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### Perceptions of Secondary Educators Regarding The Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students With Disabilities

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY EDUCATORS REGARDING  
THE EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT OF AFRICAN  
IMMIGRANT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Charity Obiageli Uzochukwu

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Special Education

May 2022

This Dissertation by Charity Obiageli Uzochukwu

Entitled: *Perceptions of Secondary Educators Regarding the Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students with Disabilities*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, School of Special Education

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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## **ABSTRACT**

Uzochukwu, Charity Obiageli. *Perceptions of secondary educators regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2022.

Despite the vital role that educational engagement has on student learning and academic achievement, there is limited research on how secondary educators perceive the concept concerning African immigrant students with disabilities. There is a significant increase of African immigrant students with disabilities in United States (U.S.) public schools. Little is known regarding how secondary educators perceive their roles and facilitate educational engagement for these students. Inadequate information about immigrant students with disabilities, further makes it difficult to support this student population in U.S. public schools.

This phenomenological qualitative study investigated how secondary educators perceived their roles in facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. The 16 participants for this study were purposively drawn from public middle and high school in Mid-Southeastern state school districts of the United States. These secondary educators were ESL coordinators, exceptional children (EC) facilitators, and special education (SPED) teachers. Data collection for this study was through multiple source; questionnaires, interviews, participant reflections, and researcher journals. The interview was semi-structured and guided by open-ended questions. A six-step thematic process was used to analyze and transcribed the data collected. The theoretical perspectives for this study theory were culturally responsive pedagogy and the constructivism theory.

Findings for this study revealed secondary educators perceived that barriers of cultural factors, curriculum structure and educational model impacted their role of facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. As a result, the participant perceived that increased support in the learning environment could lead to successful educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. Participant are of the opinion that support systems such as inclusion support, relationship building, and specially designed instructions could aid educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

*Keywords:* African immigrants, educational engagement, educators, students with disabilities

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my mother, Victoria Chizube Moka, my biggest supporter, advocate, and mentor. She taught me to be the best version of myself. I also dedicate this to my family Okechukwu, Nosike, Ikechukwu, Ifechukwu, and Ozioma, for being my inspiration.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

Segun is a sweet 11 years old African immigrant boy who lives with his parents and two siblings. Segun's family migrated from Nigeria to the US when Segun was seven. Based on the parent reports, Segun has a relative strength in math and nonverbal reasoning skills, such as identifying similarities and differences between objects. His parent also reports he has strengths in self-direction and note his hobbies are playing soccer and drawing. Segun has fine motor skills, he struggled to write.

Segun was placed in an English as a Second Language Learner (ESL) class upon enrollment at a nearby elementary school. His parent was dissatisfied with this placement; they felt it was based on Segun's cultural background rather than the language barrier. Although Segun's family speaks the Yoruba language at home, Segun speaks the English language fluently; his parent believes that regular English Language Art class (ELA) would be more beneficial to him. After one year at the school, Segun was at risk for academic failure. His teachers noted an additional area of concern was frustration and task completion.

According to Segun's parents, their concerns are with his needing more help to be on task and get what he needs to succeed in school. Their school-related concerns are frustration with certain assignments and reading. They also reported he does complete his homework with help and with frustration. In 3rd grade, Segun's parents were skeptical

when the school made an initial referral for special education evaluation, and Segun was diagnosed with a specific learning disability (SLD).

In 5th grade, Segun's parents made a formal request to remove him from ESL program to a regular ELA class. His parent attributed the ESL placement to why Segun is yet to read at grade level and why he struggles in core subject areas. Segun demonstrated significant academic deficits and needed assistance to complete grade-level assignments based on his report card. He has not acquired the basic fundamental academic skills and was two grade levels below in all subject areas, including math.

This report was concerning to Segun's parents; they felt his academic needs were overlooked and neglected by the school. They requested a formal reevaluation of Segun's Individualize Educational Program (IEP) to look into his special education delivery and services. Segun's parents felt that Segun could also benefit from instruction specifically targeting his academic needs. In 6th grade, Segun's parents are still working hard to make sure Segun gets his academic level back to where it needs to be.

### **Personal Reflection**

I am an African immigrant. Ten years ago, upon arrival to the United States, I enrolled my three sons in a nearby district public school. The school system immediately met my sons with resistance. Without an appropriate evaluation of their academic performance level, they were moved two grade levels behind their prior grade levels in their prior school in Africa. The school felt they were incapable of performing at their grade levels. I didn't know how to support my sons because I was new to the system at the time. "It's like we speak a different kind of English language," my son said to me one day. Though he speaks English fluently, he feels his English is inferior. He reported being constantly ignored when he raised his hands to ask or

answer questions in class. My second son reported that he could barely understand his teachers because they spoke too fast. The effect was academic disengagement in their various classes. My youngest son, merely nine at the time, got frustrated and gave up trying to communicate with his teachers. He shut down and would not speak in class. Adamantly, he resisted cultural and linguistic integration, which resulted in a drawback in his academic performance.

It was challenging to get my sons what they needed to succeed in school. I discovered in a hard way that I need to shift the idea that my children's cultural background is a weakness but a strength the school can leverage to meet their academic needs.

My personal experiences with my children made me interested in the story I shared about Segun. Having been in a similar situation myself and witnessed the academic disenfranchisement of African immigrant students. I understand Segun's family struggles to meet the needs of their child with disabilities. I see myself in their situation; I feel their frustrations trying to ensure their child receives an appropriate education.

I discovered that the educational placement for most African immigrant students with disabilities are often compromised due to language barrier. The result is disengagement in their learning environment and without prompt interventions they can be at risk for academic failure. Despite the cultural inhibitors, I learned that focus on ensuring that students like Segun are academically engaged is essential for their success. The teachers who work directly with students and a collective effort from the whole school team can make this achievable.

I became interested in finding ways to improve educational engagement for African immigrant students, especially students with disabilities, because of my experiences. Past research focused on either parents, general education teachers, or students without disabilities. It is essential to hear from secondary educators who work directly with students like Segun to see

how they perceive their roles in facilitating educational engagement for these students. The current chapter introduces this study's significance and identifies the problem statement informing this research. Further, the introduction chapter clarifies the research purpose identifies the research aim and questions. Methods and procedures, definitions of key terms, and anticipated limitations are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the background information's main insights while outlining how the rest of the dissertation was organized.

### **Significance of the Study**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This mandate considers using classroom modifications/accommodation, differentiated instruction, supplemental aids, and services to support student learning in the classroom. The IDEA regulations also specified that schools must conduct an appropriate evaluation to ensure the placement of students in a learning environment suitable to meet their academic needs.

Segun's story signifies the need for appropriate educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities in their learning environment. Undertaking this study was essential for several reasons. Data collected from secondary educators will help understand their perceptions about measures to ensure educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. Ndemanu and Jordan (2017) reported that educators in inclusive public schools lacked information on facilitating learning and academic performance for students with disabilities. Conducting this research will help unearth essential insights about educators' perceptions of student engagement in public schools.

Furthermore, this study will help identify secondary educators' attitudes about educational engagement among African immigrant learners with disabilities. Lee et al. (2018) shared that teachers tended to positively support learners with disabilities. However, there was limited information on whether secondary educators in public schools supported and facilitated the educational needs of students with disabilities (Bartlett, 2015). Study findings from the current research will help address this knowledge gap and help identify secondary educators' positions regarding African immigrant students with disabilities. Furthermore, this study will help identify secondary educators' attitudes about educational engagement among African immigrant learners with disabilities. Finally, the present study will help identify potential challenges and barriers secondary educators encounter when facilitating educational engagement for students like Segun and provide recommendations to address the identified barriers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study investigated how secondary educators perceived their roles and facilitated educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities while identifying potential challenges educators encountered when ensuring educational engagement among these learners. The problem statement that informed this study's need was the lack of findings in special needs literature regarding educators' perceptions about the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. The results of this study may help address the knowledge gap in the literature regarding secondary educators' perception of their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Further, the research is expected to add new insights to the current topic based on secondary educators' information. Such an approach could add further information to existing literature which is currently limited to views expressed by teachers, parents, and children with disabilities.

### **Inadequate Data on African Immigrant Students with Disabilities**

Concerning African immigrant students with disabilities, there were inadequate data regarding the numbers of learners with disabilities, especially within the education sector (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2020; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020). Ndemanu and Jordan (2017) defined students with disabilities as learners who have a mental or physical impairment that impacts their ability to carry out normal daily activities. As applied to this study, individuals with disabilities were referred to as learners eligible for special education services, related services, and early intervention services outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004; Hunt, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) estimated that in the school year 2018-2019, the percentage of students with disabilities was higher in Alaska/Indian Natives (17%), followed by those who were Black (16%), White (14%), Hispanic/Latino (13%), Pacific Islander (12%), and Asian (7%). However, these education statistics did not clarify the specific number of students with disabilities who were African immigrants.

A review by Kibria and Becerra (2020) reported inadequate information about immigrant students with disabilities, making it difficult to support this student population in public schools. Specifically, a literature search on the Department of Public Instruction in the Mid-Southeastern state child count showed limited statistics on the enrollment and academic performance of students with disabilities. The child count data counted children ages 3 through 21 receiving special education and related services under IDEA in Mid-Southeastern state schools. These data provided the extent to which students with disabilities were educated with their non-disabled peers and were reported yearly according to disability category, race/ethnicity, and educational environment to the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2019). The child count data did not

provide the academic performance of students with disabilities, and the enrollment data did not reflect African immigrant students with disabilities.

According to the Education Commission of the States (Parker, 2019), the lack of consistent data on enrollment of students with disabilities and subsequent academic information might contribute to the diverse ways the 50 states allocate resources and finances for special education. The Education Commission of the States especially noted over 50 different approaches in which States allocated funding and assessed students with disabilities in various school districts (Parker, 2019). It became difficult to obtain the actual number or statistics of African immigrant students with disabilities in American schools, especially in Mid-Southeastern state public school districts. Besides, there was also limited information on the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities within different public-school settings. Available literature failed to document how educators perceived the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Increasing Number of African Immigrants Students with Disabilities**

The number of immigrant students with special needs continues to rise across the United States. A recent review of past literature by McKay (2019) revealed the number of immigrant children in the American public education sector increased, constituting 22% of the total student population. Of this population, 27% included African immigrant students, 43% European students, 15% Asian students, and 15% from other continents. Based on the 27% African immigrant students, an estimated 150,000 learners had disabilities and received special education services, representing about 11% of this population (McKay, 2019; Salem, 2018).

According to Ndemanu and Jordan (2017), the percentage of African immigrant students served under IDEA (2004) rose from 3.7% to 4.4% in the last decade. In the previous three

years, the number of African immigrant students with disabilities rose to 4.6% in 2019 (McKay, 2019). These data further indicated the necessity for schools to meet these learners' unique needs (McKay, 2019). However, a literature review revealed a lack of research on the experience of African immigrant students with disabilities within the American education system thus, the need to undertake this study (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017).

However, this population includes all African immigrant students from Africa, the Caribbean, and other countries. Also, the population consists of both students with and those without special needs. Even so, 27% of African immigrant students, or 40,500 learners, have disabilities and are enrolled in inclusive mainstream schools (McKay, 2019). A further study by Kibria and Becerra (2020) reported inadequate information about immigrant students with disabilities, especially African immigrant students, further necessitating this study's need.

### **Language as a Means of Identification**

Many African immigrant families speak languages other than English at home as a first or native language. Data on language use, English-speaking ability, limited English speaking, and speakers of languages other than English provided evidence that African immigrants exist or live in the Mid-Southeastern state. According to NCES (2020) data, 9,861 people speak African languages in the Mid-Southeastern State. For example, immigrants from Western Africa speak the Yoruba, Twi, Hausa, and Igbo languages, while immigrants from Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa speak the Swahili language (NCES, 2020).

The number of immigrant students enrolled in Mid-Southeastern state public schools continues to rise. Data showed the number of English as a second language (ESL) students in the school districts increased by 156% in the last three years (NCES, 2019). The Mid-Southeastern state public schools are making efforts to implement ESL programs. For example, they offer free

ESL training to teachers and a pay raise incentive to earn an ESL endorsement. However, these programs' effectiveness cannot be measured as schools implement the ESL programs individually. Available data did not provide information on how effective ESL programs in public schools were monitored or enforced to help immigrant students, especially those with disabilities, succeed in schools and beyond.

### **Inadequate Data on Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students**

Educational engagement refers to the extent of interest, inspiration, and attention students show or receive when taught or learning (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2018). Students' interest involves a willingness to go beyond the requirements to master complex skills using curiosity, passion, optimism, investment of time, and energy in the learning process. Kibria and Becerra (2020) elaborated that educational engagement extends to the extent of motivation learners have to learn and progress in their academics. Motivation could come from caring about doing well, being energized by the subject matter, a sense of belonging, or feeling one's identity as a student is central. Stiefel et al. (2017) added that the concept of educational engagement anchors on the belief that learning improves when students are inspired, interested, or curious. An effective educational engagement promotes participation in school-related activities, academic and learning tasks, positive conduct, and the absence of disruptive behaviors. By contrast, learning tends to be negatively impacted when students are disaffected, dispassionate about their school, disengaged from learning, or bored with their teachers (Stiefel et al., 2017). Improved or more robust educational engagement is particularly critical when dealing with learners with disabilities.

Despite the vital role educational engagement has on student learning and academic achievement, there was limited research on how educators perceived this concept concerning

learners with disabilities. Specifically, there was little information on educators' perceptions regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities within Mid-Southeastern state public school districts of the United States. Instead, available literature was limited to parents' perceptions, general education teachers, and students' opinions on educational engagement. For instance, Pit-ten Cate and Glock (2018) used a qualitative study to examine teacher perceptions concerning students with immigrant backgrounds or special educational needs. Their research revealed inclusive schoolteachers were inadequately prepared to facilitate the learning of students with special needs. Specifically, due to diverse cultural and language backgrounds, teachers noted they felt less skilled in facilitating the learning process of immigrant students with disabilities (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2018). However, despite these demographic trends, most of the available data were limited to all African immigrant students. A review of academic literature and institutional reports showed limited data specific to African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions of secondary educators regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities within Mid-Southeastern state school districts of the United States. The specific research focus examined how educators perceived their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Thus, this study's primary participants were limited to English as a second language (ESL) coordinators, exceptional children (EC) facilitators, and special education (SPED) teachers. Besides, the specific focus was exploring and assessing how ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers perceived their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities such as Segun. For this study's

purposes, ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers were referred to collectively using the term educators.

### **Research Aim**

This study investigated how secondary educators perceived their roles in supporting and facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

- Q1     How do secondary educators perceive their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?
- Q1a    What barriers do secondary educators report that prevent effective educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities?
- Q1b    What are secondary educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities?

### **Methods Overview**

I used a phenomenology research design to investigate the postulated research aim and research questions. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique (Creswell, 2017), was used to select a sample of 16 participants. According to Creswell (2017), phenomenology relates to studying participants' subjective experiences with a topic under study. This phenomenological study examined educators' lived experiences regarding educational engagement with African immigrant students with disabilities. The lived experience was essential for this study because it enabled me to explore secondary educators' perceptions about the topic, how they felt when engaging with African immigrant students and identify challenges to effective educational engagement. Thus, I limited the population of research interest to educators drawn from Mid-Southeastern state schools in the United States.

Cobern and Adams (2020) noted a sample size of 8-20 interviewees was enough to collect rich and in-depth data about the phenomenon under study in a qualitative study. The choice of 14-20 participants was informed by the need to achieve data saturation and ensure methodological rigor. The final sample size of 16 participants in this study enabled rich data saturation. At this point, no new information could be collected even if I added new participants to the study. Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, I collected data through questionnaires, participant reflections, researchers' journals, and interviews (video conferencing or face to face). Interview sessions lasted for 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Collected data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). I reported the main themes using tables and exact excerpts of participants' responses.

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

I made various assumptions and delimitations for this study. My assumptions are the implied self-evident truth about the information I collected. The choices I made to establish boundaries and limits of the study are the delimitations. These aspects are further detailed in subsequent subsections.

#### **Assumptions**

Gatlin and Wilson (2016) shared that participants provide information about a topic based on their knowledge or skills regarding the topic under study during interview sessions. I assumed that the participants in this study shared accurate and honest information about the subject. Also, I deemed that the participants shared reliable and accurate responses to the interview questions to the best of their abilities. I also assumed the study findings accurately represent the current

educators' perceptions of their roles in the educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study included a research focus on African immigrant students with disabilities. Thus, obtained results might not apply to African immigrant students with disabilities or other racial/ethnic immigrant groups with special needs. Additionally, the study was limited to Mid-Southeastern state public school districts of the United States. Which implied the findings might not be transferable to other school districts outside the Mid-Southeastern state region. Further, the study findings were limited to secondary educators' information without considering feedback from students, parents, and other teachers. Data collection methods were also limited to questionnaires, interviews, a research journal, and participants' reflections as an instrument for data collection in this study, excluding archival document reviews and classroom observations.

### **Researcher's Role**

Based on the story of Segun I shared above, my social science research experience, and a solid foundation in education as a profession, I initiated and completed this phenomenological qualitative study in line with critical scientific requirements. For example, I am well-versed in research and pedagogical frameworks with over ten years of experience working with minority ethnic/racial groups students. Moreover, I have worked with immigrant students with disabilities with expertise in traditional and online settings over the years. Being an educator, I have years of experience and insights on potential challenges and hurdles African immigrant learners often encounter when enrolling in local public schools. My prior professional experience and personal interest in this topic motivated me to conduct this scientific study to understand current and

emerging issues on educators' perceptions about their role in the educational engagement of immigrant students with disabilities. With a solid foundation of education as a profession, I am knowledgeable in research frameworks and pedagogical insights drawn from past undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Years of experience have equipped me to appreciate the dynamic nature of social sciences research, particularly research methods, strategies, data collection, and data analysis. I have applied the most recent approaches from literature to explore this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**African Immigrant Students.** According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016), African immigrant students refer to first-generation and second-generation learners whose families migrated (voluntarily or involuntarily) from Africa into the United States to extricate themselves from civil, economic, and political turmoil or the pursuit of further studies (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017; UNDP, 2016).

**Educational Engagement.** Pit-ten Cate and Glock (2018) defined educational engagement as the extent of interest, inspiration, and attention students receive or show when taught or during learning.

**Educators.** Schulze and Boscardin (2018) defined educators as those who create a vision of academic success for all students, including those that lead, supervise, and manage the provision of special education and related services for students with disabilities.

**Students with Disabilities.** Students with disabilities refer to eligible learners for special education services, related services, and early intervention services as outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004).

## **Summary**

Chapter I presented the study's background, research rationale, research aims and objectives, and the importance of undertaking this study. A literature search showed the number of immigrant students with special needs increased in U.S. schools. The Mid-Southeastern State Department of Public Instruction (NCES, 2019) student enrollment data did not reflect African immigrant students with disabilities; they were categorized as African American. However, data on limited English speaking and speakers of languages other than English provided evidence that African immigrant students existed in Mid-Southeastern state schools. There was little information on how secondary educators in public schools supported and facilitated the educational needs of students with disabilities. Findings from this research might help address this knowledge gap and help identify potential challenges and barriers educators encounter when facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Numerous studies indicated an increasing number of African immigrant students with disabilities in their educational settings (e.g., McKay, 2019; Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017; Salem, 2018; UNDP, 2016). This literature review explores the suitability of the educational engagement concept in U.S. public school districts by examining the gaps and disharmony in legislation, scholarly contributions, and practices utilizing (a) an examination of current legislation that guided the educational practices for students with disabilities, (b) a review of scholarly contributions on educational engagement and the impact on the holistic performance of African immigrant students with disabilities in U.S. schools, and (c) explored educators' challenges in pursuing a complete continuum of educational services for better educational outcomes for these students to identify actions to deduce implications and recommendations for future research and improvement.

#### **African Immigrants in the United States**

Migration is an essential issue to policymakers, human rights, and the education system. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2016), migration refers to both voluntary (such as migrant workers) and involuntary movement (such as refugees and asylum seekers) of individuals across geographical borders to free civil or political persecution or seek better economic or education life. Data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020) estimated that of the 47.8 million people forcibly displaced worldwide in 2019, about 18.6 million were refugees, and 2.3 million were asylum seekers. According to the United

Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs<sup>20</sup>), the number of international migrants to the United States reached 51 million in 2019. A fundamental impact of migration on host countries is a change in the education sector dynamics as schools need to accommodate culturally diverse immigrant groups. Besides, immigration increases pressure on education resources as financial planning requires hiring more teachers, expanding learning facilities, and providing learning materials for new students.

According to the Migration Policy Institute (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2019), it was estimated that as of 2019, about 2.1 million African immigrants are in the United States of America. About 75% of these African immigrants are from either East or West African countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria (McCabe, 2020). For the current study, the term African immigrant students referred to first-generation and second-generation learners whose families migrated (voluntarily or involuntarily) from Africa into the United States to extricate themselves from civil, economic, and political turmoil or to pursue further studies (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017; UNDP, 2016). More than 18,000 people from many African nations live in the Mid-Southeastern state. Still, no official population numbers are available because the census categorizes these people as African American or Black (NCES, 2020).

### **Federal Laws and Immigrant Students with Disabilities**

Over the decades, there has been a growing body of research on immigrant students' access to education. The legal debate on the right to education for immigrants and children with disabilities is clearly in line with the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* regarding undocumented school-age children (Grunberg et al., 2018). Federal laws noted that undocumented immigrants and students with disabilities were entitled to similar free public education accessible to other residents in the same school district. For example, the IDEA (2004)

ensured that students with a disability were provided with free appropriate public education tailored to their individual needs. Further, the Emergency Immigrant Education Act required that school districts provide financial and educational support for eligible students, including testing and counseling, administration services, and parental involvement (Au, 2007; Keehne et al., 2018).

Federal laws mandate that students have equal access to education, and it is too necessary to defer, delay, or deny (Hunt, 2011; IDEA, 2004). Access to education for immigrant students with disabilities includes special needs support, supplemental programs for those with learning challenges, free school meals, and necessary support to close the achievement gap (Keehne et al., 2018; Kibria & Becerra, 2020). Federal laws require that all publicly funded schools meet Child Find requirements, including developing approaches to identify and refer learners with disabilities for support and evaluation according to Section 504 of the federal laws. According to Bush (2018), Section 504 provides civil rights protection to all students with disabilities in school programs that receive federal funding, including most public schools.

Both Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 are non-discrimination laws that public schools must apply to support the rights of learners with disabilities. Schools that fail to refer to and evaluate newly arrived or struggling students might create 504 eligibility or special education access barriers. Further, a lack of timely support might increase the risks of emotional and social support, including behavioral support, tutoring, and counseling (Kibria & Becerra, 2020; McCabe, 2020). Schools need to ensure timely support for immigrant students with disabilities in line with IDEA (2004), where learners with disabilities have appropriate free public education in the least restrictive environment (McCabe, 2020; NCES, 2019).

## **Educators' Role in Special Education**

Educators play a vital role in the success of special education programs. The IDEA (2004) comprehensively detailed the mandatory requirements for the special education process (Yell et al., 2006). It outlined six requirements describing students with disabilities rights concerning education access and the provision of free and appropriate education as informed by individualized education programs (IEPs) and least restrictive environments (IDEA, 2004; Wright & Wright, 2006; Yell et al., 2006). It comprehensively detailed mandatory teaching requirements for students with disabilities, including the use of evidence-based practices (Yell et al., 2006). These mandates provided a basis for educators' expectations to improve all students' achievement (Billingsley et al., 2004).

Educators have a primary role in ensuring effective teaching and learning aligns with student needs. According to Stebleton and Marina (2016), good instruction that addressed the needs of students with disabilities existed in most public schools but rarely did good educators exist to meet every student's needs in the classroom. Schools with less effective educators are more likely to have struggling students or significant achievement gaps between students with special needs and without disabilities (Stebleton & Marina, 2016). Kumi-Yeboah (2016) added that educators' quality plays a more significant role in special education success. Such educators have a clear mission and vision that students with special needs can achieve high grades within public education settings (Kumi-Yeboah, 2016). Nonetheless, I observed that educators played an additional critical role in facilitating student achievement when focusing on immigrant learners' academic achievement (Kumi-Yeboah, 2016).

Wilson-Forsberg et al. (2018) added that educators are the nexus of accountability and school learning performance. The definitive expectation is they will function as instructional

leaders in special education. The need for instructional leadership is most significant when there are acute learning needs, such as when dealing with students who have disabilities and come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Specifically, the greater the learning challenges in terms of an achievement gap, social inequities, and underperformance, the more significant the impact of actions educators embraced in teaching and learning (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). A qualitative study by Olsen et al. (2016) attempted to examine educators' changing responses and perceptions about immigrant students. Researchers found strong instructional leaders defined instructional climate and displayed specific instructional actions in classrooms.

Academic standards focus on participatory, instructional, and managerial skills. He et al. (2015) observed that educators and staff members must know special education needs and student diversity within these competence areas faced by immigrant students. Such educators' conceptions contribute to culturally responsive learning when dealing with immigrant students in special education programs. However, most schools' diversity has been challenging to attain due to a lack of training and instructional leadership competency (He et al., 2015). Dajana (2020) conducted a qualitative study to examine teacher competency and perceptions teaching refugees and immigrant students with special needs. Results showed a lack of skills and knowledge on leadership facilitation negatively impacted special education outcomes. Educators must design an environment that allows teachers to develop skills and programs to address learners' daily needs. Thus, educators have a significant role in ensuring the success of special education.

### **Educators Preparation Mandate**

Section 1462 of the IDEA (2004) mandates educators have the necessary skills and knowledge to serve students with disabilities. This mandate includes using practices derived from scientific research and preparing special education personnel with an increased focus on

academics and core content areas. Adequate educator preparation is essential to successfully supporting and integrating culturally diverse students in public schools. An effective educator is also vital to close collaboration among teachers, the school, and immigrant families. Schulze and Boscardin (2018) investigated perceptions among educators in Rhode Island. Qualitative findings from 13 educators showed training was fundamental in aligning student demographics, accountability structure, and other educational needs. Preparatory training helps equip educators with the necessary tools and resources to meet public schools' diverse needs (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Yarnell and Grunberg (2017) noted that educators' preparation facilitated transformative growth based on an educator's ability to address ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, marginalization, and negative stereotypes that immigrant students were facing.

Khalifa et al. (2016) investigated culturally responsive educators. A systematic review of past literature revealed that educators who received training in culturally responsive classrooms tended to show stronger desire and often promoted social justice and diversity in their schools (Burns et al., 2019; Georges, 2020; Scanlan et al., 2020; Zorba, 2020). Further, Khalifa et al. (2016) observed that professional development and pre-service training alone did not contribute to culturally diverse educators, especially if schools lacked inclusive learning for minority ethnic groups such as native Indians, Latino, and African Americans. Moreover, Bertrand and Rodela (2017) conducted qualitative research on rethinking educators' roles and social justice implications. Interview responses with 21 educators showed preparation programs were crucial to developing educators' attributes, skills, and knowledge about diverse students' management and support.

Young et al. (2019) found educators faced challenges in promoting greater cultural competency among school personnel. Also, educators were tasked with creating school climates

where all learners had equitable opportunities to learn. The focus on cultural competency and diversity approach to pedagogy instruction delivery was informed by the need to break the destructive cycle of ethnic, gender, and racial stereotypes in the education sector (Young et al., 2019). Noha (2019) conducted qualitative research on educators' development in non-university urban school settings. Research findings from 67 peer-reviewed studies showed adequate educator preparation focused on facilitating social justice in inclusive public schools where student diversity defined these learning settings. Noha (2019) found educators' roles could not be separated from social justice. Educators must ensure inclusive learning, support for tailored education, and meet and address individual learners' challenges, especially when dealing with students with disabilities.

Educators' preparation plays a vital role in the educational engagement of immigrant students. An effective educator with cultural competence could facilitate the learning of all student populations. However, the literature review showed some educators lacked this skill. Preparation training helps equip educators with the necessary tools and resources to meet students' diverse needs in public schools. Promoting greater cultural competency among educators is essential to address the growing number of immigrant students with disabilities.

### **The Mandate for Family Partnership**

Among the IDEA (2004) principles for students with disabilities was the right of families to participate in educational decision-making. Family involvement in student learning is essential when facilitating students' learning experiences from different ethnic and racial groups. Koyama and Bakuza (2017) shared that immigrant students' academic success was enhanced when educators engaged family members. Among the significant predictors of student outcomes was the extent to which families participated in their children's education (Park & Holloway, 2017).

Thus, researchers advocated that educators develop a learning curriculum where teachers and students spend more time with families, especially during parent-teacher conferences (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017). Qualitative research by Dryden-Peterson (2017) examined the potential impact of the teacher-school partnership on student performance. Insights from families and teachers who participated in the focus group discussions showed trust was built when families engaged with teachers. Trust resulted in comfort where families were motivated to share information about their children, such as proficiency and efficiency. Teacher-parent interaction also helped turn sociocultural stressors into a positive experience, eliminating all fear and promoting effective learning (Dryden-Peterson, 2017).

Zwicky and Walls (2020) explored the type of family-school relationship that facilitates the social, emotional, socio-economic, and academic wellbeing of African immigrant children. Researchers used ethnographic studies to collect data through observations and interviews from two elementary schools. Results showed school-family partnerships helped create trust in the learning process and integration of students in school. Immigrant families were empowered to hold their children accountable for academic performance and socialization. Besides, potential misconceptions were minimized when educators connected and engaged with immigrant families (Zwicky & Walls, 2020).

Educational engagement revolves around schools, teachers, and families sharing valuable information regarding the student (Epstein, 1986). Years of research have shown several benefits to a healthy family and school partnership. Ylimaki and Jacobson (2018) shared that school-family relations enhanced the likelihood that students with disabilities had better life outcomes and positive school experiences. In school-family partnerships, continued sharing about the needs of students, families, and teacher expertise in addressing the needs might occur. The

increased correspondence between families and teachers would also increase families' ownership and support for the established programs (Epstein, 1986). Family well-being improves when students learn in a supportive environment without exposure to anxiety or stress. Ylimaki and Jacobson (2018) found school-family partnerships allowed families to meet with educators who advocated for their children's needs, which was likely to strengthen the support they had for educators. Further, solid family-school ties allowed families to voice areas facing their children's learning and to advocate for their children's learning needs.

DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) examined how immigrant students' families supported positive school outcomes. Qualitative study findings revealed that families supported positive results in diverse ways. For instance, families collaborated with educators and shared their knowledge about their children. This collaboration helped educators understand the child's needs, learning preferences, and strengths. In some situations, the process involved providing information about the child's learning ability and might include institutions outside the school, such as mental health facilities.

Moreover, families could shift education practices and paradigms by challenging deep-seated and limiting beliefs about student disabilities (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). Burns et al. (2019) added that family partnerships might help make concrete recommendations for accommodation, help develop individualized education programs and reinforce critical lessons at home. Educators also encouraged families to contribute by scheduling meetings when additional academic support was needed for their children.

### **Educational Engagement Definitions**

Educational engagement is the extent of interest, inspiration, and attention students receive or show when taught or learned (Pit-ten Cate & Glock, 2018). The potential of using

educational engagement in addressing the needs and challenges that characterize students with disabilities, especially in public schools, is widespread. Brown (2016) defined educational engagement as the extent to which students participated in research activities linked to high-quality outcomes and a reliable indicator of either positive or negative student trajectories. This definition purported that low educational engagement was associated with higher probabilities of maladaptive outcomes, including disruptive behaviors, poor academic performance, and antisocial behaviors (Brown, 2016).

Educational engagement is one means of increasing the overall school outcome for students with disabilities. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2019), educational engagement is the time, and related efforts learners dedicate to their learning activities to achieve the desired outcome. The underlying phenomena of educational engagement are the interplay between the person-specific and contextual elements (Shernoff et al., 2016). Notably, the students' states, such as well-being, and their dispositional attributes, such as personality, inform their perceptions of experiences in and toward schools (Cipriano et al., 2019; Hyseni Duraku, et al., 2018). Contextual factors, including the school, classroom environment, and family, substantially influence educational engagement (Vaz et al., 2014). The school and classroom environments facilitate students' subjective views toward learning, thereby affecting participation. Educational engagement is one means of increasing the overall school outcome for students with disabilities.

Fredricks et al. (2004) defined educational engagement as a multifaceted paradigm encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral modules. Cognitive engagement includes a student's self-regulation and utilization of in-depth learning tactics and strategies while dedicating the necessary energy to understanding ideas and mastering complex skills (Fredricks

et al., 2004). Emotional engagement revolves around expressing positive emotions and reactions to other students, activities, and teachers, including recognizing the value of learning and demonstrating an interest in the content. Behavioral engagement incorporates efforts, attention, and participation. This definition was dominant because of its broad scope and student-centered. It emphasized direct student indicators rather than indicating other confounding variables that included school environment and classroom behavior (Schindler et al., 2017).

### **Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students**

Although there were studies on students with disabilities, there was limited information on the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Specifically, a review of past studies indicated most studies on the topic examined families' and teacher perceptions about students with disabilities, and few studies explored how educators perceived the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Some studies in Canada and Australia on immigrants who had children with disabilities showed they struggled to access suitable education programs and services from schools (Carroll & Muller, 2018; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). Also, Carroll and Muller (2018) also shared that most research focused on parental experience with education services with limited information on teacher or school faculty perceptions of student engagement and learning. Thus, researchers advocated the need for additional research on education access, service utilization, and the overall experience of African immigrant students with disabilities.

Skiba et al. (2016) examined school engagement of immigrant and native students and noted that students at risk benefited from highly engaging classrooms. However, researchers cautioned that due to different student needs and teacher expectations, educational engagement among African immigrants might differ from their native and White peers. Kahu and Nelson

(2017) noted that African student retention and success continued to concern schools. Although there was wider participation, the problem was compounded by lower completion rates for African immigrant students, highlighting the need for change in practice and policy. This specific change was needed to ensure inclusive educational engagement, focusing on improving students' and schools' interactions and how formulated interactions influenced student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Skiba et al., 2016).

Griffin et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study on student engagement and found African students who did not feel included in school or the classroom lacked a sense of belonging. Insights from 16 interviewees also revealed that lack of inclusion resulted from a lack of self-efficacy, well-being, belonging, and having negative emotions. Such students had a low educational engagement in the classroom and reported poor coordination among teachers, faculty, and learning outcomes. Ndemanu and Jordan (2017) also showed African immigrant students were mainly at risk of early school dropout and low academic performance due to a lack of engaging curriculum and supportive teachers. Further, McKay (2019) linked student engagement in school with educational outcomes, successful transition into adulthood, and career growth. Engaged students also tended to have positive behaviors in school and were more likely to avoid crime, delinquency, early sexual encounters, and other risky behaviors.

Despite the significant role of educational engagement in student outcomes, school districts lack elaborate measures to meet student academic integration needs. Morningstar et al. (2016) conducted quantitative research to examine the existing framework for African immigrant secondary school students with disabilities. The study examined three school districts in Virginia, Florida, and New York. Results revealed that about 37% of school districts lacked elaborate curriculum measures and readiness to facilitate cognitive and learning engagement of

students with special needs. Students who expressed a high sense of belonging were more likely to show high concentration, be interested in achieving their academic goals, and readily socialize with other learners. Therefore, it could be noted that school district readiness improves learners' education engagement that translates to academic success.

Castellano et al. (2017) conducted a study on the Maryland school districts to examine high school students' educational engagement and academic outcomes. Results showed that students from minority ethnic groups showed low cognitive concentration and were less motivated to learn. Further, students showed a low sense of belonging and lacked a connection to the school. A negative attitude toward school due to a low sense of belonging contributes to a poor transition to college and can negatively affect career outcomes (Stebbleton & Marina, 2016). These findings showed a low level or lack of school district readiness in promoting a culture of educational engagement, especially among minority groups. Additional research needs to be undertaken to have highly engaging school programs and curricula for students, especially immigrant learners.

### **Missing African Immigrant Voices in U.S. Schools**

Considering the lack of specific studies on African immigrant students with disabilities in U.S. public schools, current research timely highlighted the missing voices of African immigrant students with disabilities. Johnson (2020) reported that immigrant students were more likely to be subjected to systematic discrimination and marginalization, resulting in achievement gaps. Johnson recommended additional research on this topic to highlight African students' voices in education. A systematic study by He et al. (2015) cautioned that despite the recent increase of African-born immigrants in the United States, their presence was poorly reflected in educational planning and curricular decisions. Ukpokodu (2017) examined the reality of African immigrants

in K-12 schools. These students were reported to adopt a model minority status within an educational system that embodied systematic oppressive learning frameworks that failed to capture their needs.

The number of African immigrant students in public schools across the United States has risen in the last three decades. According to Cook-Sather (2020), the population of African immigrant students rose from 2.7% in the early 1990s to 12.7% in 2019. Despite the surging number of African immigrant students in public schools in the last three decades, Proctor and Truscott (2013) observed that this population has received limited research interest. Specifically, Proctor and Truscott investigated the missing voices of American psychologists among the diversifying education sector. They found limited insights into dynamics that impacted African students' school enrollment, retention, and academic achievement. Nonetheless, the study did not examine the experience of African immigrant students, especially learners with disabilities.

Carroll and Muller (2018) investigated challenges immigrants and students who had been diagnosed with disabilities experienced in school. Qualitative interviews, policy analysis, and field notes observations revealed students experienced low academic engagement with the inclusive education curriculum. Carroll and Muller (2018) emphasized the need to have formal and informal curricular differentiation to meet different learners' diverse needs. Interview insights from parents and teachers revealed students with disabilities had unequal access to learning opportunities. These inequalities led to gaps in health, occupation, and educational outcomes. However, Carroll and Muller (2018) did not explore educators' perceptions about the challenges immigrant students with disabilities experienced or their educational engagement with existing curricula.

Cheatham and Lim-Mullins (2018) conducted a qualitative study on bilingual immigrant students with disabilities. The researchers used semi-structured interview questions to collect information on the level of support immigrant children received in school and perceptions regarding received support. Results of focus group discussions, interview responses, and classroom observations from 40 African immigrant refugees, four community members, four parents, eight teachers, and two principals revealed African immigrant students experienced psychological, economic, and academic challenges. Parents also confirmed that immigrant students received limited help from their schools regarding mentors and counseling to manage these challenges. Teachers and school principals advocated the need for urgent education reforms and policy framework to help immigrant students with disabilities. Also, there was a need for a parent-professional partnership to achieve valuable and meaningful educational engagement of students with disabilities.

Stebbleton and Marina (2016) investigated Black African immigrant college learners' experience and perceptions of white institutions. Researchers used a constructivist, grounded theory approach to collect data using interview questions. Twelve undergraduate African immigrant students were invited to participate in the study. Results showed African immigrant students lacked a sense of belonging due to contextual factors such as peer pressure and teacher interaction. African immigrant students were also impacted by symbolic and physical spaces on campus, making their transition and belonging difficult. The lack of adequate structures for African immigrant students in white institutions hindered effective student engagement and community interaction. However, Stebbleton and Marina (2016) did not examine African immigrant students' perceptions of disabilities in similar institutions.

Louis et al. (2017) examined the experience of African-Caribbean students at traditional colleges. Five students were invited to participate in the study. Results showed that despite Afro-Caribbean students' influence and historical impacts in America, the education system failed to facilitate culturally relevant pedagogy and learning outcomes. The findings aligned with Stebleton and Marina's (2016) observations on the lack of tailored facilities and programs to promote learning needs and school experience for Afro-Caribbean students. Specifically, African immigrant students still experienced isolation, micro-aggression, stereotyping, and negative narratives in traditional institutions (Louis et al., 2017). These findings further showed missing African immigrant voices in some learning institutions due to lack of diversity, change in policy guidelines, enhanced curriculum development, and departments' reforms to accommodate African immigrant students' needs. A further assessment of past studies on the topic showed most studies on the plight of African students in schools were conducted in higher learning institutions with a specific focus on African American students or African immigrant students without disabilities (Cook-Sather, 2020; Louis et al., 2017).

Wilson-Forsberg et al. (2018) examined disruptions resulting from imposed racial stereotyping among African immigrant students in Texas. A total of 17 students in college participated in the study. Results showed African identities were not reflected in most institutions in Texas. The absorption of African immigrant students into the larger context of higher learning institutions implied little was known about their achievements, cultures, and histories. Further, how Western media negatively portrayed African immigrants in Western-authored textbooks (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018) has negatively affected missing African immigrant voices.

### **Challenges of African Immigrant Students with Disabilities in U.S. Schools**

Considering the missing voices of African immigrant students with disabilities in U.S. public schools, extant literature assessment showed limited data about their demographic characteristics. Ndemanu and Jordan (2017) examined the development and implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy for African immigrant students. Quantitative research was used where data were collected from 231 teachers of African immigrant children. Most children came from low-income families earning less than \$10,000 a year. A single parent with a household size of between 4 and 12 members led most families. Further, 37% of the African immigrant children were less likely to pursue higher education due to financial constraints, while 17.3% were more likely to drop out (Ndemanu & Jordan, 2017).

George Mwangi and English (2017) examined the challenges of being an immigrant student. The results revealed that about 21% of students experienced racial prejudice and seclusion, with 41% of African immigrant learners experiencing segregation more than African American or Caribbean students. Morgan et al. (2017) reported that about 9.3% to 12.5% of African immigrant students graduated from high school, but between 3.7% and 5.1% graduated from higher learning institutions each year. These statistics showed more than 6.9% of African immigrant students were less likely to transition to college or complete their college degrees after graduating from high school.

### **Impact of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive pedagogy means schools acknowledge students' culture and use cultural nuances to integrate these cultural experiences into the teaching and learning environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive pedagogy is also known as culturally sensitive, culturally proficient, culturally competent, or culturally relevant pedagogy

(Au, 2007; Keehne et al., 2018). According to Ladson-Billings (1995) and Au (2007), culturally responsive pedagogy postulates that emphasis is placed on students' needs from various cultures, including those students who must experience academic success. Harrison and Skrebneva (2019) noted that culturally responsive pedagogy also states that learners' academic achievement increases if teachers and schools transform to reflect and apply their language and cultural strengths.

Over the years, culturally responsive pedagogy has gained growing support across the scholarly and practitioner cycle as critical to meeting the needs of minority students' (Young, 2017). According to Wrench and Garrett (2020), culturally responsive education ensures educators achieve efficient and effective support for culturally diverse students, thereby ensuring academic achievement among students of color. Over the years, a growing body of literature has shown that culturally relevant pedagogy increases student performance, i.e., it empowers students from minority ethnic groups emotionally, socially, politically, and intellectually by utilizing their culture as a channel to convey attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Sheppard et al., 2019). Researchers advocated integrating student culture with pedagogical techniques that contribute to academic performance among immigrant students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019; Vass, 2017). Au (2007) noted the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy offers schools/teachers three propositions for learning and teaching. First, there must be a focus on individual student learning and academic achievement. Second, teachers must ensure they develop cultural competence in their classroom, and learners also maintain this competency. Third, students must comprehend how social practices and structures contribute to school inequalities (Au, 2007). Over the years, a growing body of literature has shown that culturally relevant pedagogy increases student performance, i.e., it empowers

students from minority ethnic groups emotionally, socially, politically, and intellectually by utilizing their culture as a channel to convey attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Sheppard et al., 2019).

In line with African immigrant students' learning needs, culturally responsive pedagogy must use cultural perspectives, experiences, and characteristics of ethnically diverse African students as conduits to achieve effective instruction delivery (Au, 2007; Morrison et al., 2019). Specifically, educators need to develop a culturally diverse knowledge base for African immigrant students with disabilities, establish cross-congruity in instruction delivery, establish cross-cultural communications, develop a culturally relevant curriculum, and demonstrate cultural caring (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019). Successful educators apply culturally relevant pedagogy to build and rely on performance styles as a framework for their instruction. Including prior experiences and cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse African immigrant students makes the learning experience more relevant and meaningful even to special needs learners (Coppola & McHugh, 2018; Flory, 2017). For educators to maximize learning opportunities for students, Coppola and McHugh (2018) believed educators must learn about their students' culture and develop instruction to permeate their learning with identified cultural knowledge.

### **Conceptualizing Educators' Roles**

Educators in public school districts include those responsible for special education administration and service delivery. These individuals include ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers who lead, teach, supervise, and manage special education programs and related services for students with disabilities. These educators determine and articulate educational standards and goals for special education programs using collaborative efforts with other educators to ensure accessibility to high-quality special education programs for students

with disabilities (Pazey & Yates, 2018). They work with teachers and parents to implement policies and procedures that support appropriate free public education for all students with disabilities (Luckner & Movahedazarhouli, 2019).

Many research studies examined educational engagement from the perspective of teachers and students. There was a void in the literature regarding those charged with educating students with disabilities. Luckner and Movahedazarhouli (2019) examined the perceptions of special education administrators. They identified that this profession was complex, dynamic and the challenges they encountered negatively affected their ability to perform their jobs well. The study's results indicated the primary difficulties were hiring, retaining, supervising, evaluating qualified personnel, providing and evaluating services for students with disabilities. According to Lemons et al. (2019), SPED educators at the school level play critical roles that position them to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities. They often work with building-level administrators, general education teachers, and other service providers to perform special education programs' day-to-day delivery (Meeks, 2016). Educators are responsible for implementing IDEA (2004) provisions, program development, implementation, and quality of special education services (Meeks, 2016).

### **Roles of English as a Second Language Coordinators**

The ESL Coordinator is responsible for coordinating instructional programs and classroom strategies for ESL learners. Their duties include developing and implementing professional development, organizing staff meetings, regularly visiting school sites to ensure program compliance, and implementing appropriate academic instruction (Lacina, 2004; Lewis, 2018). According to Miller (2004), ESL program coordinators face staff shortages, lack of learning materials, general course content, and language instruction evaluation. Shiffman (2019)

examined ESL programs for immigrant families and found ESL supports promoted understanding and communication between immigrant families. This support allowed for easy dissemination of information, family-school interactions, and opportunities to connect families and educators (Shiffman, 2019). The study results indicated the importance of ESL coordinators and ESL programs to help tailor immigrant students' needs.

DeMatthews et al. (2020) observed that few studies focused on how educators impacted immigrant students with disabilities. Results showed most immigrant ESL learners experienced a delay in placement, with a disproportionately high number of these learners being placed in special education due to language barriers. Estorga (2020) added that immigrant students with disabilities were more likely to report delays in getting initial access to education services. In other schools, parents were less involved in their children's learning process with a lack of translators to enable learners to become more engaged and active in the learning process. DeMatthews et al. (2020) further noted some schools failed to provide oral or written forms to allow parents to understand their children's progress. These ESL challenges negatively impacted the educational engagement of most immigrant students with disabilities. The perception of ESL coordinators was essential to this study. It might help to discover more focused programs tailored to meet the needs of immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Roles of Exceptional Children Facilitator and Special Education Teacher**

Exceptional children (EC) facilitators and SPED teachers work with students with disabilities to promote and develop successful learning under the IDEA (2004). The difference is EC facilitators report directly to the designated SPED or building administrator. Exceptional children facilitators and SPED teachers manage and assign caseloads, maintain regular communication with parents and appropriate staff members, and develop, revise, and implement

IEPs. Miller (2004) found SPED teachers' responsibilities were becoming increasingly diverse due to the influx of immigrant students in public schools. These changes required educators to use the best practices to reach every student in their classrooms. Many teachers differentiated instruction to ensure students learned. However, it was challenging for EC facilitators and SPED teachers to determine best practices for educational engagement (Dixon et al., 2014). Estorga (2020) investigated SPED teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to lead inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities. The study revealed that limited knowledge and preparedness negatively affected students with disabilities.

Many African immigrant students with disabilities speak different languages in the home environment and have diverse family backgrounds (Dixon et al., 2014; Katz, 2008; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Educators must understand students' needs, strengths, and experiences and use them to help students reach their full potential. Cooc (2019) found inadequately trained teachers could not deliver suitable learning material to immigrant students. Students expressed challenges accessing and receiving helpful information on their academic progress. Schulze and Boscardin (2018) found teachers who lacked special education backgrounds were less likely to facilitate the academic performance of immigrant students with special needs.

Due to a SPED teacher shortage in most public schools, some districts employ staff not SPED-endorsed to teach special education (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Special education teachers need to be culturally competent to meet the needs of African immigrant students with disabilities. Workshop programs, retreats, and training conferences need to be set up to create new types of SPED teachers who can facilitate learning outcomes for immigrant students with disabilities (Bush, 2018). DeMatthews et al. (2020) noted educators' preparation was paramount to address the growing concerns of immigrant students with disabilities. An essential approach to

educators' preparation should not be limited to developing effective instruction. However, an effective SPED teacher who is culturally competent facilitates learning for all student populations with or without disabilities and makes teachers cognizant about their dispositions and how they might impact their teaching performance.

### **Limited Preparation of Culturally Responsive Educators**

A culturally responsive approach has been noted to be crucial to student success in school and academic performance. Educators have a significant role in supporting culturally responsive learning. Burns et al. (2019) investigated the successful integration of ethnically diverse students in public schools. Results showed successful public schools have a coherent and unobstructed vision regarding how best to educate learners from culturally diverse backgrounds. Despite the potential impact of a culturally responsive approach on student integration, current literature showed most educators lacked skills and knowledge on how to promote culturally responsive learning or teaching, and this widened the academic achievement gap for learners with disabilities (Georges, 2020; Scanlan et al., 2020; Zorba, 2020).

Zorba (2020) investigated personal and professional readiness among in-service teachers in facilitating culturally responsive teaching among migrant students. This qualitative study revealed immigrant students' needs were best met when educators had a relevant, culturally responsive instruction delivery experience. According to Hoover and Soltero-González (2018), culturally responsive educators recognize the importance of academic achievement while maintaining African immigrant students' heritage and cultural identity. However, most educators had limited skills in facilitating culturally responsive classrooms for students with disabilities. Hoover and Soltero-González added that despite significant educators' preparations over the

years, they mainly focused on theory, practice, and preparation approaches from a diverse perspectives.

Zengaro et al. (2016) examined 11 high school educators' experiences and efficacy in facilitating social and academic learning among culturally diverse learners in the United States. Using agency and identity in figured worlds, researchers used interviews to collect data and field notes on classroom learning implementation. Results showed educators were less aware of culturally responsive approaches and student achievement in public schools. The researchers cited the need for a shift in both practice and scholarship practice central to culturally diverse students with special needs.

Educators are central to designing learning goals, developing students' motivation, and setting the direction for teaching. Bajaj and Bartlett (2017) and Koyama and Chang (2018) examined the impact of culturally responsive learning and student integration approaches. Findings from qualitative interviews from the two studies showed culturally responsive educators impacted second language learners' academic achievement. In examining how schools might lead culturally responsive values, Bajaj and Bartlett (2017) observed that an educator's role in strengthening their school culture and raising their achievement was based on four factors: building positive relationships, celebrating academic success, fostering learning environment conditions to enhance learning, and creating shared values. As applied to this study, creating shared values was based on communicating beliefs, values, and visions about success and high expectations for immigrant students with disabilities.

Tran and Birman (2017) conducted a study to examine common characteristics among high achieving high schools with culturally diverse English students. Results showed culturally responsive educators created a clear and shared vision that resonated with their communities and

faculty, held constant communication, and structured their time to collaborate with data, interventions, and instructional strategies. Gbotoe (2019) noted that a change in values required a mental shift among culturally responsive educators regarding immigrant students' habits, assumptions, and beliefs. Individual ability to build positive relationships among culturally responsive educators plays a vital role in achieving and integrating culturally diverse students (Auslander, 2018; Gbotoe, 2019). Thus, a culturally responsive educator plays an essential role in facilitating student engagement and learning in school.

### **Summary**

This literature review chapter presented vital themes and insights from past literature regarding how educators conceptualized immigrant students' educational engagement. The chapter examined the gaps in legislation, scholarly contributions, and practices. The literature also showed an existing knowledge gap in educators' perceptions regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities and considered the limited studies that have covered migrant voices within the American education system.

Moreover, there was little information on the demographic characteristics of African immigrant students with disabilities. These learners' experiences in public schools were hardly documented in past studies, further necessitating the need for this study. Also, insights from the literature showed limited preparation for culturally responsive educators (Kumi-Yeboah, 2016; Stebleton & Marina, 2016). Further research would help examine educators' lived experiences with African immigrant students with disabilities, thereby creating new knowledge to the extant literature. The next chapter presents the phenomenological research method used in this study to collect relevant data from participants.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This phenomenological study investigated secondary educators' perceptions regarding their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. This chapter presents the research approach, design, and strategies used to collect data. Specifically, the following areas are discussed in this chapter: (a) purpose of the study, (b) research questions, (c) research design, (d) research approach and strategy, (e) participant selection and sampling technique, (f) data collection instrument, (g) data collection and storage methods, (h) data analysis methods, (i) trustworthiness, (j) potential ethical issues, and (k) researcher role and positionality. The chapter concludes with a summary of the essential research methods and strategies I used in this study.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored secondary educators' perceptions of their roles regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. I specifically investigated how secondary educators, including ESL coordinators, EC Facilitators, and SPED Teachers perceived their roles regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant learners with disabilities.

Further, I assessed how secondary educators conceptualized the educational engagement processes that play a significant part in shaping African immigrant students with disabilities' active participation within their schools. I looked at potential factors contributing to the academic success of African immigrant students with disabilities and barriers to participation. Based on the

identified obstacles and challenges experienced by these students, I asked educators to share potential recommendations necessary to transform African immigrant students' schooling experiences in U.S. public schools.

### **Research Aim**

This study investigated how secondary educators perceived their roles in supporting and facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

- Q1     How do secondary educators perceive their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?
  - Q1a    What barriers do secondary educators report that prevent effective educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities?
  - Q1b    What are secondary educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities?

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

#### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

In my search for theoretical perspectives suitable to understand how secondary educators perceive their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities, I identified the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy developed by Ladson-Billings (2014) and Au (2007). Culturally responsive pedagogy is also known as culturally sensitive, culturally proficient, culturally competent, or culturally relevant pedagogy (Au, 2007; Keehne et al., 2018). According to Au, culturally responsive pedagogy is essential to minority ethnic or racial group students' academic achievement. Harrison and Skrebneva (2019) noted that culturally responsive pedagogy also states learners' academic achievement would increase if teachers and schools transformed to reflect and apply their language and cultural strengths.

Over the years, culturally responsive pedagogy has gained growing support across the scholarly and practitioner cycle as critical to meeting the needs of minority students (Wrench & Garrett, 2020; Young, 2017). According to Wrench and Garrett (2020), culturally responsive education ensures educators achieve efficient and effective support for culturally diverse students, thereby ensuring academic achievement among students of color. Researchers advocated integrating student culture with pedagogical techniques that contribute to academic performance among immigrant students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019; Vass, 2017). Au (2007) noted the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy offers schools/teachers three propositions for teaching and learning.

First, there must be a focus on individual student learning and academic achievement. Second, teachers must ensure they develop cultural competency in their classroom, and learners also maintain this competency. Third, students must comprehend how social practices and structures contribute to school inequalities (Au, 2007). Over the years, a growing body of literature has shown that culturally relevant pedagogy increases student performance, i.e., it empowers students from minority ethnic groups emotionally, socially, politically, and intellectually by utilizing their culture as a channel to convey attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Sheppard et al., 2019). As it applies to this study, culturally responsive pedagogy focused on educators' roles in addressing the diverse academic needs of African immigrant students with disabilities.

Culturally responsive pedagogy theory provided me with a lens to analyze the data from this research. In line with the learning needs of African immigrant students with disabilities, educators must use cultural perspectives, experiences, and characteristics of ethnically diverse African students as conduits to achieve effective instruction delivery (Au, 2007; Morrison et al.,

2019). Specifically, I examined how educators developed a culturally diverse knowledge base for African immigrant students with disabilities, established cross-congruity in instruction delivery, established cross-cultural communications, developed a culturally relevant curriculum, and demonstrated cultural caring (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019). Successful educators who apply culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for their instruction build and rely on performance styles, prior experiences, and cultural knowledge to make the learning experience more relevant and meaningful even to learners with special needs (Coppola & McHugh, 2018; Flory, 2017). For educators to maximize learning opportunities for students, Coppola and McHugh (2018) believed educators must learn about their students' culture and develop instruction to permeate their learning with identified cultural knowledge.

### **Constructivism**

I used the constructivism approach to understand how educators perceived the educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. Constructivism is an epistemological theory that emphasizes how individuals gain knowledge (Bodner, 1986). Jones and Bursens (2015) noted constructivism connects a researcher to the "epistemological and theoretical perspective that informs how one might investigate a particular phenomenon" (p. 69). People have multiple experiences that change over time. Constructivism aims to probe for a deeper understanding of these experiences (Crotty, 1998). I gathered reliable data by triangulating questionnaires, interviews, participants' reflections, and the researcher's journal to understand my participants' experiences fully.

Constructivism has received substantial attention due to the departure toward modern education concepts, including promoting educational engagement (Fernando & Marikar, 2017; Shah, 2019). According to Ericson et al. (2015), educational engagement is chiefly and

traditionally associated with increased student accomplishment, positive mindsets, and a sense of belonging. Therefore, the constructivism approach plays an indispensable role in a learning endeavor. Researchers have extensively explored constructivism to address educational engagement and promote learning environments around student boredom and alienation, poor learning outcomes, and feelings of failure. Wilson (1996) noted constructivist learning environments are where learners might work together and support each other as they use various tools, information, and resources in the guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities.

In line with the learning needs of African immigrant students with disabilities, learning should be student-centered as proposed by the constructivism approach. Students play an active role in their education, and teachers should assist them in reaching their conclusions or discovering more solutions (Yager, 1991). Classroom and learning should not be passive but instead be expected to help students accept information with questioning (Wilson, 1996). For data analyses, I examined how educators applied the constructivist approach to translating information appropriate for the learner's current state of understanding. Specifically, educators could develop a constructivism-based curriculum for African immigrant students with disabilities to build upon what they had already learned.

## **Research Design**

### **Inductive Research Approach**

In addition to a qualitative research strategy, I used an inductive research approach to examine educators' levels of preparedness and readiness to support and assist African immigrant students with disabilities. Creswell (2017) noted the inductive method has a close tie with qualitative research and is a process of building from the data to broad themes. It enabled

researchers examine underlying premises and the evidence to reach a predetermined study outcome. As applied to this study, the inductive research approach denoted assessing individual participants' experiences regarding the phenomenon under study. In elaboration, the phenomenon under study focused on examining and understanding educators' perceived roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities within public schools. I used information and insights collected from educators, such as individual experiences and thoughts, to inductively assess how educators conceptualized their role in the educational engagement processes that shape active participation for African immigrant students with disabilities. As a research approach, Bryman (2016) shared that grounded in the actual data drawn from participants invited to participate in the study is inductive logic. Therefore, a research strategy's choice is the key to obtaining relevant information to understand the phenomenon under research (Ghauri et al., 2020).

### **Qualitative Research Method**

A qualitative method as a research strategy helped me examine the current topic and obtain relevant information from participants. Its advantages inform my decision to use a qualitative research method to explore formulated research questions. According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), qualitative research helps researchers collect detailed and in-depth information about the topic under investigation and understand participants' lived experiences. Creswell (2017) added that the qualitative research method allows researchers to collect information anchored on understanding essential human elements such as personal views, feelings, perceptions, and opinions about the phenomenon under study. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative data contribute to understanding the 'why,' 'what,' and 'how' questions, thereby ensuring the researcher moves beyond numerical data evaluations or descriptive

statistical trends. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) added that during the data collection sessions, such as through focus group discussions or interview sessions, qualitative research promotes openness and collaboration between the researcher and the interviewees. As a result, interviewees have a conducive environment to expand, detail, or elaborate more about their previous responses to the interview questions, potentially opening new themes that might have been overlooked. Cooper and McNair (2019) shared that qualitative studies' interactive nature helps researchers capture detailed pictures about why individuals who participate in a study behave or act in a particular manner toward the phenomenon under investigation and their feelings about their actions.

However, despite its advantages, the qualitative research method has potential limitations. Creswell (2017) shared that data from qualitative studies come from small sample sizes. Therefore, it might not be easy to transfer the obtained results to other settings outside the research interest's immediate area (Creswell, 2017). For instance, since this study collected information about how educators perceived their roles regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students in a Mid-Southeastern state, their perspectives might not necessarily reflect educators' views in other regions of the country. Furthermore, Cooper and McNair (2019) cautioned that qualitative research methods might entail potential challenges when systematically comparing the collected interview responses. To elaborate, collected information about participants' perceptions of their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities using interviews might result in subjective feedback. Participants shared widely varying opinions, views, and insights about the topic based on their personal experiences. As a result, it was difficult to establish common themes since participants had different or conflicting opinions, feelings, and views about the same topic (Cooper & McNair,

2019). Ghauri et al. (2020) added that qualitative studies are time-effective or cost-effective when interviews are conducted through paper-and-pencil or face-to-face processes.

### **Phenomenology Design**

I utilized a phenomenology research design to investigate the postulated research aims and questions. I collected data from educators who had experienced the schooling needs of students like Segun or other African immigrant students with disabilities.

Based on the collected information, I developed a composite description of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of educators' experiences with African immigrant students with disabilities in their schools (Giorgi, 2017; Umanailo, 2019). For instance, educators' experiences with this phenomenon helped assess their perceptions about individual readiness to support these learners, existing curriculum, training, and competency in assisting learners with disabilities, focusing on African immigrant students. Soule and Freeman (2019) added that phenomenology is anchored in the principle that individual experience might be interpreted in multiple ways. Reality consists of each participant’s interpretation, perceptions, and personal opinions of the said experience. Therefore, phenomenology provides in-depth information about unique individual experiences, offering a complete and rich description of human experience and their meanings to a studied topic.

In the current study, the specific phenomenon under evaluation examined how educators perceived their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. The specific research interest examined these educators' views and perceptions about their conceptualization of the educational processes that affected African immigrant students' engagement in the learning process. Another vital phenomenon of research interest in this study

design explored and identified facilitators and barriers likely to hinder the experience of African immigrant students with disabilities in Mid-Southeastern state public school districts.

Phenomenology research focuses on reducing individual participant experiences to the topic of interest. According to Creswell (2017), phenomenology examines and assesses participants' subjective, lived experiences and perspectives. Further, Creswell added that a phenomenology study helps a researcher describe the individual meaning participants attach toward a phenomenon under investigation based on their lived experiences. Heotis (2020) added that phenomenology researchers focus on describing what every participant has in common when and as they experience a phenomenon. Frechette et al. (2020) further shared the phenomenological process entails grasping the very nature of the phenomenon and participant experience with an object of human experience such as grief, anger, feeling left out, support, lack of competency, and commitment to assist others.

### **Participants and Research Setting**

This section discusses participant selection and the technique used to identify educators who participated in this study. The section provides the details of the population of research interest, the number of participants invited, and the research setting. Additional insights included a detailed description of the participants (including experiences and contextual information on the participants' demographic characteristics).

#### **Participants**

Since it was not feasible for me to interview all educators in the Mid-Southeastern state public school districts, I focused on educators who work directly with African immigrant students with disabilities. The participants were drawn from five selected schools for this study after completing a questionnaire (See Appendix A) and meeting the criteria for participation.

Details about the questionnaire are further discussed below. I invited the participants through contacts (emails and phone calls). Participants were limited to ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers who worked in Mid-Southeastern state public schools. The sixteen participants (4 ESL Coordinators, 5 EC facilitators, 7 SPED Teachers), are eleven females and five males with experiences ranging from 2 to 22 years. Nine participants worked at a middle school and seven participant at a high school.

For this study, I looked for professionally trained participants who work with students with disabilities in their roles. The participants were all trained to work in their various roles and were all professionally licensed to function in their roles. The district staff directory and record showed these educators were solely responsible for providing special education and ESL programs at the five selected schools for this study. To work in these roles and positions requires a high level of education and certifications. For example, an ESL Coordinator must earn at least a bachelor's degree or higher and be endorsed in ESL by state's tests for teacher licensure. The EC Facilitator and SPED Teacher must have a master's degree in special education to be licensed to teach in Mid-Southeastern state public school districts. Since the staff directory established that these educators were certified and licensed to work in their various roles, I considered their roles for recruitment, not their academic qualifications.

Participant years of experience were crucial to the quality of information I gathered. Since the scope of my participants is limited to educators who work directly with African immigrant students with disabilities. I decided to set a minimum of two years of experience in their roles to recruit enough participants. This decision was advantageous to the study, as it gave me a wide range of participants' experiences (2 to 22 years) from beginning educators to veteran educators. All of the participants had experience working with African immigrant students with

disabilities. Gender and ethnicity were not a consideration for participating in this study.

However, the information is an important marker of the participants' cultural differences and diversity. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic data from the questionnaire's questions 1 to 5.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Demographic Information*

Participant	Role	School Level	Years in Role	Gender	Ethnicity
1	EC Facilitator	High School	9	Female	Black
2	SPED Teacher	Middle School	7	Male	White
3	ESL Coordinator	High School	18	Female	Asian
4	EC Facilitator	High School	15	Female	Black
5	ESL Coordinator	Middle School	8	Female	White
6	SPED Teacher	Middle School	5	Male	White
7	EC Facilitator	Middle School	9	Female	White
8	SPED Teacher	Middle School	9	Female	Black
9	SPED Teacher	Middle School	2	Female	Black
10	ESL Coordinator	High School	6	Female	Asian
11	SPED Teacher	High School	6	Male	Black
12	EC Facilitator	Middle School	20	Male	Black
13	EC Facilitator	High School	5	Male	White
14	SPED Teacher	Middle School	4	Female	Black
15	SPED Teacher	High School	22	Female	Black
16	ESL Coordinator	Middle School	15	Female	White

## **Recruitment Procedures**

I identified 22 educators with at least two years of experience in their role. These participants were invited through emails and phone contacts using the district staff directory and record. After identification, I sent a questionnaire (see Appendix A) to the 22 educators who responded to the first email (see Appendix B) to determine their eligibility to participate in the study. Selection for the participants was based on the following four criteria:

1. The ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers working at public schools in the Mid-Southeastern state
2. The participants were responsible for special education, ESL, or related services at any of the five schools selected for this study
3. Participants must have had at least two years of experience in their role, and
4. They must have had experience working with African immigrant students with disabilities.

Of the 22 educators recruited, 16 met the four criteria for participation. According to Creswell (2017), the goal of selecting a sample size for a qualitative study is to achieve saturation where themes on a phenomenon under investigation might be identified until a point where no new themes would emerge with the addition of more participants into the study. Based on the purpose of this study, all the 16 participants had at least two years of experience working with African immigrant students with disabilities and are educator working at a Mid-Southeastern state middle or high school. All the participants provided services for African immigrant students with disabilities who received special education services and could offer their perspective on facilitating educational engagement.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

I used purposeful sampling to identify participants from the selected five schools in the district. According to Hennink et al. (2019) and Campbell et al. (2020), purposeful sampling recruits a sample size with relevant expertise and knowledge about the investigated phenomenon. Specific focus includes educators (ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers) who provides services for African immigrant students with disabilities in their schools by nature of their job. These participants had the expertise and knowledge about the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Purposeful sampling provided me with an "in-depth understanding not available through random sampling" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 186). This design was appropriate as it helped me select participants who understood the central phenomenon in this study (Creswell, 2015, p. 156). Specifically, I utilized criterion-based sampling procedures. This type of sampling was advantageous to my research because it allowed me to conduct a thorough investigation of the 'lived experience' of educators who had experienced working with African immigrant students with disabilities (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

### **Research Setting**

This study's specific setting was five schools in the Mid-Southeastern state of the United States. Recent data from K-12 standards statistical profiles, the Education Graduation Performance System, and NCES (2020) showed more than 254 public schools in the Mid-Southeastern states. Mid-Southeastern states schools have a student population ranging from 750 to 2000 and an average class size of between 25 and 45 (Cohen et al., 2019; NCES, 2019; Rincón, 2020).

The selected schools comprised two public middle schools and three public high schools. The rising number of immigrant students enrolling in these schools informed the decision to

focus on these five schools. Criteria for the selected five schools were based on obtaining the following data from the Mid-Southeastern State Department of Public Instruction:

1. The number of students who spoke African languages at home either as a first or native language. The Mid-Southeastern State Department of Public Instruction students' demographic data showed the number of students in Mid-Southeastern state schools who spoke various languages other than English at home (NCES, 2019);
2. Each high or middle school selected for this study had an average of about 70 students who spoke African languages or spoke languages other than English at home;
3. Among these 70 students, an average of 13 should have an IEP, 504, and receive ESL services or other related services in their school. Therefore, the highest demography of students with disabilities who spoke the African language at home informed the decision to choose the five schools identified for this study.

Other considerations for choosing these five schools include that the school must be a public school and should have ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers. Also, the growing number of African immigrant student with disabilities in this school district informed the choice of public schools for this study.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

I used a questionnaire, interviews (see Appendix C), participants' reflections, and researcher journals for the data collection instrument in this study. The information I gathered from the questionnaires, participants' reflections, and my journals were used to triangulate the

data provided by the participants during the interviews regarding their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

#### **Questionnaire**

Using the Mid-Southeastern school district staff directory, I sent out a recruitment email letter (see Appendix B) to all the ESL coordinators, EC facilitators, and SPED teachers who worked with the five selected schools for this study. To confirm the eligibility of the educators that responded to the first recruitment letter, I sent an email asking them to complete a 10 minutes questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire contains ten questions; questions 1 to 5 asked participants to provide their demographic information. For this study, participants were asked to self-report their role, years in this role, school level, gender, and ethnicity. Questions number 6 to 10 asked participants to describe their experiences working with African immigrant students with disabilities. Including reporting the special education or related services the student receives. They were also asked to describe the challenges of working with these students and the educational engagement strategies they used with the student(s). Table 2 provides the obtained information from questions number 6 to 10 of the questionnaire.

**Table 2***Questionnaire Responses*

Participant	Students Service Delivery (IEP, 504, Related service)	Experience with the student(s) Negative Positive	Challenges with working with the student	What educational engagement strategies have you used with the student(s)
1	IEP	Positive	Lack of school based support	Building relationship/peer grouping
2	IEP	Negative	I need more training	Focus on knowing the student
3	ESL learner	Positive	Difficulty with task completion	Differentiate instruction
4	IEP	Negative	Language barriers	Specially Designed Instruction
5	ESL learner/IEP	Positive	Cultural/ Language barriers	Working with a partner
6	IEP	Negative	Lack of student engagement	Modeling/gesture/verbal prompt
7	IEP	Positive	Gap in curriculum	Differentiate instruction
8	IEP	Positive	Cultural differences	Direct instruction/modeling
9	IEP	Negative	Inadequate curriculum/materials	Interactive strategy
10	ESL learner/504	Positive	Language barriers	multiple representations
11	IEP	Positive	Different school model	Visual agenda
12	IEP	Negative	Lack of support and training	Differentiate instruction
13	Related service/504	Positive	Lack of family involvement	Collaboration with families
14	IEP	Positive	school model and students' needs	Knowing the students
15	IEP	Positive	Off task behavior	Differentiate instruction
16	ESL learner/IEP	Positive	Language barriers	Visual representations/

## Interviews

With the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) IRB approval, I emailed a consent form requesting interview time with all the educators who responded, completed, and met the criteria on the questionnaire, indicating they could participate in the study. I initiated follow up calls to three educators who did not respond to the email or return their consent forms. Four participants rescheduled their interview sessions due to other personal commitments. The interviews were conducted through Zoom conferencing and were audio-recorded. Participants could turn off their cameras during the interviews but none turned off their camera. I audio-recorded the discussions using an audio recording phone app called "voice memos"; participants were notified about the planned audio recording in the consent form. In addition to maintaining the participants' privacy and confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms to protect personal information connected to the participants. The data collected from the interviews had no identifying information on them.

Each interview session lasted for 60 minutes, ensuring an in-depth evaluation of all the interview questions. I used an interview guide to follow through with 10 interview questions by asking the same questions in the same manner. A semi-structured interview based on a structure proposed by qualitative researcher Brevan (2014) enabled me to use the descriptive phenomenological framework's elements. Three types of questions were asked: (a) contextualization, (b) apprehending the phenomenon, and (c) clarifying the phenomenon (Brevan, 2014, pp.139-142). Semi-structured interviews are essential because they enable researchers to collect first-hand and in-depth insights about the topic. (Campbell et al., 2020; Cobern & Adams, 2020). I conducted the interviews using open-ended, focusing but not leading questions, and listening carefully to the participants. The open-ended questions allowed me to

ask follow-up questions and seek clarification or additional insights from participants regarding their responses.

To answer the primary research questions presented in this study, I utilized two minor research questions further broken down into ten interview questions. I developed the interview questions based on similar studies and similar questions used by Pit-ten Cate and Glock (2018) in their research. To answer Research Question 1a: the first 5 interview questions asked participants to describe their experiences, roles, successes, challenges and strategies for educational engagement. Participants were asked to share their background experiences in dealing with African immigrant students with disabilities. They were asked to describe their role in promoting educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities; precisely, their perceptions and understanding of their roles. I also asked participants to identify specific factors contributing to African immigrant students' success and challenges in their school district, including their understanding of the educational engagement strategy(s) to increase participation. How they conceptualized educational engagement processes that shaped active participation for African immigrant students with disabilities. The specific focus was on examining how participants defined student engagement and factors they considered when determining students' engagement, especially for African immigrant students with disabilities.

To answer Research Question 1b regarding educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities, I formulated interview questions 6 through 10. Participants were asked to describe some of the school district policies, curriculum, and learning materials they consider appropriate in meeting the needs of African immigrant students with disabilities. Whether their understanding of cultural differences can support diversity in their school environment and factors to increased family involvement for

African immigrant families with a student with disabilities. Participants were also asked to share their views, opinions, and ideas of supporting and promoting educational engagement. What strategies to adopt or implement to transform African American students' schooling experience in U.S. public schools. This information is crucial to understanding how educators perceive the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Finally, I asked participants if they had any training on handling, managing, or engaging with African immigrant students with disabilities. Whether access to additional training, support from top management and colleagues, new school policies and guidelines or skills development would help achieve a positive experience for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Participants' Reflections**

The participants expressed their personal views, experiences, emotions, and perceptions about the studied phenomenon during the interviews. Using a semi-structured interview method enabled me to build rapport with every participant and seek richer responses to their subjective experiences (Campbell et al., 2020). The raw data were transcribed verbatim using a free online transcription service. The transcribed data were coded by me and secured in password protected file to ensure information confidentiality, data safety, and participant privacy (Creswell, 2017).

Upon completing each interview session, I assured that each participant received a copy of the interview transcripts through email. I asked them to confirm that I captured their responses, views, thoughts, and perceptions. I told them to reflect on the answer they provided if it genuinely reflects their views and if they would like to make changes or add to their previous responses. Four participants, in response, added new thoughts to their interview responses regarding challenges and moving forward with their roles. One participant requested a follow up discussion on strategies for educational engagement, of which I scheduled and we met on Zoom

conferencing. Two participants also added to initial reactions on how to support students. I initiated phone calls to two participants who did not respond to get their reflections. The rest of the participants acknowledged their agreement with the interview transcript. The feedback I received added to data collected and helped confirm the data.

### **Researcher Journals**

I kept a journal recording of events during this study's interviews, coding, and analysis. My journal contained a significant part of the data I collected, including date, time, facts, and details of the interview conversations. After completing each interview session, I made immediate reflections and completed my journal by reviewing my interview guide to ensure accuracy, including recalling all the events and recordings I obtained from the interview responses. I also recorded what transpired between each participant and me during the interview. I journaled their personal views, emotions, and perceptions about the studied phenomenon. To check my biases, I journaled every one of my feelings after the interview. During the coding stage, I continued to journal to ensure I did not reflect my assumptions or miss any vital information. These recordings were meaningful evidence that helped me during triangulation and the analyses of data.

### **Data Collection and Storage Methods**

Before conducting this study, I obtained approval from the University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix D). I also got permission from Mid-Southeastern state school districts and consent from the 16 participants. DiGiacinto (2019) shared that IRB approval and consent are vital to protecting participant privacy and ensuring safety when collecting interview responses. Human subject use contributes to potential ethical issues, including participant privacy, confidentiality, and data safety. The obtained UNC

IRB approval highlighted critical measures to consider to protect participants from possible psychological, physical, or emotional harm (Cooper & McNair, 2019). Schuwirth and Durning (2019) added that important ethical considerations include ensuring information confidentiality, obtaining consent, and ensuring participant privacy. The participants in this study received and signed a consent form (see Appendix E) that updated them on the study's aim and objectives. The informed consent form also assured participants of their rights in participating in this study, that taking part in this study was voluntary, and anyone was free to drop from the study at any time without any negative consequences (Cooper & McNair, 2019).

I achieved participant's privacy by avoiding collecting personal information such as names, dates of birth, places of residence and revealing their actual identities on coded data or to third parties. Taylor et al. (2016) advised storing all coded data in a password-protected computer to avoid unwarranted access. Using Google Drive and a secure password email to backup data ensured secure storage and confidentiality of the collected information for future reference. UNC IRB requires that raw data be stored for at least three years before permanent deletion or destruction.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

I used the six-step thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze the transcribed data from the interview responses. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), the six-step thematic analysis enables a researcher to identify patterns and formulate themes within qualitative data. The method includes the following steps: Step 1: Familiarize, Step 2: Generate, Step 3: Search, Step 4: Review, Step 5: Define, and Step 6: Write-up.

## **Comprehending the Data**

Braun and Clarke (2006) stipulated the first step is to familiarize oneself with the data for extensive comprehension to aid handling, accuracy, and appropriateness. I read and re-read the data from the questionnaires, interviews, participant reflections and researcher journals to get familiar with the entire body of data before beginning to code and identify themes. After transcribing the raw data from interviews, I highlighted key phrases and impressions and compiled sentences related to the research topic (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). I also analyzed each transcribed respondent's interview data, questionnaire response, and reflections looking for the study topic and research questions. A combination of participants' answers reflected the patterns I used in Step 2.

## **Generating the Codes**

Code generation is Step 2 of the thematic analysis process; it relies heavily on the extent of familiarity achieved in Step 1 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I utilized an inductive manual coding strategy to look for texts relevant to the research topic and assigned a term to help identify them. I focused on writing down initial codes by organizing and developing data set in a meaningful and systematic way. The data set contained information from the questionnaires, interviews, participant reflections and researcher journals. The identified preliminary codes reflected critical features of the data that appeared significant. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that these codes are often more specific and numerous than themes but indicate the conversation context. Usually, sentences or phrases are highlighted to create clear shorthand labels or 'codes' that describe their content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After the preliminary coding, the peer reviewer and I discussed together to reduce the data set to a manageable size, we clustered the interview responses under a series of codes.

Questionnaire responses, participant reflections and researcher journals were also coded using this same method. The identified codes reflected critical features of the data and were specific to describe the study's phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In generating these codes from the data extracts, the peer reviewer and I used a latent analysis that provided more comprehensive and profound evaluations of underlying meanings. Through latent analysis, we dug deeper into the responses to uncover underlying assumptions and conceptualizations fundamental in shaping the given data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The peer reviewer and I met the second time on zoom conferencing to code the data sets to reflect the research questions formulated in this study. The interview questions were structured, so a set was intended to answer the respective research questions. Only codes were extracted at this stage, with further data enhancement and refining done in Step 3.

### **Systematic Extraction of Themes**

Step 3 entailed searching for themes and relationships between themes or subthemes using interpretive analysis of the collated codes, including the consolidation of the respective codes that communicated common ideas. The techniques I used with the help of the peer reviewer to find themes included the identification of repetition in data, similarities and differences, and the consideration of missing data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The extraction of codes was systematic, using inductive tagging allowed me to structure my data by themes. The extraction of the codes formed the basis for formulating themes (Creswell, 2017). Relevant data extracts were sorted (split or combined) in line with the overarching themes, including finding the relationship among themes, subthemes, and codes. Relationships were determined by the extent to which the themes hosted common or uncommon elements; it was fundamental to evaluate how the themes complemented each other.

### **Reviewing the Identified Themes**

Step 4 required the reviewing themes. The peer reviewer and I reviewed the emerged themes by redefining the identified themes and consolidating them into more meaningful ones. It was not necessary to make any changes to the themes since they holistically represented the circumstances of African immigrant students with disabilities.

Reviewing the themes helped me cohere the data meaningfully to achieve a precise and identifiable distinction between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two phases completed this process: checking the theme with the coded extracts and then the overall data set. The Step 4 process also helped me generate a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Defining the Identified Themes**

Step 5 focused on describing and naming themes reviewed in Step 4. Specifically, Braun and Clarke (2006) shared that Step 5 entailed refining and then defining themes and potential subthemes that might emerge within the data. With the help of the peer reviewer, I defined the identified themes to create a unified story of the data. Doing so was critical in establishing the systematic coherence of the themes and ensuring their workability.

### **Writing up Findings**

Step 6 focused on writing up findings to answer the formulated research questions where interview extracts and specific participant responses supported identified themes. I created the write up to answer the formulated research questions using interview extracts and specific participant responses to support identified themes. The use of verbatim expressions from participants did not only go to the effect of manifesting participants' dispositions and feelings; by speaking for themselves, participants also importantly validated the data. Moreover, their testimony lent more credibility to the data that would have been otherwise questionable if

obtained in my reported speech form. As advised by Braun and Clarke (2006), I utilized “vivid examples...to capture the essence...” (p. 93) of the points being demonstrated. Stated differently, as much as every participant volunteered so much information, only their key expressions were cited as examples to illustrate specific phenomena.

### **Trustworthiness**

The reliability of a research study’s methods and findings made it worthy of attention and demonstrated the research could be trusted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I have some preconceptions about the current research topic that might bias the findings. Specifically, due to my experience, I believe that most public schools have not emphasized relevant support services to aid the academic progress of students like Segun or other African immigrant students with disabilities. As a result, these students often have low educational engagement compared to their peers. Thus, I hold the view that educators in public schools might have negative experiences or might negatively conceptualize educational engagement processes among African immigrant students, thereby negatively shaping these learners' active participation. My attachment to the topic might inadvertently impact the study findings and contribute to subjective bias. I used researcher journals and bracketing technique to ensure objectivity and to get a clear picture of the studied experience (Creswell, 1998). In addition, I also applied the four steps proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Nowell et al. (2017) noted these elements help achieve reliability when conducting a qualitative study.

## **Credibility**

Credibility is associated with how well results from a study accurately represent participants' experiences. Thus, credibility helps ensure the internal validity of the study. I used a well-established data collection plan to achieve credibility in this study, as initially discussed in the data collection and analysis sections. I ensured participants had sufficient time to listen, share, and document their responses to attain data saturation (McNarry et al., 2018). Thus, I applied the following strategies during the research process: (a) triangulation and (b) member checking.

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation is "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Triangulation assures a study's validity using various methods to collect data on the same topic. The purpose is to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon using more than one method to collect data on the same topic (Mathison, 1988). I collected multiple data to triangulate this study: questionnaires, interviews, participant reflections, and researcher journals. Data triangulation allowed me to gain in-depth insight into each participant's perceptions by looking for outcomes they agreed. Recruiting multiple participants with various levels of experience (2 to 22 years) in their distinct roles helped increase the credibility of the information collected for this study.

### ***Member Checking***

After each interview, I used member checking to debrief the participants by providing copies of their interview transcripts for verification (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All participants received a copy of the interview transcripts through email to confirm the authenticity of the

collected data. Each participant was asked to review and reflect on the transcribed data for additions or changes to ensure I captured vital details and nothing was misstated, misunderstood, or left out (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I received feedback from all the participants confirming the accuracy of the transcript. Six participants expounded their views on the initial responses and I had a follow-up discussion with one participant. Two participants did not respond until I initiated a phone call to them. I added this information to their original responses but no changes were made to the transcript. The information I gained from the participants' feedback helped me confirm the accuracy of the data, themes, interpretations, and conclusions that emerged during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Dependability and Audit Trail**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability defines the extent the research procedures are reliable and the clarity of their documentation. In this study, I used an audit trail to ensure the inquiry process's dependability when collecting and analyzing data (McNarry et al., 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). The audit trail contained the raw data gathered from the questionnaire, interviews, participant reflections and researcher journals. Further, I used exact interview transcripts and direct quotes during data reporting to capture participant responses. I conducted an in-depth methodological description of the research design, strategies, and approaches to ensure this study's dependability. Creswell (2017) noted that detailed description increases the soundness of study usefulness for future studies.

### **Transferability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) shared that transferability refers to using a study's findings in future practice and policy application. In addition, transferability implies the extent to which results are transfer to other people or contexts outside the immediate research area (Bryman,

2016; Nowell et al., 2017). I used thick descriptions to attain transferability, and detailed responses from the participants allowed comparisons of the study phenomenon to other contexts (Creswell, 2017). A thick description provided me with detailed interpretations of the quotations from interviews. Further, the participant selection process recruited 16 participants to ensure sampling sufficiency and detailed information collected from the participants. The sample size of 16 participants helped me achieve methodological rigor and data saturation reached during participant interviews. When the participant repeated the same comments, I stopped collecting information. Thus, recruiting 16 participants helped me achieve data saturation.

### **Confirmability**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is established when the interpretations and findings derived from a study achieves trustworthiness. In line with the current study, confirmability refers to the objectivity of the findings or other researchers' ability to confirm the obtained results. Coding raw data is one approach to achieving confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). I clearly described the coding process with a specific focus on how naming patterns were acquired using the six thematic analysis processes by Braun and Clarke (2006). Detailed evidence of participants' responses during data collection supported findings and ensured comprehensive data evaluation.

### **Bracketing**

Due to my experience, I have some attachments and preconceptions about the current research topic that might increase the potential bias of the findings. Therefore, I used the bracketing technique to address potential bias, ensure objectivity, and get a clearer picture of the study's experience (Creswell, 1998). Bracketing is an essential part of phenomenological research; it demonstrates data collection validity and separates its experiences from those studied

(Creswell, 1998; Crotty, 1998). As Bentz (1995) proposed, I was aware and open to reflective feedback from others, especially from my course advisor and peer reviewer. Using semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions and researcher journals, data collected were revisited continually to examine emerged issues and carefully analyze them using appropriate language to present findings (Vagle, 2014).

I also engaged in debriefing to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). I held several consultations with my dissertation advisor to review and comment on the study's descriptions, analyses, and interpretations (Brantlinger et al., 2005). I also consulted with a peer reviewer to help examine and appraise the coding, data analysis, and findings for accuracy and consistency (Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Peer Reviewing**

I had a peer reviewer who worked with me on this study. The peer reviewer was a doctoral student who was familiar with qualitative research. Peer reviewing allowed someone familiar with qualitative research to examine the methodology, transcripts, data analysis, and study findings. I also engaged in debriefing to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell & Miller, 2000). The peer reviewer and I partnered to ensure that my interview guide would answer the research questions for this study. We both agreed on the structure and sequence of the questions. After I completed the preliminary coding, the peer reviewer and I met twice on Zoom conferencing to review the generated codes. We read through the transcripts until we both agreed that we captured every detail for accuracy. Furthermore, the peer reviewer and I worked together to decide on the emerged themes. We reviewed the themes to make sure they answered the research questions. During the data analysis process, we

discussed and agreed on the trustworthiness of the findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Collaborating with a peer reviewer increased the credibility of my coding and analysis.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented and discussed approaches and strategies I used to collect relevant data from participants in this study to answer the research questions. The chapter outlined the research designs, process, and method used to collect qualitative data from participants working in five public schools located in a Mid-Southeastern state. A phenomenological study was used as a research design with the inductive logic, and the qualitative research method is the research approach and strategies. Further, this study's specific target population was discussed, focusing on educators drawn from Mid-Southeastern state public school districts. Purposeful sampling was used as a sampling technique to identify the required sample size of 16 participants.

This methodology chapter also discussed data collection procedures, data analysis, and data handling, with questionnaires, interviews, participants' reflections, and researcher journals being the data collection instrument. Finally, the chapter outlined critical ethical issues that arose during this study's duration and highlighted measures taken into consideration to protect the rights and privacy of participants while ensuring data safety and confidentiality. The next chapter presents the main themes from the participants' responses.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

While many studies have been conducted on immigrant students and students with disabilities, an absence of literature combining migration and disability was noteworthy. As such, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine secondary educators' perceptions of the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Specifically, the study explored secondary educators' perceptions of their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Ndemanu and Jordan (2017) found the percentage of African immigrant students served under the IDEA (2004) rose to 4.4% from 3.7% in 2010–2020. McKay (2019) reported that immigrants are now 22% of the total student population, and of the new arrivals, 22% are Africans.

Of the studies conducted on the proportion of African immigrant students from different regions, there were limited revelations about African immigrant students with disabilities, especially on how educators perceived their roles and facilitated educational engagement for these students. The current study addressed this gap in the literature. I used a six-step thematic process to analyze the responses obtained from the 16 participants. To understand better how educators perceived their roles in supporting and facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities, I established a research framework to address the following research questions.

- Q1     How do secondary educators perceive their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?

- Q1a What barriers do secondary educators report that prevent effective educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities?
- Q1b What are secondary educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities?

### **Findings**

This chapter presents the data analysis according to themes that emerged from the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were used as they were open-ended and therefore did not restrict the participants. The data collected from the 16 participants were coded and no new data were introduced after interviewing the 16 participants as data saturation was reached. Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a six-step thematic process to analyze transcribed data from the interview responses: I used the six steps to discuss and highlight educators' perceptions and identify patterns and formulate themes within the qualitative data.

After transcribing the raw data from the participants' interviews and reviewing the data from questionnaire, participant reflections and research journal in Step 1, I familiarized myself by making notes, highlighting key phrases and impressions, and then compiling sentences related to the research topic. I also analyzed each participant's responses, looking for the study topic and research questions. In Step 2, I generated the initial codes by organizing the obtained data meaningfully and systematically using an inductive manual coding strategy. This strategy allowed me to look for texts relevant to the research topic and assign a term to help identify them. To reduce the data set, I clustered the responses under a series of meaningful codes using a latent analysis to provide more comprehensive and profound evaluations of underlying meanings.

Furthermore, in Step 3, I used interpretive analysis of the collated codes to search for themes and relationships between themes or subthemes with the help of the peer reviewer. The

techniques we used to find themes included the identification of repetition in data, similarities, differences, and the consideration of missing data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Relationships were determined by the extent to which the themes hosted common or uncommon elements; it was fundamental to evaluate how the themes complemented each other. The extraction of codes was systematic, using tagging, and based on what strongly evoked the data if the codes substituted them. The extraction of the codes formed the basis for the formulation of themes. The following four themes emerged: cultural factors, curriculum structure, educational model, and support for educational engagement.

To review the themes in Step 4, the peer reviewer and I worked to redefine the identified themes and consolidate them into more meaningful themes. It was unnecessary to change the identified themes since they holistically answered the research questions.

- Theme 1: Cultural Factors (Q1a)
- Theme 2: Curriculum Structure (Q1a)
- Theme 3: Educational Model (Q1a)
- Theme 4: Support for Educational Engagement(Q1b)

I reviewed the themes in Step 4, including the subthemes that emerged within the data, by creating a unified data story in Step 5 of the six-step thematic process. Doing so was critical in establishing the systematic coherence of the themes and ensuring their workability. While cultural factors consisted of all elements involved in an individual's disposition, curriculum structure was concerned with the relevance of teaching content over time rather than the consideration of the cultural uniqueness of students. Considering that educational models differ worldwide, it was also critical to consider the differences between the students' models as they moved from Africa to the United States. Support for educational engagement indicates the

assistance received by students, educators, and families towards achieving educational engagement. This support system influences secondary educators' roles in enhancing or hampering students' successes. Table 3 outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged from each research question.

Three overarching themes emerged as I analyze the findings. The result was "Barriers," which included: Cultural Factors, Curriculum Structure, and Educational Model. The Barrier construct indicated the challenges noted by the participants as impacting their roles in facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. To elaborate on the Barrier construct, I generated the thematic map below (Braun & Clarke, 2006), Figure 1, to connect the research questions and investigate participants' perceptions of their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities.

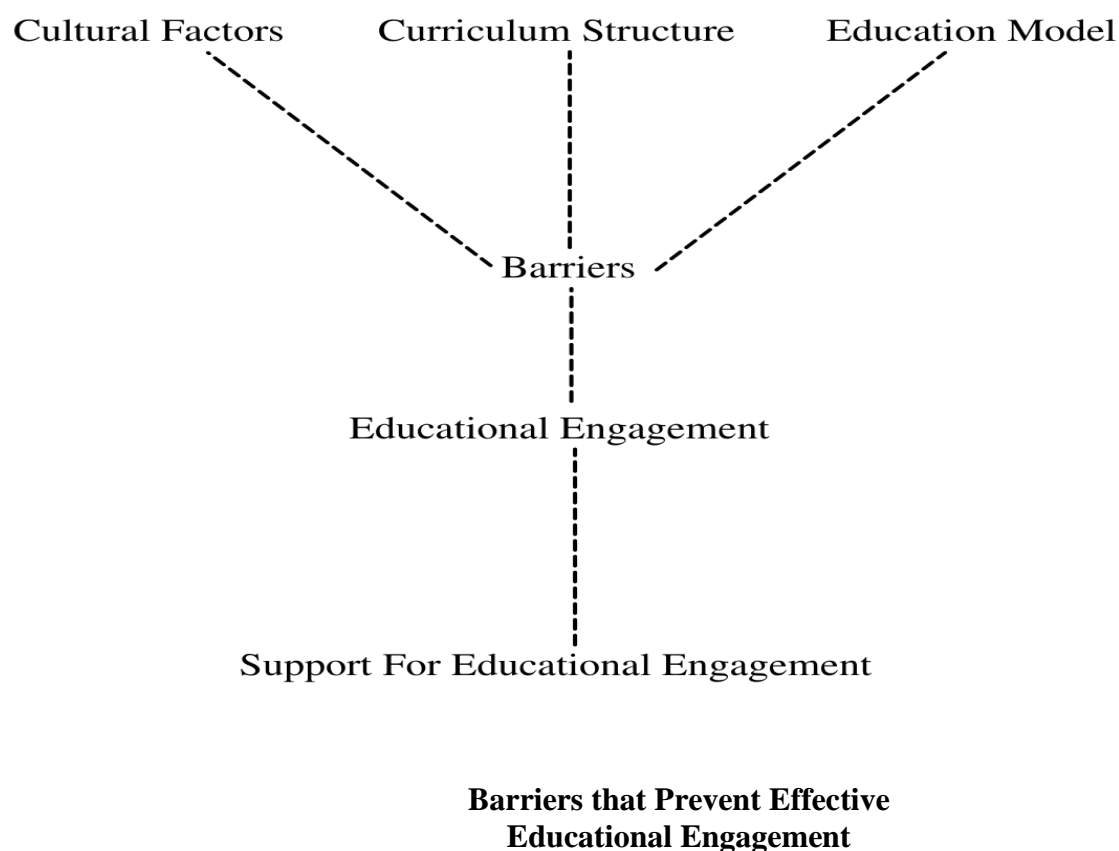
I utilized the identified themes to answer the formulated research questions using interview extracts and specific participant responses for support. The use of verbatim expressions from participants did not only go to the effect of manifesting participants' dispositions and feelings; by speaking for themselves, participants also importantly validated the data. Moreover, their testimonials lent more credibility to the data that would have been otherwise questionable if obtained in a reported speech form by me; as advised by Braun and Clarke (2006), I utilized "vivid examples to capture the essence" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93) of the points demonstrated. Stated differently, as much as every participant volunteered so much information, only their key expressions were cited here as examples to illustrate specific phenomena.

**Table 3***Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Sub-theme	Research Question
1. Cultural Factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers of Cultural Differences on Educational Engagement</li> <li>• Challenges of Environmental Changes and Culture Shock</li> <li>• Language barriers</li> <li>• Social-Emotional Wellbeing of Students with Disabilities</li> </ul>	Q1a: What barriers do educators report that prevent effective educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities?
2. Curriculum Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Impact of General Curriculum on Students Centered Learning</li> <li>• Barriers of Curriculum Gap on Special Education Service Delivery</li> <li>• Pedagogical Issues</li> </ul>	
3. Educational Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers of Large Class Size</li> <li>• Standardized Testing Barriers on Educational Placement</li> <li>• Inadequate Training for Educators</li> <li>• Lack of Collaboration Among Service Providers</li> </ul>	
4. Support System for Educational Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for Student Engagement</li> <li>• Educator's Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Educational Engagement</li> <li>• Support for Student's Motivation</li> <li>• Strategies for Educational Engagement</li> <li>• Inclusion Support</li> <li>• Removing Deficit Mindset</li> <li>• Support Through Relationship Building</li> <li>• Support for Family Involvement</li> </ul>	Q1b: What are educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities?

**Figure 1**

*Map Connecting the Barrier Theme to the Research Questions*



### **Theme One: Cultural Factors**

#### ***Barriers of Cultural Differences on Educational Engagement***

This section provides an in-depth finding of participants' varying beliefs on the impact of cultural differences on the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Results showed that some participants perceived cultural differences were a deep concern and a fundamental barrier to the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. One Participant noted:

Culture is the big barrier because of a lack of understanding on both sides; some students and teachers have never experienced different cultures other than theirs. Some teachers

cannot relate to a student from another culture, who has a certain thing going on, and they have never been through it.

The participants in this study perceived culture as an integral part of teaching and learning. Another Participant stated, "Culture should be considered when teaching these students; it has a lot to do with their learning style." These findings suggested the participants perceived cultural factors might be a barrier to the teaching and learning endeavor of African immigrant students with disabilities. Its effect might impact educators' roles in promoting the educational engagement of these students.

### ***Challenges of Environmental Changes and Cultural Shock***

Many participants perceived that encountering an unfamiliar environment and unfamiliar cultures might influence the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. One Participant expressed: "I can understand the culture shock of coming to a completely different culture, but also a completely different learning environment." Of the high school and middle participants, six females and three males postulated that cultural shock was a unique barrier. This perception was supported by another Participant: "So just culture shock would be one huge thing." Some participants also stated that environmental change might impact African immigrant students with disabilities. For example, a Participant said:

The biggest barrier is movement, movement of the student. Like, they change schools, change country, and change teachers, we do not know their impact on students and learning. I think what really catches them off guard is change. Change is a challenge. And then social interactions and the Culture.

One participant postulated that environmental change and cultural shock were unique barriers. Participants' responses revealed that cultural shock and environmental changes might

impact students' learning. The participants felt this was a barrier to their role in facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. This finding suggested many participants believed environmental change and culture shock was a barrier to their role of facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### ***Language Barriers***

Findings indicated that the participants perceived language as a huge barrier that might impact effective communication, learning, and teaching for African immigrant students with disabilities. According to one Participant, "I think the language barrier is a problem, some students are not able to understand or communicate effectively, and it affects their learning." Also, "Communicating is more difficult, especially with the student having a thick accent, I think. Language is a big problem," said a Participant. Participants' perspectives appeared to be related to students' learning, and they reported the language barrier might affect students' learning. Of the high school and middle participants, eight females and three males postulated that language was a unique barrier to learning. A middle school Participant stated, "Language barriers are huge, and some teachers think these students are incompetent, but they are not; language is the problem." Furthermore, some participants who perceived language as a considerable barrier noted that structuring exams in students' respective languages would help foster integration and promote educational engagement.

Findings suggested the participants perceived increased communication amongst educators, students, and families would support them in their role regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Communication with students and families was perceived as a significant barrier. A Participant stated: "Communicating with

parents is important. It supports students' learning and concerns and helps the teacher better understand the students' needs to fully provide educational engagement.”

Amongst the concerns noted by the participants was their inability to communicate with families, especially in the case of language barriers. One Participant from high school stipulated: "Language interpreters are not available across the school district." This perspective was supported by another Participant: "School districts should try to have translators that will break the language barrier to have effective communication."

Another area of participant concern was the inability of families to access school information and the lack of support from the school district in building relationships with families. A Participant from middle school stated: "Due to growing digitalization, the school's websites need to be more accessible to the parents. As a teacher, I find it difficult to find information on the website; how much more parents" This thought was seconded by a Participant from high school: "It would be great if proper contact information were updated in the system so that teachers can reach out to parents." These findings suggested that participants perceived language as a barrier to students and their roles in African immigrant students' educational engagement.

### ***Social-Emotional Wellbeing of Students with Disabilities***

Findings indicated the participants perceived students' social-emotional well-being might impact the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Participants' perspectives suggested students' social and emotional well-being played a massive role in their educational engagement. According to one middle school Participant, "There is a firm emphasis on data and not enough emphasis on social wellbeing, first of all, social-emotional, like, how is the kid doing?" This perception was supported by a high school Participant: "Understanding the

socio-emotional differences and cultural differences of these students is important when providing educational engagement." Similarly, one Participant shared this thought:

There is not enough emphasis on social-emotional and well-being; first, added to the challenges of culture change, they have a disability. I believe that supporting students' social-emotional development is effective in understanding their skills and abilities. Then we can better manage their emotions, behavior, and social skills, which can lead to better academic outcomes.

These participants agreed that social-emotional support might positively impact students' learning. Findings indicated that the participants believed this issue has not been addressed by schools and might impair educators' role in facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

## **Theme Two: Curriculum Structure**

In this theme, 9 of the 16 participants opined the curriculum needed to be updated to engage African immigrant students with disabilities in this theme. Three subthemes emerged from this theme: (a) The Impact of General Curriculum on Student-Centered Learning, (b) Barriers of Curriculum Gap on Special Education Service Delivery (c) Pedagogical Issues

### ***The Impact of General Curriculum on Student-Centered Learning***

Participants' responses suggested that due to the increased mandate for students with disabilities to access the general curriculum, there is not enough focus on student-centered learning. The participants perceived the curriculum to be fast-paced, and it is challenging to achieve student-centered learning targets. Seven participants posited that more emphasis on accessing the general curriculum hinders student-centered learning and would not facilitate educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. For instance, a middle

school Participant stated, "The curriculum does not support student-centered learning." Another Participant reinforced this view: "I think that African immigrant Students with disabilities need more student-centered learning to access academic content and to give students what they need. Similarly, a middle school Participant said, "Teachers should be aware of student-centered learning to meet individual needs, not just the curriculum. This includes figuring out what they have, what they are coming with, and then giving them the advantages that you give everybody else can be beneficial." These findings suggested many participants perceived that the focus on the general curriculum takes away access to meeting individual student needs. Therefore, it impacts student-centered learning, which might be a barrier to fully providing educational engagement to African immigrant students with disabilities.

***Barriers of Curriculum Gap on  
Special Education Service Delivery***

A middle school Participant stated, "The biggest gap in the curriculum to me is alignment with the needs of African immigrant students with disabilities." Another Participant concurred: "You can try to engage the children, but the curriculum needs to be revisited, and it should not fall back on the teachers." One Participant whose input contributed to this subtheme stated,

I have issues with the IEP implementations; I find it challenging to align students' IEP goals with the curriculum. It does not address the student's needs and is beyond the student's level of performance. I think we will have better success if we focus more on using specially designed instructions to target students' needs instead of chasing after the curriculum.

The participants believed the curriculum update was more necessary in supporting special education service delivery. The gap in the curriculum might negatively impact student achievement, as voiced by the participants. This finding indicated the participants perceived the

gap in the curriculum as a barrier and ineffective in helping educators perform their role in the educational engagement of African migrant students with disabilities.

### ***Pedagogical Issues***

Related to the curriculum concern was the issue of pedagogical strategies. Eleven participants admitted that the pedagogical approaches need to be changed to provide educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. According to Participant 8, "The educational system has been rigid; adopting what was used in the 1950s to a population with changing needs is not applicable in the 21st century. They fail to realize that the school dynamics have changed with the influx of diverse students" This assertion was supported by one middle school Participant: "I think a big flaw in the educational system is that the educational system has failed to adequately adapt to the kids of today" The participant responses suggested pedagogy might impact teaching and learning for African immigrant students with disabilities. These responses also indicated that participants believed this barrier affected their role in facilitating educational engagement for these students.

### **Theme Three: Educational Model**

Participants perceived the educational model as a barrier to their role in promoting educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. As viewed by one high school participant, "There needs to be changed in the educational model and how we approach teaching and learning for African immigrant students with disabilities." Four subthemes emerged from this theme: (a) Barriers of large class size, (b) standardized testing barrier and placement issues, (c) training for educators, and (d) collaboration among service providers.

#### ***Barriers of Large Class Size***

Thirteen participants agreed current teacher-student ratios were challenging and unsuitable for handling the diversity of African immigrant students with disabilities. According to a middle school Participant, "Many times the larger the classes, the more difficult it is to reach students with disabilities...we need smaller classes." In support, one participant said, "More teachers so that we have smaller class sizes so that we can really relate to students." The agreement was noted strongly among those with more experience, precisely those with seven or more years in teaching. In this case, a high school Participant clarified: "We need smaller classes and more teachers to reach students where they are, and high turnover of teachers impacts students' learning." The participants' responses regarding large class sizes signified their frustration with not providing educational engagement due to too many students in a class.

### ***Standardized Testing Barriers and Educational Placement***

Ten participants articulated that standardizing testing was the greatest weakness of educational engagement; it places students in the wrong instructional group. This perception was most substantial among ESL coordinators and SPED teachers. Participant 15 with 20 years of experience in education stated: "I think standardized testing should be abolished. Moreover, I believe that students, ideally in an ideal world, should not be given age-based grades. You put students in a group that is at their learning level." In support, one Participant confirmed: "I think that being able to take standardized tests in their language, their native languages, is especially important when we know that they are not proficient in English, why assess them in the English language." An accurate assessment of where these students are, not standardized testing." A middle school Participants responded that standardized testing might hinder a sense of academic achievement. The participants agreed that standardizing tests were not rewarding for African immigrant students with disabilities. As stated by high school Participant, "So, we have these

very nice-looking documents of things that we would like to teach. However, due to emphasis on the testing, we are de-emphasizing the skills that these students are going to need." The participant did not elaborate on how standardized testing de-emphasized student skills. In this study, the responses from participants revealed standardized testing might be a barrier that hinders students' growth. As such, participants perceived standardized testing as a barrier to their role in providing educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### ***Inadequate Training for Educators***

In this subtheme, 14 participants communicated that additional training was needed for educators to facilitate their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Several participants expressed that the following training would be appropriate for many educators working with these students: (a) equity training (14 participants), (b) restorative justice training (middle school Participant), (c) micro-aggressions training (high school Participant), (d) patience training for teachers (middle school Participant), and (e) training in connecting with parents (middle school Participant). Another high school Participant stated emphatically: "More teacher training on acknowledging the African immigrant population." In support, a middle school Participant said: "Training designed specifically for interventions and understanding these students." this finding indicated participants believed the school district had not adequately prepared them to educate these students. Therefore, they believed lack of training impacted their ability to facilitate educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### ***Lack of Collaboration Among Service Providers***

Nine participants believed collaboration and teamwork might help facilitate their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. As affirmed by a

middle school Participant, "More collaboration with the service providers will contribute to the overall success of students." In support, one Participant stated categorically that "All the support staff, the general education teachers, resource teachers, and special services like speech pathologists should all work with the classroom teachers to make sure the student is engaged." Participants were concerned there was a division among team members and lack of planning with all service providers was a barrier to educational engagement. As a result, one Participant proposed the "removal of the divisiveness of teachers' roles in student engagement. More interconnectedness of educators, and resources for students." A high school Participant also added, "More communication and cooperation from counselors, ESL teachers, EC Facilitators, and of course the social worker." This finding indicated participants' perceived educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities might not be successful in isolation of teamwork. Participants believed they needed to collaborate with other service providers to perform the area's roles effectively.

### **Secondary Educators' Attitudes Toward Roles of Educational Engagement**

#### **Theme Four: Support for Educational Engagement**

##### ***Support for Students' Engagement***

To answer research question 1b, 10 of the 16 participants shared they had an instrumental role in facilitating educational engagement and ensuring synchrony between these two cultures. Participants acknowledged the need to promote support for African immigrant students with disabilities. A Participant stated: "My role would then be to support and help them make sense of the curriculum so that they can see not only my support to help them get to the next level in the American school system but also to help them achieve whatever personal and educational goals

they have." This section provides an in-depth understanding of participants' views of the varying educational support for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### ***Educators' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Educational Engagement***

Findings suggested participants' perceived support for students and educators as crucial in facilitating educational engagement. The participants felt they lacked support from the school administration, which forestalled their ability to perform their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. According to a middle school Participant with 5 years experience, "More input coming from educators and more freedom for educators in creating curriculum and teaching process. Freedom to do what we want to do in the classroom, not what we are told to do only." In contrast, participants opined on the need to support students as they admitted they had not paid attention to these students' needs in their class.

### ***Support for Students' Motivation***

Most participants agreed to have a positive experience facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. However, they agree with the frustration that these students experience. One Participant expressed enthusiastically: "So far, my experience has been pleasant and quite rewarding. I find African immigrant students somewhat reserved, respectful, conscientious, and kind. I try my best to keep them motivated" On a similar note, a middle school Participant concurred: "They hold themselves to a very high standard; the students have typically been wonderful. For the most part, they have been wonderful. I have not had any behavioral concerns." Eight participants agreed that African immigrant students with disabilities showed enthusiasm and a thirst to attain higher educational outcomes. Another Participant reinforced this view: "They have an interest and dedication to learning. They are determined to do the work, but I see their frustration. So, I have to remember to be patient with

them.” This finding indicated the participants believed these students were dedicated to learning, but there might be a barrier that hindered their educational engagement. Therefore, participants believed their role was to provide the support to facilitate educational engagement for these immigrant students with disabilities.

### ***Support for Active and Meaningful Learning***

Fifteen of the 16 participants perceived that educational engagement strategies should be active, engaging, and meaningful to support students learning. Eight participants agreed educational engagement should be an active process. According to a Participant, "Finding ways that we can have kids more alive in classes, maybe adding more visuals and auditory elements will help engage students." In support of this idea, a high school Participant said: "Instead of having classes inside all the time, maybe we can have classes on the outside in nature to help students experience a true meaning of the lesson.” Another Participant also agreed that educational engagement should capture students' interest. Participant 1 expressed: "If we could make class instructions more engaging to the students, I feel like kids would learn a little bit better."

Finally, participants believed learning needed to be meaningful to support educational engagement. One Participant said enthusiastically: "I use a lot of photos to demonstrate concrete objects, support and engage my students in learning." Participant 10 also supported this thought: "I want to show them how these things connect to their actual life in the real world and are not just like, abstract." These responses indicated the participants believed that with active, engaging, and meaningful activities, educational engagement could be supported and enhanced for students.

### ***Inclusion Support***

Some participants agreed they had not done due diligence with their role by not recognizing African immigrant students with disabilities in the classrooms. One Participant stated: "I probably did not engage my African immigrant students with disabilities as much as I did my African American and my Latino students. I am working on it." Similarly, another Participant expressed: "There is a focus on Spanish-speaking students, but we disregard students who speak other languages." Another concern expressed by the participants was grouping African immigrant students with disabilities with other students. A Participant with over 10 years' experience pointed out: "Try to not lump these students in with African American students; just because they look the same does not mean that they are the same; they learn differently." To emphasize this point, a Participant commented: "Unfortunately, people so wrongly group the Latino, African American and African immigrant students with disabilities in the classroom." These responses indicated the participants were of the view that the uniqueness of African immigrant students with disabilities needed to be recognized in the classes to promote educational engagement for these students. To the participants, this was a barrier to supporting them and educators performing their role in these students' educational engagement.

### ***Removing Deficit Mindset***

Some participants stated that for educators to fully support educational engagement they need to remove deficit mindset and give African immigrant students with disabilities the same advantage instead of labeling them. One Participant said:"

We need to get rid of the deficit mindset. These kids come with immense richness and background, and we need to let them share it with us, and we will all be so much more successful. We want these kids to get over the terribleness of their background and not

realize the richness and what the kids are coming with and what they are bringing from their communities and their families.

Another Participant also agreed: "The fact that schools come with the attitude of the deficit mindset. ...The kids come from a terrible background, they are like an empty vessel, and we need to pour knowledge into them." This finding indicated the participants acknowledged that removing deficit mindset and every bias would help promote and support educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### ***Support through Relationship Building***

Participants believed student support was possible through building student-teacher relationships. According to a Participant, "If you build a relationship with the students, they gravitate towards you and are more likely to learn." Another Participant concurred: "My role is to help students become more comfortable and trust and watch them assimilate and grow educationally and socially." Many participants further noted they had a duty beyond offering instructional education as they must also show emotional support. A Participant stated, "I create a welcoming classroom environment and being there for them, trying to be in their lives. It sets the tone for the student to be receptive to me." Another Participant agreed: "Most success that I had was from really engaging one-on-one with the students and making it very clear to them that I care about them as a person."

### ***Support for Family Involvements***

Participants perceived their role to include promoting communication between families. Participants agreed that connecting with families was the most significant pillar in identifying unique areas to support and address students' needs in this breakdown. One Participant expressed: "Communicating with parents is important, and it supports students' learning,

concerns, and helps out. If the school system held more open house events or Parent Teacher Association events, things of that nature, things or what parents can actually really get engaged.” These findings indicated that the participants perceived family support as a necessary tool in facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities.

### **Summary**

This chapter was modeled on a six-step thematic process used to identify codes embedded in the responses and extracted according to the themes identified. The codes related to four themes: cultural factors, curriculum structure, educational model (barriers), and support for educational engagement aligned with the study's research questions. The questions related to the research problem: missing or inadequate literature about educators' role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. It was essential to comprehend the possible barriers educators faced regarding creating interest, motivation, and inspiration for these students, reflecting the Research Question 1a sought to establish.

Research Question 1b provided the opportunity to gather insights into educators' attitudes and predispositions toward their role in creating a positive educational engagement, which Pit-ten Cate et al. (2018) defined as the interest, inspiration, and attention the students receive and subsequently demonstrate in their academic endeavors. Participants suggested that support systems could critically shape and define their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities, as presented by Research Question 1.

The participants' demographic profiles helped to support this study's analysis. The participants interacted with middle and high school students in the Mid-Southeastern state. The increased enrollment of African immigrant students with disabilities in these schools informed the decision to use these levels of participants through purposive sampling. The participants'

roles also formed the core of this analysis. They are trained professionals who provide direct services to these students, therefore have the foreknowledge of the phenomena under study.

Lastly, experience is another factor inherently embedded in a phenomenological study (Neubauer et al., 2019), which this study adopted. To obtain a comparative review, participants in this study were educators with experience ranging from 2 to 22 years. The findings indicated their broad views and suggestions, signifying rich perspectives on the respective themes.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

Segun's story inspired this phenomenological study. I investigated secondary educators' perceptions regarding their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Findings from the data analysis is presented in this chapter according to research questions and themes that emerged. This chapter focuses on how the themes are connected and interpreted to explore the meaning behind the findings. Mainly, I highlighted the areas in which educators' encountered challenges in their roles. The chapter also discusses the implications of the four major themes and subthemes. In doing so, I focused on how these different themes added up to inhibit a holistic experience for these educators and illustrated actions that educators must take to bridge these educational barriers.

Culturally responsive pedagogy as the theoretical perspective for this study provided a lens through which I analyzed data. Several participants expressed their beliefs that a fair and equitable learning environment could be created by accepting and appreciating the diversity of students' cultures, experiences, knowledge, especially for students with disabilities who already have a lot of needs to be met. This opinion was in line with Au (2007) and Morrison et al. (2019) who found that educators must use cultural perspectives and characteristics of ethnically diverse conduits to achieve effective educational engagement.

Constructivism theory also helped me to understand how educators perceived the educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. I examined how educators applied the constructivist approach to translating information appropriate for providing

educational engagement. Specifically, educators perceived that a constructivism-based curriculum will assist African immigrant students with disabilities to build upon what they had already know. That students play an active role in their education, therefore support can help them reach their learning needs. The following questions were answered:

- Q1     How do secondary educators perceive their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?
- Q1a    What barriers do secondary educators report that prevent effective educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities?
- Q1b    What are secondary educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities?

### **The Problem Restated**

The problem statement that informed this study's need was the lack of findings regarding secondary educators' perceptions about the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. I identified four themes that highlighted the perceptions of educators regarding their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. The findings suggested educators perceived barriers impacts educational engagement for these students. As such, students need some level of support to be successful in their learning environment. The study suggested barriers such as the inadequacy of trained educators, cultural differences, and language barriers constituted a gap in the learning process of African immigrant students with disabilities. The implications included additional aid and support for educators, continuous professional training, teacher-parent associations, and formal and informal differentiation in instruction.

## **Implications for Practice**

### **Research Question 1a**

Three themes emerged in answer to Research Question 1a: (a) cultural factor, (b) curriculum structure and (c) educational model.

#### ***Barriers of Cultural Factor***

Insight from the participants revealed their understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy. They perceived it as a tool successful educators use to apply as a framework for their instruction in order to build and rely on cultural knowledge to make the learning experience more relevant and meaningful even to special-needs learners (Coppola & McHugh, 2018; Flory, 2017). For educators to maximize learning opportunities for students, participants suggested that educators must learn about their students' culture and develop instruction to permeate their learning with the identified cultural knowledge (Coppola & McHugh, 2018). This study identified various shocks and barriers concerning cultural factors.

Subtheme one examined cultural differences and their challenges to educators' role in promoting educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities. Just like Segun, African immigrant students with disabilities are undeniably in a position of disadvantage relative to their peers. From the responses, most participants felt the students experienced a culture shock as they switched from their African schools and cultures to a new world defined and shaped by a new language to be assimilated. Participants expressed they understood every immigrant is expected to adapt to the culturally shocking elements, the concern was how they psychologically adjusted to the unfamiliar environment. To the extent they found it exceedingly difficult to cope, their flexibility might be instrumental in their adjustment. A Participant called for schools to "find ways to integrate culture appreciation in our curriculum. Actually,

connecting curriculum to people and communities." This adjustment would happen over time. Segun's story showed that unavoidably, African immigrant students with disabilities suffer a setback in adjusting to new environments; the demands of familiarizing themselves with the new settings created a deficit in their efforts at learning. For instance, one cannot entirely focus on the proceedings of a lesson when one is not sure whether they are culturally correct in the manner they contribute to the lesson. The present study revealed new information about the impact of culture on educational engagement as perceived by educators.

Participants in this study believed the change of environment from one country to another presented a challenge and opportunities in the new setting. These changes could breed a spectrum of challenges that might make the attainment of one's goal problematic. Participants expressed their views concerning the change of environment, which they insisted was a formidable barrier in limiting the educational engagement of this group. Segun's experiences and the change of environment were notable concerns that meant moving between cultures and switching from one educational frame and model to another. For instance, Participant 10 noted, "I can understand the culture shock of coming to a completely different culture but also a completely different learning environment." On the same note, a Participant noted, "The biggest barrier is movement, movement of the student like they change schools, change the country, and changing teachers. We do not know its impact on students." The findings were consistent with Belford's (2017) illustration that a switch between cultures disconnects international students from familial support by disorienting their focus and limiting their educational attainment. Given this, the assimilation approach might render a sense of belonging to the students. As they can feel accepted, students could also develop a sense of comfort much like that derived from interaction with family members.

Participants also expressed that language is a massive barrier to educational engagement. According to Buarqoub (2019), the language barrier is a formidable obstacle to communication and understanding between people. The lack of a common language hampers collaboration, making the expedition of integration and progress problematic. While education is an important intergenerational legacy that shapes societal progression as it is the bedrock on which solutions to and emancipation from problems lie, the participants believed the language barrier is a limiting agent to the education of African immigrant students with disabilities. Segun's story indicates that his teachers could not work with him because of the language barrier; as such, he was placed in ESL class. From the interviews, participants affirmed language is an instrumental factor that connects them to their students. For instance, a Participant said, "Language is a barrier. Some students move here and have not been exposed to the English language; there is a 'silent period.' We have few interpreters, if any, in the students' school that could interpret for them." Also, one Participant noted, "The major challenge is language barriers and lack of vocabulary in the English language, which makes it difficult for them to communicate."

Since Africans speak different languages, the universality of communication is lost. For instance, a newly enrolled African immigrant student from West Africa may not speak or understand different language from other regions in Africa. Students from East Africa speak Swahili (Waliaula, 2019) while those from West Africa speak other languages such as Nigerians speaking Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and other indigenous languages (Ayoola & Soneye, 2016). Students from East and West Africa constitute 75% of the African immigrant students' population (McCabe, 2020). The differences in these languages and their distance from English, which is the primary language of instruction in the American school system, means educators face challenging times teaching and imparting skills necessary for these students. As a result,

students who are present in the learning environment are absent from it as they are not precisely alienated by the language factor but distanced from the complete package of what the curriculum has to offer. Imagine if there were interpreters to bridge the language gap, African immigrant students would stand a chance to benefit and contribute more to the learning process. This finding indicated linguistic incompetence stifled students' ability to participate optimally in any given learning situation.

According to Ironsi (2019), most African immigrants speak English as a second language, implying that moving to an English-speaking setting requires further acclimatization. Some-Guiebre (2019) affirmed it is more difficult for children torn between their cultural background and the opportunities and responsibilities in the unfamiliar environment. From the interviews, participants noted that the English syllabus delivery created a disconnection that disadvantaged these learners. To address this instructional difficulty, participants suggested collaborating with other service providers to ensure interpretation and translation. In line with this, one participant noted, "Try to have translators, and break the language barrier to have effective communication." With interpretation, students could quickly learn English, approach their studies with the necessary rigor, and keep up with their peers. In this way, the students would feel appreciated and not disenfranchised from the system. While participants in the current study suggested using translators, others thought the studies should be conducted in their native languages to avoid assimilation while maintaining and furthering their cultural heritage. This approach would also foster a keen sense of cultural diversity in a world that is increasingly becoming a global village. However, there is also the possibility of both educators and students feeling the foreign cultural practices threaten their culture. Perhaps a middle way between cultural diversity and assimilation would produce mutual benefits for all involved. Another

intervention could be the provision of interpreters for immigrant students. However, this intervention might not be cost-effective since many African immigrant students do not speak the same language. Therefore, hiring interpreters for a variety of African languages would be too expensive for a school. Nevertheless, hiring an interpreter for a large group of students from one African country or one region of Africa, where one language is used in common, might still be practical.

Another identified barrier was social and emotional wellbeing issues. The shock and environmental change experiences lay the foundation and open the way for other retrogressive issues to set in as these students seek education. Participants felt there was no emphasis on students' emotions beyond teaching. For instance, a Participant noted, "Some of these students come from war-zone countries, and the memories are still with them. There is not enough emphasis on social well-being, first, social-emotional, like, how is the kid doing? A kid who is hungry or who lost a family member is not going to learn." Especially for students with disabilities who already have other issues they are dealing with, participants observed they have a role to play in ensuring the emotional wellbeing of these learners is considered. For instance, a participant observed, "I find that I have to play and put my hand in other pots, sometimes disciplinary, sometimes being an ear or shoulder for emotional support." These perceptions indicated social-emotional skills are vital for supporting educational engagement.

Beyond regular teaching, participants also expressed that they must be supportive emotionally. Participants felt they had a duty to aid this transition by providing students with emotional and other support. While this is essential, lack of training and absence of association between parents and teachers limited educators' knowledge and understanding of what was to be done. The implication was that as much as educators were willing to support immigrant students

to be emotionally balanced, they were limited and could only do so much. Hence, the gap remained of the imbalance in immigrant students' emotional wellbeing.

### ***Barriers of Curriculum Structure***

Theme two examined the curriculum structure as a barrier to educators' role in promoting educational engagement for immigrant students with disabilities. Intricately linked to the language incompetence on the part of the immigrant students was the curriculum problem. Under a subtheme, participants noted the educational and instructional curriculum was fast-paced and therefore misaligned with the changing needs of students with disabilities. For instance, a Participant said, "The curriculum is not engaging enough for our students with disabilities" while another Participant noted, "The curriculum does not cover the gaps that African immigrant students with disabilities have."

Conventionally, the curriculum is intended to reflect a given background and particular issues and challenges society faces. A good part of education is designed to devise solutions for the practical problems that arise in their daily lives. Hence a curriculum is designed with awareness of the context in which it is delivered. The curriculum design should enable and empower students to respond to these challenges so they can figure out practical and sustainable solutions. With the dynamic nature of society, where challenges shift to new formations, more suitable interventions are needed. Therefore, the curriculum should reflect these constantly changing formations. One participant stated, "We need a current, relevant curriculum." However, most educators in the current study believed the curriculum had remained static and therefore could not meet the needs of a student with disabilities. From the above responses, it was deduced that the curriculum was not designed to anticipate these challenges where an exceptional group, such as African immigrant students with disabilities, would constitute a section of the student

population. Participants stated the strategies used in the past were still in play, making the curriculum an outdated model that failed to capture students' needs accurately. Participants in this study suggested a change to the current pedagogy in use in schools to reflect the demands of society. According to a participant, "40s and 50s mentality does not apply in 2021. There is a huge shift in society, and schools should adopt these changes."

Participants in the study perceived that learning should be student-centered as proposed by the constructivism approach. Wright (2011) defined student-centered learning as an instructional approach that places the student at the center of the learning process where the students' needs influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. In recognizing that African immigrant students with disabilities need individualized attention, educators in this study confirmed their primary duty and responsibility would be to create an inclusive and equal environment where all learners are treated equally whatever their backgrounds. However, participants described the challenges they encountered with individualized learning. According to one participant, "The curriculum should be student-centered." As Fuandai (2010) illustrated, students with disabilities are a marginalized group, which means they are likely to be discriminated against by their peers. Providing an equal learning environment is student-centered as it reflects participants' responses. For instance, Participant 1 was of the view that "there should be more student-centered learning to give students what they need." Understandably, an educational approach wherein curriculum designers are responsive to the needs of the students was better than the one in which curriculum designers rigidly determined the students' needs and set out to address them from their point of view. These curriculum designers often would have met specific challenges during their schooling years and their assumption that these challenges still exist for the current generation of students could be a huge mistake. There is a need for a

contextual approach to the needs of students, especially those with disabilities and an African background where English is learned as a second language.

Participants further articulated that the standardization of tests, including those in English proficiency, made for no appreciation and upholding of the unique differences that diversity in schools creates with the standardization of curricula. An assumption is made that all students have the same background and understanding, especially linguistically with the implementation of English as the instructional language that further distances African immigrant students with disabilities. This group spoke English as their second language, which created a barrier in their learning progress compared to their native English-speaking classmates. The participants opined that standardization of the curriculum should be reconsidered in favor of protocols and procedures that enable and empower students to make the most of the curriculum based on their unique differences.

The impact of disabilities might influence the educational engagement of students. While every child has a right to education as mandated by IDEA (2004), Fuandai (2010) revealed that some children with disabilities were not having their educational needs met. A typical example is Segun's story. Children with disabilities remain the most marginalized group, which means their school attendance disproportionately reflects their actual rate of access to education and similar services. Their disability status and deficit construct undermine their access to education (Kohli et al., 2017). Therefore, interventions are necessary to ensure African immigrant students with disabilities have full access to education. One of the interventions could be in the form of tailor-made English lessons targeting individuals' weaknesses and needs. Admittedly, this requires extra time on the part of both educators and students. Special education teachers or other related service providers might also be required, depending on the level of disability.

### ***Barriers of Educational Model***

Theme three explored the educational model including the problem of large class size. Class size was of significant concern for this study's participants. For instance, a participant mentioned "overcrowded classrooms, stressed-out teachers, lack of educational resources." Considering their educational needs, students with disabilities often require close and individual attention to be successful learners. However, this remains a challenge given the current student-teacher ratio. Participant 6 noted, "Our class size is 35 students per class. That is insane." According to one Participant, "You should not have close to 200 students as a teacher and still be expected to have one-on-one interaction." Another Participant stated, "Many times, the larger the classes, the more difficult it is to reach the students." The failure to have a personalized touch with this exceptional group creates disenfranchisement, especially considering they need constant encouragement to belong and feel as valued and cared for as their peers. Lowering this ratio by employing more teachers would increase interaction and create an inviting and conducive learning environment (Mathis, 2017). More recent models of education have outlined the student-centered teaching and learning approach. Understandably, this is premised on the reality that education targets the student and not the educator.

"Patience training for teachers," as illustrated by participants, reflected the concern that educators need continued professional development or training to match the skills and needs of African immigrant students with disabilities. Educators revealed they lacked the training needed to address the needs of this unique group and added that the schools must provide training and development programs to help educators engage African immigrant students with disabilities. The literature further supported that educators in public schools often reported being inadequately prepared, equipped, skilled, and less trained in providing necessary support to

immigrant students with disabilities (Cooc, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Estorga, 2020). With further and continued professional development, participants believed they would be equipped with ideas and knowledge about their students' varied and changing needs (Gomba, 2019), thus sending the idea to the students that they are indeed valued. Moreover, it is upon this knowledge about their students that teachers could execute an educational engagement approach to instructional activities.

In addition to addressing the inadequate teacher-student ratio and the lack of teachers' training, a cohesive and collaborative school system is needed. Students with disabilities receive services for different needs; for example, Segun received academic services as well as for motor skills. A Participant stated, "More collaboration with the service providers contributes to the overall success of students." Some Participant called for the "removal of the divisiveness of teachers' roles in student engagement, more interconnectedness of educators, and resources for students." Participants believed a triangular model where interdependence and interaction among students, the school, administrators, and stakeholders, including the parents, remained conspicuously absent. Across all interviews, the participants, support staff, and exceptional services providers should work with the classroom teachers to ensure the students were engaged.

As Ellis et al. (2015) illustrated, teacher-parent interaction is highly likely to improve performance. The IDEA (2004) mandated parental participation for all students with disabilities. Parents have a unique understanding of the needs of their children and these interactions provide insight for teachers. Equipped with the insights provided by parents about their children, teachers are empowered to devise the much-needed hands-on strategies for handling students. Without these associations, teachers fall back on a homogenous approach stemming from inadequate training (Adams et al., 2016) and subsequently fail to attend to students' individual needs.

## **Research Question 1b**

### ***Support for Educational Engagement***

This research question explored educators' perceptions and attitudes about their role. While African immigrant students with disabilities face the above challenges as educators strive to provide the best setting and services, educators' attitudes and perceptions were supportive. The subthemes included (a) support for students' engagement, (b) perceptions and attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement, (c) support for students' motivation, (d) support for active and meaningful learning, (e) inclusion support for African immigrant students with disabilities, (f) removing deficit mindset, (g) support through relationship building, and (h) support for family involvement.

Participants in this study believed educators' core mandate and responsibilities were to support and facilitate educational attainment. One Participant said, "My role would then be to help them make sense of the curriculum so that they can see not only my support to help them get to the next level in the American school system, but also to help them achieve whatever personal and educational goals they have." However, the participants felt African immigrant students with disabilities were highly marginalized, which created unique additional role teachers must play. As such, the participants acknowledged they were responsible for creating and maintaining trust with their students. One Participant stated,

My role is to discover what they already know. What can I tag along with, what is the background information that they already come with, and try to connect to that because that allows me the best chance of having them be interested in what I am going to teach them next?

Through trust, as revealed by many of the participants, these students could feel connected to their teacher and could share what bedeviled their lives and, in so doing, provide a pathway to creating better and enduring solutions. A Participant stated, "Help students become more comfortable and trustful and watch them assimilate and grow educationally and socially." Another Participant concurred: "If you build a relationship with these students, they gravitate towards you and are more likely to learn." A relationship formed with the students would allow them to be open to new learning strategies.

Educators expressed their contentment that African immigrant students with disabilities could perform excellently in school and prove it in their test results. Primarily these expectations and the teachers' commitment to ensuring these students attained high grades, the results revealed by teachers showed they were highly determined and dedicated to improving their performance. The observations were consistent with Gatlin and Wilson's (2016) findings that African immigrant students with disabilities continually achieved academic success in the United States despite their conditions. One participant noted, "They are very willing to learn and ask questions." Another Participant echoed this sentiment: "They have interest and dedication to learning." Participants appreciated their interest in asking questions and guidance in various circumstances to aid their learning as a demonstration of their undying quest to increase knowledge. The teachers saw that these students did not let their conditions cloud their focus and derail them from their goals.

The high commitment and dedication these students exhibited reflected their parents' expectations about their performance. According to most study participants, students' parents trusted their children had what it took to obtain excellent results despite their initial disadvantages. According to one participant, "Their parents think highly of them, and if the

student fails, they freak out." At the heart of this expectation was the parents' belief that the schools and teachers alike would provide the necessary support and educational services to consider their children's newcomer status. As noted by a participant, "Instead of relying on parents to check the parent portal, maybe we have a standing appointment where teachers and parents will have a conference call to discuss kids in order to help them." Participants suggested the schools put in place necessary measures despite the above-described challenges to ensure that reality and expectations were aligned. This insightful suggestion from a participant was accommodative of holistic learning whereby parents and educators bridged the gap between home and school. In doing so, parents and educators created a seamless transition for children from home to school, making it easy for them to identify problems as soon as they arose and sought help from the appropriate authorities.

According to one participant, "There is a focus on Spanish-speaking students, but we disregard students who speak other languages." According to the World Atlas (n.d.), Equatorial Guinea is the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa with a second language. Similarly, another Participant said, "I probably did not engage my African immigrant students with disabilities as much as I did my African American and my Latino students. I'm working on it." By implication, this focus on other student groups created a vacuum for the African immigrant student with disabilities in the American school system. When students feel left out and less valued, treated as the exception, rather than as the norm, their sense of self-worth might depreciate. With a low self-image, a student is more likely to shy away from contributing to class, which might, in turn, add to others perceiving them as incapable of their level of education. Overall, students who are overlooked by their teachers, for any reason, might find it challenging to maintain a sense of importance for schooling.

In further consideration of educators' support roles, they called for the removal of the deficit mindset. Participants expressed their vital concern about creating, perpetuating, and maintaining the deficit mindset. A deficit mindset focuses on students' problems or disabilities rather than their potential by teachers or school leaders (Smit, 2012). Participant 10 responded, "We need to get rid of the deficit mindset. Kids are coming with immense richness and background, and we just need to let them share it with us, and we will all be so much richer." As students migrate to the American school systems, some school personnel view them as suffering from a cultural deficit, which Kohli et al. (2017) defined as the new racism that plagues K–12 schools in the country. The disregard of migrant students' cultures on the part of the school personnel creates an artificial cultural vacuum on the part of migrant students. As a result, the school atmosphere might become prejudiced against migrant students who are assumed to be uncultured or inadequately cultured. In this case, a false impression of inferiority is created about the migrant students, acting as a discouragement to dedicated otherwise and able students. Standardized admission tests conducted in English confirmed the system's rigidity (Sireci, 2020) that disadvantages African immigrant students with disabilities.

Educational engagement strategies involve providing direct practical experience in the operation of learning (Kaltman, 2010). Participants in this study noted the failure to use practical models to which learners could relate, especially considering the gaps in the curriculum as outlined in the pedagogical issues, which limited educational engagement. Participants were concerned that lack of engagement primarily related to the failures that defined and characterized the curriculum. For instance, a Participant was of the view that "the curriculum is not engaging enough." In this case, educators expressed their views on what needed to be done and on their role in the process of maximizing engagement. "If we could make the curriculum more engaging

to the students, I feel like kids would learn a little bit better,” stated another Participant. Given this necessity for specially designed instruction, participants have had to be creative. For instance, a Participant explained, "I use a lot of photos to demonstrate concrete objects to engage my students."

The participants noted the emotional disconnect and cultural shock experienced by students when an unfamiliar environment confronted them that required support with an appropriate intervention model including building trust and strengthening teacher-student relationships. The changes and integration into an unfamiliar environment required building trust between these two parties. "If you help them to get to the spot where they are at, and they trust you, they will respect you and do work for you," a Participant responded. Similarly, "If you build a relationship with the students, they gravitate towards you, and they are more likely to learn," affirmed another Participant. The failure of the teacher to engage students beyond teaching limited educational engagement.

While the participants expressed their views on the language difficulties affecting educational engagements of African immigrant students with disabilities, they also expressed opinions regarding the contextual role communication itself played in the educational engagement of these students. A Participant said, "Improved communication...communication needs to be easy, and it needs to be immediate." Communication is integral in connecting learners to the instructional materials and integrating both learners and parents into the school system. Insufficient communication between teachers and parents creates a vacuum in understanding students' varied needs. One participant supported this notion: "Communicating with parents is important; it supports students' learning and concerns and helps out." With the use of translators, photos, and other hands-on materials, communication should be enhanced,

especially in enhancing the accessibility of the web and other platforms. When parents are kept in the loop about school activities and undertakings, their contribution to their children's education is informed. Moreover, since they act as observers, their perspectives might be instrumental in resolving emergent matters in which the school administrators and educators would be too embedded to see the way out.

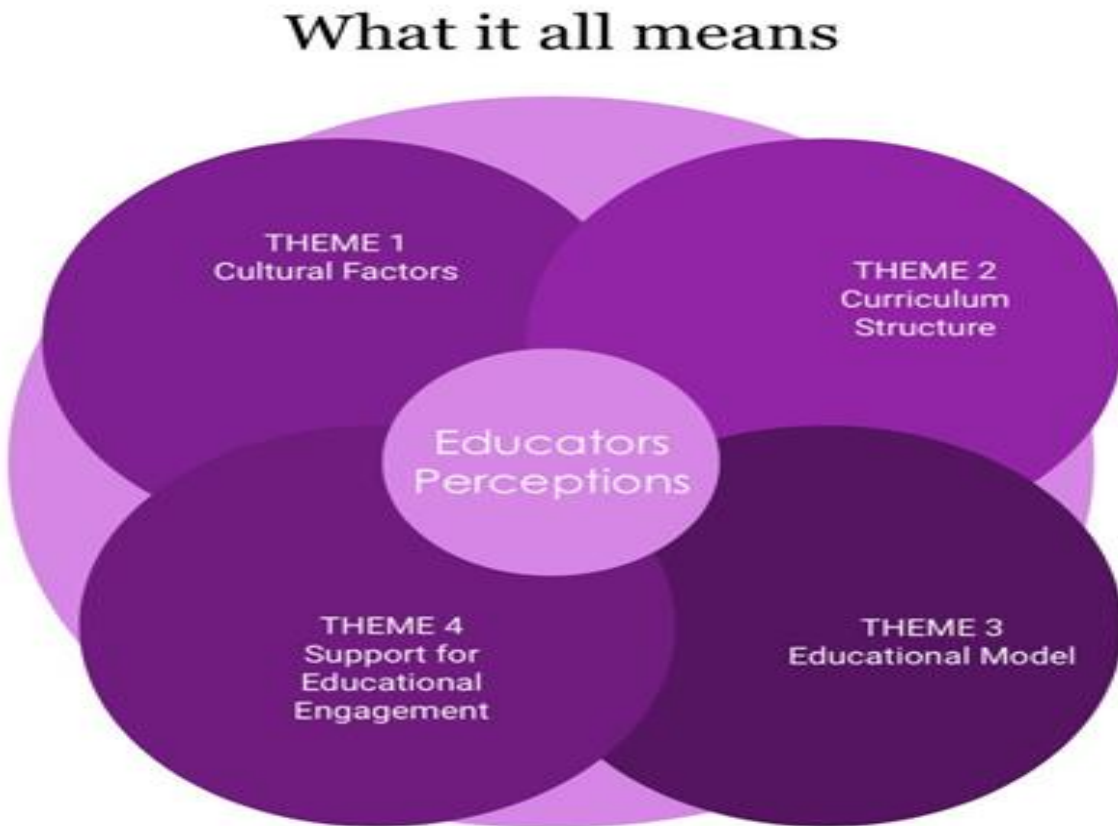
### **Meaning of the Study**

The findings of this study indicate that the themes were all connected to represent the holistic barriers impacting the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities and how secondary educators perceived their roles (see Figure 2). The barriers of Cultural Factors, Curriculum Structure, and Educational Model, are all built upon each other to affect the students learning. However, secondary educators believe that with increase support system in place educational engagement is achievable for African immigrant students with disabilities.

The themes show that secondary educators perceived that there are barriers that impact the educational engagement of African immigrant students. These barriers are linked together to determine the level of disengagement faced by these students. The Cultural Factor barrier influenced the way African immigrant students with disabilities responded to the Curriculum Structure and Educational Model. These barriers then affect educators' roles as they make efforts to support the student. At the same time, Support for Educational Engagement was possible to the extent the barriers of Cultural Factor, Curriculum Structure and Educational Model allows the educators to facilitate engagement. The circle goes on unending.

**Figure 2**

*Map Showing the Connectivity and Relationship of the Themes*



The above map shows a continuous circle between the themes. Participants felt that the barrier themes need to be addressed collectively to achieve educational engagement for African immigrant students. However, Segun's story indicates that the school district tries to address these barriers individually instead of as a whole. For example, Segun like most African immigrant students with disabilities was placed in ESL classrooms because the understanding of his academic problem was language barrier. In contrast, more issues were identified in this study impacting the educational engagement of this student; thus, focusing on language barriers left the other barriers unattended. The result was more academic problems. Therefore, to holistically

address the barriers faced by African immigrant students with disabilities in their learning environment, secondary educators recommended putting a support system in place for the students, families, and educators.

### **Limitations**

Some of the potential limitations of this study resulted from the qualitative methods. The study's focus on educators might have resulted in subjectivity and the influence of personal biases. It is also typical to conduct direct observation of participants in their work area; however, due to COVID-19, there were no direct observations. This study's interviews were conducted via the Zoom video-conferencing platform. Face-to-face interaction with the participants would have yielded deeper insight into their perspectives.

The study was limited to Mid-Southeastern state public school districts of the United States, which implied the findings might not be transferable to other school districts outside the Mid-Southeastern state. The purposive sampling strategy used might have also limited the transferability of the findings. This study focused on educators that work directly to provide special service to African immigrant students with disabilities. Thus, obtained results might not apply to general education teachers or other service providers. Further, the study findings were limited to educators' information without considering feedback from students, parents, and other service providers. Data collection methods were also limited to questionnaires, interviews, participants' reflections and researcher's journal, excluding survey, archival document reviews, and classroom observations, potentially affecting the confirmability and internal consistency of the study findings. My attachment to the topic might inadvertently impact the study findings and contribute to subjective bias.

### **Implications for Future Research**

More research should be conducted beyond the Mid-Southeastern state to capture a more comprehensive picture of the perceptions of secondary educator regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. This research focused on secondary educators and how they perceived their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. However, to fully grasp the findings from this study, it would be interesting for future studies to (a) interview African immigrant students with disabilities who had passed through the American secondary educational system to find out how they felt the roles their educators played in their education and how it impacted them as adults, (b) conduct research on highly engaging programs and education curriculum for these students, (c) compare other ethnic groups' educational engagement with African immigrant students, and (d) conduct research on school administrators' perceptions of the educational engagement of these students. The perspectives of primary educator, general educators and other service providers can also provide insight on this topic.

### **Conclusion**

The movement of people from their countries of birth to other countries pursuing varied interests has aided immigration. The United States has had a significant share of this movement with people from different continents moving into the country. According to McKay (2019), 22% of the students in the United States are immigrants; African immigrant students accounted for 27% of this population. Despite this influx, literature regarding African immigrant students with disabilities and educational engagement was limited. This study set out to address this gap and identify the role of educators, their perceptions and attitudes, and the barriers preventing educational engagement. Doing so was a means to increase the volume of literature about the

plight of African immigrant students with disabilities. The current study was strategically placed to inaugurate the finding of effective ways of addressing the challenges faced by these educators. Therefore, the study was an apt response to a contemporary problem.

African immigrants with disabilities are a large and growing subgroup in the U.S. student population. However, while there was literature regarding other students' educational attainment and experiences, there was limited attention to African immigrant students with disabilities. Instead, available literature information is limited to parents' perceptions, general education teachers, and students without disabilities regarding their opinion on educational engagement. This phenomenological study used a sample of 16 high school and middle educators as participants to provide critical insights. The study identified gaps such as the inadequacy of trained educators in effectively addressing the needs of African immigrant students with disabilities and the assumption that students from African countries would automatically cope with the use of standardized language (English), especially considering those with disabilities. Moreover, cultural differences and language barriers also constituted a vast gap that made African immigrant students with disabilities feel alienated from the learning process.

African immigrant students with disabilities in the United States face numerous challenges even as their population continues to increase. These students suffer from culture shock and require time to acclimatize to the unfamiliar environment. They are marginalized and face language barriers in connecting with their peers and teachers. Lack of training for teachers coupled with a high student-teacher ratio presents further challenges in their educational engagement (He et al., 2015). However, educators perceived students as able and committed in their studies as educators, for their part, strove to offer support beyond the primary role of teaching.

This study suggested numerous factors affecting the success of the educational engagement of students like Segun and many African immigrant students with disabilities as noted by the participants. The results also provided insight into how the educational engagement of this student population could be improved. Most educators expressed their opinions about what needed to be done to aid students' intervention in ensuring that students were well connected to their educational engagement. The most important considerations that need additional attention are the additional support required by educators as they struggle to implement engagement strategies in their classrooms and schools. Educators need continuing training as the curriculum is modified to reflect the changing needs of students. Teacher-student relationship should also be encouraged to bring students closer to their teachers for more individualized care.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE**

### Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in the study “Perceptions of secondary educators regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities” To determine your eligibility to participate, please take a moment to answer the following questions.

1. Role (please choose any that apply)

\_\_\_\_ English as Second Language (ESL) coordinator

\_\_\_\_ Exceptional Children (EC) Facilitator

\_\_\_\_ Special Education (SPED) Teacher

2. Years in Role

\_\_\_\_ Years

3. School Level

\_\_\_\_ Middle School

\_\_\_\_ High School

4. Gender

\_\_\_\_ Female

\_\_\_\_ Male

5. Nationality/Ethnicity (please choose any or all that apply):

\_\_\_\_ American Indian

\_\_\_\_ Asian-American/Oriental/Pacific Islander

\_\_\_\_ Asian East Indian

\_\_\_\_ Black/African American

\_\_\_\_ Mexican-America/Chicano

\_\_\_\_ Puerto-Rican

\_\_\_\_ Other Hispanic

\_\_\_\_ White/Caucasian

\_\_\_\_ Other

6. How many African immigrant student who receives special education or related services do you work with presently or in the past?
7. Tell me about the student(s)
  - a. What are the disability diagnoses
  - b. What is the Service Delivery (IEP, 504, Related service)
8. Tell me about your experience with the student(s)
  - a. \_\_\_\_ Negative
  - b. \_\_\_\_ Positive

Please describe these experiences:

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9. Have you experienced some challenges with working with the student? Please briefly describe the challenges.

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10. What educational engagement strategies have you used with the student(s)?

- a. Please describe these strategies:

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Number of African immigrant student who receives special education or related services do you work with presently or in the past?	Disability diagnoses and Service Delivery (IEP, 504, Related service)	Experience with the student(s) Negative Positive	Challenges with working with the student

**APPENDIX B**  
**RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear Educator,

My name is Charity Uzochukwu, and I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Northern Colorado. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study *Perceptions of Secondary Educators Regarding the Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students with Disabilities*. You are eligible to be in this study because you are an educator in Mid-South Eastern state public schools.

Suppose you decide to participate in this study. In that case, you will engage in a semi-structured video conferencing or phone interview where you will be asked questions about your experiences with your role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities and your perspective on effective strategies for student engagement. Each interview will be recorded and will take about 60 minutes to complete. There are no anticipated risks or discomforts to participants. Participants are expected to indirectly benefit from participation in the study by experiencing a general feeling of reward for the research and the benefits to the discipline resulting from the study. We expect that this research results will lead to an improved understanding of effective strategies for educational engagement and potential intervention strategies to use in the schools for African immigrant students with disabilities.

This opportunity is entirely voluntary. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at [uzoc9447@bears.unco.edu].

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,  
Charity Uzochukwu

**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How would you describe your experience working with African immigrant students with disabilities?
2. How would you describe your role in the educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities in your school?
3. What successes have you experienced in your role in promoting the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?
4. What do you perceive to be the possible challenges or barriers to the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities in your school?
5. What are your understanding and your views regarding the educational engagement strategy(s) in your school to ensure active participation for African immigrant students with disabilities? Do you think they are appropriate to supporting and promoting learning? Please explain.
6. What are some of the school district policies, curriculum, and learning materials you consider appropriate to meet the needs of African immigrant students with disabilities and their families? Please explain.
7. What is your understanding of the term cultural differences? How can diversity be supported in your school environment?
8. What factors do you think can contribute to increased family support and involvement for African immigrant families with a student with disabilities to improve their engagement and learning?
9. What would you recommend as measures to be changed, adapted, or implemented to transform educational engagement for African American students with disabilities in schools?

10. What additional skills, training, support from top management, and resources, if applicable, would you need to promote educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities, and how would these skills and resources help?

### Interview Guided Questions

**Primary Research Question:** How do secondary educators perceive their roles in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?

<b>Research Sub-Question a: What barriers do secondary educators report that prevent effective educational engagement among African immigrant students with disabilities?</b>	<b>Research Sub-Question b: What are secondary educators' attitudes toward facilitating educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities?</b>
1. How would you describe your experience working with African immigrant students with disabilities?	6. What are some of the school district policies, curriculum, and learning materials you consider appropriate to meet the needs of African immigrant students with disabilities and their families? Please explain.
2. How would you describe your role in the educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities in your school?	7. What is your understanding of the term cultural differences? How can diversity be supported in your school environment?
3. What successes have you experienced in your role in promoting the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities?	8. What factors do you think can contribute to increased family support and involvement for African immigrant families with a student with disabilities to improve their engagement and learning?
4. What do you perceive to be the possible challenges or barriers to the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities in your school?	9. What would you recommend as measures to be changed, adapted, or implemented to transform educational engagement for African American students with disabilities in schools?
5. What are your understandings and views regarding the educational engagement strategy(s) in your school to ensure active participation for African immigrant students with disabilities? Do you think they are appropriate to supporting and promoting learning? Please explain.	10. What additional skills, training, support from top management, and resources, if applicable, would you need to promote educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities, and how would these skills and resources help?

**APPENDIX D**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL**



UNIVERSITY OF  
**NORTHERN COLORADO**

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**Institutional Review Board**

Date: 05/20/2021

Principal Investigator: Charity Uzochukwu

Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**

Action Date: 05/20/2021

Protocol Number: 2105025688

Protocol Title: Educators Perceptions Regarding the Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students with Disabilities.

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(701) (702) for research involving

Category 1 (2018): RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).



You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

**As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:**

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. \*You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicole Morse".

Nicole Morse  
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

**APPENDIX E**  
**CONSENT FORM**



### Informed Consent Form for Participation in Research

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**Project Title:** Educators Perceptions Regarding the Educational Engagement of African Immigrant Students with Disabilities.

Researcher: Charity Uzochukwu, M.A, Ph.D. Student in Special Education

Email: [uzoc9447@bears.unco.edu](mailto:uzoc9447@bears.unco.edu)

Research Advisor: Todd Sundeen

Phone: 970-351-1652

Co- Research Advisor: Jennifer Ritchotte

Phone: 970-351-1657

Committee Member: Jason Robinson and Madeline Milian

**Purpose and Description:** This study will seek to understand educators' perceptions regarding their role in the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities. Educational engagement is the extent of interest, inspiration, and attention students receive or show when taught or during learning. This study will help identify potential challenges and barriers educators encounter when facilitating educational engagement in their schools and provide recommendations to address the identified barriers. Determining educators' perspectives regarding their role is vital in selecting and designing effective, easy-to-implement instruction and interventions to increase participation for African immigrant students with disabilities.

Through your participation in an interview, you will be asked to share your experiences, perceptions, and opinions about your role regarding the educational engagement of African immigrant students with disabilities in your school. Your experiences and other members of this study will be analyzed to develop several core ideas in implementing an intervention for these students. The estimated time for the interview session will be approximately one hour, and each interview will be audio recorded. The participant will turn off their camera during conference. I will assign a pseudonym for you to alter your personal information, and only I will know the name connected with a pseudonym. Data collected and analyzed for this study will be kept in a password-protected file in the investigator's office. Only pseudonyms will be used to report data.

The cost for participating in this study is the time invested in participating in the interview. No compensation will be provided to you in this study. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you. You might indirectly benefit from participation in this study by experiencing a general feeling of reward for the help in the research and the benefits to the discipline as a result of the study. The expectation is that the results of this research will lead to an improved understanding of the strategies to facilitate educational engagement for African immigrant students with disabilities and potential methods of its implementation in US schools.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study, and if you begin participation, you may still choose to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in the loss of benefits you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and have had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_