives towards students and desire for them to receive special education services. Participants did not work towards individualization of supports and achieving success with interventions, but instead focused on demonstrating lack of progress. Time in the process and the completeness of forms also contributed to justifications for referrals to evaluation. These perspectives reflected assumptions of the dominant culture as universal for all learners, with the quality of interventions not questioned. The tools used were assumed to be appropriate, but documentation was needed to justify referral for evaluation. Further, lack of student background and experience in interventions reflected the dominant culture's beliefs in meritocracy, reinforcing deficit perspectives of students. The second theme, *reliance on standardized data* further demonstrated assumptions of the dominant culture as universal and beliefs in meritocracy. Standardized data was relied on for decision making, without consideration for student background. Assessments were considered reliable measures for culturally-linguistically diverse students, and English-language acquisition was the only consideration for them. Resistance to changing evaluation (and referral) procedures and data collection was evident in apparent awareness of the lack of validity in scores while simultaneously relying on them to describe students and make decisions. The third theme, *lack of consideration for student background*, further reflected beliefs both in interventions and assessment tools as universal for all learners as well as in meritocracy and individualism; the systems were not questioned, and blame was placed on the students for their failure to meet expectations. The fourth theme, *negative perceptions of parents*, reflected a lack of consideration for parent perspectives. Not sharing the school's concerns for their students was dismissed

because parents are perceived or assumed to be uneducated or undereducated. This theme was very similar to one from the pilot study: parents were either in agreement with the school's concerns, or their input was dismissed as not understanding the concerns.

The themes identified in analysis of the data reflect assumptions about the dominant culture as a standard. Although some of the identified themes may not be exclusive to culturally-linguistically diverse students (e.g., moving to evaluation without finding student success), these perspectives likely reflect *assumption*s that such attitudes are *valid* because of the neutrality of intervention and assessment tools and the disregard for student background. In this way, the themes can be tied to the framework as possible evidence of epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological perspectives based in Whiteness that contribute to disproportionality. The conclusions and implications of this study will be explored more in chapter five.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how child study team (CST) members' discussions of and decision-making for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students reflect meaning perspectives based in Whiteness. The need for this study was based on ongoing disproportionate placement of CLD students in special education, the predominantly White demographics of CST members, and the lack of research linking the two. Using tenets of both Transformative Learning Theory and Whiteness Studies as a framework, this study sought to identify how meaning perspectives, or habitual frames of reference, held by the members of a CST might reflect experiences and beliefs based in Whiteness. Written records (general education intervention data and evaluation reports), verbal discussions (during child study team meetings, evaluation meetings, and general education intervention discussions), and one-on-one interviews were analyzed to describe how the discussions, data sources, and decision-making of the CST member participants reflected meaning perspectives based in Whiteness.

This chapter will (1) provide a summary of the study's design, (2) summarize the significant findings of the study, (3) present conclusions from the findings, (4) describe the implications of the findings, (5) pose potential questions for further research, and (6) conclude with some final remarks.

Summary of the Study

Child study teams (CSTs), also known as multidisciplinary teams, student study teams, student support teams, and other names (Klingner & Harry, 2006), are often integral parts of evaluation processes and placement decisions. Therefore, they have a significant responsibility in contributing to disproportionate special education placements. Existing research has revealed that these teams, or evaluators in general, often rely on English-language standardized

assessments to determine the presence of disability in culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students (Hoover et al., 2018; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Such assessments are not appropriate for many of these students (Abedi, 2008; Blatchley & Lau, 2010) since they were designed and standardized for monolingual English-speakers of the dominant culture. Evaluators often focus on students' English-language acquisition to justify testing only in English (Klingner & Harry, 2008), without consideration for other factors of students' backgrounds (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). These reasons *why* teams rely on these sources of data have not been well researched.

Some insight may be gained by looking to the literature for examinations of teacher attitudes and perspectives. Teachers and CST members in the United States are overwhelmingly White and of the dominant, Western European culture. Teachers often assume that assessments and tools used in the classroom are appropriate for all learners (Castagno, 2014), not recognizing how the dominant White culture shapes curriculum, instruction, and the education system (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Castagno, 2014; Tanner, 2018). CLD students are perceived to be lacking knowledge or deficient (Jupp et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2016) since their experiences do not match the dominant culture's. Unfortunately, the presence of such perspectives in CST members has not yet been identified.

Tenets of both Whiteness Studies and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) created the framework for this study. Whiteness Studies focuses on the people who construct and benefit from the White-dominant systems that maintain inequality/inequity (Applebaum, 2016). Whiteness is perceived to be both neutral and color-blind, an invisible yet universal standard to which others can be compared (Applebaum, 2016). In education, Whiteness Studies provides a lens for understanding how the education system is constructed and how those within it operate (Matias & Liou, 2015; Thomas, 2019). Transformative Learning Theory helps explain how

underlying beliefs, knowledge, and experiences shape the lens through which the world is seen and openness or resistance to learning and change. Frames of reference based in experience, or *meaning perspectives*, serve as filters for acceptance or rejection of new information.

Combining both parts of the framework, this study used three guiding tenets to structure and answer the study's questions: beliefs in normative Whiteness (an epistemic perspective), beliefs in meritocracy (a sociolinguistic perspective), and White fragility/resistance (a psychological perspective). Specifically, this study sought to discover how perspectives based in Whiteness help explain the actions and decision-making of the members of one child study team (CST) that contribute to disproportionate and inappropriate special education placements for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students. This study asked the following questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do child study team members' use of data and decision making for culturally-linguistically diverse students reflect perspectives based in normative Whiteness and an ideology of meritocracy?
2. In what ways, if any, do child study team members' explanations for and defense of their decision making reflect perspectives based in White fragility and resistance?

To answer the study's questions, a qualitative mini-ethnographic case study design was utilized. Data were obtained from observations, interviews, and written records. Observations were completed at three different meetings: a weekly child study team meeting, a monthly general education intervention (GEI) discussion, and a reevaluation staffing. Field notes were collected and audio was recorded during observed meetings and individual interviews. Audio was transcribed for analysis, and field notes served as a record of the process and of the researcher's thoughts and impressions. Written records, including GEI documentation and

evaluation reports, were collected for three different students who were discussed at the observed child study team meeting.

Initial coding of data was based on the words and phrases participants used (the *emic* perspective) in spoken and written communication. Data were then recoded using tenets of the theoretical framework, through the researcher' lens (the *etic* perspective). Codes were then combined and consolidated to identify themes in the data, using a constant comparative method (Bogden & Bilken, 2007). Through constant comparisons of emerging codes and categories throughout analysis and comparisons of the etic and emic perspectives, an interpretation of the participants' words and actions were gained through the lens of the theoretical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to address the study's questions.

Credibility and consistency of the findings from this study were established primarily through triangulation (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015), with data obtained from multiple sources: written records, observations, and interviews. Consistency was further enhanced through the use of journaling during the research process (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015), in which the researcher detailed and reflected on the data collection and analysis processes. Transferability to other studies and contexts was assured through detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, data sources, and analysis procedures.

Four distinct themes emerged from analysis of the data: *the need for evaluation*, *reliance on standardized data*, *lack of consideration for student background,* and *negative perceptions of parents*. These findings are potentially significant and will be discussed more directly through the lens of the theoretical framework's tenets to answer the study's questions.

Review of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how (1) unspoken beliefs in normative Whiteness and meritocracy and (2) how resistance to discussions related to Whiteness might explain the actions and decision making of the members of a child study team (CST) that contribute to disproportionate and inappropriate special education placements for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Themes identified in the analysis can be related directly to the research questions and the study's theoretical framework.

Deficit perspectives towards students and their families were revealed throughout all four emergent themes. Perceptions of students' backgrounds reflected epistemic assumptions of the neutrality and universality of the dominant culture. These perspectives were evidenced by the lack of consideration for students' histories and the dismissal of parents' information and perspectives. When students were missing the knowledge and experiences deemed valuable by the participants, they were seen as in need of special education evaluation and placement. Non-accommodative and non-individualized instructional, intervention, and evaluation instruments and methods were relied on for decision-making, without questioning the potential cultural-linguistic loading of these tools or the lack of validity of scores/data obtained from them. Such adherence to known strategies and sources of data reflected both (1) assumptions that these tools were appropriate for all learners (assumptions of universality and neutrality) and (2) that scores and data from these tools were accurate, and failings were the result of student deficit (beliefs in color-blind meritocracy and individualism).

In the first theme, *the need for evaluation*, deficit perspectives were particularly evident. The urgency and necessity to evaluate students for special education were driven by desires to "get some services in place" to help students and to avoid "heartbreaking" delays in obtaining these placements. GEI data and discussions focused on the completeness of forms, without any

apparent attention given to modifying interventions or meeting students' needs. Students were referred when they *failed* to meet the participants' expectations, consistent with existing research (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Hoover, 2012).

This district's GEI process, based in a response to intervention and multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) model, is intended to find student *success* through adjustment of instruction, interventions, and other supports. Participants in this study instead focused on demonstrating a *lack* of success with interventions to justify evaluation (e.g., "he is not making that growth and everything, so we are recommending to go ahead and move forward with an evaluation"). Had this GEI process been implemented as intended, perceived needs would be met prior to, and potentially without need for, special education evaluation. The process was not individualized to student background and need, further reflecting epistemic perspectives of the dominant culture as both a universal and neutral standard. Dependence on established instructional methods and materials, paired with deficit perspectives towards students, led participants to look for and identify "red flags" for the necessity of evaluation. Regardless of the results of this process and reasons for referrals, both seemed to be disregarded once students entered the evaluation process.

Participants' *reliance on standardized data*, the second theme identified from the data, further represents deficit perspectives of CLD students and assumptions about the universality of the dominant culture. By relying on data from standardized assessments that were not designed for CLD students, participants demonstrated assumptions that such data were appropriate for all students and were, therefore, accurate measures of student abilities. These assumptions reflected both beliefs in the universality of Whiteness (the tests are perceived to be objective) and in meritocracy/individualism (since the tests are objective, failings are indicative of deficit). One participant, however, conducted evaluations using dynamic assessment and informal tasks,

without relying on standardized assessments. She integrated parents' information and students' skills across languages in her reports. It is important to note here that she is a speaker of both English and Spanish, and she has had opportunities for extensive professional development and training in CLD considerations. However, her information was disregarded by the team when in conflict with standardized scores and there was a general lack of triangulation of data.

The case in which there was disagreement about a student having an intellectual disability reflected this lack of triangulation and entrenched dependence on standardized data. The speech-language pathologist and the student's mother saw him as a typically developing child, without any concerns for his language or cognitive functioning. However, the psychologist's evaluation data did not agree. Instead of using the opportunity to consider these different sources of data, she instead explained that the discrepancy was a matter of the difference between "social and academic language." Such dismissal of the student's experiences and knowledge and the exclusive consideration of academic language to justify an intellectual disability exceptionality potentially represents several assumptions described by the framework. This student was perceived to be lacking knowledge (since Whiteness is the standard), the standardized assessments are accurate measures (because tools based in Whiteness are neutral), and his performance was reduced to individual effort without consideration for factors outside of the test (individualism and meritocracy). The results of the cognitive assessments were perceived to be valid by the participants. Triangulation of data, use of alternate measurements/information, and student culture and experience were ultimately not considered when interpreting results.

There was a *lack of consideration for students' backgrounds*, the third identified theme, during both the general education intervention and evaluation processes. One participant explicitly stated that, besides requesting bilingual speech-language screenings for Spanish-

speaking students, the general education intervention process "doesn't necessarily look different" for CLD students except for who documents interventions (ESL teachers instead of classroom teachers). Language use was also considered in evaluations, but often as the *only* CLD consideration. English acquisition was used to justify testing in English, as described in previous studies (such as by Klingner & Harry, 2006). Whiteness was perceived to be a neutral standard, so English acquisition was the only necessary consideration.

Finally, participants' comments reflected a *deficit perspective towards parents* (the fourth theme). When parents did not share the school's concerns or when their information conflicted with the school's, their education and ability as parents were questioned. One participant even said that parents' information sometimes needs to be taken "with a grain of salt." Negative perceptions of parents demonstrated continuing assumptions about what knowledge and experiences are valued. They may represent a form of resistance to contradictions of participants' data and assumptions: when information was in contrast, rationalizations were made to dismiss incompatible with preconceptions or favored sources of data (i.e., standardized scores).

Conclusions From Findings

This study examined how the discussions, data sources, and decision making of the members of one child study team (CST) might reflect perspectives based in Whiteness. These perspectives included assumptions of the neutrality and universality of the dominant White culture (an epistemic perspective), beliefs in meritocracy and individualism (sociolinguistic perspectives), and resistance to challenges to dominant Whiteness (a psychological perspective).

The themes identified in analysis of the data did reflect assumptions about the dominant culture as a standard; although some of the identified themes may not be exclusive to culturally-linguistically diverse students (e.g., rush to evaluation without finding student success), these

perspectives likely reflect that the participants held *assumption*s that such attitudes were *valid* because of the perceived neutrality of intervention and assessment tools and the disregard for student background. In that way, the themes can be tied to the framework as possible evidence of epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological perspectives based in Whiteness that contribute to disproportionality.

Primarily, themes reflecting a perceived need for special education evaluation and dependence on standardized assessments were indicative of beliefs both in the neutrality and universality of the tools of education and in meritocracy, contributing to deficit perspectives of students. One participant, who did not rely on standardized assessment or results from English assessment alone, often did not reflect these perspectives. Her comments and written reports represented a contrast to the other two participants' perspectives. Lack of consideration for student background and non-standardized data sources as well as deficit perceptions towards parents reinforced perspectives based in Whiteness. These themes reflect not only assumptions of Whiteness as a universal standard and beliefs in meritocracy, but also potentially reflect a *White savior* mentality (Matias, 2013) of needing to *save* students from their non-White experiences.

This study's findings were not unique or dissimilar from the existing literature. Previous studies have identified similar actions and decision making from teams (e.g., dependence on standardized data), and perspectives towards CLD students have been seen in classroom teachers that are similar to those of this study's participants. Existing research has shown that teams often approach general education interventions, in which the goal is to meet student needs in the classroom, as if they are pre-referral interventions meant to justify evaluation (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). As seen in the current study, previous studies have found that data from

standardized, evidence-based, and/or norm-referenced tools are assumed to be both valid and sufficient for decision making (Orosco & Klingner, 2010), without individualization to student background and need. There was a perceived neutrality and universality of the education system, as if it is applicable to and appropriate for all students (Castagno, 2014; Hairston, 2013). Thus, consideration was not given to how the system is designed by and for the dominant White culture (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). In this study, participants assumed students to have deficits when they did not meet expectations, rather than looking more closely at the environment and instruction (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Once referred, evaluators relied on English-language based**,** standardized testing to determine the presence of disability (Hoover et al., 2018). Cultural and linguistic biases in instructional and evaluation tools were not considered.

Not only are standardized scores often invalid for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students, but they alone are not sufficient to determine special education eligibility. Evaluations need to have multiple measures of ability and need to be culturally sensitive (Allen, 2017). Evaluations represented in this study were completed without this consideration, with certain data sources (standardized cognitive results) assumed to be more credible than informal measures or parent information.

General education interventions and students' response to intervention can provide the foundation for interpreting evaluation results (Hoover et al., 2018), because areas of strength and need will be clearly identified. This data can then be used for assessment planning and for comparison to test performance. When response to intervention (RTI) and general education intervention processes are not implemented effectively, as in this study, these considerations

cannot be made because it cannot be determined that students have had appropriate and adequate opportunities to learn (Klingner & Harry, 2006).

Previous studies of child study teams (and evaluators) have also described teams' focus on English-language acquisition as the only consideration of cultural-linguistic diversity. Culture and experiences are often not considered, reflecting goals of assimilation to the dominant culture (Garza & Garza, 2010; Tanner, 2018). As described in chapter two, a study of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) found they self-reported being "comfortable" (Guiberson & Atkins, 2012, p. 174) treating and evaluating *culturally* diverse students, but less capable with *linguistically* diverse students. The authors speculated that it may be because "SLPs are becoming more knowledgeable and comfortable with cultural aspects of their caseloads" (Guiberson & Atkins, 2012, p. 172), but it is also possible that *culture* is not seen as a factor in treatment and assessment. A study by Kraemer et al. (2013) found that another group of SLPs continued to rely on standardized assessment even after training in non-standardized assessment. Dependence on standardized data appeared to be a key contributor to placement decisions for these participants and may represent assumptions and beliefs based in the dominant culture.

Implications

Findings from this study revealed that the discussions, data sources, and decision-making of the participants were consistent with perspectives described in the theoretical framework. Participants demonstrated potential evidence of perspectives based in Whiteness which influence their decision-making during processes that contribute to disproportionate and inappropriate special education placements for culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) students. There are several possible implications for the findings, at both the theoretical and practical levels.

Theoretical Implications

Existing research has described the ways that assumptions about the neutrality of the dominant culture and beliefs in meritocracy contribute to educators' perspectives towards CLD students. The current study revealed findings that appear to be consistent with previous studies, but for CST members instead of classroom teachers.

Intervention strategies, evaluation tools, and the larger curriculum are perceived to be neutral and applicable to all students (Castagno, 2014; Hairston, 2013), without consideration for how the system is designed by and for the dominant White culture (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). In the case of CST members in this study, this resulted in both deficit constructions of students and adherence to standardized scores for decision making. Previous studies have described perceptions of intervention processes as being *barriers* to evaluation (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006) or done to *justify* evaluation (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). In the current study, evidence of both perceptions was evident: participants stressed the importance of documentation of failure to move students to evaluations. Consistent with previous studies, deficits were assumed when students failed to make expected progress instead of looking to the environment and instruction (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Similarly, deficits were assumed when students' scores did not match expectations, without consideration for their appropriateness as measures of student ability and knowledge. The perceived appropriateness of these tools was reinforced by beliefs in meritocracy.

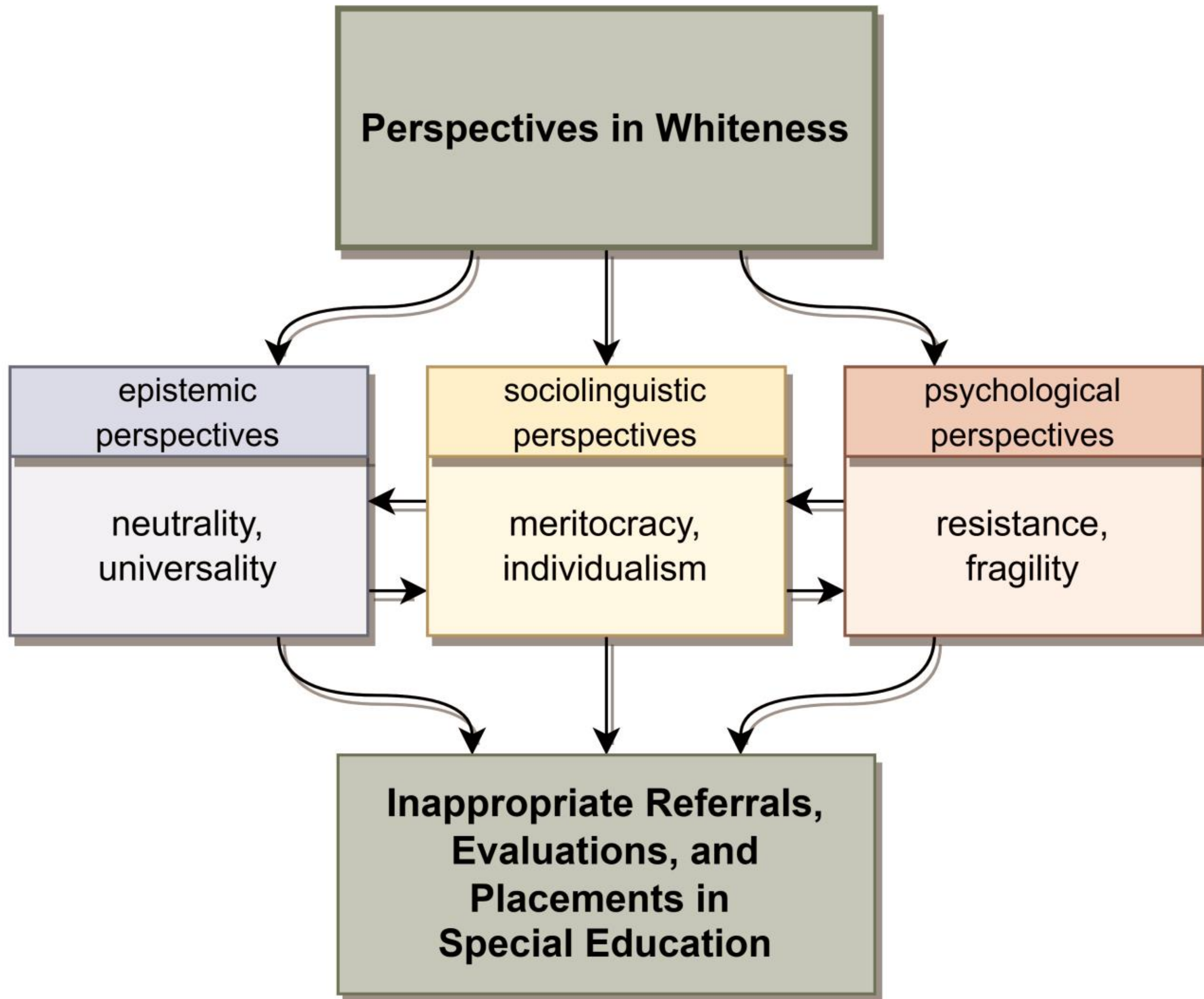
Beliefs in meritocracy lead to assumptions that everyone is given equal opportunity, and failure to succeed is due to lack of effort or ability (Castagno, 2015; Zamudio et al., 2011). Deficits, again, are assumed at the individual level instead of looking to the instruction or larger systems. Consistent with the framework, participants in the current study did not question the appropriateness of the tools they employed or the data they relied on for decision-making and

seemed to perceive students as deficient and in need of help. Placements in special education to *save* or *help* students can further entrench Whiteness and reinforces perceived appropriateness of blaming students instead of the instruction (Hernandez Finch, 2012; Matias & Mackey, 2016).

Justifications for deficit perspectives, including dependence on inappropriate data sources and desires to *help* students, may reflect resistance to confronting Whiteness. The education system in the United States is created and maintained by the dominant White culture (Nganga, 2015). Through denial of the inappropriateness of intervention and evaluation tools and instructional strategies for some students, educators do not have to acknowledge the ways they contribute to and benefit from the system (Applebaum, 2016; Sleeter, 2017).

Findings in the current study were compatible with the described framework. Participants' words and actions demonstrated evidence of meaning perspectives based in Whiteness, with epistemic assumptions of the normativity of Whiteness, sociolinguistic beliefs in meritocracy, and psychological resistance to questioning the system or the instructional/evaluation tools used. These perspectives seem to contribute to inappropriate placements for CLD students (as seen in Figure 1). It is possible that if these perspectives were evidenced in this study and with these participants, then they are occurring elsewhere.

Figure 5.1. *Theoretical Framework*



Note. Perspectives in Whiteness leading to inappropriate special education placements.

Lack of training has been cited as a possible explanation for the lack of consideration for language and culture in education and evaluation (Bonner et al., 2018). University level training in cultural-linguistic diversity is often separate from the rest of the coursework in teacher education programs, and often covered in just one or a few courses (Sleeter, 2017). Of four speech-language pathology graduate programs near this research, only one offers any coursework related to cultural-linguistic diversity. The dominant culture determines both academic and social expectations in education (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Tanner, 2018).

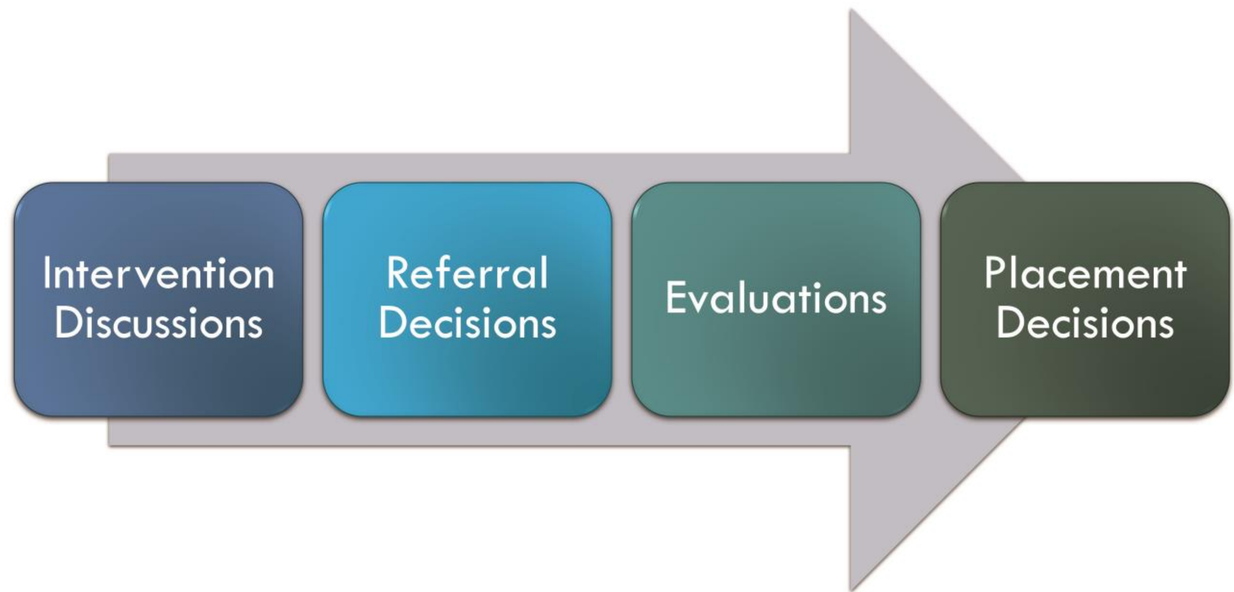
Predominantly White educators are trained to work in and sustain this system, basing decisions about students on those experiences, beliefs in color-blindness, and in the larger White culture (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Matias & Liou, 2015). Consideration needs to be given not only to what training educators and CST members *do not* receive, but to the training they *do* receive. The education system, in general, has been described as inculcating ignorance through what is and is not taught (Outlaw, 2007), reinforcing the dominant culture's status quo. In this way, training could work to legitimize deficit perspectives and adherence to the described perspectives based in Whiteness.

Practical Implications

Existing research has focused more on the perspectives of teachers, without considering those of the teams responsible for evaluations. Although studies have revealed insight into the ways teachers contribute to disproportionate and inappropriate special education through their attitudes, beliefs, and actions, child study team (CST) members have not been the focus of such research. As White professionals, the CST member participants in the current study represented a potential cultural mismatch with CLD Students. CST member participants in this study were responsible for deciding when and whether to refer students for evaluations. Once data were collected and documented, CST representatives brought information about students to the rest of the team to recommend evaluation. As the arbiters of referral and through their participation in general education intervention discussions, CST members in this study shaped the data teachers collected. Once referred, the psychologist's standardized scores appeared to trump all other data sources for the cases analyzed. CST members in this study were involved with students through multiple processes that result in special education placements, from interventions through eligibility decisions (see Figure 2). Their attitudes, beliefs, and actions seemed to have a

significant impact on outcomes for CLD students, and it is possible the same is true for other teams.

Figure 5.2 *Processes Leading to Special Education*

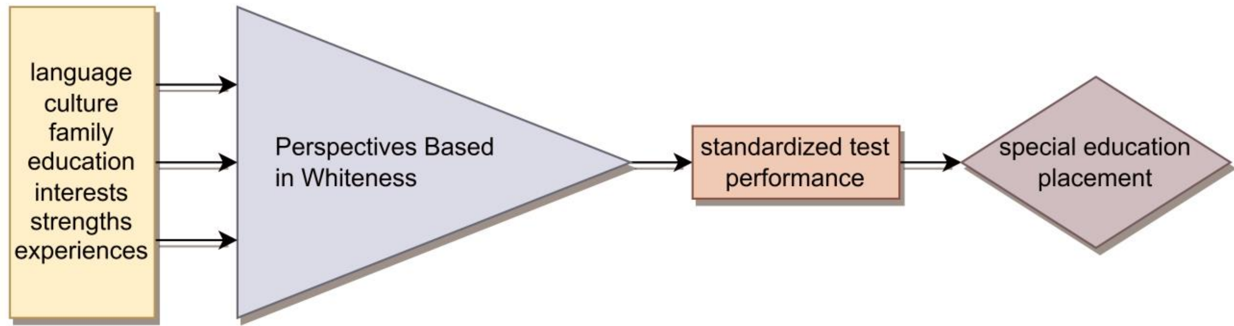


Note. Processes participants were involved in that lead to special education placements.

Evidence was found that perspectives based in Whiteness may explain some of the actions and decision making of the CST member participants in this study and offered insight into their attitudes towards students and beliefs in educational structures and processes. Reliance on standardized data, along with lack of consideration for qualitative information and students' backgrounds, serve as a filter through which students are reduced to their performance on standardized assessments (as shown in Figure 3). This performance, and resultant scores, were perceived by participants in this study to be both representative of students' abilities and knowledge and sufficient for placement decisions. The experience and culture of Whiteness was perceived to be universal, and CLD students were put at a disadvantage and deficit perspectives

were maintained. Although the current study focused on just one team, it is possible that similar perspectives are held by teams elsewhere.

Figure 5.3 *The Filter of Whiteness*

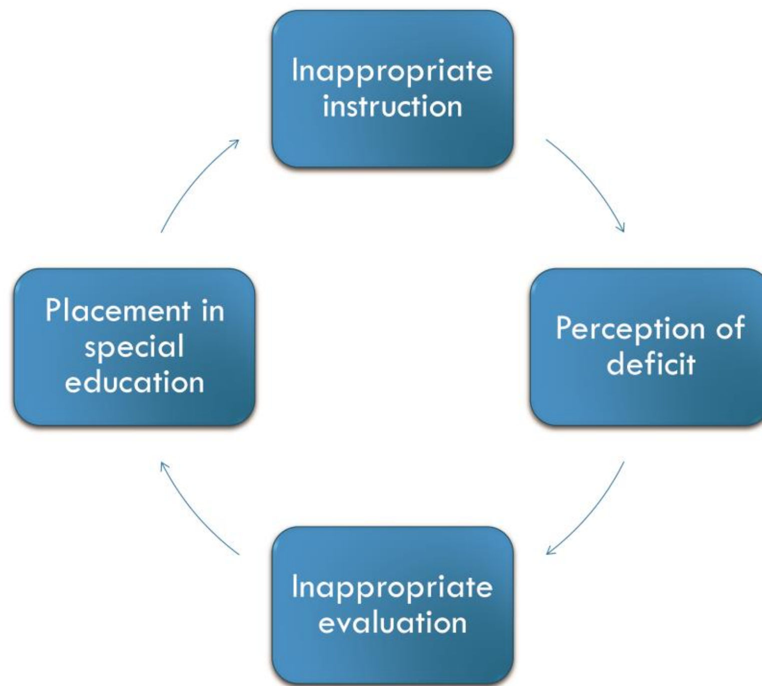


Note. Whiteness serves as a filter that reduces students to standard scores.

In this study, the processes of intervention and referral led to evaluations, which then resulted in placements. At each step of this process, students' identities were disregarded in favor of "getting some services in place" with decisions made based on standardized data. Both processes relied on deficit constructions of students to move to and through evaluation. Research also shows that outcomes for students placed in special education are not always positive, with lowered expectations (Aron & Loprest, 2012) and lack of individualized instruction (Harry & Klingner, 2006) that result in poorer long-term outcomes than general education peers (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Hernandez Finch, 2012). In this researcher's experience, reevaluations (required every three years) result in continued placement being justified because un-accommodative and unindividualized classroom instruction/intervention *and* inadequate or inappropriate special education services result in continued lack of success, reinforcing deficit perspectives. CLD students are then trapped in a cycle of remediation, lower-level instruction, and lowered expectations that further perpetuates deficit perceptions and perceived gaps in their achievement (Garza & Garza, 2010; Sirota & Bailey, 2009). Since teams look to *lack of success* to make

decisions, continued placement in special education is justified. CLD students become trapped in a cycle of remediation, never receiving the supports or instruction they need to be successful (as visualized in Figure 4).

Figure 5.4 *Deficit Reinforcement Cycle*



Note. The cycle of reinforcing deficit perspectives.

Deficit perspectives based in a standard of Whiteness that appeared to be held by participants in this study seemed to be of significant impact to CLD students. This has been described in existing literature focusing on both general education teachers and long-term outcomes from special education placement. Although the current study focused on just one team, Whiteness may be a powerful lens for also understanding the work of other teams who may also hold perspectives that contribute to inappropriate special education placements.

Previous studies have also documented the adherence to standardized data and other inappropriate methods in evaluation processes. Assumptions based in Whiteness helped explain

why these methods were maintained by participants in this study, through cultural beliefs and potential psychological acts of resistance to recognizing how Whiteness is embedded in education. To address inappropriate referrals and evaluations for CLD students, these beliefs need to be challenged. For educators and CST members working in schools, there is continued need for professional development (PD) to build capacities for understanding and educating CLD students (Hernandez Finch, 2012). Training and professional development in culturally responsive teaching, including biography driven instruction, can help teams to find new ways to provide interventions and conduct evaluations. Beliefs and perspectives based in Whiteness need to be recognized as *cultural* in order to see the biases in education and assessment. Evaluators need to become aware of their identities, subjectivities, and biases to be able to change them.

Robin DiAngelo (2011) writes that efforts to combat systems of inequality and inequity might be most successful by starting at the individual level. Our experiences and understanding of the world create preconceptions, and people often reject new learning that is incompatible with those perceptions (Mezirow, 1991). Understanding perspectives is the first step to critical reflection and transformation (Mezirow, 1997) of those beliefs and attitudes. Although this qualitative study focused on a single CST, it might serve as a model for future research. The insights gained can inform future applications of Whiteness Studies as a framework for understanding the work and perspectives of other CST members and other professionals working in education.

Questions for Further Research

The current study connected meaning perspectives based in the experiences of Whiteness to the words and actions of the members of one child study team (CST). These perspectives contribute to disproportionate and inappropriate special education placements for culturally-

linguistically diverse (CLD) students. However, this study was limited both by time and access to participants, as described in chapter three. As an initial examination of the connection between the work of child study teams, Whiteness, and disproportionality, more questions are raised for further research.

The child study team in the current study was integral to special education referrals and placements, but they are not solely responsible. Classroom teachers have the most contact with students and are often the ones to bring concerns with student progress/performance to the attention of the CST. Further research into the process throughout the educational environment may reveal additional insight into the interactions between different professionals and teams that influence outcomes for students. How do CST members influence the instructional strategies, expectations, and deficit/asset perspectives towards students of classroom teachers? How do teachers influence CST members? How do their perspectives differ? A more robust study applying Whiteness to both teachers and CST members to consider the full scope of the processes that lead from general education to special education might reveal additional insights.

The general education intervention process in this study functioned with a goal of identifying *failure* instead of finding *success,* which is goal of the process in this district. Are deficit perspectives and adherence to standardized and universal tools sufficient for explaining this? What other factors could contribute to this reversal of the process' intention? How might misunderstandings of the *purpose* of special education explain deficit perspectives and focus on failure? Special education should be reserved for students with true innate disabilities, yet many educators see it as a way to get students *help*. Research shows that inappropriate placements are often detrimental. What effect would providing professional development or training to teachers

and CST members about the purposes of special education and the outcomes from placements have on referrals?

Similarly, how would these and other CST members react to direct training on Whiteness, bringing their awareness to their own experiences as *cultural*, and not representative of all people? Would such discussions be met with defensive reactions, as in previous studies working with classroom teachers? How might such trainings change outcomes for CLD students?

Concluding Comments

The child study team members in the current study contributed significantly to special education placements, from interventions, to referral, and through the evaluation. Their decision making was central to referrals and placement decision. The literature is clear that schools rely on standardized data, ignore student backgrounds, and hold deficit perspectives towards students. These attitudes were evident with the participants in this study, and connections to assumptions based in the dominant culture were made. The literature also tells us that teams rely on standardized data and do not change from those methods when told better ways to do things. Understanding the beliefs and attitudes of child study teams may be an important step in reshaping them to help reduce disproportionality in special education placements.

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