Barriers to Accepting Special Education by Slavic Parents of Children with Special Needs in the Sacramento County

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Barriers to Accepting Special Education by Slavic Parents of Children with Special Needs in the Sacramento County

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Barriers to Accepting Special Education by Slavic Parents of Children with Special Needs in the Sacramento County

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ABSTRACT

Barriers to Accepting Special Education by Slavic Parents of Children with Special Needs in the Sacramento County

by Tatyana Kisel

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate the experiences of Slavic parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and their perceptions of special education. The researcher’s goal was to determine whether parents’ cultural beliefs and customs affected their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and what supports and barriers they had along the way.

Methodology: This is a qualitative phenomenological study. In-depth, face-to-face interviews with 15 participants allowed collecting the rich data, which was analyzed using coding and thematic analysis. In particular, the study explored the lived experience of parents with special needs children enrolling in elementary schools in Sacramento, California and undergoing the IEP and testing process.

Findings: It has been found that cultural attitudes and customs indeed played a significant role in Slavic parents’ perceptions of special education in the United States. Some common themes, such as the fear of labeling, the fear of consequences, mistrust towards psychologists, and cultural barriers were identified. Furthermore, although some parents were generally satisfied with the IEP and testing, others reported a variety of barriers and challenges they faced, such as the lack of knowledge about special education, inadequate communication, pressure, and limited language skills. Family, community, and school support, in turn, were limited. Consistent with the theoretical framework by Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939), parents shared some ideas
regarding the improvements that should be made in the special education system in order to accommodate elementary school students with special needs.

**Conclusions:** The study concluded that there is an impact of culture on parent’s experience and perceptions. The lack of knowledge about IEP and testing as well as language barriers and lack of support all play a role in parents’ perception of special education.

**Recommendations:** Further research is recommended to explore how other variables such as generational perceptions, parent’s education level, severity of disability, identification time, country or origin, and culture affect parents’ perceptions of and attitudes to special education. It is also recommended to explore parents’ grief and acceptance process and how the culture of acceptance and support can be created in schools.

*Keywords*: special education, children with special needs, disability, individualized education plan (IEP).
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) have always occupied a special place in the educational sphere due to their unique needs and abilities. The term SEN refers to students with various physical, learning, and developmental disabilities; emotional, behavioral, and communication disorders, as well as learning deficiencies (Bryant, Bryant, & Smith, 2017). Children with SEN have also been referred to as ‘exceptional children,’ ‘handicapped children,’ or ‘children with disabilities,’ but the application of these terms has caused much debate among educators, psychologists, parents, and children themselves (Alkahtani, 2016). Some scholars have argued against the use of SEN, noting that this term encourages discriminatory practices and overlooks the fact that all children may experience educational problems at some point. However, in the absence of a universally accepted, neutral term, scholars continue to use the listed terms in various contexts as their primary goal is to emphasize the need for additional support but not to discriminate these children (Alkahtani, 2016). Notably, the debates concerning what terms to use perfectly reflect the sensitive nature of the problem, which has faced varying and often conflicting responses from educators and policymakers throughout the history of special education.

Historically, children with special educational needs who had learning or physical disabilities had no access to the general educational services (Winzer, 1993). These children were excluded from the society and could not interact with peers in a traditional school setting. However, things have gradually changed as there has been a growing understanding of the importance of inclusive education and integration (Winzer, 1993). Educators and policymakers across the globe increasingly realize that by affording
individuals with disabilities the full range of services and resources needed to grow personally and professionally, they provide them with an opportunity to contribute to the society and have meaningful lives (O’Rourke-Lang & Levy, 2016). Diversity, inclusion, and equality have become the key terms dominating contemporary educational philosophies, which promotes greater attention to the special needs of minority and disabled populations. In general, the global context of disability has changed as disability itself is no longer perceived as something that should be hidden and isolated (O’Rourke-Lang & Levy, 2016).

Recognition of the students’ special needs is promoted by the most reputable and influential international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The shared goal of the United Nations, UNESCO, and other international organizations dealing with human rights and educational issues is to make education available for all students including those who are disabled and have special needs (Hughes & Talbott, 2017). Organizations such as the Global Partnership for Disability and Development, United Nations Children Fund, European Disability Forum, United States International Council on Disabilities, and many others work towards raising awareness of the problem of disability and special needs. Their efforts are critically important for promoting change in developing countries where disability still poses significant barriers to education, as well as ensuring that developed countries continuously improve their special education services to include all children with special needs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2019).

The United States has been committed to developing its special education services since the introduction of the Education for All Children Act in the 1970s (Dudley-
Marling & Burns, 2014). Before the adoption of this act, children with special needs were denied the right to free public education, and their needs were poorly addressed in public schools. However, there has been a growing understanding among educators, policymakers, and parents that children with special needs feel and perform much better when being educated in the “least restrictive environment” (LRE), that is, with their peers who do not have special needs (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014, p. 14).

Special education occupies an important place in the contemporary U.S. public education system. According to the official statistics provided by the U.S. Department of Education, the percentage of students with disabilities included for at least 80% of the day in the general education classroom ranges from 36.9% to 83.6% depending on a state (Westling, 2018). It has also been reported that the majority of students receiving special education services in 2015-2016 had learning disabilities rather than any other physical or emotional disabilities (NCES, 2018). California has also demonstrated the commitment to developing its special education services, and it currently provides diverse and inclusive education services in multiples settings including day-care, preschool, regular classrooms, and community. Children with autism, intellectual, emotional, learning, or any other types of disabilities are given free and inclusive services across the state (California Department of Education, 2018).

However, it would be wrong to claim that all organizational and resource-related issues in the sphere of special education on the federal and state levels have been addressed (Lynch, 2017). According to Lynch (2017), neither it would be fair to say that the problem of exclusion, equity, and stigmatization associated with a disability has been eliminated altogether. One of the significant problems to be solved is parental perceptions
of special education as something exclusionary, humiliating, and unnecessary. False perceptions of special education that may originate from cultural beliefs and attitudes and result in a lack of parental involvement and awareness are not being addressed properly (Smith-McClelland, 2017; Williams, 2008). According to Williams (2008), first-generation immigrant parents may not understand American education systems or the opportunities and special education services available for their children. These parents may also be hesitant to interact with the school personnel based on their experiences with government officials in their country of origin (Smith-McClelland, 2017; Williams, 2008). Developing a deeper understanding of the reasons parents from other cultures are cautious about participating in the designation and decision-making process can help to improve their children’s school experience.

**Background**

**Parental Perception of Special Education**

Special education is a sensitive issue that may be perceived differently by parents. Many studies have been conducted over the past several decades to explore parental perceptions of special education and understand the reasons behind their unwillingness or inability to participate in their children’s learning. For example, Palmer et al. (2001), conducted a survey of parents of children with severe disabilities and found that although parents generally had positive attitudes regarding inclusion practices, many of them did not believe that their child needed inclusion. Parents of children with severe disabilities argued that the severity of the condition did not allow their children to benefit from studying in the general classroom. They were worried that the public-school environment would not be welcoming to their struggling children and would be emotionally traumatic
(Palmer et al., 2001). The same concerns have been reported in the study by Doménech and Moliner (2014). The lack of teacher training, discipline issues, and intolerance were cited by parents as the main problems explaining their negative attitudes to inclusive special education (Doménech & Moliner, 2014).

Moreover, there seems to be a fear among parents that their children would be discriminated if they are referred to using specific terminology. A study by Gernsbacher et al. (2016) showed that some parents are dissatisfied when their children are called ‘students with special needs’ or ‘students with disabilities’ because they feel that their children are being labeled. Some parents believe that the term ‘special needs’ is associated with developmental and intellectual disabilities more whereas ‘disability’ normally refers to a more diverse set of disabilities (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). These perceptions are important as they may induce parents to resist seeking special education services to avoid stigmatization.

A study by Ryndak et al. (1995), however, provided more positive results. Researchers conducted interviews with 13 parents of children with moderate or severe disabilities and found that all of them held very positive perceptions of the inclusive general education setting. Parents whose children had previously studied in self-contained classrooms reported multiple social, academic, and behavioral benefits of inclusion (Ryndak et al., 1995). This discrepancy in findings may be due to the fact that children of participants in Palmer et al.’s (2001) study had no experience with integrated placements. Research shows that parents whose children have already participated in integrated programs are more positive about the inclusion as they can observe its benefits (Miller et al., 1992).
Some researchers focused on exploring parents’ satisfaction with specific aspects of general education (e.g., assessment, placement, performance, etc.). A survey conducted by O’Connor, Hartop and McConkey (2005) in the UK showed that parents were generally satisfied with the assessment of their children. Respondents confided that they thought that special needs assessment was beneficial to both them and their children. Naveed and Kasana (2017) explored the satisfaction of parents of children with cerebral palsy and found that the majority of parents were satisfied with their children’s academic performance and available facilities. However, more than half of the respondents were not satisfied with the quality of vocational training (Naveed & Kasana, 2017).

Parent Involvement in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Process

Parents are required to participate in the IEP process to ensure that their children’s needs are recognized and met properly. Parents of children with special needs come into contact with the school when they request the evaluation, after the evaluation is completed, and when the IEP is developed (Morgan, 1982). Researchers stress that parental involvement has multiple benefits. Parental involvement (1) increases educators’ understanding of the child’s family environment; (2) improves parent-teacher communication and increase trust; (3) provides valuable information to parents, and (4) enables parents and educators to find mutually satisfying solutions to the emerging problems (ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001). Researchers highlight that collaboration in the IEP should be voluntary, aiming toward common goals, and acknowledging each other’s roles with respect and trust (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2016).

Many parents experience problems with meaningful participation in IEP meetings. A study by Balli (2016) found that although the majority of respondents in the sample
attended the IEP meetings regularly, less than one-third of them reported being treated as equals. Educators did not seem to be willing to consider parents’ input while parents felt that teachers failed to understand their child’s unique needs. Some of the parents even confided that they were not included in the process and were merely asked to sign the papers (Balli, 2016). One of the main causes of inadequate involvement is communication. Educators tend to use jargon and professional terms that parents do not understand; thus, they prevent parents from making well-informed decisions about a child’s placement. Moreover, parents often lack understanding of the school system and policies, which may result in inflated expectations or, on the contrary, the lack of trust (ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001).

Special Education Experiences of Minorities

Research shows that culture and country may play a defining role in shaping parents’ perceptions of IEP and special education decision-making and participation. Brągiel (2016) conducted a study in Poland and found that the overwhelming majority of parents of students with disabilities were very satisfied with inclusive education. At the same time, a recent study from Zimbabwe by Magumise and Sefotho (2018) revealed that while there were positive attitudes towards inclusive education among parents, many of them also reported ambivalence, confusion, and anxiety and confided that there are still many changes to be made in the special education system before it could address all children’s needs (Magumise & Sefotho, 2018). Further, a study by Yssel et al. (2007) comparing parental perceptions of special education in the USA and South Africa found that different political, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds did not affect parents’ expectations or experiences of their children’s special education. This inconsistency in
findings points to a lack of information on the degree to which families’ cultural background may shape special education experiences.

Research conducted in the USA shows that minority parents of children with special needs often face more challenges associated with IEP and special education in general. Williams (2007) explored African-American parents’ perceptions of special education and found that parents perceived special education as a tool to remove children with special needs from the general classroom setting and segregate them. Indeed, there is ample evidence showing that minority children are overrepresented in special education (Kim & Kim, 2013). Researchers also found that children who had to study in self-contained special education settings had a diminished quality of life after finishing school (Kim & Kim, 2013). Williams (2007) maintained that African-American parents believed the faculty and staff members misused and abused special education. Smith-Mcclelland (2017) added that African-American parents often lack understanding and awareness of the concepts underpinning special education, so they fail to realize its relevance for their children. They also tend to feel uncomfortable during the meetings and rarely participate in the referral process as much as they could.

Other minority groups face similar problems. Montelongo (2014) found that unlike African-American parents interviewed by Williams (2007), Latino parents felt that their children needed IEP; however, they reported having little knowledge of their children’s condition and faced difficulties understanding the documents due to the language barrier. Moreover, Latino parents experienced a lack of support and cooperation from IEP professionals (Montelongo, 2014). Contrary to these findings, Krach (2003) found no significant difference between white and Latino parents and argued that schools
in Texas included in the sample allowed parents to fulfill their roles and participate in their children’s special education. In general, however, most of the available findings are in stark contrast to those presented by Fish (2008). The researcher used a sample of predominately white, middle-class parents of children with special needs living in the southwestern U.S. state and found that the majority of them were satisfied with the IEP experience and inclusive education. This research vividly demonstrates how culture (ethnic background) and socioeconomic status may affect parental experiences.

**Slavic Culture and Special Education**

While the experience of African-American, Latino, Asian, and other minority parents has been relatively well researched, there is an alarming gap in research concerning Slavic parents’ perceptions of special education. Available studies show that Slavic parents from former USSR countries that are now independent may have many stereotypes about special education, which originate from the USSR policies of exclusion and stigmatization of children with special needs (Csapo, 1984; Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2009). With time, terms such as non-educable, retarded, and defective have been gradually replaced with more sensitive and inclusive terminology, as post-Soviet countries gradually moved towards a more inclusive educational system (Malofeev, 1998). However, educators’ indifferent attitudes toward inclusion, the absence of awareness, and infrastructural issues hamper the development of special education in many post-Soviet countries (Kavelashvili, 2017; Martz, 2005).

No recent studies exist that would explore how culture and deep-seated stereotypes and beliefs about disability affect Slavic immigrant parents’ attitudes toward special education in the USA. The only available evidence on parental perceptions of
inclusive education comes from studies conducted in the post-Soviet countries, which
does not apply to the American setting (Martz, 2005). There is a gap in research on Slavic
parents’ unique experiences and perceptions of disability, special education, as well as
IEP and testing processes specifically. There is also a lack of knowledge on the culture-
specific beliefs held by this population regarding appropriate counseling and proper
diagnostic procedures.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

While the experience of African-American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Native
American, and other minority parents has been studied, little is known about how Slavic
parents perceive special education and their experience with inclusive educational
services in the USA. Slavic parents from the post-Soviet countries have culturally-
specific beliefs that originated from the way special education was delivered in their
home countries. It is known that before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, many
institutions in Russia worked with disabled children and even achieved significant
success in educating this population (Malofeev, 1998). In the USSR in the years since,
the field of special education developed considerably, but it was still mainly confined to
separate educational institutions (Raver, 2007). In other words, children with special
needs were historically excluded from the general school setting in the former Soviet
Union, which resulted in the formation of stereotypes regarding physical and intellectual
disabilities (Csapo, 1984; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2009; Rasell & Iarskaia-Smirnova,
2013). Even when the policy of inclusion was later introduced, children with special
needs had to keep up with unrealistic teacher expectations and received little specialized
support (Malofeev, 1998).
A strong denial of the very existence of citizens with disabilities is still visible in the way post-Soviet countries treat children with disabilities (Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014). Even though humiliating terms such as non-educable, retarded, or defective are no longer used in the post-Soviet countries, some people still believe that children with special needs do not belong to the general classrooms and should be segregated and educated separately (Malofeev, 1998). Infrastructural and financial constraints, the lack of teacher training, and inadequate involvement of parents contribute to the problem of special education in the post-Soviet world.

Scarce research shows that Slavic parents hold some stereotypes about special education, which were formed historically because of the pervasive policies of exclusion and stigmatization of children with special needs (Csapo, 1984; Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2009). A study conducted by Martz (2005) found that parents of children with disabilities believed inclusive education to be “an idea of an undefined future” (p. 145). However, this research was conducted 14 years ago and is no longer applicable neither to the Russian nor to the American reality. Paradoxically, no recent studies are exploring how culture and deep-seated stereotypes about disability shape Slavic immigrant parents’ attitudes toward special education in the USA. It is not known how they perceive the IEP and testing process and whether they are willing and properly equipped to participate in their children’s special learning. In addition, Kozulin and Venger (1993) argued that Slavic immigrant children face psychological and learning problems due to the breakdown of traditional support systems and erroneous school placements, which also points to the urgent need to address the research gap.
The exact number of Slavic immigrants in the USA is unknown. According to Mehta and Elo (2012), more than 600,000 former Soviet Union-born immigrants came to the country in the period from 1970 to 2000. The majority of them live in New York, California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. The 2000 census claims that there were approximately 2.9 million Russian Americans and millions of Polish, Czech, Slovak, and Ukrainian immigrants (Améredia, 2016). This data indicates there may be thousands of families with children with disabilities whose needs are not documented or understood. Parents are asked to participate in the Individualized Education Planning process to guide their children’s education experience, but their experiences in their country of origin can leave them hesitant to actively engage with the school (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007). Having a large Slavic population, school districts in California can benefit from understanding the lived experienced of Slavic parents whose children are struggling with learning disabilities and issues hampering their engagement in school. There is a lack of information on how Slavic parents view the IEP and testing processes, and what cultural customs and attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate with the school staff in the planning process.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and to identify and describe the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model.
Central Research Questions

In line with the stated purpose, the following central questions have been formulated:

1. How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

2. How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Sub-Questions

To answer this question, four sub-questions will also be addressed:

1. What cultural customs do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

2. What cultural attitudes do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

3. What supports do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

4. What barriers do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Significance of the Problem

Researchers and educators recognize the critical importance of parent involvement in the inclusive education of their child in special education (Afolabi, 2014; Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2013). When parents are actively involved in decision-making and
support for their children, they can positively improve their academic performance, social integration, and postschool experience (Hirano et al., 2016). Educators and policymakers maintain that parents should especially participate in decision-making in the testing and IEP process to be able to share their knowledge and experience with educators and choose options that they think would be the best for their children (Costello & Chamberlain, 2015). Unfortunately, parents are often excluded from the decision-making process due to multiple issues including teachers’ failure to recognize their contribution, the lack of knowledge and skills, stereotypical beliefs, and so on (El Shourbagi, 2017). Minority parents are believed to face the greatest barriers to involvement (Smith-McClelland, 2017; Montelongo, 2014).

Slavic immigrants constitute a significant proportion of all immigrants in the USA, especially in California. However, there is no current, reliable research exploring their experience in relation to inclusive education. It is not known whether they have some unique problems and how their cultural beliefs may affect participation. Available studies, most of which are outdated, show that Slavic parents have many stereotypes about special education, which were formed under the influence of USSR policies of exclusion and stigmatization of individuals with special needs (Csapo, 1984; Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2009). These studies provide only limited information, which cannot be translated to the American education setting. This gap in research has neither been recognized nor addressed in the educational literature, which warrants further research.

The present research can help to fill this gap. The study looks at Slavic parents’ experience through the cultural lens by investigating the cultural customs and attitudes
that affect their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process. The study also helps to understand the support systems and barriers which Slavic parents experience in the context of special education. In this way, the study addresses the current lack of knowledge and provides an up-to-date account of Slavic parents’ participation. The study is also valuable as it helps to narrow down the research to elementary schools in California, Sacramento which has a large Slavic diaspora.

This study can benefit all stakeholders in special education. First of all, it provides useful information for educators in California, which they could use to build culture-specific strategies for involving parents. Having a clear understanding of cultural perceptions and barriers to participation in the testing and IEP process is essential for them to design effective strategies of parental involvement and give parents the necessary resources and support (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). Specifically, the findings can be used to develop training programs for school administrations or write a handbook for employees/special education departments working with immigrant parents. This research may also encourage educators to design a bilingual manual for Slavic parents explaining special education practices, policies, and laws in the USA. Second, the study can benefit Slavic parents if educators and policymakers use the obtained findings to improve their approaches to parental-school communication. Doing so can help to ensure parents are more confident and positive in their attitudes towards special education, and more willing to participate.

Third, the findings may benefit children with special needs who desperately need the support of both their families and schools to overcome their limitations in elementary schools. Choosing the right placement from the very beginning of their educational
journey is critical for their future success, so it is essential to ensure that their parents are well-informed and supported to help them on this stage. Finally, this research may benefit the school setting in general by promoting culturally-sensitive practices and encouraging the transition to more inclusive and diverse policies and practices.

**Theoretical and Operational Definitions**

**Barriers.** Obstacles or things that prevent communication or something. In the context of special education, barriers can be physical, financial, attitudinal, systematic, technological, or failures of accommodations. These barriers can include but not limited to funding, physical inaccessibility, accommodations, lack of individualization, and negative attitudes and stereotypes (Blackwell et al., 2014).

**Children with Special Education Needs (SEN).** According to Gernsbacher et al. (2016), the term emerged by the end of the 20th century as a euphemism for “handicapped,” which has been gradually replaced with more sensitive terminology. SEN refers to individuals with physical, learning, and developmental disabilities, as well as emotional, behavioral, and communication disorders that hamper academic progress and require the special attention of educators and parents (Alkahtani, 2016).

**Cultural attitudes.** A subjective evaluation, either positive or negative, of a phenomenon, object, issue, or person (Evans, 2007). Researchers pay attention to this concept because it has a significant effect on people’s behavior. For example, some cultures are known for their negative cultural attitude towards mental illness, which results in the community discriminating people faced with mental health problems. In the context of the given research, cultural attitudes towards special education often transform into the lack of action or understanding of students’ learning needs.
**Cultural customs.** “A cultural idea that describes a regular, patterned way of behaving that is considered characteristic of life in a social system” (Crossman, 2018). It is believed that customs are one of the ways of maintaining the social order, as they serve as a glue that holds the community together. Quite often, customs are preserved and followed unconsciously, and they can persist for generations, thus contributing to the formation of a particular culture (Crossman, 2018). For example, Japan has a distinct custom of bowing while in some cultures, people follow the custom of male circumvention.

**Developmental Disabilities.** The term refers to a diverse group of chronic conditions caused by physical or/and mental impairments. Children with these types of disabilities may struggle with language, learning, mobility, self-help, and independent functioning. Children affected by developmental disability often have sensory impairments (hearing and vision problems), cerebral palsy, epilepsy or seizures, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability, etc. (Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators, 2018).

**IEP (Individualized Education Program).** A carefully designed written program developed by the special education team, the aim of which is to specify a student’s unique learning needs, academic goals, and method to obtain these goals. Ideally, an IEP must include detailed information on the student’s current academic performance, the services and supports that need to be provided, as well as a comprehensive plan for monitoring progress. The IEP also clarifies the degree of an expected student’s participation in the general classroom. IEP should be created collaboratively involving a student’s parents,
general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators (Blackwell et al., 2014).

**Inclusion.** Inclusion or inclusive education have no universally accepted definitions (Haug, 2016). In the context of special education, inclusion is the approach to educating students with SEN in regular schools, which thus enables them to have access to peer communication and quality education (Mitchell, 2015).

**Intellectual Disability.** This type of disability is characterized by the onset during the developmental period (childhood) and significant limitations of intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2016). Children with intellectual disability demonstrate limited vocabulary and inappropriate behavior; they also face difficulty in understanding new concepts and accomplishing complex tasks.

**Learning Disability.** The term can refer to a number of heterogeneous conditions or problems which may hamper the acquisition, understanding, organization, retention, and use of verbal or nonverbal information (Fletcher et al., 2018). In practice, it means that children with learning disabilities face difficulty in acquiring new skills or learn at a different rate to their peers (Alkahtani, 2016). It is believed that learning disabilities are caused by the central nervous system dysfunction and can occur at any age (Krishnan, Watkins, & Bishop, 2016).

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).** According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, schools should follow the principle of LRE, which means they should give students with disabilities the opportunity to be educated with their non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate (Epler, 2018). To put it simply, they
should enjoy the same educational opportunities as their peers do as long as their disability does not prevent them from doing it (Rotatori et al., 2014).

**Slavic Parents.** This population group includes parents of Slavic origin who immigrated to the United States from the former USSR countries that are now independent (e.g., Belarus, Russia, Ukraine).

**Supports.** Any assistance given in favor of special education. Supports in special education can refer to providing assistance or support by family, educators, or community. Such aide can vary from resources to emotional support.

**Delimitations**

According to Thomas, Nelson, and Silverman (2011), delimitations are choices the researcher makes to identify the scope of the research while Suresh (2014) argued that this term refers to the process of making the study more focused and feasible by narrowing it down to a certain geographic location, population, age, sex, and other characteristics. The study was delimited to Slavic parents of children enrolled in elementary schools in northern California and undergoing the Special Education Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and testing process in the last five years. Finally, the results of the study were delimited to Sacramento county area to which the researcher had reasonable access and proximity to collect data.

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters, a reference page, and appendixes. Following this introductory Chapter I, Chapter II contains a thorough review of literature dedicated to the topic of special education. Specifically, this chapter analyzes previously
published studies that dwelled on the history of special education, special education policies and practices, parents’ experiences, and so on. Notably, this chapter established the gap in research, thus justifying the need to conduct the present study. Next, Chapter III discusses the research design and methodology of the study. The author explains the choices made in terms of the population, sample, and data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter IV presents, synthesizes, and discusses the findings, both separately and in relation to the prior literature. Finally, Chapter V provides a summary of the findings, concluding remarks regarding the main points, as well as recommendations for practice and further research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and to identify and describe the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process. The overview of the literature on the given topic provided in this chapter offers background knowledge and helps identify gaps in research that should be filled. To begin with, the theoretical foundation for this research should be discussed through the prism of the theories of Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939). Then, the literature on the history of special education in the United States is provided, along with its main components and processes, as well as its development over time. In this section, the researcher also briefly outlines the system of special education in California where this research was conducted. Parental perceptions and experiences of special education are also discussed, with the focus being made on the IEP and testing process. The central section of this review includes the analysis of the prior literature dedicated to special education in the Soviet and post-Soviet countries, as well as Slavic parents’ perceptions of special education. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, the gap in the current literature is identified in the context of the present study.

Theoretical Foundation on Parent Participation in Special Education

The issue of parent participation in special education has been analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. Most of the theoretical research comes from Epstein (1992), who created a framework for depicting six types of parental involvement in their children’s education. According to Epstein (1992), parents can be involved through
parenting, communicating, volunteering, supporting children’s academic work at home, engaging in decision-making, and collaborating with the community. It is acknowledged that the combinations of these types of parent involvement may prove to be highly beneficial to children and school communities in general. Other evidence comes from Eccles and Harold (1996) who studied family participation in schooling and from Carey and her colleagues who focused on parental participation in elementary schools (Mitchell, 2004). Additionally, Tekin (2011) argued that Piaget’s cognitive development theory, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory may also be useful when studying parental involvement.

Several other theories have been created to conceptualize parental participation. For instance, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) described three dimensions of parental involvement, which include behavioral (e.g., attending meetings, volunteering), personal (communication and interaction with a child), and cognitive/intellectual (e.g., reading books). By engaging in these activities, parents are believed to increase students’ motivation and a sense of competence. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) distinguished between home-based and school-based participation and argued that parental involvement depends on parental beliefs about their roles, their confidence, and opportunities provided to them at school. Although these theories are generally useful for understanding the concept of parental involvement, they are not directly applicable to special education because parents of children with special needs are believed to face unique barriers to involvement.

Therefore, the topic of bilingual special education is better approached from the perspective of the theoretical matrix developed by Cummins (1989). The framework
presented by Cummins (1989) does not use the terms “learning disability” or “mildly handicapped” commonly applied in academic literature. Cummins (1989) maintained that by looking at the medical causes of poor performance, scholars overlook the organizational and curriculum issues within schools that hamper students’ progress. Therefore, the author suggested that it is better to look at the causes of academic difficulties not in medical conditions causing educational problems but in school policies that discriminate against some children overtly and covertly. According to Cummins (1989), schools have historically excluded and discriminated minority children, thus hampering their academic progress. One of the main points defended by the scholar is that populations that have been historically underrepresented, oppressed, and discriminated in the American society tend to demonstrate lower academic performance compared to their counterparts having no such experience. Cummins (1989) noted that in the USA, such populations include African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups. Based on these assumptions, the scholar highlighted the need to create a school climate that is welcoming to minority parents to encourage their involvement. To do that, schools need to challenge societal norms supporting discrimination instead of embracing them (Cummins, 1989).

Theoretical framework developed by Cummins’ (1989) is based on the idea that minority students underperform because of the societal pressure and devaluation of their identities. Therefore, the scholar believed that schools should eliminate all forms of discrimination and ensure that children would not feel oppressed or discriminated in any way, neither from their peers nor from their educators. Therefore, the following changes have been proposed by the scholar: (1) incorporate students’ culture into the school
program; (2) promote community participation and parental support; (3) encourage students to use their native language and (4) improve assessment strategies. To put it differently, the theory suggested by Cummins (1989) emphasizes the importance of native language literacy skills and a nurturing school setting for addressing learning problems of minority students.

Cummins’ (1989) theoretical framework fits the present study as it touches upon the issues experienced by minority students and their parents. By applying this theory to Slavic parents of children with special needs, one may better understand their experiences and requirements. This theory acknowledges the role of culture and native language in promoting students’ performance, so schools may benefit from recognizing and respecting parents’ and students’ cultural and linguistic needs. Cummins’ (1989) theory may encourage schools to reconsider the extent to which their policies recognize the diversity of languages and cultures and their impact on students’ academic success.

Furthermore, Wolfendale (1939) looked at the problem of special education from a different perspective, but this author also emphasized the importance of parental participation. According to Wolfendale (1939), parents play a key role in their children’s early education, as they are more than anyone else involved in their daily cognitive, emotional, and intellectual development. Wolfendale (1939) maintained that given their critical role in educational efforts, parents should be supported by educators through effective family engagement programs. Thus, the author emphasizes the importance of partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers. As a key author in this area, Wolfendale (1939) also believed that schools should build collaboration with parents to address children’s special learning needs. This theoretical framework also perfectly fits
into the studied topic, as it could help understand how to address the challenges faced by Slavic parents of children with special needs and show the path to their greater inclusion into the special education efforts through IEP meetings.

**Special Education in the United States: History and Overview**

The system of special education in the United States has evolved considerably over the past century. Beginning with the 1960s, the government and educators have unanimously stressed the importance of providing quality education to children with disabilities. One needs to explore how exactly special education policies and practices have changed and how they currently operate on the federal and state levels, with the focus being made on California.

**Special Education in the United States**

The historical roots of special education are found in the United States and Europe in the 19th century (Dash, 2005). Prior to that period, acceptance and education of children with special needs were sporadic and rare. Systematic efforts to provide relevant care and support for this demographic population began in the 19th century when European physicians began studying the needs of mentally disabled children, as well as those with hearing and vision impairments (Rotatori et al., 2014). Many of the important ideas presented by European scholars were adopted and further developed in the United States, with such researchers as Louis Braille, Samuel Howe, Anne Sullivan, Thomas Gallaudet, and others making the greatest contribution (Dash, 2005). However, by the end of the 19th century, a crisis of special education was observed in America, which was mostly caused by the failure of special education personnel, the lack of financial support,
political and economic issues, increased expectations of parents, and many other factors (Dash, 2005).

Continuing the topic of special education in the USA, Spaulding and Pratt (2015) added that contrary to the common belief, the history of special education in this country began long before the key reforms of the 1960s-1970s. According to the researchers, the history of disability began a century earlier when educators, scholars, and reformers sought to change the laws and public attitudes to disability and make the life of children with special needs easier. Spaulding and Pratt (2015) divided the history of special education in the USA into three main stages including Early Reform (1800-1860), Stagnation and Regression (1860s-1950s), and Contemporary Reform (1950s-present). During this period, the very understanding of the concept of disability changed. While in the 19th-20th centuries, it was believed that children with disabilities are different and, therefore, learn differently compared to their peers, in the second half of the 20th century, a new idea was promoted – children with disabilities function and develop as much as others do, but their progress is less visible and should be supported more (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). This new understanding of disability has become the basis for new policies introduced in the mid-20th century.

However, before the change in the public awareness finally happened, children with disabilities were commonly discriminated, and their needs were misunderstood by educators, policymakers, and judges. Yell, Rogers, and Elisabeth (2019) described some of the most blatant cases of discrimination in the overview of the history of special education in the USA. Thus, for example, in 1893, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court recognized that children with mental disabilities who could not benefit from
education, were troublesome to their peers, and could not take care of themselves should not be allowed to attend public schools. In 1919, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that a student with facial contortions and speech problems should be expelled from school because he made teachers and other students feel uncomfortable. In 1934, the state department of education in Ohio was allowed to expel certain students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2019). Even in the 1950s-1960s, it was still believed that children with severe disabilities should not attend public schools and could be expelled if they cause trouble to educators and peers (Winzer, 1993).

Fortunately, there has been a growing recognition that this vulnerable population requires a special approach to education. Therefore, after the World War II, the issue of special education entered the agenda again. The report presented at the White House Conference of 1940 recognized that “Schools should give increased attention to the educational needs of individual children, including those who are physically handicapped, mentally retarded or socially handicapped” (White House Conference, 1940, p. 36). Baily and Mosher (1968) noted that the dissatisfaction with the U.S. educational system was building gradually in the years following the war. Politicians were aware of the mounting challenges faced by educators across the country, who lacked resources and training to meet the increasing social and educational needs of the diverse population.

President Kennedy and President Johnson were particularly interested in introducing reforms to protect the interests of children with disabilities and ensure that education of such children was viewed as a necessity, not a privilege (Dash, 2005). In the 1960s, President Kennedy sent missions to Scandinavia, Russia, and the Netherlands to
study the system of special education there and explore best practices that could be applied in the USA (Winzer, 1993). Based on the collected data, it was decided to introduce some changes, one of which was the requirement to involve trained doctors, psychologists, and social workers to evaluate individuals with disabilities and understand their needs better. Winzer (1993) also noted that there was an increasing number of special programs for children with disabilities in the 1960s-1970s, which allowed more children to receive proper education and care.

Baily and Mosher (1968) and Winzer (1993) provided valuable insight into this period of change and dwelled on the processes that determined the introduction of new policies in the 1960s. According to them, the adoption of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (also referred to as the Public Law 89-10) in 1965 marked the beginning of the swift changes in the American educational system. Among other things, ESEA allowed for the creation of special education centers across the country (Baily and Mosher, 1968). It also called for introducing school-related programs for children with special needs and contained requirements regarding dropout prevention (Beyer & Johnson, 2014).

However, significant progress in the sphere of special education had not been achieved before the introduction of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, which addressed the problem of discrimination of students with special needs in public educational institutions (Beyer & Johnson, 2014; Kritzer, 2014). The act was later renamed to become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The introduction of this act was a landmark decision in the history of special education policies in the USA, as it promoted the idea of
a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children and highlighted the importance of the least restrictive environment (Martin et al., 1996). IDEA also laid out the requirements regarding students’ eligibility for special educational services, individualized education programs (IEPs), parental rights, and other related issues, thus significantly changing the whole approach to the inclusion of children with special needs (Schwab & Gelfman, 2005).

Meanwhile, during the 1960s-1970s, states continued to discriminate children with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996). It was common in some states to place children in inappropriate programs. For instance, children with physical impairments were placed in classrooms with their peers with intellectual disabilities. Parents were not willing to accept the situation, so they advocated for their children’s rights on the state level. In particular, they managed to achieve the establishment of the so-called “mandatory laws” that better protected children’s interests. The new laws, however, still had many loopholes that allowed schools to avoid initiating costly evaluation and service provision procedures (Martin et al., 1996).

In 1997, the Congress made amendments to IDEA to address multiple concerns raised in the educational community (Schwab & Gelfman, 2005). It focused on the issues of disciplinary procedures for students, contents of IEPs, membership of IEP teams, and strategies for resolving disputes between parents and educators. Two years later, final regulations were released, which addressed some of the remaining issues and provided a conclusive definition of special education. In this document, it was defined as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (quoted in Schwab & Gelfman, 2005). In general, this federal law regulates a
wide variety of issues, from funding and services to specific policies of special education designed for different population groups (Jones et al., 2004; Martin et al., 1996).

There are several other laws that currently govern the provision of special education in the USA. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, for example, serves to eliminate discrimination by providing students with disabilities the accommodations and modifications to give them access to services enjoyed by other students (Morin, 2014). Notably, Section 504 is much broader than IDEA, so more children may be covered by it. Next, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), also called the Buckley Amendment, which was adopted in 1974 prohibits access to the evaluations, teacher notes, and students’ grades and records to ensure that misleading, incorrect, or embarrassing information would not be passed to third parties (Dunklee & Shoop, 2006). Under this act, parents are allowed to get access to student-related data to be able to participate in the educational process (Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2011). Thus, FERPA mainly deals with confidentiality issues and anything that concerns information sharing and parental involvement.

Furthermore, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) adopted in 1990 prohibits discrimination of disabled individuals. It ensures that no person with a disability is denied access to elementary and secondary education or denied the right to receive relevant adjustments in higher education (Crockett, Billingsley, & Boscardin, 2012). The document sets forth standards for what constitutes discrimination on the basis of physical or mental disability, provides a definition of disability, and offers a complaint mechanism for individuals facing discrimination. Notably, Martin et al. (1996) pointed out that because Section 504 and the ADA offer a broader scope of requirements and, therefore,
more remedies to parents than does the IDEA, they have often been used by parents for litigation. Finally, one needs to mention the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, which is the latest version of ESEA. NCLB held schools accountable for the performance of all students, especially those who have traditionally demonstrated low academic achievement (Cortiella, 2006).

**Policy and Practice of Special Education in the USA**

To receive special education in the USA, a child should first undergo evaluation, which determines eligibility and allows understanding what services and support a student might need (Bateman & Cline, 2016). If parents feel that their child is not benefiting from the general education or struggling with the curriculum, they may ask the school (either private or public) to evaluate him. Moreover, the law requires the local school districts to identify and evaluate every child who may have a disability and request a comprehensive individual evaluation of his performance and abilities if needed. This “Child Find” program allows identifying infants and toddlers with special needs by conducting periodic screenings in local communities (Bayat, 2016). “Child Find” is based on the idea that children with special needs should be referred to special services as soon as possible.

In some cases, a child may first undergo a pre-referral process called response to intervention (RTI) (Burns & Gibbons, 2011). RTI implies the provision of intensive instruction in areas of the greatest academic weakness for a specific child. Educators then assess the child’s progress in these areas and determine whether special instruction is needed. This process is designed to provide a student with the necessary academic support before the school district authorities decide whether he should undergo evaluation.
(Burns & Gibbons, 2011). IDEA does not require the application of RTI but allows local school districts to use it as part of the process. In some schools, the discrepancy method is employed for determining the need for evaluation; it consists in assessing the student’s performance based on the results of standardized tests (Bateman, Lloyd, & Tankersley, 2015).

Evaluation is not based on one particular test (e.g., IQ) because no single test can adequately assess suspected disability. A child undergoing evaluation is assessed in all areas including academic, functional, and developmental (Bakken & Obiakor, 2015). Educators must use standardized tests and be properly trained to follow the manuals to prevent errors. Notably, tests should be given in a child’s native language and should assess his disability, not language proficiency. As part of the evaluation, a child may be observed in his regular class. Educators must avoid using any evaluation interventions that discriminate on a cultural or racial basis (Bakken & Obiakor, 2015). Parents who disagree with the results of the evaluation have a legal right to reach an agreement with schools through communication and negotiation; they can also ask for mediation or due process or even file a complaint with the state education agency.

The evaluation performed after obtaining parental consent allows the school to determine eligibility and develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). To begin with, a school must schedule the IEP meeting and notify parents so they could attend. During the meeting, educators, social workers, and parents discuss the results of the evaluation and determine what services a child needs to receive to improve academic performance (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). The results of the meeting are reflected in an IEP – a document outlining a student’s educational goals, performance objectives, teaching
methods and strategies, the recommended educational setting, as well as plans and
timelines for their achievement (Martin et al., 1996). MacLeod et al. (2017) and Blok,
Peetsma, and Roede (2007) highlighted that parents must be allowed to participate in the
development of an IEP and act on behalf of their children. Depending on the IEP, students
are given individualized instruction and learning resources to enable them to study to the
maximum of their capacity along their non-disabled peers in a general education
classroom or other placements (Epler, 2018).

Parents have a right to use the services of special education advocates to ensure
that their children receive appropriate services (Burke & Goldman, 2017). A special
education advocate is a person who guides parents through the process of evaluation, IEP,
and subsequent interaction with school and educators. Advocate can negotiate with the
school on parents’ behalf, advise them on the steps to be taken to ensure that the child
receives the best support, help write formal letters, educate parents on their legal rights,
and so on. At the same time, advocates are not allowed to provide legal advice or draft
legal complaints, as only an attorney can do it (Burke & Goldman, 2017).

Schools normally use a variety of practices to enable students with special needs
to improve their academic performance. For instance, some schools provide assistive
technology to students struggling with writing. In some cases, students need
accommodations (e.g., seating near the teacher to avoid distractions or focusing on
writing responses if having difficulties with oral presentation). Some students need
modifications to the amount and complexity of homework given (Darrow, 2007; Pacer
Center, 2015). Accommodations for children with special needs may be needed in every
aspect of the educational process, from curriculum and classroom setting to the
instructional approaches and assignments (Pacer Center, 2015). If a student fails to perform well in the general classroom, educators may recommend transferring him to a more segregated, self-contained classroom. In some cases, complementary services including counseling, adaptive physical education, occupational therapy, and may also be recommended (Kritzer, 2014). However, access to the latter varies geographically due to the lack of well-trained professionals.

Methods of provision of special education may vary depending on a student’s needs and available resources. Ideally, schools employ an inclusive method, which means they place a child in the general classroom and provide differentiated instruction. Inclusion is normally used with students with mild or moderate disabilities because it implies a significant modification of curriculum (Wearmouth, 2013). Inclusion allows a child to attend smaller instructional sessions whereas the mainstreaming approach presupposes the child’s learning in separate classes most of the school day. Segregation is used when a child cannot attend the general classroom; it implies the provision of educational services in separate classrooms where children with special needs do not have contact with their peers without special needs. The practice of exclusion whereby a student is not provided with any instruction and is fully excluded from the school setting is employed in severe cases of disability (Lindsay, 2013).

Students with special needs may sometimes be recommended to attend learning centers where they receive multi-leveled instruction. The purpose of these learning centers is to provide students with supplementary services, promote their academic achievement, and foster their communication skills (Sagor & Cox, 2004). A learning center is usually a quiet place to work and complete assignments; students attending this
center may use computer technologies, word processing tools, and various software to complete homework or any other tasks. However, learning centers take much time and human resources to establish and maintain, so they are not available in every school.

Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprathaban (2016) specified some of the approaches and principles of inclusive classrooms where children with special needs can succeed academically. First, the researchers maintained that teacher-teacher and teacher-student collaboration is the key to adjusting instructional techniques and promote effective communication between stakeholders. Second, the scholars argued that teachers are expected to employ techniques that accommodate a wide range of learners including those with special needs. These may include peer support, group work, community-based instruction, and so on (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprathaban, 2016). Brownell et al. (2012) added that instruction should be goal-directed and evidence-based, that is, based on the IEP and the most current research. It is also useful to perform the regular informal assessment of a student’s progress to determine whether the selected approach is working.

Unfortunately, despite the immense progress in terms of securing inclusive education for children with disabilities, there are still many problems to address for American policymakers and educators. Teacher training is one of the most pressing problems widely discussed in the press and scientific literature (Mader, 2017). Many teachers do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to work with special-education students and provide individualized instruction. Time and resource constraints make it almost impossible to pay adequate attention to each child’s needs (Mader, 2017).
Another problem is that students with a native language other than English may not be recognized as those requiring special education because their culture and limited language skills make it difficult for educators to assess their performance (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Nelson, 2014). It is difficult to identify whether academic performance problems are caused by disability or limited understanding of the material. State educational agencies and school districts lack resources, time, and knowledge to help schools and educators meet the needs of all students, so some of them are not being provided the relevant services to succeed academically.

**Demographic Characteristics of Students with Special Needs in the USA**

The American system of special education has served millions of children over the past decades. For example, the data collected in 1993-1994 showed that more than five million students in the USA and Puerto Rico from birth to age 21 were classified as having disabilities and, therefore, needed special education (Schwab & Gelfman, 2005). The data collected in the period from school years 2000–01 through 2004–05 showed that the number of students ages 3–21 who had special needs increased from 6.3 million to 6.7 million respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In 2013–14, the number of students ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 6.5 million, which constituted nearly 13% of all public-school students. Moreover, about 35% of those receiving special education during the identified period had learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) (for more detail on children served under IDEA, see Table 1). A more recent statistics showed that approximately one in nine children under the age of 8 receives special education services (M&L Special Needs Planning, 2018).
Table 1: Percentage of students with disabilities age 3-21 by disability type served under IDEA in 2013-2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014)

These statistics are also alarming in terms of the increasing incidence of various types of disability (Samuels, 2016). For instance, the number of students age 6-21 and classified as having autism increased by 165 percent in the period between 2005-06 and 2014-15 school years. Students with other types of disabilities, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, epilepsy, mobility impairments, mental-health issue, etc. increased by 51% over the same period, which vividly demonstrates the importance of strengthening and diversifying the system of special education in the USA (Samuels, 2016). At the same time, it has also been found that the number of students with speech and language impairments, intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and behavioral and emotional problems has been declining over the past decade, which may be due to better diagnosis and treatment of these problems.
Special attention has been paid to the racial and ethnic disparities in special education. It is believed that African-American students are 40% more likely, and American Indian students are 70% more likely, to be qualified for needing special education services than are their peers of other races (Harper, 2017). Moreover, African-American students are twice as likely to be diagnosed with emotional and intellectual disabilities compared to their counterparts, while American Indian children are significantly more likely to be identified as having learning disabilities and developmental delays (Harper, 2017). As a result, the number of minority children with special needs is disproportionately higher. At the same time, research shows that nationally, 76% of white students in special education earned a traditional diploma in 2014-2015 compared to only 65% and 62% of Hispanic and African American students with special needs who received this type of diploma during the identified period (Felton, 2017).

Special Education in California

IDEA is the main federal law that currently determines the system of special education in the USA. However, while it lays out the main rules, some details may differ depending on a state. For example, states can decide who is eligible for special services under the category of special learning disability or what instruction or services they should provide. In other words, as long as states follow the general principles of IDEA, they can exercise some autonomy in changing the details (Rosen, 2019). In California, state special education laws generally comply with the federal requirements outlined in IDEA with some minor differences. For instance, whereas the federal law states that students are no longer eligible to free special education when they turn 22 years,
California law extends services for 22–year–old students (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2013).

In 2015-2016, 12% of children with California were identified as having a disability (Ed.gov, n.d.). Only 8.3% of California eighth-graders with disabilities were found to be proficient on the state assessment in Math while the percentage of students with disabilities being proficient in reading was 12.6%. According to the most recent data, 774,665 individuals in 2017-28 were provided with special education services (California Department of Education, 2018). The most common disability categories during the identified period were specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, autism, and intellectual disabilities. As for the graduation rate, it has been found that this population was significantly less likely to graduate from school compared to children without disabilities (Ed.gov, n.d.). Furthermore, the number of children with special health care needs and, therefore, special educational needs, varies by race. The data collected in 2011-2012 in California showed that most children with special needs were minorities (Hispanic/Latino and African-American) (please see Table 2 below).

![Pie chart]

Table 2: Percentage of children with special needs by race (California) (National Survey of Children’s Health, 2013).
According to the California Department of Education (2018), the state schools seek to comply with the federal law and provide the instruction in a variety of settings. Specifically, all stakeholder groups including infants and their families, preschoolers, students, and young adults spend most of their learning time with peers, that is, in the least restrictive environment. Children with special needs living in California can receive special services in different settings including preschool, day-care, general classrooms, classrooms with special instruction, the community, etc. (California Department of Education, 2018). The Department of Education collaborates with higher education institutions to ensure that both newly-trained and experienced teachers and other service providers are qualified to work with diverse populations and meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Unfortunately, the evidence provided by the Learning Policy Institute (2017) shows that there is a growing shortage of qualified special education teachers (SETs) in California. Schools cannot fill positions with qualified, well-prepared professions and have to hire teachers with little or no experience in delivering services to students with special needs. It has been found that this problem especially affects English learners and African American students who are overrepresented in special education. Learning Policy Institute (2017) also added that while many teachers are expected to retire in the next five years, the problem of teacher shortage will grow even more pressing, especially given the increasing number of children with special needs. Therefore, researchers strongly recommended providing training to young teachers and diversify educational options so that teachers could receive the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver quality services (Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Along similar lines, Cooc and Yang (2016) called for
improving teacher training and added that the racial composition of SETs should be diversified because they remain predominately white.

**Parental Perception of Special Education**

Special education is a sensitive issue that different parents may perceive differently. Many studies were conducted over the past several decades to explore parental experiences of special education and understand why they are often left behind when it comes to seeking solutions to their children’s educational underperformance. As noted above, parents are expected to be major decision-makers when it comes to evaluations and IEP. They provide critical input, possess valuable knowledge due to their close interaction with children, provide comprehensive insights into their children’s unique needs, and advocate for children when educators fail to comply with the law (Logsdon, 2018). Unfortunately, parents’ capacity to perform all these roles and engage in the educational process is sometimes limited by educators or their own limitations and perceptions. All these issues are analyzed in detail in this section based on the findings of prior studies.

One needs to start with a large study by Rehm et al. (2013), which provided an extensive description of parental perceptions and experiences in relation to special education services. The aim of this study was to explore the types of parental advocacy styles and reflect on how parents’ experience with special education differs. Data collected from the sample of 61 parents revealed that their advocacy styles and responses differed considerably. Rehm et al. (2013) found that some parents were very active and persistent and insisted on the provision of wide-ranging services. Their involvement, however, often resulted in conflicts with teachers who considered their demands to be too
pressing. Some of the participants were ready to negotiate and compromise, which made it easier for educators to collaborate with them. Finally, there were parents who fully trusted educators and relied on them in terms of decision-making. Additionally, the results revealed that 18 parents were emotionally exhausted and dissatisfied with their participation in special education procedures, which highlighted the need to build better parent-teacher relationships (Rehm et al., 2013).

In a study conducted in the American setting (New Jersey), Lalvani (2015) found that parents were particularly worried about their children being labeled as disabled in the special education system. Some of the parents interviewed by the researcher believed that this labeling changed everyone’s perceptions of a child and might negatively affect teachers’ attitudes towards them. Moreover, parents strongly objected the use of some specific labels; thus, they were especially concerned when their children were claimed to have an intellectual or cognitive disability. Furthermore, Lalvani (2015) found that parents resisting labeling often disagreed with educators regarding the interpretation of their child’s behavior and performance. Notably, the study revealed that parents resisted labeling but were generally positive regarding the provision of special education services if needed. This detail is particularly important for educators willing to engage parents meaningfully and ensure that special education has no negative connotation for them.

Interesting findings were provided by Zablotsky, Boswell, and Smith (2012) who found that parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were more likely to engage in their children’s education compared to parents of children without ASD. At the same time, these parents were more dissatisfied than their counterparts with the quality of provided services and communication with educators. These findings demonstrate that
parents of children with disabilities have increased expectations regarding their children’s educational activities, so teachers’ failure to meet their needs results in negative emotions (Zablotsky et al., 2012). The complexity of stakeholders’ needs should, therefore, be considered by educators so that children with special needs could receive the best support.

Numerous studies conducted over the past decade demonstrate that parental satisfaction with special education varies considerably. While some parents are generally satisfied with the system and consider it to be extremely beneficial to their children’s academic performance, others think that special instruction is ineffective, discriminatory, exclusionary, etc. Thus, for instance, Ryndak et al. (1995) conducted interviews with 13 parents of children with moderate or severe disabilities living in New York. They found that all parents had very positive perceptions of the inclusive general education setting. Parents whose children had previously studied in self-contained classrooms maintained that inclusion brought many social, academic, and behavioral benefits to their children (Ryndak et al., 1995). The findings of this study highlight the necessity of including students with disabilities into the general setting to promote their progress.

In another study, Zanobini et al. (2017) conducted a survey of 285 parents of students with disabilities in Italy. It has been found that parents were generally very satisfied with the provided special education services. Specifically, they gave their positive feedback regarding inclusive practices, peers’ and families’ acceptance, setting and special equipment, and the combination of education and rehabilitation services (Zanobini et al., 2017). A similar study conducted by Loreman et al. (2008) found that parents were generally satisfied with inclusive education. However, Loreman et al.
(2008) also pointed to the fact that not all parents were equally comfortable when dealing with special education services, which proves that this topic remains a rather sensitive issue even when stakeholders’ needs and met. A study conducted by Warren (2014) revealed that while parents of children with Asperger syndrome were generally satisfied with teacher qualities, their assessment of special education services in general was less positive. Moreover, parents admitted that it was sometimes difficult for them to communicate with teachers (Warren, 2014).

Furthermore, Palmer et al. (2001) conducted a survey of parents of children with severe disabilities and found that although parents generally had positive attitudes to the inclusion practices, many of them did not believe that their child needed inclusion. Parents of children with severe disabilities argued that the severity of the condition did not allow their children to benefit from studying in the general classroom. They were worried that the public-school environment would not be welcoming to their struggling children and would be emotionally traumatic (Palmer et al., 2001). The same concerns have been reported in the study by Doménech and Moliner (2014). Finally, the lack of teacher training, discipline issues, and intolerance were cited by parents as the main problems explaining their negative attitudes to inclusive special education. Based on these findings, one may suggest that the severity of the disability is one of the factors that affect parental perceptions and overall satisfaction with special education.

Partial support for this conclusion is given in the study by Gasteiger-Klicpera, Klicpera, and Gebhardt (2012). Researchers conducted a large survey of 840 parents of children with intellectual disabilities living in Austria. It has been found that parents were generally satisfied with the services, but the assessment of special education varied
considerably depending on the severity of cognitive deficits and the school setting. Parents of children placed in inclusive settings appeared to be more satisfied compared to parents whose children studied in special schools. Dissatisfaction among parents also originated from the fact that some of them were still not convinced that their children needed additional help (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2012). Interestingly, parents of children whose first language was not German showed greater levels of discontent, which allows suggesting that the language barrier may be one of the reasons for parental dissatisfaction.

Evidence suggests that there may be other factors that influence parents’ perceptions. For example, a study by Dimitrios et al. (2008) included a sample of 51 mothers and 68 fathers of children with disabilities. Survey results indicated that children’s age and gender were the main factors that influenced parents’ perceptions of special education. Specifically, participants whose children were below 18 years were more emotionally involved and concerned. At the same time, Dimitrios et al. (2008) did not find the correlation between parents’ education level and children’s type of disability and perceptions of inclusion. However, Neofotistou et al. (2014) provided conflicting findings, as they found no association between child or parents characteristics and parental satisfaction with special education. The difference in findings provided by Dimitrios et al. (2008) and Neofotistou et al. (2014) may be explained by different samples, settings, and types of disabilities explored. Notably, both studies were conducted in Greece, so their applicability to the American setting is limited.

Many studies are also available focusing on parents’ satisfaction with specific aspects of special education (e.g., evaluation, placement, etc.). A survey performed by
O’Connor, Hartop, and McConkey (2005) in the UK revealed that parents were satisfied with the evaluation of their children with disabilities. Participants claimed that they considered special needs evaluation beneficial to both them and their children. A survey conducted in Connecticut in 2014-2015 using a sample of 3,965 participants revealed that more than 90% of parents agreed with their child’s evaluation report. They also noted that the provided report was written using simple terms (Glen Martin Associates, 2015).

As for the social education placement, very few up-to-date studies on parental experience and contribution are available. One of them sought to investigate numerous factors that influence special education placement decisions (Banerjee et al., 2016). Researchers found that children of parents who actively participated in the IEP process spent more time in the general school setting. Moreover, parents’ perceptions were also found to affect placement. Thus, parents who thought that their children would be able to live independently were more positive about inclusive education; as a result, children of these parents were more likely to be placed in the general school setting (Banerjee et al., 2016). This study has important implications as it shows that parental perceptions affect the level of their involvement and, subsequently, the child’s placement. The issue of placement was also explored by Blackmore, Aylward, and Grace (2016), who studied the perspectives of parents of children with developmental disabilities placed in the general school setting. The key finding was that parents felt that their children should study along with their peers without disabilities because it is beneficial to their behavior and communication skills. However, parents also confided that they faced significant challenges when trying to secure a place for their child in the mainstream classroom (Blackmore et al., 2016).
Furthermore, several studies have been located that focused on parents’ satisfaction with their child’s performance and received services after placement. Naveed and Kasana (2017) investigated the level of satisfaction of parents of children with cerebral palsy and found that the majority of them were satisfied with their children’s academic performance and school facilities. At the same time, more than half of the participants were not satisfied with the quality of vocational training. According to the findings of another study, parents of toddlers and preschool-aged children with autism were highly satisfied with provided services (McIntyre & Zemantic, 2017). These results were surprising given that fact that services provided to this population did not comply with minimum requirements and best practices.

**Parent Involvement in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Process**

Specific attention has been paid by researchers to the issue of parental involvement in IEP, so this topic should be discussed separately. Parents of children with special needs are required to participate in the IEP process because there are the primary decision-makers who are aware of their children’s unique needs. Given their experience, they are more than anything else knowledgeable about their children’s needs. According to IDEA, parents are the primary team members of the IEP team, so they should be encouraged to participate in the meetings to ensure that their children’s needs are properly acknowledged and met (Kauffman, Hallahan, & Pullen, 2017). Educators are not allowed to make any final decisions regarding a child’s placement without negotiating it with parents.

Parents can contribute to the IEP in a number of ways. First of all, they represent a child on a personal level, that is, allow educators to see their child as a unique personality
with special needs (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2016). Second, parents can help teachers to assess the child’s skills and performance apart from standardized tests. For example, they can explain what homework assignments are the most challenging or how a child responds to specific teaching techniques. Third, parents can ensure that services provided to their child are not standardized for all students with a similar disability but tailored to their child’s unique needs. The latter may require a great deal of negotiation and communication to achieve (Adams et al., 2016).

It is recognized that parental involvement is extremely beneficial to children because it allows informing educators on a child’s unique needs, habits, and behavioral patterns. It also improves parent-teacher communication and increases trust needed to make collaborative decisions. By participating in IEP, parents also become aware of the school-related procedures and processes directly affecting their children. Finally, IEP meetings help parents and teachers find mutually satisfying solutions and avoid conflicts (ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001). However, all these benefits can be achieved only when IEP participation is voluntary and when stakeholders are genuinely willing to collaborate, communicate, and find the best solutions (Adams et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, research shows that many parents experience problems with meaningful participation in IEP meetings. For instance, a study found that although the majority of parents in the sample regularly participated in the IEP meetings, less than one-third of them felt that educators treated them as equals (Balli, 2016). Respondents claimed that educators did not want to consider parents’ contribution and failed to understand children’s unique needs. Some of the participants claimed they were not given an opportunity to make decisions but were merely asked to sign the final papers (Balli,
Evidence suggests that one of the main causes of such situations is the lack of effective communication. The problem is that educators often use jargon and professional terms that confuse parents and discourage them from participating in the IEP process. Moreover, parents lack understanding of the special education procedures and policies, which may result in the lack of involvement or inflated expectations (ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001).

Slade et al. (2017) focused on assessing parents’ satisfaction with IEPs. The sample included parents of children age 4-8 diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Attitudes to the following domains were assessed: IEP content, services, conformity of services with IEP, and effectiveness of educators. It has been found that half of the participants were moderately or very satisfied with the services. At the same time, more than 60% of parents were dissatisfied with at least one of the components. Interestingly, the level of satisfaction varied depending on parent-school collaboration and family’s economic background but was unrelated to children’s characteristics, which is contrary to the findings of Dimitrios et al. (2008). Different settings and samples used in these studies may explain the discrepancy of findings.

One survey, however, provided more positive results. Glen Martin Associates (2015) found that the overwhelming majority of parents they surveyed were generally satisfied with the IEP process. They reported being given an opportunity to communicate with educators regularly and express their concerns. Parents also claimed they were encouraged to participate in the IEP process during the meetings. In fact, participants were convinced that their input was reflected in their child’s IEP (Glen Martin Associates, 2015). In this study, parents considered themselves to be equal partners with educators.
and were willing to make their contribution. The small number of parents who expressed dissatisfaction reported having concerns regarding the lack of meaningful involvement and communication. They also claimed that their input was not considered during IEP meetings (Glen Martin Associates, 2015).

One of the studies looked at the problem of IEP participation from fathers’ perspective (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Researchers argued that most of the available evidence comes from surveys and interviews of mothers while fathers’ experience with special education is mostly overlooked. Therefore, Mueller and Buckley (2014) used a sample of 20 fathers of children with special needs and interviewed them on their perceptions of IEP participation. It has been found that fathers perceived the IEP process as ineffective and in need for improvement. They confided that participation in this process was daunting, challenging, and overwhelming for them both emotionally and intellectually. Fathers also noted that due to the high amount of information and professional terms used, they were not able to participate in the process meaningfully but instead let themselves to be guided by teachers. Participants also noted that for IEP process to be effective, educators need to build relationships, establish communication, and listen to parents’ voice. Finally, fathers reported experiencing conflicts with educators due to the lack of agreement (Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

Evidence suggests that parents may provide valuable insight into the needed improvements to male IEP meetings more beneficial to all stakeholders. Interviews with 20 parents living in the Midwestern part of the USA demonstrated that IEP is always a very emotional experience for parents because they feel that their child’s personality and unique needs are not properly acknowledged (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Parents confided
that IEP documents were depersonalized and viewed children as mere objects with disabilities requiring help. Based on these complaints, parents provided some recommendations to be considered by educators. Among other things, they stated that IEP documents should be made more parent-friendly, with the focus being made on qualitative, easy-to-understand information. They also called for making the IEP process more collaborative and student-focused (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

One needs to emphasize that although many studies on parental satisfaction are available, most of them were conducted more than five years ago and may, therefore, not reflect the current state of things. Moreover, some of the studies mentioned above were conducted outside the United States, so the experience of parents from other countries may not always coincide with the experience of American parents of children with special needs. However, these articles were included in the analysis anyway to provide valuable perspective and insight into the problem. The next section is aimed at exploring prior research on minority parents’ experiences, with the focus being made on the United States.

Special Education Experiences of Minorities

Culture and country may play a critical role in forming parents’ perceptions of IEP and special education decision-making and participation. Bragiel (2016), for example, found that the majority of parents of students with special needs living in Poland were very satisfied with inclusive education. On the contrary, a recent study conducted by Magumise and Sefotho (2018) in Zimbabwe showed that while parents held positive beliefs regarding special education, they also experienced anxiety, confusion, and ambivalence and reported facing numerous problems with their children’s education.
At the same time, Yssel et al. (2007) compared parental perceptions of special education in the USA and South Africa and found that significant political, cultural, and ethnic differences between the countries did not affect parents’ expectations or experiences of their children’s special education. This inconsistency in findings highlights the need to continue research on the impact of culture to understand the degree to which parents’ cultural background may shape their experiences with, and attitudes to, special education. Similarly, it has been found that ethnicity may also shape parental experiences (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006). A study conducted in New York using a large sample of African-American, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian parents found that different ethnic groups place different importance on various school characteristics including parental involvement, technology, and administration (Friedman et al., 2006). Unfortunately, this study was conducted more than ten years ago, so its practical significance is limited.

USA-based research indicates that monitory parents of children with disabilities face more challenges associated with IEP and special education in general compared to their counterparts. A large body of research is dedicated to the experience of African-American families, who have been historically discriminated and excluded in all social spheres including education. This overt and covert discrimination now extends to other spheres such as special education and forces parents to advocate for their children’s rights more fiercely. The system of special education tends to automatically exclude African American students with disabilities without trying to find a setting where these children would perform optimally (Felton, 2017). Given this reality, it is not surprising that
parents of these children face numerous difficulties when it comes to interacting with schools.

Williams (2007) studied African-American parents’ perceptions of special education and found that these parents viewed special education as a tool used by the white educators to remove their children with special needs from the general classroom setting. While educators’ intentions may not be discriminatory per se, there is ample evidence showing that for some reason, minority children are overrepresented in special education (Harper, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2013). Parents interviewed by Williams (2007) also believed that children who had to study in segregated special education settings had lower quality of life after finishing school because of the lack of communication skills and ability to interact with peers without disability. African-American parents also believed that the faculty and staff members misused and abused special education (Williams, 2007). Naturally, their perceptions result in a lack of trust and unwillingness to compromise or even communicate with educators.

The problem of race was also touched upon in a study by Lovelace, Tamayo, and Robertson (2018) who explored the experience of African American mothers of boys diagnosed with ASD. One of the participants noted that her challenges in the special education sphere may be partially due to her race. Others did not blame racist practices but confided having many conflict situations with white educators and school staff. Lovelace et al. (2018) suggested that race may be the reason for the differential treatment of African-American children with autism and result in the overrepresentation of this population in special education. Racial discrimination in the sphere of special education was also discussed by Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevárez (2017) who argued that the belief that
something is wrong with back people still affects educators’ decisions about special education placement.

African-American parents living in the rural areas face even greater challenges when it comes to participation in special education (Stanley, 2015). A study exploring advocacy experience of low-income African-American mothers living in rural parts of the USA revealed multiple problems faced by this population. It has been found that mothers were seeking professional help before their children underwent evaluation. Their advocacy consisted of individual participation (e.g., communication with teachers) and collective advocacy (defending children’s rights in group meetings and protests). Participants also recognized the importance of asking questions, making requests and voicing their concerns, disagreeing with teachers, attending IEP meetings, choosing the right school setting, etc. (Stanley, 2015). Overall, mothers demonstrated a high level of awareness, which is contrary to some findings (Thompson, 2017). However, successful advocacy efforts were limited by the lack of understanding from educators, mothers’ beliefs that teachers were better prepared to make decisions, as well as work and time constraints. The lack of options in rural areas was cited as one of the most pressing issues for this population (Stanley, 2015).

The lack of knowledge about disability and relevant special education services among African-American parents was cited in many studies. Pearson and Meadan (2018), for example, conducted interviews with parents of children with autism and found that some of them knew very little about this condition and the ways it should be addressed, in terms of both special education and healthcare services. The lack of knowledge, in turn, impedes access to special education services (Pearson & Meadan, 2018).
Overrepresentation of African American children in special education is also partially explained by parental lack of knowledge (Thompson, 2017). Parents having no background knowledge about their child’s disability and relevant educational responses tend to rely heavily on teachers; the latter often decide to place children in special education without knowing about their unique needs. Parents’ powerlessness and limited understanding are aggravated by the complexity of the IEP process, inadequate communication with educators, and poor teacher training (Thompson, 2017).

Thus, research indicates that African-American parents often lack understanding and awareness of the concepts surrounding special education, so they cannot assess its relevance for their children (Thompson, 2017). Moreover, they also tend to feel uncomfortable during the IEP meetings and fail to participate in the referral process in a meaningful way (Smith-McClelland, 2017). Brandon et al. (2010) agreed and added that poor parent-teacher communication, the lack of trust by parents in the educational system, logistical limitations (e.g., transportation) and disagreement with special education placement may contribute to the lack of parental participation in this population. Alienation from the school environment due to the mentioned problems is a recurring theme in almost every study involving African American parents (Williams, 2007; Felton, 2017).

Other minority groups experience similar problems when it comes to communicating with educators and protecting their children’s interests. Montelongo (2014) found that unlike African-American parents interviewed by Williams (2007), Latino parents were convinced that their children benefit from IEP. At the same time, they reported having limited knowledge of their children’s special needs and could not
understand the complex terminology included in IEP documents due to the language barrier. It has also been found that Latino parents felt a lack of support and cooperation from educators (Montelongo, 2014). Their positioning and the resulting resource-scarce climate and discrimination limit their access to special education services (Angell & Solomon, 2017). Unfortunately, even when minority parents want to participate in the IEP team meetings, their voices are silenced, and they are made to believe that their contribution is neither necessary nor appreciated.

Contrary to these findings, an earlier study by Krach (2003) demonstrated that there was no significant difference between white and Latino parents regarding special education. Schools in Texas included in the sample seemed to succeed in enabling all groups of parents to fulfill their roles and participate in the IEP process. Similarly, Ruiz (2012) found that most Latino participants trusted educators working with their children and had an overall positive perception of the school staff. Meanwhile, Fish (2008) used a sample of predominately white, middle-class parents of children with special needs living in the southwestern U.S. state and found that the majority of them were satisfied with the IEP experience and inclusive education. This research vividly demonstrates how culture, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status may define parental experiences. The lack of consistency in the literature regarding Latino parents’ satisfaction and experiences points to the limited knowledge about this ethnic group and highlights the need to conduct more studies on the topic.

Furthermore, Nguyen and Hughes (2013) explored Asian parents’ perspectives on disability and special education. The sample consisting of 18 first-generation Asian parents was drawn from the population living in San Francisco Bay. Results of the survey
demonstrated that these parents did not hold culture-specific beliefs about disability; in particular, they did not believe that their child’s disability was caused by their previous sins, which is contrary to the argument provided by Pang (2011). Asian parents also admitted that they relied on their families and friends rather than their religious community when addressing their child’s needs. Surveyed parents were also actively involved in their children’s education and expected them to succeed academically despite their disabilities (Nguyen & Hughes, 2013).

However, a study by Ikezaki, Myck-Wayne, and Jung (2014) proved that not all immigrants of Asian descent have similar beliefs about disability. A survey of Japanese parents who were born and raised in Japan demonstrated that they have developed culturally-specific stereotypical beliefs about disability. In particular, they had rather negative attitudes toward disability in general because it is viewed as “abnormal” in their native country. Notably, while the participants agreed that the American system of special education was superior to that of Japan, they faced difficulties in obtaining services in the USA because of the language barrier and cultural differences (Ikezaki et al., 2014). As for the Chinese parents’ experiences with special education, it is believed that due to their traditionally held respect for authority, they may be unwilling to confront educators and express their concerns. Their respect, in turn, may be perceived by educators as passivity and the lack of interest, which is not true (Lindsey, 2013).

One needs to emphasize that Western expectations of disability and teacher-parent collaboration may be inconsistent with the cultural belief systems of some ethnic minority families (Lalvani, 2015). For example, in some cultures, it is shameful to speak about a child’s disability with strangers because it is believed to be caused by the
ancestors’ sins. Parents belonging to these cultures may, therefore, refuse to participate in the IEP process if they do not trust educators (Pang, 2011). Teachers should be able to recognize parents’ culture-specific beliefs and make sure that the suggested solutions are consistent with their perceptions of disability.

Apart from race and culture, the language barrier also has a significant effect on immigrant parents’ experiences and participation. Limited language proficiency does not allow schools to meet IDEA requirements and build meaningful interaction with parents while the latter become automatically excluded from the special education processes (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). When parents do not understand what is being said by teachers in IEP meetings or everyday communication, they become frustrated and refuse to participate and collaborate. In addition, the lack of language skills among some immigrant parents results in inequitable special education services, as they cannot advocate for their children’s rights as much as English-speaking parents can (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018).

Limited language skills result in numerous problems in the spheres of parental participation, partnerships with teachers, and building dialogue (Jung, 2011). As explained by Cheatham and Lim-Mullins (2018), parents whose native language is not English may be perceived as inferior to educators because of their inability to voice their ideas and concerns. By using English during IEP meetings, teachers automatically silence parents while their excessive use of jargon and terms complicate the situation for parents by confusing them even more. Moreover, the lack of knowledge about the nuances of language and culture may lead to misunderstanding and make teachers think that parents agree with them. For example, nodding in Chinese American parents does not necessarily
indicate agreement but simply demonstrates acknowledgment and respect for the speaker (Pang, 2011). Cheatham and Lim-Mullins (2018) added that when parents fail to participate in conversations in the way teachers expect them to do, the latter may not learn their viewpoints and make inappropriate decisions.

It is evident that the language barrier may result in the lack of connections with educators, thus excluding parents from the process (Jung, 2011). Parents cannot communicate their culture-specific values and practices, so they have to follow educators’ recommendations that are not always sensitive to a child’s cultural background. The disparity in communication styles should also be considered, as some parents may feel uncomfortable or isolated simply because they feel that teachers are not friendly enough, do not smile, etc. (Jung, 2011). The feeling of isolation resulting from this unpleasant communication experience discourages parents from asking questions and voicing their concerns.

Given these language barriers and cultural disparities, it is essential for educators to be sensitive to immigrant parents’ unique needs and challenges. IEP documents should be carefully translated to ensure that parents understand the process and can voice their opinion. Preliminary meetings with parents may also be useful for educators to explain the IEP process, inform parents about their rights, and prepare them for active participation (Lo, 2012). It is also important to improve the quality of, and access to, interpretation services so that parents could communicate their ideas via competent interpreters able to remain impartial. Educators, in turn, should be trained in intercultural communication and, possibly even in a foreign language(s) so that to avoid misunderstanding and provide respectful, relevant services (Lo, 2012; Pang, 2011).
Furthermore, Pang (2011) recommended making it comfortable for immigrant parents to attend IEP meetings because many of them do hourly-paid jobs and can visit schools only after work.

To summarize, minority parents face unique barriers to participation in special education. These barriers are mainly caused by the minority status and isolation of these populations, their limited language skills, and cultural differences in perceptions of disability. Although research on this topic is abundant, one needs to note that its quality and reliability is limited as a large body of evidence comes from dissertations. More peer-reviewed, large studies published by credible authors are needed to understand the experience of minority parents regarding special education and IEP participation specifically.

**Special Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Countries**

The system of special education in the post-Soviet countries is currently similar to that existing in the United States. However, the path towards building this system significantly differs, and it left its mark on the way students with disabilities are now treated in these countries. Moreover, the historical development of special education has inevitably affected parents’ and educators’ perceptions of disability, which cannot but affect the way they address the needs of special-education children. Literature exploring the history of special education in the USSR and post-Soviet times is discussed in this chapter, allowing the researcher to determine the main characteristics of this system today and outline the key policies and practices that might have affected the way Slavic people perceive disability and special education.
One needs to start by citing Phillips (2010), who argued that the history of disability policy and special education in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union has been underresearched while “disabled persons living under these regimes remain an ‘unknown population’” (p. 43). There have been limited body of literature conducted in the USSR and earlier, so knowledge about this time period is incomplete. As explained by Phillips (2010), the topic of disability was not widely discussed in tsarist Russian and was not ideologically appropriate in the Soviet era, so scholars tried to avoid speaking about it on the national and policy levels.

Evidence allows suggesting that in the pre-modern era, disabled people were either fully integrated into the society or fully excluded from it since there is no proper mentioning of this population in the historical sources. Phillips (2010) suggested that disabled people were supported by their families and local religious communities, and they were expected to work and live alongside non-disabled people. In the 18th century, the main supporters were still families and the church, but the government began to play a more prominent role. For example, Tsar Peter I actively supported the identification and regulation of the disabled people’s lives. The rights of intellectually disabled individuals called *duraki* (“fools”) were severely limited, as they were denied property rights and prohibited from getting married. Increased regulation gradually led to the establishment of institutions dealing with people with disabilities; in tsarist Russia, they were referred to as “madhouses.” In other words, people with disabilities were isolated from the society because they were believed to be unable to take care of themselves and benefit their communities (Phillips, 2010).
According to Kalinnikova and Trygged (2014), by the end of the 19th century, disability care in Russia became very similar to that of the European countries. Scholars shared their knowledge and findings with foreign colleagues, thus building a theoretical base for further developments in the field. At the same time, only a small number of persons with a disability received education at that time. Those who were lucky to be supported received resources from charities, as there was no nation-wide governmental policy in this relation (Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014). This is consistent with the argument by Phillips (2010), who noted that while people with disabilities were supported by the Orthodox church and elites through charity work, no adequate state support for them was available.

Swift and dramatic historic changes in Russian Empire changed the perceptions of disability and resulted in considerable policy changes. The Russian Revolution of 1905–1907, the First World War of 1914–1918, the October Revolution in 1917 and the civil war that began soon after the Revolution inevitably changed the country (Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2017). In the context of severe economic problems, destruction, and poverty, the government was unable to take care of the disabled citizens including children. There were thousands of orphans and homeless children, many of which were disabled and required professional help. Addressing these issues was later recognized as one of the central aims of national importance. New institutions operating in the spirit of collectivism were established, which sought to make children healthy and capable of contributing their skills to building the Soviet state (Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2017).

The attitudes to disability in the USSRRA were contradictory. The principle “he who does not work, neither shall he eat” worked for a long time, making people with
disabilities suffer from hunger and abject poverty. Those who failed to work for the state for a minimum of 25 years were denied pensions, even despite the fact that they were physically unable to work (Aron, 1990). Because of the importance placed on labor in the Soviet Union, people with disabilities who were unable to work and engage in socially useful activities were automatically excluded from the community and collective discourse (Hoge, 2015; Phillips, 2010). Paradoxically, though, McCagg and Siegelbaum (1989) argued that there was “some sort of specially Russian warmth and understanding that crops up among ordinary people when they encounter the disabled” (p. 297).

As for the special education, the situation was rather complicated as well. As noted by Malofeev (1998), there was a dangerous myth that with the strengthening of socialistic state, there would be no handicapped people. This myth resulted in governmental unwillingness to see the real scale of problems faced by children and adults with disabilities. Because statistical research was banned, it was impossible to determine the number of people who needed special help or develop relevant educational policies. In the 1930s, it was even prohibited to test children’s cognitive and motor development, which prevented doctors and educators from initiating timely and adequate responses. In the 1935, the government decided to establish special schools for children with disabilities, but these were separate institutions available only in large cities (Malofeev, 1998). The overall policy of excluding children with disabilities from the general educational policy continued for many years. Even though the policymakers later recognized the necessity of inclusive practices, the majority of children with special needs could not receive education in general schools because of the lack of resources and teacher training (Malofeev, 1998).
Research and practice underpinning the provision of special services to children with disabilities were influenced by the science of defectology developed in the USSR in the 1920s-1930s (Byford, 2018). Defectology was concerned with the research and care of children with disabilities, developmental pathologies, and special needs and mainly focused on children who were believed to be “‘difficult to cure’, ‘difficult to teach’, and ‘difficult to discipline.’” (Byford, 2018, p. 67). This science was closely connected with the study of children’s biopsychosocial development, which was referred to as “paedology.” In the 1930s, paedology was condemned by the Communist Party, so the research in both these interconnected fields was limited to separate institutions. As a result, research findings of such prominent Russian scholars as Lev Vygotsky were not properly recognized and applied despite their significant contribution to the field (Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2017).

During the Soviet period following the Second World War, special education in the USSR mainly addressed the needs of children with physical disabilities, mild mental disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, and speech disorders (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007). These groups of children were educated in separate institutions where they lived most of the time. Children with more severe problems who were thought to be “uneducable” were either taken care of at home or sent in special institutions (Phillips, 2010). To put it differently, the system of special education “emphasized disability instead of ability, segregated education instead of social integration, and generalized instead of individualized educational programs” (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007, p. 1290). For decades, multiple problems faced by children with disabilities were
recognized by their parents only and not addressed properly on the educational level due to the lack of awareness, teacher training, and financial resources (Malofeev, 1998).

Some positive minor changes still occurred, though (Phillips, 2010). As argued by Malofeev (1998), in the 1950s, there was a growing recognition that children with physical disabilities required a qualitatively different type of instruction. During this period, special education institutions across the country diversified, and evaluation methods improved, allowing professionals to better identify and address special needs. By the late 1970s, the system of special education had formed, and it remained unchanged until the dissolution of the USSR in the late 1980s (Malofeev, 1998).

However, the growing body of research on disability and practical improvements was still not enough, as children with special needs were almost entirely excluded from the social and educational life and could not interact with their non-disabled peers (Phillips, 2010).

For some time after the dissolution of the USSR, the state of things in the sphere of special education did not change considerably. Mladenov (2015) provided a rather depressing description of disability policies in the post-Soviet times. The author noted that after the dissolution of the USSR, people with physical or intellectual disabilities were stigmatized and segregated. Many states replicated the Soviet approach to dealing with this population by building systems that confined them to residential institutions and sheltered workshops without integrating them into the society. Thus, people with disabilities in postsocialist countries faced isolation, “economic deprivation, cultural devaluation, and political disempowerment” (Mladenov, 2015, p 104; Zaviršek, 2014). As explained by Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova (2013), during the Soviet times, the model of special education adopted in the Russian republic was reproduced in the rest of the
republics with some minor changes, so it took much time for these states to reconsider their approach to the provision of special education after gaining independence.

For example, in the Caucasian region, the system of general education faced stagnation in the 1990s, so special education received no proper attention as well (Rasell & Larskaia-Smirnova, 2013). Many children did not receive formal education, and children with disabilities were also confined to their home settings. There was little reflection on the policy level about how to address the needs of a diverse student population (Rasell & Larskaia-Smirnova, 2013). Baltic countries, in turn, managed to move to a more advanced inclusive education system that allowed children to either be included in the general school setting or study in separate institutions (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007). States like Lithuania have achieved significant progress in terms of diversifying and improving the system of special education.

The Russian Federation, the largest post-Soviet state, has been slowly moving towards a more inclusive educational system (Valeeva & Kulesza, 2016). Although several laws have been adopted since the 1990s to provide for education of all population groups, insufficient financing and poor law enforcement result in unsatisfactory compliance with these laws. According to the Library of Congress (2015), Russian children with disabilities are often excluded by the general schools and have to either visit boarding schools away from parents or be educated at home. More importantly, there appears to be a strong bias among teachers and parents of children without disabilities. In particular, there is a strong conviction that the inclusion of children with special needs will distract their children and disrupt classroom activities (Library of Congress, 2015).
Thus, disability in the post-Soviet countries, especially Russia, still isolates people and excludes them from the social life. As argued by Waldman, Perlman, and Cooke (2016), the city infrastructure across the country is not suitable for physically disabled people, so they are confined to their homes. The same can be said about many schools that are not built to address the needs of diverse student populations. Furthermore, adults with disabilities face barriers to employment. The majority of them employed in specially created jobs that isolate them even more and allow them to contact only other people with disabilities. Medical professionals and hospitals are not properly trained to deal with various types of disabilities, while the government does not allocate enough financial resources to change the situation (Waldman et al., 2016). Given this sad situation, it is not surprising that interests of children with disabilities are not properly recognized, and many of them are not given individualized educational services.

One needs to add that the research indicates the lack of understanding of disability among Slavic parents and educators and the unwillingness of the latter to work with children with special needs. For example, a study by Volosnikova and Efimova (2016) revealed that only a small number of teachers are ready to work with students with disabilities while the rest were not psychologically and professionally prepared to address their needs. One needs to note, though, that the research regarding parental perceptions in post-Soviet countries is limited, so more studies are strongly recommended to address this gap. Without understanding how parents in post-Soviet countries perceive disability and inclusion, it is difficult to explain their attitudes and behaviors when they are faced with the need to seek special education in the United States.
Special Education and the Slavic Culture: Gap in Research

The issue of Slavic parents’ perceptions is important for the American educational setting because of the large number of immigrants from post-Soviet states currently residing in the USA. Statistics provided by Alperin and Batalova (2016) shows that there were 2,123,000 immigrants from the Eastern Europe living in the USA in 2016. These mainly came from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – countries with predominately Slavic population. Research shows that immigration from Eastern Europe has always been significant. In the period between 1880s-1920s, nearly 20 million people came to the USA, fleeing political and religious persecution. The number of immigrants from this part of the world increased considerably in 1990s-2010s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Alperin & Batalova, 2016).

As for the state distribution, the 2012-2016 data show that almost half of all immigrants from Europe live in four states including New York, California, Florida, and Illinois. Cities with the largest number of East European immigrants are New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. According to the statistics provided by the Russian American Media (2019), there are more than one million Russian-speaking residents in Northern California, of which the majority lived in San Francisco and Bay Area. As for the demographic characteristics of this population, it is believed that compared to the overall foreign-born population, Slavic Americans are better educated and have higher household income. Their language proficiency is relatively high (Alperin & Batalova, 2016). The Slavic community in Northern California is flourishing, and many of the immigrants invest in business and have property (Russian American Media, 2019). Although the majority of the population is middle-aged, there are younger families with children as
well. The data on the number of children with special needs in Slavic immigrants’ families is not available, so it is difficult to assess special education service utilization in this population.

More importantly, while the experience of African-American, Latino, Asian, and other minority parents has been well-documented in the literature, little is still known about how Slavic parents perceive special education services and their participation in them. Studies analyzed in this literature review show that the system of special education in the USSR was built on stereotypes and controversial ideas, which were later adopted by independent post-Soviet states to promote further exclusion and stigmatization of children with special needs (Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2010). Discriminatory terminology including such terms as “non-educable,” “retarded,” and “defective” is no longer used in the post-Soviet educational sphere; more sensitive and inclusive terminology and a focus on a more inclusive educational system have been reported (Malofeev, 1998). However, educators’ negative attitudes toward inclusion, limited knowledge awareness, and infrastructural issues hamper the development of special education in these countries and cultivate stereotypical views on disability that may affect immigrants’ attitudes towards special education in the USA (Kavelashvili, 2017; Martz, 2005).

As shown in this review, no up-to-date studies can be obtained that would explore how culture and stereotypes about disability affect Slavic immigrant parents’ perceptions of special education in the USA. The only available evidence on parental views comes from studies conducted in the post-Soviet countries, so it is not applicable to the American educational setting (Martz, 2005). Therefore, the aim of this study is to fill this
gap in research by investigating Slavic parents’ perceptions of disability, their experiences with special education, and their participation in assessment and IEP meetings. The researcher believes that this study will provide valuable insight into the culture-specific beliefs held by this immigrant population and help inform the development of culturally-sensitive and student-focused counseling and diagnostic procedures.

Summary

As shown in this literature review, the systems of special education in the United States and post-Soviet countries have developed differently and are based on different ideas and principles. While the American system is guided by inclusion and individualized instruction, the system of special education in post-Soviet states, especially Russia, still excludes and isolates children with disabilities. At the same time, issues connected with instruction, teacher training, and equal treatment of all students are present in both parts of the world and point to the need to conduct more research on the topic. Significant improvements are needed to include children with special needs into the general classrooms and provide them with necessary services. These may be built on the theories by Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939) presented in this review, as they offer valuable insight into the changes needed to accommodate each special needs child.

The central part of this review was dedicated to exploring parental experiences and perceptions of disability, special education, and IEP meetings participation. It has been found that parents experience immense stress when they seek professional help, which may be due to the lack of knowledge and awareness, inadequate teacher training, stereotyping, the lack of resources, and many other problems. These problems often
become an insurmountable barrier for minority parents whose experience is even more challenging due to poor language skills, financial constraints, discrimination, etc. Unfortunately, to the author’s best knowledge, there are no studies that would explore Slavic parents’ experiences of special education in the United States. This literature review points to the paucity of research in this relation and emphasizes the need to fill this gap in knowledge.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

It is recognized that the researchers should have a range of methodologies available to them as they seek to generate valuable knowledge. Therefore, it is essential for them to be sufficiently trained to choose the relevant methodology for each specific research purpose and content and apply it effectively to obtain decision-relevant, meaningful information (Cooley & Bickel, 2012). Not all methods are equally valid for all research settings, so it is crucial for the researcher to be able to select the one most suitable for a particular context and able to produce information relevant to a target audience. According to Seasay (2012), the description of the methodology used in the research thus becomes a major part of the study, as it demonstrates how well the researcher considered the context and aims of the study and whether the author selected the optimal methodological path to achieving the research goals.

This chapter outlines the research methodology used in this study. Specifically, the researcher provides a detailed description of the purpose, research questions, population, study sample, instrumentation, data collection, and methods of data analysis. Moreover, the chapter includes the reflection on limitations associated with the selected methodology.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and to identify and describe the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?
Central Research Questions

In line with the stated purpose, the following central questions have been formulated:

1. How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

2. How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Sub-Questions

To answer this question, four sub-questions will also be addressed:

1. What cultural customs do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

2. What cultural attitudes do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

3. What supports do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

4. What barriers do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Design

Research design is a set of procedures used by the researcher to combine the components of research in a logical manner so that to address the research problem and answer the questions. The selection of the relevant research design is crucial because it
allows reducing bias and increasing trustworthiness of the collected and analyzed data (Scott & Morrison, 2007). An adequate research design should meet the following criteria: neutrality, reliability, validity, and generalization. Specifically, the results obtained in the study using a particular design should be free from bias, reliable, objective, and applicable to the target population. The description of the research design, in turn, is the central part of any methodology section because it allows the researcher to prove that the study was carefully thought out and well-designed and that its results have theoretical and/or practical implications.

There are two main types of research design including quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research deals with numbers, that is, it is based on the collection of data that can be presented numerically in the form of statistics and tables. Quantitative studies tend to have a narrow focus and provide less detail in relation to participants’ behavior, attitudes, and motivations (Fox & Bayat, 2008). The data in quantitative studies is collected using structured instruments (e.g., questionnaires) and can be analyzed and applied to a larger. The most significant advantage of quantitative research is that if rigorously conducted, it can provide objective, generalizable, and accurate data and help establish the cause-effect relationship between the variables (Fox & Bayat, 2008). However, the main disadvantage of a quantitative research design is that it does not allow understanding the participants’ subjective experience and, therefore, it is not suitable for the present study.

Qualitative research design, at the same time, fits this study’s purpose and scope. As explained by Matthews and Kostelis (2011), qualitative research is characterized by intensive, in-depth investigation of participants’ experiences in a real-world setting. This
type of research asks “how” and “why” specific phenomena exist and affects people. Compared to the quantitative study focusing on the objective exploration of the world, qualitative research seeks to understand this world through the eyes of participants (Matthews & Kostelis, 2011). Robert K. Yin, one of the most influential theorists in the area of qualitative research, provided five main characteristics of qualitative research. According to Yin (2010), qualitative research seeks to study the meaning of people’s lives; represents participants’ views and perspectives; considers the contextual conditions in which people live; gains insights to explain human behavior, and, finally, uses multiple sources of evidence (triangulation) to reduce bias. Unlike quantitative research seeking to either support or reject the hypothesis, thus obtaining the yes/no answer, qualitative research generates more detailed, deliberate, meaningful answers, so it is more suitable for exploring people’s subjective experiences (Matthews & Kostelis, 2011).

There are several cases when the qualitative methodology is the most suitable option. First, it is useful when very little or no prior research on the topic exists. Gaining insightful information from participants thus allows filling the gap in knowledge and creates a basis for further research in this area (Yin, 2010). Second, qualitative research is appropriate when the study focuses on subjective meanings attributed to the social phenomena by the participants themselves. Third, a qualitative study is the only relevant solution when the researcher focuses on the data not amenable to counting or measuring and when no clear variables and problems can be isolated and defined (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016).

This study employed the qualitative research design to explore the subject experiences of Slavic parents of children with special needs who refuse to participate in
the IEP and testing process. Qualitative research is the best choice in this case because it allows investigating participants’ subjective experiences and attitudes that cannot be measured numerically. Moreover, it is appropriate because of the lack of background knowledge on the topic. As noted in the previous chapter, there is a gap in research when it comes to an understanding Slavic parents’ attitudes to special education and their experiences of facing the need to use special education for their children. Overall, the qualitative research design is appropriate for answering the broad questions and addressing the purpose of this study.

Furthermore, the researcher should select a qualitative research approach. There is no unanimity among the researchers as for the classification of these approaches. According to Creswell (2007), there are five approaches including case study, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative research. Other scholars also distinguish clinical research and participatory research (Merriam, 2009). This study employed the phenomenological approach. As noted by Patton (2015), phenomenological analysis “seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or a group of people” (p. 482). This approach helps to study the meaning of lived experiences and allows seeing the problem from the participants’ point of view (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Mertens, 2005). Notably, phenomenology has been successfully used in educational research and studies of special education, so it was suitable for the given research as well (Mertens, 2005). Given the fact that little is known about the unique experiences of Slavic parents of children with special needs, it was decided that phenomenology could offer the needed insight into this population’s beliefs and attitudes, thus filling the knowledge gap.
Population

As defined by Polit and Beck (2004), the population of the study is “the entire aggregation of cases in which a researcher is interested” (p. 289). In the given study, a population is a group of people from which a sample is drawn, that is, the total number of Slavic people living in Northern California. According to the recent estimates, there are approximately 20 million Slavs in the United States, which mainly come from Poland, Russia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Bosnia (“Slavs of America,” n.d.). Furthermore, there are nearly 1,100,000 Russian-speaking residents in Northern California, most of whom live in Greater Sacramento and San Francisco and Bay Area. An average Slavic family in the Bay Area consists of four people while an average family in the Greater Sacramento Area consists of five members (Russian American Media, 2019). The population for this study was the estimated 1,100,000 Slavic residents of Northern California.

Target Population

As for the target population, Bickman and Rog (1998) defined this term as the “group about which the researcher would like to make statements” (p. 109). It may be public at large, some specific demographic group, members of an organization, etc. Best and Krueger (2004) stressed that it is critically important to identify the target population correctly because researchers failing to do so risk generating misleading conclusions. Thus, the target population of this study included the total number of Slavic parents of children with special needs at the schools of Sacramento County, California. One of the ways to determine the approximate number of these parents is to look at the number of Slavic school age children who may qualify for special education services. Statistics
show that there are approximately 36,000 Slavic school age children in the Sacramento area (Gurzhiy, 2015). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2018) claims that 14% of all school children have special needs, and 34% have learning disabilities. Therefore, one may suggest that there are at least 12,240 Slavic children who may need special education services. Based on these rough estimates, one may understand the approximate number of parents who constitute the target population of this study.

Sacramento County, California was selected due to the researcher’s proximity and access to local schools. Given the fact that this population is similar to Slavic communities across the United States, the findings could be generalized to the wider population. Slavic population is heterogeneous, as it includes people coming from different post-USSR states. However, these countries share significant similarities in political structures, traditions, customs, languages, and culture, all of which affect people’s worldviews and attitudes to special education (Vinokurov & Libman, 2012). For many decades, the USSR imposed its political, social, and economic policies on member states, which resulted in a formation of strong connections that persist today (Pavlenko, 2008). Therefore, the researcher assumes that attitudes and beliefs demonstrated by Slavic parents living in Sacramento County reflect the attitudes and beliefs characteristic for the general Slavic diaspora in the USA.

**Sample**

A sample is group of people selected directly from the population of interest (Schutt, 2006). According to Levy and Lemenshow (2013), sample refers to the subset of the population, that is, a portion of a population accessible to the researcher (Levy & Lemeshow, 2013). In social sciences, it is impossible to collect data from every person
meeting the inclusion criteria but only from some limited part of the target population, so the process of sampling is a necessity. Sampling, in turn, is the method of selecting a given number of participants from the target population (Lodigo et al., 2010). The strategy for selecting the sample influences the quality of data and the inferences that a researcher can make from it (Mertens, 2005). Qualitative researchers most often use convenience sampling, purposive sampling, snowball sampling, or quota sampling (Gentles et al., 2015; Rahi, 2017).

It was practically impossible and impractical for the researcher to access all members of the target population. Therefore, a specific population sample was normally selected using predefined criteria (Lodico et al., 2006). The sample for this study was drawn from the population using the following criteria:

1. Slavic parents (from former USSR countries).
2. Children have an active IEP and/or are active in the testing process.
3. Recommended for participation by the Sacramento County SELPA or school site principal.
4. Willing to participate.

Sample Selection Process

These parents were referred to the researcher by various principals in the Sacramento County area. The researcher reached out to the director of Sacramento County Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) for a recommended list of parents that would fit the criteria of the study (parents who were Slavic [Russian, Ukrainian, etc.] and who were initially hesitant to participate in the testing process.
The selection of adequate sample size was another concern. A sample size of more than 12-15 people may be big enough to conduct a thorough analysis of collected data while the sample of less than five would be too small for obtaining new, valuable information (Suter, 2011). Some scholars maintain that determining the sample size in qualitative research is a matter of judgment. Since this type of research seeks to describe and interpret rather than to generalize, it is allowed to limit the sample to 10-12 participants only (Fortune, Reid, & Miller, 2013; Lichtman, 2006). By limiting the sample to this number, the researcher can cover material in-depth and form a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Qualitative analyses typically require a smaller sample size than quantitative analyses. Qualitative sample sizes should be large enough to obtain feedback for most or all perceptions. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend the concept of saturation for achieving an appropriate sample size in qualitative studies. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) recommends five to 25 and Morse (1994) suggests at least six. There are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research. Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 1990).

Given these considerations, a total number of 15 parents were interviewed for this study. These were 15 people residing in the Sacramento area who were recommended by SELPA director and gave consent to participate. This sample is sufficient for the qualitative study which typically relies on relatively small samples to obtain in-depth, rich information about participants’ lived experiences (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Besides, due to time, cost, and human resource constraints, it was not feasible to include
a larger sample. Thus, the study employed purposive sampling, that is, sampling based on characteristics of the population and the study’s purpose (Daniel, 2011; Ray, 2012). The goal of purposive sampling was not to obtain a large sample but to select people, places, and phenomena that can provide the richest and most detailed information to answer the research questions (Lodico et al., 2010). Purposive sampling is the suitable in the given context due to the limited availability of Slavic parents of children with special needs and their potential unwillingness to take part in this research.

Additionally, the researcher employed homogeneous sampling in this study. To put it simply, it means that the individuals within the sample were similar on account of the shared experiences, which suggests that they experienced the same phenomenon (special education testing and IEP) in similar settings (elementary schools). Homogeneity implies that the findings of this study may be transferable to other similar people facing the same issues in the same contexts. However, it is important to realize that the interpretation of the phenomenon under study and the individual’s own reality may vary from person to person, so the findings may not be equally applicable to all concerned (Baldwin, 2018).

The researcher went to the Sacramento County Special Education Local Plan Area director to acquire permission to conduct the study. The researcher worked with the districts’ superintendents and principals to contact parents and ask them to be willing to participate. Since every precaution must be taken when working with such sensitive issues as special education, the researcher also contacted a well-known Slavic community member that is a radio personality, parent liaison, writer, and a minister. His role was to be an advocate during interviews to monitor stress with authority to stop the interview if
he perceived it causing any harm to parent. In compliance with Brandman University’s Institutional Review Board (BUIRB) process, the researcher completed an assessment for protection of the research subjects. Additionally, letters of consent from the researcher (Appendix A) along with a letter (Appendix B) detailing the purpose of the study and expectations of the interviews and interview questions were provided to the participants prior the interviews.

**Instrumentation**

The next step is to describe the instrument used for data collection, as it determined the content and quality of obtained data. The most common data collection strategies in qualitative research include participant observation, document analysis, and interviewing (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). The first two were not available due to the sensitivity and confidentiality issues, so the best option in the given case was to interview people who agreed to participate and learn about the issue from their perspective. Furthermore, while quantitative research employs standardized instruments to collect the data, the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research is the researcher, who develops the instrument based on the research questions. In this study, the researcher developed the instrument for interviewing using the literature review findings and research questions (Appendix C). Below is a table of research questions aligning with interview questions.
The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process. In addition, it was the purpose to identify and describe the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Central Research Questions</th>
<th>Sub Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process.</td>
<td>How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process?</td>
<td>What cultural customs do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process?</td>
<td>Interview Q 2, 4, 8, and 9</td>
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<td>In addition, it was the purpose to identify and describe the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process.</td>
<td>How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process?</td>
<td>What supports do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process?</td>
<td>Interview Q 3, 5, 7, and 9</td>
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<td>What barriers do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process?</td>
<td>Interview Q 3, 6, and 9</td>
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Table 3. Alignment of Purpose, Research Questions, and Data Collection

Creating Interview Questions

In-depth recorded interviews were the instrument of data collection in this study. Interview in qualitative research seeks to help the researcher to describe and understand
the meaning of the main themes and aspects of the experience being investigated (Lichtman, 2006). Interviewing allows looking Interview may be conducted in the form of informal conversation or using an interview guide approach or standardized open-ended approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2010).

The informal conversational interview is the most unstructured of the three types mentioned above. The researcher using this approach allows the conversation to flow freely and does not restrict the scope of topics or limit them to some specific questions. However, the main disadvantage of this informal conversational interview is that it makes it difficult for the researcher to analyze, structure, and synthesize the collected data; therefore, it was not suitable for the present study seeking to answer specific questions.

The interview guide approach, in turn, allows the researcher to use some prepared questions and topics but exercise a certain degree of freedom when communicating with interviewees. In particular, it allows to change the wording or sequence of questions and add clarifying questions if needed. Although the researcher using this approach obtains more standardized data, it is still not suitable for the well-structured and logical analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2010).

In this study, the researcher used the third type of interviewing – standardized semi-structured interview. The main advantage of this type is that it allows organizing the interview logically and controlling the topics discussed. The researcher has a specific set of interview questions that he asks exactly as written, so every participant responds within the same framework. This approach allows standardizing the responses and enables easier analysis and interpretation of results (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). Another benefit of this approach is that it allows achieving objectivity and reducing any
unwanted interviewer effect. Finally, it allows the interview to be focused, thus enabling the researcher to collect the needed data within a limited amount of time (Martella et al., 2013). The main weakness of standardized open-ended interview is that it may be too formal and less spontaneous, which makes it hard for the interviewer to adjust the questions to each participant to elicit the appropriate response.

The researcher used phenomenological interviewing, which implies engaging the participants in a conversation and encouraging them to share their experience in detail (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2013; Valle & Halling, 2013). According to Conway and Conway (2014), interviewer using phenomenological interviewing should listen carefully to the participants and ask thoughtful and relevant follow-up questions to obtain the rich and detailed data. It is important for the interviewer to refrain from contributing one’s ideas during the conversation, but the supportive and understanding tone is essential for the creation of a favorable and comfortable atmosphere. Jones et al. (2013) noted that open-ended questions are most commonly used in phenomenological interviewing because they allow the participants to describe their experiences of the phenomenon and the meanings they create. Naturally, phenomenological interviews should be conducted with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon first-hand. In this study, the researcher employs open-ended interview questions to collect the data from people who have encountered the need to seek special education services and who have participated or are still participating in the IEP or/and testing.

As noted above, the topic of special education is a very sensitive one. Besides, given the potential challenges that could be faced by Slavic parents with limited English skills, it was decided to invite an advocate to attend the interviews. This person knows
both English and Russian well and can translate any words and phrases that are not clear to the participants. Besides, the presence of an advocate gave the participants more confidence, which was crucial for obtaining detailed responses. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the researcher also translated all letters sent to interviewees in Russian because it is the commonly understood language. All letters were sent in both English and Russian to ensure that no gaps in understanding were present. For the same purpose, the interview protocol was also provided in both Russian and English.

The interview protocol used in this study consists of several parts. Following the introduction section, the researcher followed the interview guide. The body of questions constitutes the core of the instrument, which is then concluded with the closure. A total number of ten questions was included, with a few follow-ups for each question to get more clarifications and collect rich data. Notably, all ten questions were connected with the synthesis matrix (Appendix D) topics developed based on the review of the literature, which means that they were a product of background research and analysis. Each question was also related to the main research questions of this study and helped collect the needed data to answer them properly.

**Researcher as Key Instrument**

Although qualitative studies such as this one rely on standardized interview protocols, the impact of researcher on the process of data collection and analysis cannot be fully eliminated. Researcher’s involvement in the process is one of the main characteristics of qualitative studies, as this person participates in the collection and interpretation of data. The researcher immerses oneself in the study and actively interacts with the participants, which means that the researcher’s personality, skills, and ethical
values play a critical role. The author of this study works in education as an elementary school vice principal, so their skills and knowledge in the field definitely play a role. However, the fact that the researcher is a primary instrument in qualitative research is not necessarily bad. In fact, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) maintained that as a human being, the researcher can immediately respond and adapt to the setting, as well as expand understanding of the studied phenomenon through clarification and nonverbal cues.

However, the researcher’s involvement is often perceived as a limitation if the basic requirements are not met. For example, the researcher may interpret the information subjectively due to being affected by bias and prejudice. It is, therefore, extremely important for the researcher to identify and be aware of the biases to ensure objectivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As an immigrant from Ukraine, the researcher may be biased towards the participants or even share some of their beliefs, so it is critically important to constantly reassess one’s values and beliefs to identify and eliminate bias before they interfere with the research process.

It is also essential to provide researchers with the necessary skills and apply stringent supervision to enable better extraction of information from qualitative studies. To address the limitations of researcher involvement, qualitative studies are often conducted by several people who divide responsibilities. For example, the person collecting the data may involve another researcher to interpret it afterward. In this study, the author invited a second researcher to help examine the collected data and extract themes to be closely analyzed.
Validity and Reliability

According to Lodigo et al. (2010), those conducting qualitative study using a standardized instrument should also dwell on the critical reliability and validity evidence justifying the application of the developed instrument. Validity in qualitative research is the ability of the data collecting method (instrument) to measure the phenomena in question. Within the context of this research, these are Slavic parents’ perceptions of special education in the United States and their experiences regarding their encounter with special education services. Validity thus refers to the degree of honesty, truthfulness, depth, and richness of the collected and presented data; it allows suggesting that participants’ responses are sincere (Callara & Callara, 2008). To put it simply, ensuring validity means demonstrating that the findings can be used to enable action, policy improvement, or further research and that they are generally trustworthy.

One of the ways to increase validity is to present detailed, rich descriptions of participants’ responses so that readers would be able to decide upon their own interpretations of findings and compare them with those provided by the author. Data triangulation (reliance on several sources) and the use of mixed methods in research are also believed to strengthen the validity of the study (Cho, 2018). In this study, the responses generated using the interview questions were quoted throughout the text to support the researcher’s interpretation. Validity was also enhanced through the use of multiple researchers and mechanically recorded data. One researcher read and approved interview questions, another researcher translated the interview protocol and questions into Russian, and a third researcher was an intercoder for data. In addition, the researcher
used prior literature to formulate the questions and then tested them in a pilot study, which is described below.

**Content Validity**

Content validity refers to the extent to which an instrument represents all key aspects of a concept (phenomenon) studied (Yin, 2010). Here, content validity concerns whether the developed instrument can help answer the formulated research questions. To ensure content validity in this study, the researcher created interview questions and protocols and asked an expert in special education to review these questions and provide constructive feedback. This feedback was then used to revise the questions, that is, modify the wording to avoid any ambiguity and misunderstanding, as well as cover all key dimensions of the problem. A variety of questions ultimately included in the interview included all areas of the problem and were complemented by additional questions that the researcher prepared to ask for clarifications and collect the most detailed data possible.

Next, the pilot testing was conducted. This testing included interviewing one person who matched all the criteria of the study was attended by one observant who provided their feedback regarding the administration of the interview as well to detect any actions by the researcher that might indicate bias. The practice interview was recorded so that the process could be later analyzed. Pilot testing was a valuable experience for the researcher, as it allowed practicing interviewer skills, increased confidence, and illuminated areas for further development for the researcher as an interviewer (Appendix E). All interviews followed the same protocol, and the researcher
read most of explanations, protocols, and questions to ensure that each participant covers the same issues and topics in their responses.

**Reliability**

Reliability in qualitative research is understood as the extent to which results are consistent in different contexts and settings and represent the total population under study. However, researchers recognize that due to the nature of qualitative studies, their results cannot be accurately reproduced as participants’ unique experiences and perceptions differ depending on the setting and individual characteristics (Ary et al., 2018; Syed & Nelson, 2015). It does not mean, though, that the concept of reliability is not applicable in this case. Some of the most common methods of ensuring high reliability of qualitative studies include researcher reflexivity and intercoder reliability (also referred to as interrater reliability) (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

**Data Collection**

The aim of data collection in a qualitative phenomenological study is to collect the data that would reflect participants’ position regarding the topic or issue under research. While quantitative research collects specific data using standardized instruments to support or refute hypotheses and establish correlations between variables, qualitative research explores the meaning participants attribute to the social phenomenon (Randolf, 2008). To do so, the researcher used standardized open-ended interview questions and performed interviews with 15 Slavic parents of elementary school children who participated or are still participating in special education testing and the IEP process. The research was conducted in Sacramento County, California, which has a significant number of Slavic immigrants.
The first step of data collection in studies involving human participants involves paying attention to ethical considerations and IRB. As explained by Nijhawan et al. (2013), informed consent is the process wherein participants are informed about all aspects of the study, which are important for them to make a decision. After studying all aspects of the study and the significance of the research for the advancement of knowledge and social policies, participants are invited to confirm their willingness to participate voluntarily. Nijhawan et al. (2013) emphasized that informed consent should be written in a language easily understood by potential participants, which means that it should not contain any ambiguous or misleading statements or complex terminology. In this study, the researcher followed these recommendations and developed an informed consent (Appendix A) form presenting the study’s goals, participants’ contribution to the current knowledge, and significance of the study for the educational field (Appendix B). The consent form also includes a concise description of what exactly is expected from participants (Appendix C). In addition, it emphasized that they were free to stop the interview and leave anytime they want.

Receiving an institutional review board (IRB) approval is another critical step that allows ensuring that the study is conducted according to the fundamental ethical standards. Federal requirements state that regardless of the researcher’s position, all studies involving human participants must be carefully reviewed and approved (Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008). Therefore, data collection in this study began only after the researcher obtained the University’s IRB approval. Johnson and Christensen (2010) highlighted that researchers should remain attuned to the ethics of their research even after receiving the IRB approval because of the number of ethical concerns that can
emerge during the research process (e.g., privacy). To maintain confidentiality and privacy in this study, the researcher stored the obtained data on a password-protected computer kept in the researcher’s home and assigned numbers to participants to avoid using their true names.

**Interview Process**

Participants were called over the phone and explained the goals and procedures of the research. The researcher made interview appointments with those who were willing to participate and selected a location that was most comfortable for them where the interview would be held. A copy of the interview questions was sent by e-mail to the participants several days before the interviews so that they would have enough time to study them. One the one hand, one may assume that by giving respondents the time to review the questions, researchers lose a chance to collect spontaneous, raw data and give interviewees time to think about their responses, adjust and interpret them thoroughly. On the other hand, Englander (2012) emphasized that qualitative interviews serve to not only collect respondents’ responses but also record the deeper level of their interpretations, so such preliminary procedures should not be overlooked.

Guerrero-Castañeda, Menezes, and Ojeda-Vargas (2017) provided some valuable recommendations as to how researchers should behave during the interview to build trust and confidence in interviewees. According to the authors, it is important for the researcher to avoid using formal clothes which could be interpreted as a sign of social superiority. They also recommended paying attention to the body language and avoid poses and attitudes that could make participants feel uncomfortable. For example, Guerrero-Castañeda et al. (2017) reminded that keeping arms closed or strictly focusing
one’s eyes on the person should be avoided. Instead, the researcher should assume the neutral pose and look attentive, tranquil, and respectful. All these recommendations were followed in this study to create a favorable atmosphere for respondents and ensure that they felt comfortable and relaxed.

To build trust and elicit honest responses, the researcher conducted interviews face-to-face with each of the participants. According to Englander (2012), face-to-face interviews are often longer and, therefore, richer in terms of nuances and depth. In preparation for the face-to-face interview, the researcher gave each participant the informed consent form and IRB approval and asked them to study these documents carefully to ensure that they were aware of what was needed from them. After the researcher received written participants’ consent, the interview itself started. The researcher once again introduced the research topic, questions, and goals and then proceeded to ask the interview questions. Each interview lasted from 40 to 60 minutes approximately, depending on participants’ involvement and desire to provide in-depth clarifications. During the data collection process, the researcher asked probing questions to elicit more detailed responses. According to Gerrish and Lacey (2013), probing questions can help the researcher to explore, explain, clarify, or amplify, thus generating valuable and meaningful responses.

Interviewing participants whose native language is not English may be challenging because they have different language proficiency levels and may require language adjustment (Squires, 2009). Therefore, the researcher explained some educational phrases to the interviewees, so they knew what exactly the phrases meant and could provide accurate responses. Both researcher and the advocate are bilingual. To
avoid confusion and misunderstanding, such phrases as parental involvement, IEP, disability, and least restrictive environment were defined, explained, and or translated into Russian to the participants during the interview. In addition, they were encouraged to ask clarifying questions in case some of the words or phrases were not clear.

The researcher used an audio recorder to ensure a comprehensive and accurate record of interviewees’ responses and enable faster data analysis. In addition, notes were taken during the interviews to record participants’ emotions, facial expressions, and any other notable details that could improve the researcher’s understanding of responses. Both audio recordings and written notes were then used during the data analysis stage, which is described in detail below.

**Data Analysis**

Researchers recognize that qualitative data analysis is one of the most challenging and mysterious processes because the nature of qualitative data makes it impossible to develop some universal rules (Lichtman, 2006). However, there are some general rules that apply in this case. First of all, qualitative data collection employs inductive reasoning, which generates ideas from the collected data. In other words, the researcher uses data (in this case, interview findings) to develop explanations and interpretations and provide answers to the research questions. The next step in this process is comprehension, synthesis, and comparison of findings with prior literature.

Another common feature of qualitative data analysis across a variety of studies is the identification of themes and codes, which simplify data interpretation (Elliot, 2018; Lodico et al., 2010). Themes are big ideas that combine several codes in a way that allows the researcher to track the connections between interviewees’ experiences and
make sense of the common trends and patterns. Creswell (2013) defined themes as “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186). To identify these themes and codes, the researcher should read, re-read, and re-examine all data many times to make sure that no important idea is missing. Conducting this time-consuming phenomenological work implies making a significant intellectual effort, so the researcher should always be immersed and fully concentrated on the phenomenon (Guerrero-Castañeda et al., 2017). Once the data is carefully studied and understood, the researcher can identify the common topics (themes) emerging across interviews. There are normally no more than five or seven wider themes in the study while the number of codes (smaller bits of information) is higher (Houser, 2014).

To identify themes and codes in the data collected in this study, the researcher first hired a transcriber to transcribe all interviews. All data were put in Word documents. The researcher initially read through all the data to get an overall sense of the content and determine whether it would be enough to answer the research questions. Then, thematic analysis was performed, and the researcher used themes that formed in his mind during the interview process, as well as themes that emerged during the thorough analysis of collected data. Next, the data was coded using the NVivo software. This software allowed the researcher to specify which strings, words, or phrases occurred most often and, therefore, have the greatest significance (Fujita & Herrera-Viedma, 2018). The researcher then listened to the audio recorded material once again and used notes to recall the non-verbal signs and behavior that allowed to interpret the identified codes and themes more accurately. All this data was then compared with those generated by the second researcher.
invited to participate in this study, which allowed reducing bias and including all key information without omissions.

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity means that the researcher monitors one’s subjectivity in generating credible findings and is constantly aware of biases and personal beliefs that may affect data collection and interpretation (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014). As explained by Attia and Edge (2017), reflexivity can be both prospective and retrospective. The former type of reflexivity concerns with the effect of the researcher on the research process while the latter implies the effect of the research on the person conducting it. In other words, reflexivity involves thinking about both one’s potential interference, as well as the way the research may affect the researcher’s way of thinking or position regarding some issues or topics. To account for both types of reflexivity, the researcher should be self-aware and know when to step back and reflect on the research process (Attia & Edge, 2017).

As for the reflexivity in the current study, the researcher kept a reflective journal, which included various observations, thoughts, ideas, the rationale for decisions, and self-criticism. This journal was a mirror allowing the researcher to understand the reasons behind his decisions and actions, thus controlling for bias. Reflexivity through journaling also enabled the researcher to monitor the tension between one’s involvement in, and detachment from, the study (Berger, 2015).

**Intercoder Reliability**

Intercoder reliability, in turn, signifies the extent to which raters (researchers) code the same units of data in the same way. In other words, it is the amount of
agreement between the coders, which determines credibility of the findings (MacPhail et al., 2015). Inter coder reliability allows addressing the limitations of the researcher as an instrument and ensuring that codes are not merely a result of one person’s ideas, mental models, or opinions but are objective and shared across coders. Inter coder reliability in this study was achieved by inviting a second person to look for themes and trends in the collected data. The researcher coded all responses looking for themes, and this data was then compared with themes and codes generated by another person to solidify patterns in the collected data.

**Limitations**

Any study has limitations originating from the selected methodology (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2012; Lichtman, 2010). Although the researcher’s aim is always to minimize these limitations by paying attention to the ethical and methodological standards, some things cannot be controlled. The nature of the phenomenological research makes it hard for the researcher to generalize the findings and make them objective even if the validity and reliability are ensured. However, Conrad and Serlin (2011) remind that qualitative researchers do not aim at objectivity in the first place because they focus on discovering the truth as it is perceived by the participants, and this truth may differ from some universally accepted beliefs and experiences. With this key idea in mind, the researcher moves to describe the limitations of this study, which include the researcher as an instrument, sample size, location, and time. Study was also delimited by the availability and willingness of the participants. It was assumed that participants engaged in the interview to the best of their ability. All data was collected by the researcher as an ethnographer, which means that the researcher gathered interviews data
to produce a detailed and comprehensive account of a social phenomenon (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013).

**Researcher as Study Instrument**

As mentioned above, the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis in phenomenological studies, so unique researcher characteristics can potentially influence the collection and analysis of empirical materials (Atieno, 2009; Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). Therefore, it is commonly acknowledged that reflexivity and the inclusion of several researchers into the study is needed to minimize the potential limitations (Pezalla et al., 2012). In this study, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal during the data collection process, which allowed to control for possible biases and reflect on how the researcher responded to the environment and participants and what thoughts and attitudes they induced (Berger, 2015). The researcher made a conscious effort to be unbiased and nonjudgmental during interviews data analysis to keep up with the high standards of qualitative scientific research. The involvement of a second researcher was also a way to reduce this limitation because it ensures a more objective collection and analysis of data.

**Sample Size**

Sample size is another common limitation of qualitative phenomenological studies. It is commonly acknowledged that there is no standard recommendation regarding the sample size and that it may vary depending on the topic and research aims (Yin, 2015). This study involved 15 participants. There was no need to include more people because according to Guetterman (2015), superfluous sampling leads to data becoming repetitive and the analysis losing its depth. Besides, the inclusion of more
people would mean that the researcher had to invest more resources and burden more participants than it was actually needed (Guetterman, 2015). Yin (2015) reminded that while in quantitative studies, a large sample is required to achieve an acceptable probability of confidence level, qualitative studies aim towards maximizing information and do not seek to obtain findings relevant to the wider population. In order to minimize the risks of the small sample size in this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews and collected detailed, rich data that can throw light on Slavic parents’ perceptions of special education. Although the findings cannot be applied to parents of other ethnic minorities or those whose children study in middle or high school, they can nevertheless help understand the unique experience of the target population.

Location

This study was limited to the Sacramento County, California to permit face-to-face interviews and limit travel expenses. Although limiting the research to this geographic area narrowed the possibility of including more Slavic parents of elementary school children, it was nevertheless necessary to fit into the time and budget constraints. In addition, it is important to note that the findings of this study may not be applicable to Slavic parents living in other parts of the United States due to differences in state and school special education policies.

Time

Qualitative data collection normally takes a lot of time because the interview with each participant should be conducted face-to-face (Yin, 2015). This study took several weeks to conduct because interviews had to be scheduled in such a way so that to cater to participants’ schedules and preferences. In some cases, interviewees did not have much
time, so the researcher was limited to 40-60 minutes of the interview. This might have affected the length of answers and prevented the researcher from obtaining the needed clarifications. To address this limitation, the researcher sent an interview questionnaire to participants in advance so that they would have enough time to reflect on their answers.

**Summary**

This study used the qualitative phenomenological methodology to get insight into the meaning of Slavic parents’ experiences and their perceptions of special education. Interviews with 15 participants were the primary data collection method in this study, which was complemented with the researcher’s observations during the interview process. The methodology was aligned with the research goals and questions and was fully justified. This chapter demonstrated that the researcher invested time and efforts into ensuring high validity and reliability of this study, conducting the thorough and unbiased data collection and analysis, and addressing all potential limitations. The next chapter reports the study’s findings and includes a substantial description and analysis of meaningful themes and codes that allow answering the research questions.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

This qualitative phenomenological research used in-depth qualitative interviews with Slavic parents residing in the greater Sacramento area whose children went through IEP and testing process in elementary school. This chapter recapitulates the purpose of the study, research questions underpinning it, population and study sample, as well as data collection method that was used. The main section of this study presents the findings obtained during the interviews. The data is organized into themes that facilitate understanding of the information and allow identifying the common patterns and meaningful pieces that require more thorough analysis in the next chapter. The last section of the chapter includes a brief summary of the main findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and explore how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and to identify and explore the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process.

Central Research Questions

The study has two overarching central questions and four sub-questions. The main questions are as follows:

1. How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?
2. How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Sub-Questions

To answer this question, four sub-questions will also be addressed:

1. What cultural customs do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

2. What cultural attitudes do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

3. What supports do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

4. What barriers do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

The present study employed qualitative phenomenological research inquiry to investigate how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect the experiences of Slavic parents residing in greater Sacramento area and having children who went through IEP and testing process in elementary school. It also sought to explore what supports and barriers these people face when being involved with special education services. After conducting an interview trial with an observer and revising interview questions, the researcher conducted 15 in-depth interviews with the selected participants.
All 15 interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 15:45 and 52:23 minutes, with an average of 25:24 minutes in length. Nine of the 15 interviews took place in the researcher’s work office; four interviews were conducted in cafés such as Starbucks, one interview took place in the participant’s home, and one was scheduled in a park near the participant’s workplace. It took two months for all interviews to be completed. A portable device “otter” app was used to record the interviews to collect the data. The researcher strictly followed the interview protocol, so all participants responded to the same ten semi-structured open-ended questions. This allowed ensuring the reliability of obtained data and enabled a comprehensive analysis. Seven out of 15 interviews were conducted in Russian. Therefore, interview questions, interview protocols, and researcher rights were translated into Russian to ensure that the participants understood everything. All Russian interviews were transcribed by a paid “Happy Scribe” website and then translated into English. After all the interviews were transcribed, the researcher e-mailed them to participants for review. This step was necessary to ensure that all information was captured accurately and without omissions or changes.

Participants were offered to have a community member present during the interviews. However, they refused to have someone at the interviews as they preferred a one-on-one interview to be able to discuss the sensitive issues in a trusting atmosphere. Two of the participants confided that what they were about to share was confidential information, so they preferred not to have anyone else present. Three of the participants noted that a community member would make them uncomfortable.
Population/Sample

The population for this study was estimated to include 1,100,000 Slavic residents of Northern California. These people came from Poland, Russia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Bosnia and have different levels of English language proficiency (“Slavs of America,” n.d.). This population was further narrowed down to approximately 36,000 Slavic school-age children studying in the Sacramento area (Gurzhiy, 2015). Statistics show that about 14% of all school children have special needs, while 34% have learning disabilities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Therefore, one may suggest that there are more than 12,240 Slavic children who may need special education services in the selected area. Given these rough estimates, it is possible to understand the approximate number of parents that constituted the target population of this study.

This study used a purposeful sampling method and a convenience sampling strategy. From the target population, 15 participants were selected that fit the criteria of the study, which were as follows: (1) Slavic parents (from former USSR countries); (2) children have an active IEP and/or are active in the testing process; (3) recommended for participation by the Sacramento County SELPA or school site principal, and (4) willing to participate. These people residing in the Sacramento area were recommended by the SELPA director and gave their consent to participate. The given sample size was considered appropriate for this type of study, as it allows collecting rich, detailed information that enables a thorough analysis (Fortune et al., 2013; Lichtman, 2006).

There were 15 parents in the sample, including 14 mothers and one father. The sample was homogeneous, which means that the participants were similar in regard to the
shared experiences. Their children had to participate in special education testing and IEP in elementary schools. All participants were of Slavic origin (three from Moldova, three from Russia, seven from Ukraine, and two from Belarus). The participants were all residing in Greater Sacramento Areas (Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Rancho Cordova, Sacramento, Folsom, Antelope, Arden-Arcade, Fair Oaks, and Mather). All participants had a child on IEP ranging from one year on IEP to ten years with an average of 4.6 years.

Demographic Data

The study included 15 participants who met the criteria and signed the consent forms. To guarantee confidentiality, data were reported without any reference to the involved individuals. Participants were assigned an alphabetical letter (A-O) to enable the data analysis. Participants’ demographic data relevant for this study are described below. Table 4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in the USA</th>
<th>Language Interview was Conducted in</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Number of Years Child on IEP</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>Russian</td>
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Table 4: Demographics for study participants

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<td>Russian</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Moldova</td>
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<td>female</td>
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<td>Russian</td>
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<td>Russian</td>
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<td>female</td>
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<td>male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
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</table>

**Presentation and Analysis of the Data**

This section contains a detailed presentation and analysis of the collected data obtained during the interviews. By conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with 15 Slavic parents residing in greater Sacramento area and having children who went through IEP and testing process in elementary school, the researcher was able to collect a rich body of data that required a thorough and consistent analysis. In order to make the analysis appropriate, valid, and reliable, specific steps had to be followed. These are described in more detail below.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative studies such as this one implies the analysis of a large bulk of information obtained through the interviews. Making sense of this large body of evidence is difficult, especially given the fact that no universal rules exist for this process (Lichtman, 2006). However, there are still universally accepted steps that enable the
comprehensive analysis and allow presenting the findings in a consistent and meaningful form. One such step is the use of inductive reasoning. The inductive approach to data analysis means that the researcher organizes data into categories and establishes the relationships among them, which, in turn, allows identifying the common patterns of meaning (Creswell, 2015). In this way, it is possible to provide explanations and interpretations needed to answer the research questions.

The identification of themes and codes is another common feature of qualitative phenomenological studies using interviews for data collection (Elliot, 2018; Lodico et al., 2010). In this study, codes were identified with the help of the NVivo software, which was used to transcribe the data. After that, the researcher combined codes manually in a way that allowed tracking the connections between participants’ experiences and making sense of the common trends and patterns.

Next, the identification of themes is the crucial step in qualitative data analysis because it determines the way the results are presented and allows obtaining clear answers to the set research questions (Creswell, 2013). The researcher followed five steps if thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarizing with data; 2) producing initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing the themes; 5) naming the themes; and 6) presenting the report. During this process, the researcher also selected quotations with the key ideas so that to include them in the results chapter. Textual data analysis was complemented with the analysis of notes that contained descriptions of the interviewees’ non-verbal signs and behavior. Together, interviews and observation data provided enough information to make accurate conclusions.
Validity

Validity is an integral part of qualitative research. As explained by Leung (2015), validity determines whether the research questions are valid for the desired outcomes, the methodology is appropriate for answering the research questions; the design is valid for the methodology, and so on. Validity was enhanced in this study through the use of several strategies. In particular, the researcher interviewed participants in their language, recorded the data using specialized equipment, and let the participants review their transcribed interviews. It is believed that using these approaches together allows ensuring the high credibility of the findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Reliability and Intercoder Reliability

Analysis of qualitative data collected through the interviews is a subjective process, which requires strict control in order to ensure the accuracy of results and reduce bias (Packer, 2010). In order to ensure reliability and consistency in this study, the researcher used the interview protocol developed for the study. Each participant was asked the same questions, and all questions were read so that no unintentional re-wording could influence participants’ understanding and, consequently, the results. Another approach to increase reliability is the involvement of a second person in the coding process (Taylor, Killick, & McGlade, 2015). In this study, a person with a Ph.D. was asked to analyze 13% of the coding (two out of 15 interviews with a standard agreement set to 80%). It has been found that 23 of the 24 themes were coded consistently. The coded themes represent 96% agreement with the researcher, which allows suggesting that this study has high intercoder reliability (Klenke, 2008).
Research Questions and Subsequent Results

This study sought to answer two main questions and a number of sub-questions analyzed within the theoretical framework by Cummins (1989) (please see Table 2 below). The findings are presented according to the research questions and the corresponding themes to enable greater consistency. There are seven large themes to support research questions and theoretical framework (Cummins, 1989). In addition, there are 26 sub-themes in each large theme, and these are discussed as well because they reflect the nuances of participants’ experiences. The table containing all the themes and the number of references is provided as well. The themes are placed in the table by the frequency number (see below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Research Questions/Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Sub Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ model?</td>
<td>What cultural customs do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ model?</td>
<td>Interview Q 2, 4, 8, and 9</td>
<td>• Cultural Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Student Culture in School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What cultural attitudes do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ model?</td>
<td>Interview Q 1, 3, 4, and 9</td>
<td>• Cultural Beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assessments and Teaching Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process within</td>
<td>What supports do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ model?</td>
<td>Interview Q 3, 5, 7, and 9</td>
<td>• Supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parent and Community Involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What barriers do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ model?

Table 5: Research questions and respective interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
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<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Image</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Label</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child is Normal</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Future Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americanization</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Culture in School</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know the Student</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Culture Not Supported</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6: Themes and sub-themes with a number of references

**Cultural Beliefs**

Cultural beliefs were the most frequently cited theme in the interviews (P14, F110, where P stands for participants and F stands for frequency). Please see Table 7 below for more detail.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Beliefs</td>
<td>Cultural Image</td>
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<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Label</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Child is Normal</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of Future</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Americanization</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7:** Cultural beliefs theme and sub-themes

The majority of 15 participants touched upon the influence of culture on their perceptions of, and attitudes to, the IEP and testing process. One of the most frequently mentioned sub-themes, which are given in the order of importance, was the cultural image (P12, F26). Parents of elementary school children who underwent the testing and IEP unanimously claimed that they were worried about the impact of these processes on their child’s cultural image. Participant M, for example, was not satisfied that educators made decisions without her involvement, thus risking the student’s image: “*They decided everything without me and put the child’s image down. This is scary.*” Participant N explained that this cultural image is important because “*in Slavic culture, it’s all about the image,*” and Participant G fully agreed with this idea. Participant E accurately summarized the cultural bias regarding learning disabilities: “[…] in our post-Soviet world, in particular in Russia, people are very worried about what others will think and what others will say that my child is not like all the rest.” Thus, parents were concerned that testing and IEP would adversely affect the way others perceived their children.

Fear of labeling (P10, F25) was another cultural belief that emerged during the data analysis. Participant M confided that Slavic people are “very shy” about labels,
which means that they do not want people to think that their children are uneducable. This idea was supported by Participant N, who stated that her family did not like the child’s involvement in special education services because, according to them, it put a label on him. The same problem was experienced by Participant A and Participant G, who argued that their families disapproved of special education and perceived it as unnecessary. According to Participant N and Participant A, it is a cultural bias that makes Slavic families see this problem in such a negative light. In general, “…the fear of labeling your kids” appears to be a common cultural problem in Slavic families.

Another commonly cited sub-theme related to a tendency of Slavic parents to deny their children’s special needs. Participant O and Participant J explained that in Slavic culture, parents tend to reject special services and maintain that their child was normal (P11, F18). There is a reason for such cultural attitude, though, as evident from the following quote from Participant O interview: “I came from a culture from a country where if you are not normal, it will trace you all the way to your adult life, and possibly probably affecting your future career.” Participant I, in turn, noted that it is a cultural thing to “expect our children to be normal, to go to normal schools, to learn normally” and added that it is good that in the United States, any abnormalities are addressed adequately and that children with special needs do not end in boarding schools. Notably, Participant M expressed her belief that a child should be educated in the general classroom because otherwise, people would perceive him as weak and abnormal.

Furthermore, the fear of future consequences (P9, F18) was also cited as a cultural issue. Participant A and Participant G explained that their families resisted the use of special education services because of the cultural fear that they may have adverse long-
term effects on children. One of the parents labeled Participant B expressed disappointment and resentment regarding the way the IEP process was conducted and noted that currently, schools are not doing enough to ensure that the child having an IEP will not face any negative consequences in the future. This fear of consequences, however, appeared to be affected by the negative experiences more rather than some cultural beliefs in this case. The same can be said about Participant C, whose experience is cited below:

“[...] it’s just putting a label on a child and thinking like what people will say to me, or why, why would you want to test her, there’s going to be label, it’s gonna continue with her [...] they advise me actually not to pursue the IEP, because some label is gonna stick with her and there’s the catch when she’s going to go to college, stuff like that. They felt like the label will affect her from getting into college.”

Not all parents were worried about their children’s future, though. For instance, Participant I noted that there should be no problems for the child in the future because special education had already helped him to improve considerably in speaking and social interaction. Positive expectations regarding special education were also expressed by Participant K.

Interestingly, there has been a common sub-theme of Americanization (P7, F12) in many of the interviews. It has been found that Slavic people believe that IEP and testing are characteristic of the American culture. Participant A noted that her family thinks that accepting special education services means becoming “too Americanized.” However, several participants noted that this American approach to special education
positively affects children. Participant G, for example, said that American special education programs are well-suited for children’s emotional needs while Participant D liked the way Americans do not single out children with special needs but allow them to be part of the general classroom. Participant E agreed that special education in the USA is better than that in Russia:

“However, speaking of my child in Russia, I think I can safely say that nobody needs such children in Russia, and it is believed that you go and thank God there is no class for such a level of children who almost fall short. Therefore, everything is sad about Russian special education.”

Thus, interviews showed that although there are stereotypes about the American culture and special education held by Slavic people, some of them still agree that this system is superior to that in Slavic countries.

The last cultural belief that should be mentioned is the attitude towards psychologists (P6, F11), which are involved in the testing and IEP. Participant J argued that Slavic parents might feel reluctant to let their children be tested because of the involvement of psychologists. There is a stereotype that these professionals work with mentally ill people only. Participant M, in turn, maintained that she was pressured by the psychologist during the testing process: “And every time we met, they kept asking, why are you so afraid of IEP, why are you afraid of psychologists? Why are you reacting like that? One even said that maybe you yourself need a psychologist!” Moreover, the participant noted that in her home country (Ukraine), psychologists work with students having behavioral and mental problems, so the very fact that these professionals were involved in the testing process was terrifying for Participant M. The same negative
cultural attitude towards psychologists was expressed by Participant B: “And why include psychologist, why do they need to observe our children. That’s just my opinion. In Ukraine, there was no such thing as a psychologist included in the child’s life. I understand that everyone needs a job, is that what it’s for?” In this way, it is possible to conclude that interviews revealed many cultural beliefs and attitudes that affected Slavic parents’ perceptions of special education.

**Barriers**

Some of the parents participating in this study noted that the process of testing and IEP was challenging. Many of them had to overcome significant barriers in order to receive the proper help and ensure that their children were treated adequately at school. Thus, barriers were the commonly cited theme (P12, F91). Table 8 presents the theme of barriers and sub-themes that were identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Barriers theme and sub-themes.

Communication was one of the most criticized aspects (P11, F24). One of the participants did not like the communication style and kept repeating that the school lied to her and pressured her to make particular decisions. This is how Participant B described it:
“I like that they worked him and I believed them that they said none of this will ever follow him, that it doesn’t go into computer or records. But everything goes. I transferred him to another school without telling them anything about him, and guess what, they called me for another meeting said he has IEP. So see, it all goes into a computer! Why would they do that to our children? They don’t want them to get a job when they grow up? “

Participant J, in turn, claimed that there was absolutely no communication from teachers, so it was difficult for her to track her child’s progress. She noted that she would want to attend more meetings so that teachers could keep her updated. This experience is in stark contrast to that of Participant E, who claimed that she liked the communication style and was well-supported and informed by the school.

In addition to inadequate communication, the lack of knowledge was perceived by many parents as a significant barrier (P11, F24). For instance, Participant H said the following: “I know I didn’t understand her progress much. It wasn’t really explained to me. And I didn’t speak much English to understand anything. I see that she improves but not sure how they do it, they don’t tell me.” Participant M reported the mixture of fear and confusion when first hearing about her child’s special needs because she lacked the knowledge and could not understand what the teachers were trying to discuss with her. The language barrier (P9, F21) was also cited by Participant K and Participant O as a significant problem. In addition, Participant H, Participant I, and Participant O claimed that the lack of English language skills was a significant barrier for their children.

Notably, there was also a lack of knowledge on the part of educators. Participant I maintained that teachers were not responding properly to her child’s unusual behavior
and noted that they lacked an understanding of how such children should be treated. Participant J, in turn, stated that she felt teachers at her child’s school were not trained enough. “I think school still has a long way to go to support kids that have ADHD because they just don't understand how to deal with it,” explained the interviewee.

Pressure was also widely reported (P4, F15). Participant M shared her negative experience of communication with educators. The interviewee noted that the school pressured her and wanted her to sign the papers as soon as possible. Despite the woman’s desire to discuss everything with her husband and think about what would be best for her child, the educators kept pressing her to sign the forms. “Well, I finally just took the papers home without signing anything, but still I got a call from a psychologist. “Well, what did you decide? Well, come to sign, and you need to sign.” That is, it was a constant pressure,” admitted Participant M. Thus, instead of letting the parent understand the IEP process better, the school simply wanted to settle the basic bureaucratic issues.

Participant O also noted that she felt being pressured and shamed during the IEP meetings, and added that the professionals she communicated with were not helpful. A certain degree of pressure at the IEP meetings was also reported by Participant C.

Some parents were lucky because they reported facing no barriers to special education for their children. Participant C claimed that although testing took much time, she was generally satisfied with the experience. Participant G agreed that testing indeed took too much time, and added that it seemed like teachers were not in a hurry and could not move on quickly to the next stage. Thus, as one can see, time was another sub-theme identified in the interviews (P5, F7). Furthermore, participant L was also very satisfied and expressed gratitude to educators for working hard to meet her child’s needs. The
same positive experience was reported by Participant N, who especially liked the educators’ communication style. Participant A, in turn, felt well-informed and claimed that she was provided with enough knowledge to make evidence-based decisions.

**Student Culture in School**

Student culture in school was another recurring theme (P13, F14). Please see Table 9 for more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Culture in School</td>
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<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Culture Not</td>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Culture Supported</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know the Student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 9: Student culture theme and sub-themes.*

Interviews showed that student culture is not always supported in school (P9, F11). Participant M, for example, argued that she did not see any progress with the culture at school, even though some teachers knew Russian and could communicate with children in their language. Participant I stated that she had to educate teachers on her family’s culture in order to ensure that they understand her child better and can be more culturally sensitive. Similarly, Participant K said that teachers do not know about her child’s culture, so she has to fill the gaps in their knowledge by clarifying some cultural issues. There has been a shared belief that schools need to be more sensitive to students’ culture.

Parents provided some suggestions regarding student culture (P8, F11). For example, they argued that knowing the students (P3, F3) is the key to meeting their
unique needs. As noted by Participant I in this relation, “*Know the kids, each one is unique and has its own needs. They are not all the same.*” Having a different approach for every child in teaching is especially important, according to this participant. The participant also advocated for the use of face-to-face classes because students’ levels are different, and crowded classrooms are not the best option for them. The same wish was expressed by Participant K, who argued that more teachers were needed to provide individualized services. One of the interviewees also suggested that teachers should create a tolerant and supportive classroom environment so that children with special needs would not feel isolated, labeled, or discriminated in any way. “*The role of the teacher is to explain to the rest of the students that we are all different, and we learn differently. They need to lay the right attitude to the differences in the classroom,*” said Participant F. Participant I added, “*They need to be available to children. They need to listen to them. Be true to their wishes.*”

Student culture was greatly supported by some of the schools (P5, F5). According to Participant O, there was a bilingual principal who was well-aware of the issues faced by the Slavic community. In addition, the school had several administrators that spoke two languages. Participant D, in turn, said that approximately 40% of Slavic community children attended her child’s school, so there was no problem with recognizing cultural differences. Participant E also shared her thoughts regarding the respect for her child’s culture and noted that the teacher had been very sensitive to the girl’s language needs. Along similar lines, Participant C claimed that her school had been very professional and sensitive throughout the process of testing and IEP, so she had no complaints.
Assessment and Teaching Strategies

Assessment and teaching strategies (P12, F40) were another commonly mentioned theme that should be discussed (please see Table 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and Teaching</td>
<td>Testing Process</td>
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<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and Teaching</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 10**: Assessment and teaching strategies theme and sub-themes.

Parents dwelled much on the testing process issues (P10, F20). The lack of information was a common concern. Interviews revealed that many parents were not provided with enough information about the testing process and their rights. Participant F, for example, reported inadequate communication: “So after each meeting, I find out something new, and I ask them why didn’t you tell me that last time? Why are you withholding information from me?” Participant G and Participant I both claimed that they were not informed properly. In the case of Participant I, educators simply informed her that the testing was conducted and told her the scores. However, the interviewee was not invited to attend these testing meetings and was not explained what the results actually meant. Participant G was not satisfied with how teachers conducted testing, mostly because she was not given a chance to voice her opinion. “I need to be much more involved; it’s my child, after all. They gave me results, and they told me what they think about my child. I don’t think they know much about my child by just spending little time with him,” explained the interviewee.

Furthermore, Participant A was satisfied with how educators reassessed her child’s progress and needs regularly. However, the interviewee noted that it was difficult for her
to understand the testing process at first. She noted that she was not given enough information on the overarching goal of this testing; aspects that were assessed; the importance and practical value of the tests, and so on. The experience faced by Participant B was even more challenging. The interviewee claimed that educators did not even inform her about the testing: “The psychologist and administration knew what they were doing to my son, but I didn’t do anything to allow them to test him.” The participant was very upset when she learned that her son was tested without her consent. “I was not included, I didn’t understand what was going on,” she added. Participant M, however, seems to have had the worst experience with the IEP and testing, as she was screamed at, pressured, deceived, and ignored by the IEP team:

“I tried to say something, but they didn’t look at me, they continued to decide among themselves what to do and how to start, what to start from. And it turns out I was sitting there, I even burst into tears at this meeting. No one noticed me; my voice was not heard as if no one had seen me there. This was disrespect to me as a parent. This meeting affected me very painfully.”

The woman shared her negative feelings and emphasized that her opinion was not even considered, which left her feeling devastated.

The long and stressful process of testing was found to be emotionally draining and challenging for some parents and their children. Participant J noted that when the child was evaluated by many different psychologists and educators from school, she felt somewhat overwhelmed by such attention. In contrast, Participant E perceived the long assessment process as a benefit: “Then we were tested for a very long time, unlike Russia, where the child would stand for a minute, and they would already make a diagnosis.”
Some participants reported generally positive experiences with the IEP and testing. For example, Participant C was satisfied with the testing process and the level of parental involvement. The interviewee especially liked the fact that all testing was completed during the school hours, which was convenient for both her and her child. Participant E said that her child was tested in her native language, which was good. The presence of a Russian translator allowed receiving more accurate results in this case. Teachers prioritizing parents’ interests and being understanding were perceived by Participant A and Participant I as the main contributing factor to their children’s academic progress.

Parents also provided some recommendations on how teaching and learning (P5, F5) should be approached in order to meet students’ needs more effectively. Participant B, for instance, claimed that a more personalized and caring approach should be used. The interviewee said that teachers should try to get to know students better and stop seeing them as a problem, which is consistent with the position voiced by Participant I. “[…] they need to know how to talk to them. If teachers love children and their job, they will find an approach to work with children without the need for IEP,” added Participant B. She was convinced that teachers simply want to label children they cannot work with so that they will become someone else’s responsibility. A similar idea was stated by Participant G, who said that teachers should be “more personal with kids.” Moreover, Participant I recommended introducing some incentives for children, which can enhance the learning experience. The incorporation of physical education is also important for children with special needs, as they can benefit from physical exercise as much as other children.
Parents also suggested that more should be done to accommodate their children with special needs. For example, Participant A suggested the following: “So they can find a different way that they could help them not just as a cognitive learner, but also, you know, how are they reacting to things, their social habits, their work habits, all of that, it's pretty important.” There has been a desire to see a more individualized, student-tailored learning experience. According to Participant E, educators “should build the learning process in such a way as to make the child interested in taking into account different needs, as well as individual characteristics.” In parents’ understanding, special education means not testing and standard procedures but a more humane and caring approach to every child. They maintained that in order to improve special education services, schools should hire well-trained professionals who can adjust to every child’s unique needs, be their advocates, and always act in the children’s interests.

Parental and Community Involvement

Parental and community involvement were also identified as an important theme (P14, F17) (see Table 11 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental and Community Involvement</td>
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<td>Parent Support in School</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Support</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Parental and community involvement theme and sub-themes.

Parents who were interviewed admitted that they did everything they could to support their children at home (P14, F17). Participant A stated that she had to invest much time and energy in teaching her child and noted that she constantly challenged her
to keep working on her skills. “[...] my biggest thing is I know, she will have challenges even as an adult. But as she's growing, I don't want her to be like, just quit because she can’t do it. So that’s my mission, keep progressing, and little steps, but it’s progress,” concluded the parent. Interviewees said that they were paying attention to their children’s behavior and academic needs and helped them do their homework. Some of them also reported that they contacted teachers often to ensure that they were aware of the challenges and learn more information about their children’s progress in class.

Results showed that not all parents invested equal time and effort into their children’s education and support at home. Participant D and Participant I said that educators worked hard with her child, so they mainly monitored their children’s progress and helped them with some homework. Participant J, however, admitted that she spent many hours reading about her child’s condition, establishing the routine, and ensuring that her child progresses academically. Participant M also spent much time with her child, focusing on educational activities, reading, games, and everything that helps develop cognitive skills. In addition, while some parents volunteered and school, others could not do it because of the tight schedules at work. However, they all appeared to be committed to supporting their children at home as much as they could.

Interviews showed that parents want to be supported more at school (P4, F4) because, despite their individual efforts, they often lack knowledge and skills to do more for their children. Parental support in school was cited by many interviewees as one of the greatest gaps that should be addressed. Participants argued that providing more information and being honest and open can help get parents on board and enable better learning. As stated by Participant D, teachers should check with parents and ensure that
they have at least some basic understanding of the IEP and testing. This idea is repeated by Participant C: “Based on my own experience, I feel the teacher should identify the child’s needs, how and advise the parents to reach out for help and to tell them what type of help we need.” The provision of information could help Slavic parents fight the cultural bias and stereotypes that hinder the acceptance of special education.

An important idea was expressed by Participant G, who noted that educated parents have positive attitudes to the IEP. However, those Slavic parents who lack knowledge risk becoming victims of cultural stereotypes regarding disability, thus failing to provide their children with timely help. “[…] there needs to be some kind of pamphlet, some information for our community, so they understand what IEP is. Do some kind of a seminar so that parents won’t be afraid of it, but help their child,” added Participant G in this relation. So, as noted by Participant, raising awareness is the key to helping Slavic children with disabilities.

Parents who had a generally positive experience were less critical and more optimistic regarding special education. Participants C, E, and H encouraged other parents to seek support. Participant E assured them that they should not be afraid of the IEP and testing because the sooner their children receive help, the easier it will be for them later in life. Participant C fully agreed with this statement: “there’s nothing to be ashamed of; you just go out there and ask for help and get all the help you can get, there's nothing wrong.” These parents were grateful to schools and educators for what they did for their children and called for other parents to ask for professional help if needed.

Some parents confided that they learned much about the IEP and testing from other people (P3, F3), which helped them to make the right decisions and navigate the
system. For instance, Participant J said that her friend facing similar problems shared her knowledge and experience, which was extremely helpful. Participant G, in turn, obtained valuable information from her co-worker, who gave her some legal advice. She also searched for the information online, and it helped her to overcome some cultural stereotypes regarding disability and special education. In general, however, community support was inadequate, mostly because of the cultural stereotypes shared in the Slavic communities and parents’ reluctance to share their problems with others.

**Supports**

Support (P10, F23) was another commonly discussed theme that emerged in all the interviews (Table 12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>School and Community</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>No Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>Online Research</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 12: Support theme and sub-themes.*

Support from school and the community (P9, F10), online research (P4, F5), and family (P3, F3) were mentioned, while some of the parents confided they received no proper support at all (P4, F5). Participant C said that her coworker helped her to navigate the IEP system and provided her with essential information while for Participant D, it was a kindergarten teacher who provided the most significant support. Participant E, Participant G, Participant I, Participant L, and Participant N appreciated the support from the school teachers, noting that they had been very attentive and involved in the process. Participant E also confided that she was thankful for her husband’s support because, in
her home country, fathers often turn away from children with special needs. Participant I, in turn, noted that she took advantage of online communities of parents facing similar issues and sought the support of doctors. While arguing that her family was generally loving and supportive, she admitted that they would not want the child to receive special services.

Participant F, in turn, noted that she had not received the needed support. Her husband was not involved in the process, and there was no family to help her navigate the complex special education system. “It was not easy because it was all on me,” said the woman. The same loneliness was experienced by Participant H and Participant K, who said that they had no one to ask for help, as their families and friends would not understand them. Similarly, Participant J felt that she did not receive proper support: “I made the changes in my personal life to be able to accommodate him, and I was spending a lot of hours humiliated by others around me. And I didn't feel there was any support for this, he's also feeling that.” The absence of support from school was mentioned by Participant J, who noted that she benefited greatly by seeking the help of Kaiser psychologists. Thus, while some parents received the support of their families, schools and professionals, and even the online community, others felt that they did not have any of these support systems in place and had to collect information piece by piece by themselves.

Use of Native Language

The last theme that was covered in the interviews related to the use of language (P9, F23) (Table 13 below).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of Native Language</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Barrier</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translator Provided</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 13**: The use of language theme and sub-themes.

Many parents admitted that they faced a language barrier (P9, F20) during the IEP and testing. Since English is not their native language, they could not understand all the information, communicate with educators, or read the printed documents they were expected to sign. This lack of English skills prevented some parents from fully understanding the nature of special education, its goals and benefits, and, more importantly, parents’ rights. While some parents simply believed that teachers had good intentions and agreed to everything, others felt intimidated, confused, and pressured because they were not sure what they were signing and whether they made the best decision for their children. However, some schools recognized parents’ language needs. For example, Participant E stated the following: “*All my rights have been very well explained to me in both English and Russian, and translators always come*.”

Moreover, many parents were worried that due to their child’s language barrier, test results might have been inaccurate. Some of the children had serious language problems and could not speak well even in their native language, not to mention English. Parents confided that they wanted to use both the child’s native language and English, although some professionals discouraged them from doing it because it might have caused some confusion. Some parents, however, claimed that their children adapted easily to the English language setting, so they understood everything well.
Several parents suggested that the provision of translators (P3, F3) during the IEP meetings would be helpful. Participants confided that they did not understand much of what teachers were telling them, so they were confused and could not make informed decisions. Participant M, for example, said that at first, she was not provided with translation services. Later on, a translator was present at the meetings, but this woman was poorly trained and did not translate everything. Similar disapproval of the translator’s services was expressed by Participant O, who argued that the woman hired to translate did not translate everything. Some of the parents were frustrated with the quality of translation services. According to the interviewees, the involvement of a well-trained translator could help them be more informed and would prevent misunderstanding and violation of patents’ rights.

**Summary**

This chapter reported the findings of interviews conducted with Slavic parents residing in the greater Sacramento area and having children who went through the IEP and testing process in elementary school. The analysis has revealed seven main themes and 26 sub-themes. It has been found that parents’ cultural beliefs and attitudes had a significant effect on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process. However, parental knowledge and awareness, as well as proper school support, helped to eliminate the reluctance to receive special education services. Furthermore, parents reported multiple barriers such as time, the lack of language skills, inadequate communication, the lack of knowledge, and pressure from educators. While some parents claimed they were supported properly by their families and schools, others admitted that they did not receive the much-needed support and guidance. The interviews also revealed
areas for improvement, which are expected to empower parents to be more involved in their children’s special education. The following chapter analyzes these findings in more detail, focusing on their consistency with prior research, as well as their relation to the theoretical framework.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and explore how cultural customs and cultural attitudes affect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and to identify and explore the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during the IEP and testing process. This chapter provides a concise summary of the main findings obtained with the help of in-depth interviews with 15 parents. These findings are analyzed in the context of the existing research on the topic, as well as through the prism of the selected theoretical framework by Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939). Furthermore, the researcher provides recommendations for practice and research, which were developed based on the obtained results. The chapter ends with a personal reflection, which contains the researcher’s experiences and thoughts regarding this study.

Central Research Questions

The study was guided by the two central questions and four sub-questions. The main questions were as follows:

1. How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?
2. How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Sub-Questions

To answer this question, four sub-questions will also be addressed:
3. What cultural customs do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

4. What cultural attitudes do Slavic Parents describe as affecting their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

5. What supports do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

4. What barriers do Slavic parents describe that they experience during the IEP and testing process as reflected within the framework of Cummins’ Model?

Research Methods, Population, and Sample

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research inquiry. Specifically, 15 in-depth interviews with the selected participants were conducted face-to-face to collect the data. After all the data had been recorded and transcribed, the researcher analyzed it using coding and thematic analysis. In this study, codes were identified using the NVivo software, while the themes were formulated manually after a thorough analysis of the common trends and patterns in data. Validity and reliability of the findings were ensured with the help of the meticulous data collection methodology and the involvement of a second person in the coding process.

The population for this study was approximately 1,100,000 Slavic residents of Northern California (“Slavs of America,” n.d.). This population was narrowed down to 36,000 Slavic school-age children studying in the Sacramento area (Gurzhiy, 2015). Next, the researcher assumed that there were at least 12,240 Slavic children who may
need special education services in this area because, according to the statistics, about 14% of all school children have special needs, while 34% have learning disabilities (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). Based on these calculations, it was possible to obtain a general understanding of the target population – parents of elementary school children with special needs. Next, using a purposive sampling method, the researcher selected 15 participants that met the outlined inclusion criteria. These were people of Slavic origin residing in Greater Sacramento Areas and having a child on IEP. The analysis of the major findings obtained using the in-depth interviews with these participants is provided below.

**Major Findings**

**Research Question 1: How do Slavic parents describe the effect of cultural customs and cultural attitudes on their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process?**

**Key finding 1: Labeling as not normal, weak, or mentally retarded**

Fear of labeling (P10, F25) was one of the major issues identified in this study. It has been found that parents were afraid of their children being perceived as not normal, weak, mentally retarded, and incapable of studying in the same way their peers do. There was a distinct cultural image of disability shared among parents, which induced them to fear special services. Many of them admitted that its roots were in their Slavic culture and history and explained that in their culture, disability inevitably leads to labeling and discrimination. Parental refusal to participate in the IEP and testing, as well as parents’ negative perceptions of these processes, were found to be significantly associated with
this cultural labeling. The evidence obtained from other studies demonstrates that these cultural beliefs can be observed in many other cultures (Pang, 2011).

These findings are fully in line with the existing research. The USSR policies of exclusion and stigmatization of children with special needs have affected generations of people, and they seem to be present in the modern-day mentality of Slavic people (Csapo, 1984; Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2009). In many post-Soviet states, educators’ indifferent attitudes toward inclusion, limited awareness, and infrastructural issues continue to affect the negative image of special education (Kavelashvili, 2017; Martz, 2005). Slavic people moving to the United States bring their negative attitudes to special education with them, while the lack of knowledge and limited understanding of the American system further aggravate the problem.

**Key finding 2: Parents’ fear of consequences of IEP and testing**

The fear of consequences (P9, F18) was found to be another cultural issue affecting parents’ willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process. In Slavic countries, children with disabilities have been historically excluded from the society, discriminated against, and stigmatized (Csapo, 1984; Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Phillips, 2009). As a result, Slavic parents of children with special needs are afraid that testing and the subsequent IEP will create unfavorable conditions for their children’s further academic and professional development. They are afraid that their children will have to live with a label for the rest of their lives and will be unable to find a job when they finish studying. Limited understanding of special education in the United States adds to these negative perceptions and makes parents resistant.
Key finding 3: Cultural attitudes to testing and IEP are negative

Some of the parents perceive testing and IEP as something foreign and unnecessary (P7, F12), and they are unwilling to be “Americanized” by letting schools evaluate their children. Mistrust towards psychologists is another cultural issue because Slavic parents are convinced that the involvement of these professionals in the IEP and testing process is a sign that educators perceive their children as mentally ill. In Slavic countries, psychologists work with children having behavioral and mental problems, so it is difficult for Slavic parents to understand why these people are involved in the special education process.

Key finding 4: Culture affects parents’ willingness to participate

One may conclude that culture played a significant role in shaping participants’ attitudes to, and perceptions of, the IEP and testing. More importantly, it greatly affected the parents’ willingness to participate in special education. A high level of dissatisfaction with provided services reported by some parents may be due to various culture-related factors such as labeling (P10, F25), stereotyping and cultural image (P12, F26), fear of consequences (P9, F18), and others. Existing research shows that parents of children with special needs are generally satisfied with special education services provided by schools (Glen Martin Associates, 2015; O’Connor et al., 2005). The majority of parents reported positive experiences and were glad that their children had been evaluated and received specifically tailored instruction (Naveed & Kasana, 2017). The fact that so many participants in this study were dissatisfied allows suggesting that their culture must have affected their experiences and perceptions greatly.
Key finding 5: Experience with the IEP and testing has impacted parents

Interestingly, the influence of culture was found to decrease as parents gained more knowledge about special education and observed its effects on their children. It has been found that many parents encouraged other parents to recognize the problems their children face and not to be afraid of seeking professional help. They emphasized that there is nothing to be ashamed of and that special education helps children, not excludes them. These findings are consistent with prior research, which showed that parents whose children have already participated in some special education programs are more positive about them because they can observe their benefits (Miller et al., 1992).

At the same time, the literature suggests that negative perceptions and stereotypes regarding disability can be observed in different populations and are not always connected with some specific cultural beliefs (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Many parents, irrespectively of the culture, do not like it when their children are perceived as weak or different from others (Lalvani, 2015). They resist the very idea of special education because they fear that their children would be discriminated against or excluded in some way (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). A better understanding of other factors that may explain negative attitudes and perceptions should be built through further research.

Research Question 2: How do Slavic parents describe the barriers and supports they experience during the IEP and testing process?

Key Finding 6: Parents’ level of satisfaction with special education

Prior research confirms that parental experiences and perceptions of special education may differ considerably (Rehm et al., 2013). While some parents are satisfied with special education services, others are convinced that this system is ineffective,
discriminatory, and exclusionary (Loreman et al., 2008; Slade et al., 2017; Zanobini et al., 2017; Warren, 2014). In many cases, the experiences are mixed and complex, as shown in the previous chapter. Interviews with Slavic parents revealed that they had very different experiences during the IEP and testing process. Some of them were satisfied with the evaluation report and liked the personalized approach to their children, which aligns with the findings obtained by O’Connor et al. (2005) and Glen Martin Associates (2015). However, some parents had very negative experiences and confided that the IEP and testing (P10, F20) were extremely stressful and emotionally challenging for both them and their children.

**Key finding 7: Communication barriers affect parents’ perception**

Communication barriers (P11, F24) have been one of the most commonly reported issues experienced by many Slavic parents. The failure to engage parents properly, inadequate participation in decision-making, the limited information provided by educators, pressure, and other problems were different facets of the same communication failure. Research showed that parents often felt being left out of the testing and IEP process. Their ideas and concerns were not taken into consideration, and they felt as if their opinion or contribution did not matter much. The failure of the schools to communicate with parents effectively was also reflected in the use of jargon, which Slavic parents simply did not understand. These communication problems are commonly encountered by parents of different cultures and backgrounds, as shown in the prior literature (Balli, 2016; ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001; Glen Martin Associates, 2015). They also demonstrate that schools fail to comply with Individuals with Disabilities Act, which states that parents are the primary team members of the IEP team and should be allowed
to participate in the meetings to ensure that their children’s needs are properly recognized and met (Kauffman et al., 2017).

Thus, the study showed that communication during the IEP and assessment process needs to be improved and made more parent- and student-friendly, which aligns with the theoretical framework and prior research (Cummins, 1989; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). An abundant body of literature confirms the need to build partnerships with parents through enhanced communication (Adams et al., 2016; Balli, 2016; ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001; Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004). It includes, but is not limited to, the provision of all necessary information and respect for each family’s unique needs and experiences.

**Key finding 8: Lack of knowledge negatively affects attitude**

The lack of knowledge (P11, F24) regarding special education is another significant problem reported by the majority of the participants. Parents often do not understand why educators make particular decisions, what their role in the IEP and testing process is, how they can defend their children’s interests, and so on. Existing research fully supports these findings, showing that parents are excluded from the IEP and testing process due to the lack of knowledge and skills (El Shourbagi, 2017; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Moreover, it is important to note that the lack of knowledge about disability and special education is commonly encountered among minority populations (Montelongo, 2014; Pearson & Meadan, 2018). Research shows that minority parents’ powerlessness and limited understanding of their child’s condition makes them unable to communicate with teachers effectively and participate in the decision-making process (Pearson & Meadan, 2018; Thompson, 2017). This study revealed that parents sometimes
feel uncomfortable during the IEP meetings because they do not understand much of the information, and it appears to be a common problem among minority parents (Smith-McClelland, 2017).

Notably, parents argued that some educators lacked knowledge as well, so they were unable to meet the children’s needs properly. Slavic parents interviewed in this study believed that educators were not trained enough to be able to demonstrate an individualized, sensitive approach to each child. Indeed, the literature suggests that teacher training should be enhanced so that teachers would have the necessary knowledge and skills to work with students with special needs (Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

**Key finding 9: Language barrier affects parent satisfaction**

Language barrier (P9, F21) may be one of the reasons why some parents were dissatisfied with IEP and testing. Slavic parents who were not proficient enough in English found it hard to understand the information they were given, so they felt being left out of the process. These findings are confirmed by prior research. A study by Gasteiger-Klicpera et al. (2012) conducted in Germany showed that parents of children whose first language was not German demonstrated greater levels of discontent with special education. The same language problems were reported by Montelongo (2014), who explored Latino parents’ experiences in American schools, as well as Ikezaki et al. (2014), who focused on Japanese parents in the USA. Children’s language barrier was also found to be a serious problem. It has been found that students with special needs are induced to use English at school. Since it is harder for these children to learn the new language and understand everything, the results of the testing and their overall academic performance may be severely affected by their language barrier.
Key finding 10: Pressure and time as communication failures

Pressure (P4, F15) and time constraints (P5, F7) imposed by educators were also reported as a significant communication flaw that resulted in negative parental experiences. Some of the participants confided that they were pressured to make particular decisions and sign papers that they did not even understand. These findings demonstrate that contrary to IDEA’s provisions, schools fail to recognize parents as primary stakeholders and decision-makers in the testing and IEP process. It is widely recognized that parents should represent children on a personal level and be allowed to negotiate and communicate on their behalf (Adams et al., 2016; Kauffman et al., 2017).

Meaningful parental involvement helps find mutually satisfying solutions, so communication with parents should be the core of the IEP and testing process (ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001). Unfortunately, both findings of this study and evidence from existing research show that parents are not treated as equals and are not recognized as the main team members (Balli, 2016).

Key finding 11: Support systems

Raising a child with special needs is a challenging task, so parents need to have strong support systems. However, the findings of this study showed that many parents often lack school (P4, F4) and family (P3, F3) support. Due to the negative attitudes to disability held by Slavic families, some parents could not receive the much-needed support of their family members and even refused to tell them about the IEP and testing. Some of those interviewed sought the advice of friends and people who had the first-hand experience of placing their child on the IEP (P3, F3). Research shows that community participation can empower parents to support their children better, and this idea is also
highlighted by Cummins (1989), so this aspect requires more attention from educators, social workers, and policymakers (Wright & Taylor, 2014). Moreover, while some of the parents appreciated the school support, others claimed that they lacked communication from teachers and did not feel that their child’s needs were met. The literature confirms that it is common for minority parents to feel the lack of support and communication from educators, which leads to the feeling of isolation and exclusion (Jung, 2011; Montelongo, 2014).

Key finding 12: Student culture and language

It has been found that, according to parents, knowing the students and their culture (P3, F3) is the key to the provision of relevant educational services. They called for schools to find an individualized approach to every child and create a tolerant and supportive classroom environment, which is generally consistent with scholars’ recommendations (Horn & Kang, 2012). Moreover, parents want teachers to be culturally sensitive and have a better knowledge of children’s cultural background, thus agreeing with Cummins’ (1989) recommendations.

Unexpected Findings

Prior literature offers conflicting evidence regarding the association between the severity of disability and parents’ attitudes towards special education. A study by Gasteiger-Klicpera et al. (2012) revealed that the severity of the disability is a significant factor that affects parental perceptions and overall satisfaction with special education. Research showed that dissatisfaction with special education experienced by some parents originated from the fact that some of them had not been convinced yet that their children
needed additional help. In other words, their special needs were not obvious to parents (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2012).

However, a study by Zablotsky et al. (2012) demonstrated that parents of children with severe disabilities who know about their children’s problems have increased expectations regarding their educational activities, and they are often dissatisfied with the way educators meet their children’s needs. Similar findings were provided by Palmer et al. (2001) and Doménech and Moliner (2014). At the same time, other studies showed that special education services were highly evaluated by parents of children with autism or cerebral palsy (Naveed & Kasana, 2017; McIntyre & Zemantic, 2017). There is also evidence showing that the level of parental satisfaction is unrelated to children’s characteristics (Slade et al., 2017).

In this study, out of 15 participants, five had children with severe disabilities and birth defects, which put them on IEP. Four of these participants were positive regarding the support their child received during IEP, and only one was not satisfied. They realized that schools helped their children considerably and were grateful for this support. Those parents, whose children were identified as having special needs later in school life, were less positive and more resistant regarding the IEP and testing. These findings contradict those of many previous studies and are unexpected. However, given the lack of agreement among the researchers, more studies are needed to explain the connection between children’s diagnosis and parents’ perceptions of special education.

Conclusions

This study focused on the experiences of Slavic parents of elementary school children who underwent the IEP and testing process. The main goal was to understand
whether cultural customs and cultural attitudes shared by these parents affected their willingness to participate in the IEP and testing process and what barriers and supports they experienced along the way. The following conclusions are based on the findings and supported by the literature and align with the study’s theoretical framework developed based on the studies by Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939).

**Conclusion 1: Impact of Culture on Parents’ Experiences and Perceptions**

Educational professionals in school districts will be able to provide directions and support to parents who refuse to accept the need for special education (P11, F18). Because all parental perceptions of special education originate from the parents’ culture and are fueled by the lack of knowledge regarding the system of special education in the United States, school districts that educate and train the staff will have greater success in meeting the needs of students and families. Based on the interviews with 15 parents residing in the Sacramento area, it is concluded that cultural customs and attitudes have a significant impact on parents’ perceptions of special education in the United States, as well as their experiences of placing their child on the IEP. These findings are also supported by the existing literature on the topic (Csapo, 1984; Kalinnikova & Trygged, 2014; Malofeev, 1998; Pang, 2011; Phillips, 2009). Thus, it can be concluded that educational professionals who understand the cultural attitudes to disability (P12, F26), and the fear of labeling and exclusion (P10, F25), will be able to address parents’ concerns about the children’s future (P9, F18).

**Conclusion 2: Influence of Positive Experience on Parents’ Satisfaction**

Based on the findings of this study, as well as prior literature, it is concluded that when school districts have systems in place to address cultural difference, parents have a
positive experience with special education because these systems will neutralize the
negative effect of culture on their perceptions (Miller et al., 1992). More specifically, it
can be concluded that school districts that educate their staff on Slavic history and culture
will experience a decrease in the negative influence of culture as parents gain more
knowledge about special education and observe its positive effects. Unfortunately, it can
also be concluded that many parents have negative experiences that undermine their trust
in educators and the whole system of special education. These experiences are
determined by a variety of factors, some of which are still under-researched and require
attention.

**Conclusion 3: Lack of Knowledge about the IEP and Testing**

Slavic parents unfamiliar with special education in the USA will experience
stress, confusion, and unfounded fears, which will greatly contribute to their negative
attitudes towards the IEP process and testing (El Shourbagi, 2017; Montelongo, 2014;
Pearson & Meadan, 2018; Thompson, 2017; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Educational
professionals who do not understand and acknowledge this fact will struggle with
including parents in a meaningful way in the educational process.

Based on the findings of this study and supported by the literature, it can be
concluded that Slavic parents have little knowledge (P11, F24) of special education,
including the IEP and testing process. In fact, the lack of knowledge was identified as one
of the central barriers to their meaningful participation in the IEP and testing. The
researcher concludes that parents lack an understanding of why their children need an
IEP, how the school determines what services need to be provided, who is involved in
this process, and what the consequences may be. The lack of language skills, cultural
barriers, and inadequate teacher and community support make it hard for parents to obtain this knowledge.

**Conclusion 4: Communication and Language Barriers**

Based on the findings of this study and supported by the scholarly literature, it can be concluded that educators who fail to understand that communication (P11, F24) is a widely encountered barrier among parents of children with special needs will struggle with making sure that parents are actively included in the special education process as well-informed and empowered team members (Balli, 2016; ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001; Glen Martin Associates, 2015). There are instances where it is common among the educators not to inform parents properly about the IEP and testing process and pressure (P4, F15) them to sign papers without taking time (P5; F7) to read and understand them. Schools that fail to consider parents’ language needs (P9, F21) will experience pressing problems (Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2012; Ikezaki et al., 2014; Montelongo, 2014). These problems include adequate translation, which is often absent during the IEP and testing meetings, so parents cannot receive all the information necessary to make well-informed decisions.

**Conclusion 5: Lack of Support**

Based on the findings of this study supported by the literature, it follows that Slavic parents of children with special needs lack support systems. School districts that recognize, respond, and create systems of support for minority parents will mitigate the effects of this commonly faced problem, which contributes to the feeling of isolation and mistrust (Jung, 2011; Montelongo, 2014). School, family, and community support was found to be inadequate, which means that parents have to overcome the challenges and
complexities of the IEP and testing by themselves. It can also be concluded that Slavic parents cannot receive family support due to cultural attitudes and perceptions of disability, and this lack of support will increase stress and a feeling of helplessness.

**Conclusion 6: Student Culture as a Tool to Enhance Special Education**

It can be concluded that student culture is the key to enhancing special education services in elementary schools. Research showed that parents are a valuable source for new ideas regarding the specific culture-based improvements that should be made in the special education system in order to accommodate all children. When school districts partner with parents to determine the effectiveness and improvements of the school-wide special education system, students’ culture, language, and educational needs will improve. The theories of Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939), as well as the findings of this study, conclude that there is a strong need to consider students’ culture, acknowledge their language needs, and approach each child individually.

**Conclusion 7: Parental Involvement and Support**

Given the findings of this study, prior literature on the topic (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014), as well as the theoretical framework by Cummins (1989) and Wolfendale (1939), it can be concluded that educators who focus on the improvement of the assessment process and better collaboration between parents and teachers will build a truly inclusive educational experience for minority children with special needs. The study revealed multiple problems with testing that make this process extremely stressful for both parents and children. School districts that did not develop meaningful partnerships and collaboration between parents and teachers experienced less effective communication, which impeded the achievement of optimal outcomes. The literature confirms the need to
build partnerships with parents and enhance their community participation in order to empower, support, and guide them on the path of becoming well-informed decision-makers (Adams et al., 2016; Balli, 2016; ERIC Clearinghouse, 2001; Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004; Wright & Taylor, 2014).

**Conclusion 8: Severity of Disability and Identification Time**

This study generated some unexpected findings which, given the inconsistency in prior studies, point to the need for further research. It is not well-understood how the severity of a child's disability affects parents' perceptions of special education (Doménech & Moliner, 2014; Gasteiger-Klicpera et al., 2012; McIntyre & Zemantic, 2017; Naveed & Kasana, 2017; Palmer et al. 2001; Slade et al., 2017; Zablotsky et al., 2012). Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that parents of children with severe disabilities and birth defects, which put them on IEP, will be generally satisfied with the quality of special education. In other words, it can be concluded that parents of children who are put on the IEP later in life will be less satisfied with the special education process because they have no positive experience of being part of this system. Districts that use awareness-raising interventions for this latter group of parents will make them more engaged in the IEP and testing process and more positive about special education in general.

**Implications for Action**

The present study revealed many gaps in practice that should be addressed to make parental participation in the IEP and testing more effective and meaningful.
Implication 1: Raising Awareness to Eliminate Negative Cultural Attitudes

Slavic parents have some culture-specific beliefs regarding disability and special education, many of which originate from the USSR policies of exclusion. Therefore, it is recommended that schools design a year-long outreach and education program that will explain to the Slavic parents the difference between the special education policies in the USSR and post-Soviet states and those used in the USA. It will help parents to become aware that educators are guided by the concept of inclusion and act in the best interests of the child. More importantly, it will help them understand that the IEP serves to address the child’s unique learning needs, and it does not exclude or isolate students. This program would be evaluated annually through surveys and community focus groups.

Implication 2: Combatting the Fear of Psychologists in the IEP Process

Given Slavic parents’ fear of psychologists, it is also recommended to expand Slavic’s parents’ knowledge about these professionals and their role in the IEP and testing process through meet and greet sessions out in the community. These sessions will develop relationships and knowledge in the parent community and will help ensure that parents do not consider the involvement of psychologists as a sign that their children are mentally ill. A mandate at each school site that would require educators to explain what psychologists do, how they can help a child, and what functions in the IEP team they play is also recommended. In order for the system to work smoothly, educators need to be provided with additional education and training. Their professional development is crucial because it can help them become more culture-sensitive and child- and family-oriented.
Implication 3: Filling Gaps in Knowledge

An in-depth education and communication program using all avenues of communication should be developed for school districts that serve Slavic populations. One of the greatest concerns has been the lack of knowledge among Slavic parents regarding the system of special education in the United States. The IEP and testing process is difficult to understand for them, and they find it hard to accept it and participate because of the fear, cultural stereotypes, and language barrier. This limited understanding, in turn, causes resistance and denial and prevents parents from helping educators to find the best way to meet the children’s needs. Therefore, it is recommended to raise an awareness of the IEP and testing process so that to combat any fears or prejudice that may cause negative feelings among the Slavic parents. Awareness-raising can be pursued through social media, school meetings with parents, leaflets, and other means as outlined in the program.

Implication 4: Improvement of Educator-Parent Communication

Slavic parents have reported being dissatisfied with the quality of their communication with educators. In particular, they experienced pressure from educators to sign the papers, which caused stress and made them feel as if their opinion did not matter. In order to prevent such problems and ensure that parents feel respected, it is recommended that educators give parents time to think and make informed decisions as well as explain the IEP process more effectively. This element of the plan would be implemented district-wide in all schools. Instead of setting deadlines and pressuring parents to sign the papers, educators are recommended to provide them with as much information as possible. Among other things, they should inform parents of legal
timelines of IEPs and their overall rights so that to empower them to make informed decisions. This improvement of communication will make parents feel less confused and stressed and will show them that teachers consider them as primary decision-makers.

**Implication 5: Eliminating Language Barrier**

Language barrier was identified as a significant communication problem for some parents. Therefore, it is recommended that schools consider the involvement of well-trained translators in the IEP and testing process. Slavic parents whose English skills are too under-developed to understand the information should also be given enough time to translate everything. All IEP documents should be translated into parents’ first language (most of the Slavic parents also know Russian). It is important to remember that the language barrier may be the cause of parental dissatisfaction and limited involvement in the IEP and testing process, so this issue needs to be addressed flexibly depending on each parent’s needs and language proficiency. The elimination of the language barrier will help engage parents in the IEP and testing process.

**Implication 6: Improved Collaboration**

It is recommended to enhance collaboration between parents and educators in order to make the IEP and testing more effective. This can be done through the formation of stakeholder teams with parents, staff, and community members, regular communication by phone and/or face-to-face, as well as the involvement of translators when needed. Encouraging parents to volunteer in classrooms and engage in extracurricular activities and events may also help create a favorable and trusting atmosphere and make them feel more involved in their children’s educational process. Parents should be recognized as the primary decision-makers, so educators need to
encourage and appreciate their contribution, seek their advice, and keep them updated regarding the child’s progress and needs. Thus, schools will be able to comply with IDEA requirements while at the same time engaging stakeholders meaningfully.

**Implication 7: Student Culture**

It is recommended to make modifications in the special education system to address students’ and families’ cultural needs and knowledge level in the first place. Consistent with the theoretical framework and the findings of this study, it is recommended to incorporate students’ culture into the school program and allow students and parents to use their native language if necessary through the IEP and testing process. Therefore, the involvement of a translator is absolutely necessary if parents and children struggle with communicating in English. This is critically important during the testing process because children’s limited English skills may lead to incorrect assessment. More importantly, students’ culture and individual differences should always be considered, as it will help deliver relevant and culturally-sensitive instruction. Teachers should be provided with additional training so that to enable them to work with diverse students and demonstrate more sensitivity to cultural differences.

**Implication 8: Holistic Approach to Special Education Delivery**

It is recommended to encourage a home-school-community approach, which would be included in the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) goals and incorporated into the stakeholder meetings to serve students with special needs. It implies empowering parents to educate children at home as well as school and making them advocates for their needs on the school and community level. It also highlights the need to use all available platforms and guiding documents to ensure that students’ interests are
always prioritized. These changes will ensure that each child with a disability receives specifically-tailored services.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Perceptions and attitudes of Slavic parents towards special education in the United States is an under-researched topic. There are still some gaps that need to be filled in future studies.

**Recommendation 1: Generational Perceptions**

To begin with, it is recommended to conduct a qualitative study to learn how different generations of Slavs perceive IEP and testing and determine whether years lived in the USA affect acceptance of IEP. Based on the findings of this study, it is possible to say that older people have more negative perceptions of special education, possibly due to their stronger ties with the USSR and the impact of its discriminatory policies towards children with disabilities. Interviews with Slavic parents revealed that their own parents and family members did not support the provision of special education to children. However, more research is definitely needed to confirm this finding.

**Recommendation 2: Parents’ Educational Level**

It is recommended to conduct a mixed-methods study to learn whether parents’ educational level affects their perceptions of special education. In this study, the researcher did not collect data regarding Slavic parents’ educational level, so it is not known how this factor may shape their experiences and attitudes to the IEP and testing. One may suggest that parental awareness is directly associated with their perceptions of special education, but this claim should be supported with reliable evidence from more large-scale studies.
**Recommendation 3: The Impact of Identification Time**

Furthermore, it is recommended to conduct a comparison study to understand whether the experiences of parents of students born with disability vs. those whose children were identified in school with specific learning disability differ considerably. The findings of this study allow suggesting that parents who have been aware of their children’s disability from the first years of their lives tend to be more acceptant of special services, possibly because they are aware of all the challenges faced by their children and know that they cannot raise them without professional support. Those whose children have been identified with some minor learning disabilities in elementary school, in turn, may find it harder to accept the need for special education because it takes time to get used to the idea that their child needs more attention. More research needs to be conducted to explore this issue in more detail, as it may help develop effective strategies for engaging and connecting with different groups of parents.

**Recommendation 4: Severity of Disability Compared to Parental Attitudes Toward Special Education**

It is recommended to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study to learn how parents with students that have differing levels of disability feel about Special Education. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that parents whose children with severe disabilities were placed in special education early on had positive attitudes toward special education compared to the parents whose children were identified and placed into special education later which were more resistant. More research is needed to explore the issue in detail and determine how the severity of disability can affect parental perceptions.
Recommendation 5: Grief and Acceptance Process

It is recommended to conduct a qualitative study of parents’ emotional experiences as they go through the initial state of identification of special needs to building awareness and the ability to help their child. A mixed-method study can also be useful because it can help obtain more accurate results due to the use of triangulation (Biddix, 2018). The role of culture is undoubtedly significant, but all parents irrespectively of their cultural background undergo the grief process. When they learn about their child’s special needs, they go through cycles of denial, hesitation, doubt, acceptance, and so on. Special education professionals need to learn more about what these parents go through and how it affects their mental wellbeing so that to empower and support them.

Recommendation 6: Exploring other Cultures

It is recommended to explore how parents of other cultures perceive IEP and testing. Perceptions and attitudes of Hispanic, African American, Asian, and African parents of children with special needs may be affected by distinctive cultural norms and beliefs that require an in-depth analysis. The results of this study may not apply to representatives of other cultures because Slavic participants’ customs and attitudes have been formed under the unique influence of history, culture, and personal experiences, which vary from state to state and from culture to culture.

Recommendation 7: Slavic States Differentiation

It is recommended to conduct a qualitative study to explore the differences among parents who came from different Slavic countries. The post-Soviet world now consists of many countries that have been developing differently for the past three decades. Although
they have a common culture and history, there are still many unique cultural and social features that may result in different perceptions and attitudes towards special education and disability in general. Since there are no studies addressing this gap in knowledge, more research is strongly recommended.

**Recommendation 8: A Culture of Acceptance and Support at School**

Finally, it is recommended to explore best practices regarding the culture of acceptance and support at school and the ways it can be built to accommodate children with special needs. Multiple case studies based on primary and secondary data can help determine the best approaches to creating a favorable atmosphere and generate useful recommendations for special education professionals.

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

This study revealed that one of the main reasons why Slavic parents refuse any assessments and IEP is the lack of understanding and knowledge about the system of special education in the United States. They need to be informed that this system is not the same as it was decades ago in the USSR, or what one may still observe in post-Soviet states. It is crucial to raise awareness among these parents so that they will not be afraid that their children will be sent to a boarding school or discriminated/excluded in any way. Parents must learn that the IEP is simply a plan to help children with special needs. It is neither a label nor an attempt to isolate them. Many of the participants who learned more about the IEP and testing eventually admitted that this system works, and there are no reasons to be afraid of it.

Another observation that should be mentioned is the fact that many parents wanted to be heard. They were eager to share their concerns, experiences, and
expectations. After the interview, every participant ended up having a conversation with me about different approaches to IEP and testing. Some told me how unhappy they were and how schools mistreated them and their children. Others expressed how happy they were to help me with the study so that I could help others to understand how IEP can support children with special needs. I felt that the topic was very important for all of them, and they needed someone to listen to them, to care, and help if possible.

Interviews with parents were emotionally exhausting and stressful because of the complexity of the issues discussed and the general sensitivity of the topic. Some of the experiences that participants shared were painful to listen to and react properly. Four of the participants cried during the interview, so I felt responsible for making them feel this way because I encouraged them to recall the unpleasant memories. I knew that I had to ask the difficult questions because it was my job, but, naturally, it did not make the process less challenging. I felt that some of the participants simply wanted to be understood and supported, so I listened patiently and respectfully and tried to be as sensitive as possible.

The interviews also revealed a sense of mistrust and fear. Three of the participants kept looking at the recording device, as if fearing to say anything that others might hear. I think that they wanted to protect their children and did not want to reveal any information that could affect their lives or image in school. This feeling of mistrust was almost palpable during the interviews, even though the participants were informed regarding the protection of their anonymity. The fact that no one wanted the community member to be present during the interviews also vividly showed that these parents did not trust anyone.
In this way, I learned much about the challenges experienced by Slavic parents and looked at the problem from their perspective. I am glad that my research filled the gap in the literature regarding the attitudes of Slavic parents towards the IEP and testing. Given the number of Slavic people in the United States and California in particular, this research can be extremely valuable for educators seeking to enhance the services provided to this population. I hope that the research on this topic will continue because there are still some gaps in our understanding of Slavic parents’ perceptions of the IEP and testing. More in-depth studies involving larger samples drawn from different states could help collect richer data that may inform the development of more effective, student-centered, culturally-sensitive special education programs. In addition, more research should be conducted to learn how representatives of other cultures perceive special education, as it will help schools accommodate students of all cultures.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent and Audio Recording Release

VIDEOTAPING RELEASE FORM RESEARCH TITLE: Barriers to Accepting Special Education by Slavic Parents of Children with Special Needs in the Sacramento County

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD IRVINE, CA 92618

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Tatyana Kisel, Doctorate Student

I understand that the interview may be audio recorded per the granting of my permission. I do not have to agree to have the interview be audio recorded. In the event that I do agree to have myself audio recorded, the sole purpose will be for video analysis to support data collection related to barriers of accepting special education by Slavic parents of children with special needs.

I hereby give my permission to Tanya Kisel to use any audiotape material during her research on Special Education. The audiotape material will only be used for this research and the audiotape will be destroyed at the end of the study. As with all research consent, I may at any time withdraw permission for audio to be used in this research project.

Name of Participant: ________________________________________________

Signature of Participant: __________________________________________

Date: ______________

Signature of Principal Investigator: _________________________________

Date: ______________
APPENDIX B

Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study

Dear ________________.

My name is Tanya Kisel and I am a doctoral candidate of Organization Leadership at Brandman University and a vice principal at Community Outreach Academy, Elementary School. I am conducting a study on how cultural customs and cultural attitudes effect Slavic parents’ willingness to participate in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and testing process. The study will strive to identify and describe the barriers and supports Slavic parents experience during IEP and testing process. The study will fill in the gap in research of Slavic parent’s participation, support, and barriers in regards Special Education. The results of the study may assist school administration to understand and support parents of Slavic origin that are participating in special education process.

I have been granted permission to conduct this study. Since you fit my criteria for the study, I would very much appreciate including your experience and thoughts in my study. If you can volunteer an hour of your time, I would like to schedule a time to interview you. Attached are the informed consent and audio recording release form and Research Participant’s Bill of Right as well as the interview protocol with all interview questions. Please let me know if you would be willing to help contribute to this important study. If you are willing to contribute to this study, please provide me with an email address and a phone number of the person what I should work with to schedule an interview. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at tkisel@mail.brandman.edu or (916)532-8505.

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By participating in the study, I agree to participate in an interview. The interview will last about 45-60 minutes and will be conducted in person.

I understand that

1. There is minimal risk associate with participating in this research. The researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping all research material locked in a cabinet.

2. The interview will be audio recorded for a more precise data interpretation. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist.

3. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained.

4. Once the study will be completed, all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and this consent will be locked securely and stored for three years after the data completion ends. After three years, this data will be shredded and fully deleted.

5. The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding supports and barriers of Slavic parents’ participation in IEP and testing process as well as how culture and customs may affect participating in special education, and finally help school administration to understand how to support Slavic parents that are going through testing and IEP process.

6. I understand that a Slavic community member may be present at the interview for support and formality.

7. I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the researcher may stop the
study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed I will be so informed and my consent obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research participant’s Bill of Rights.

I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

[ ] No, I do not wish to participate in this study

[ ] Yes, I am willing to help contribute to this important study

Printed Name: __________________________________________________

Signature: ______________________________________________________

Phone Number: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________

Email: _________________________________________________________

Signature of Researcher: ___________________________

Date: __________________________
APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

The goal of this researcher is to acquire information about the IEP and testing process experience through the parent lens. There may be additional follow up questions asked of the participants for clarity.

Interview Script

Interviewer: Tanya Kisel

Interview time planned: Approximately 45-60 minutes

Interview place: Venue of Choice

Recording: Audio recording

Opening Comments: My name is Tanya Kisel and I am doctoral candidate at Brandman University. I am also a vice principal at an elementary school. I want to thank you for participating in this study. We also have Ivan Leshchuk present here as a Slavic community member. Ivan Leshchuk is an advocate for the Slavic community and he will be present to monitor the interview, clarify or translate any questions needed, and intervene when needed or stop the interview all together.

Based on the email or flyer you received you understand that this study is to explore the parent perspective and expectation of the IEP and testing process regarding their child with special needs. For these interview questions we will primarily be focusing on the processes of identification, cultural customs, cultural attitudes, supports and barriers to the IEP and testing processes for special education.

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. Information from this one-on-one interview will be included in my dissertation. For privacy concerns, your identity will not be revealed and will remain confidential. All data will be reported without any reference to you or your child’s school. To make our interview run smoother, I will record our interview. After the interview will be transcribed, I will email you the transcription so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas.

Have you thoroughly read the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill of Rights that was sent to you? Do you have any questions or do you need any clarifications about either document? Although, you have signed the consent form to participate in this study, you may choose to withdraw your consent at any time. If at any time you do not understand the questions being asked please ask for more of an explanation to clarify the question or for translation of the question.

We have scheduled an hour for this interview. You are welcome to let me know at any time you wish to not answer or would like to skip a question or even stop the interview. The questions I will be asking are the same for everyone participating in the study. I will be reading most of what I say so that my interview will be conducted pretty much in the same matter for all interviewees.
There are some key words that you would need to understand what they mean.

IEP - Individualized Education Program
Barriers – obstacles or things that prevent communication or something

Do you have any concerns or questions before we begin?

**Settling in Questions**

How long have you lived in the United States?
Where are you from originally?
How long has your child been on IEP?

**Interview Questions**

1. What roles should educators (teachers, principals, vice principals, IEP team members etc.) play in helping children succeed in school?

   How has your culture been supported in your child’s school?

2. As a parent, what role do you play in helping your child succeed in school?

   How have you been supporting your child’s education?

3. In what ways have you been included in your child’s IEP and testing process?
   (Probing questions: Have you attended the IEP meetings? Did the IEP team include you in on the decision-making process, Did you understand everything that was happening at the meetings? Tell me about the IEP team, how did you feel at the meeting.)

4. What is your perception of Special Education?
   a. (Probing questions: What was your experience like with IEP and testing process? Were you resistant at first to accept special education or testing? If so what was the reason?)

5. What supports have you received during your child’s testing and IEP process?
   Please describe.
   (Probing Questions: Were school staff members helpful during the IEP and testing process? Did the offer any advice or words of wisdom? Did you receive any supports for home?)

6. Describe any barriers you have encountered during your child’s testing and IEP process.
(Probing Questions: Do you feel like you have been given enough information about the process? Was academic language and long terms outcomes easy to understand? If necessary, did your child have a translator during the assessments? What he/she able to explain in his/her native language as needed? Did you know all of your parent rights?)

7. How can schools/programs better serve families during testing and IEP process?

Were there things that you would have hoped went differently?

8. Describe any cultural ideas or thoughts you have regarding IEP and testing process?
   (Probing Questions: are there any cultural reasons why you would not want your child to be on IEP? What are they?)

9. Do you have any other perspectives on the IEP and testing process that you would like to share?
   (Probing questions: What could the schools improve on regarding the IEP and testing process?)

**Closing Comments**: Again, I would like to thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Your time is valuable to the research. Before we conclude are there any additional comments or thoughts you would like to add to this discussion?
## APPENDIX D

### Synthesis Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical foundation</th>
<th>History and Laws of SE in the USA</th>
<th>Policy and Practice of SE in the USA</th>
<th>Demographic characteristics of USA students with special needs</th>
<th>SE in California</th>
<th>Parental perceptions of SE</th>
<th>Parental involvement in IEP</th>
<th>SE experience of minorities</th>
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<td>‘If I was a different ethnicity, would she treat me the same?’: Latino parents’ experiences obtaining autism services. Angell &amp; Solomon (2017).</td>
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APPENDIX E

Field-Test Feedback Reflection Questions

Observer Reflection Questions

1. How long did the interview take? Do you feel like it was appropriate amount of time?
2. How did you perceive the interview went for the parent? (Were they comfortable? nervous?)
3. Did you feel like the parent was prepared enough? Did I give the parent enough information ahead of time? Is there something that I could have done to better prepare the parent?
4. What parts of the interview went well? Why so?
5. What parts of the interview did the parent struggle with? Why?
6. What are some things that could be changed in the interview to make it better?
7. Do you have any other suggestions or comments?

Field Test Participant Feedback Questions

During the field test interview, the researcher will take notes on certain clarifications or questions the interviewee will have. After the interview, the researcher will provide the field test interviewee a copy of the interview protocol and ask for any improvement suggestions. The responses will be followed up for specificity.

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had enough opportunities to describe how you feel about participating in IEP process?
2. Do you think the amount of time given was enough?
3. Were there any questions that were confusing or you didn’t understand? If so which ones?

4. Were there any words or terms that you did not understand or were confusing?

5. Did I make you feel comfortable during the interview?
This is to certify that:

Tatyana Kisel

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Subjects Research (Curriculum Group)
Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Brandman University

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w9e82e99c-0f20-4156-ae9b-5e767fa58993-33198899
MyBrandman <my@brandman.edu>
to me, Douglas, Larrie

Dear Tatyana Kisel,

Congratulations! Your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If you need to modify your BUIRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at BUIRB.Brandman.edu

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank You,

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