SPECIAL EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING EDUCATIONAL RAP MUSIC TO BUILD PHONEMIC AWARENESS SKILLS FOR STUDENTS IDENTIFIED WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand special educators' experiences and perceptions of using rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students with mild intellectual disabilities, in three Smith County (pseudonym) public school self-contained special education classrooms. A purposive sample utilized six participants in data collection comprised of semi-structured interviews, observations, documents, and one focus group. Data was analyzed using phenomenological reduction. Using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences theory, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, the essence of the shared experiences and perceptions were reported. An analysis of the data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and a focus group discussion with co-researchers revealed three themes. First, although the co-researchers identified negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing as obstacles, they felt that these were minor problems and did not negatively impact the use of educational rap music in the special education classrooms. Secondly, the music had a positive influence on student learning in different ways by sustaining student attention and helping students to retain the information they heard in the songs. Thirdly, the special educators perceived that educational rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: Phenomenological, phonemic awareness, educational rap music, intellectual disability, phonological awareness, experiential learning, learning styles, multiple intelligence, sociocultural theory.

Copyright Page

Dedication/Acknowledgments Page

I would like to dedicate my work to the parents of children with intellectual disabilities who have dreams of their children being able to read and function independently in society.

First, and perhaps the most important acknowledgement I would like to make is to thank God for bringing me to this point in my life. I know He has a purpose for my education and experience at Liberty University, and will reveal it to me when the time is right. I will forever be grateful for the guidance and encouragement from Dr. Collins. I feel I have gained not only a source of support throughout this process, but I have gained a friend as well. I owe an enormous amount of gratitude to my husband Jimmy for his love, encouragement, and support throughout my education and dissertation process, although his real motives have been for me to complete the process in a timely manner so that he may retire. I owe my sister Nancy a huge thank you for her guidance on philosophy and theory. I am richly blessed to have such an intelligent sister, who unknowingly has been a great source of inspiration for me. I have also been blessed with an amazing committee to provide the guidance and support needed. Finally, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation for a new friend made along the way, Tina Fitts, who is now a Doctor of Education from Liberty University and has been a tremendous source of support and encouragement throughout this journey.

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List of Abbreviations

American Association on Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD)

Down syndrome (DS)

Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Experiential Learning theory (ELT)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

International Reading Association (IRA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

Multiple Intelligences (MI)

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Phonemic Awareness (PA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound. Phonemic awareness encompasses "tasks that require children to identify or manipulate the phonemes in words that are presented orally" (Torgesen, 2004, p. 4). Phonemic awareness is essential for literacy skills but only a small percentage of children with intellectual disabilities attain literacy skills (Katims, 2000, 2001). Researchers have found connections between music and literacy (Bolduc, 2008; Galicia Moyeda, Contreras Gomez, & Pena Flores, 2006; Paquette & Rieg, 2008; Salmon, 2010; Wiggins, 2007). Music is used frequently in education, so it makes sense that music may be effective for teaching phonemic awareness and developing the association between letters and their matching sounds (Goetz, et al., 2008; Martens, Jungers, & Steele, 2011; Moreno, 2009; Patston & Tippett, 2011; Tsang & Conrad, 2011). The current study focused on the perceptions of educators using rap music to teach phonemic awareness to students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Chapter One provides the reader with the introduction, background, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, significance of the study, delimitations, and an outline of the research design being utilized. A summary finalizes the chapter.

Background

There have been many research studies to debate the value of music used to support instruction in the classroom (Bolduc, 2008; Bond, 2012; Crncec, Wilson, & Prior, 2006; Fredrick, Davis, Alberto, & Waugh, 2013; Galicia Moyeda et al., 2006; Martens et al., 2011; Paquette & Rieg, 2008; Perham & Sykora, 2012; Salmon, 2010; Wiggins, 2007). Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative research studies have identified a connection between music,

language, and literacy, through shared neural processing (Goetz et al., 2008; Martens et al., 2011; Moreno, 2009; Patston & Tippett, 2011; Tsang & Conrad, 2011).

Although research that indicates students with cognitive disabilities might possibly be able to recall information when music is integrated in the learning process exists (Crncec et al., 2006), the research was not inclusive of rap music. Phenomenological research on using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities has not been found, despite lengthy searches in multiple databases. For this study, an exhaustive search for literature related to quantitative or qualitative studies involving the use of rap music to build phonemic, or even phonological awareness for neurotypical students and/or students with cognitive disabilities, was unsuccessful. A thorough search for information on the use of rap music for educational purposes produced limited results. There are studies that indicate the use of rap music increases student vocabularies (Pinkard, 2001), reading fluency, and comprehension (Gilmore, 1983; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994), while other research supports the use of rap music for writing and language arts instruction (Christianakis, 201l; Gooding, 2012; Sundeen, 2004). Additionally, there is research that reports negative effects of rap lyrics, such as violence, anger, aggression, and crime (Herd, 2009; Hunnicutt & Andrews, 2009).

It is possible that music used during instruction may change the way students learn and retain information. If the music has a fun, interesting rhythm, such as that found in educational rap music, it might just be the motivating and engaging factor for students with mild intellectual disabilities to learn the skills necessary to build phonemic awareness. Learning occurs when individuals are motivated, and motivation is a factor when information is transferred and generalized to other settings and subject matter (Guthrie, Alao, & Rinehart, 1997; Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). When there is a lack of motivation, individuals are less

likely to continue a task, and success in that task is adversely affected (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010; McKinney, Osborne, & Schulte, 1993).

Teachers have the tendency to use rote memorization and repetition when working with learners with intellectual disabilities. These are viable methods for the acquisition of some skills, but they are not recommended to be used solely for use with individuals who are experiencing learning difficulties (Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Cheatham, & Champlin, 2010; Barker, Sevcik, Morris, & Romski, 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Some researchers recommend comprehensive and/or explicit reading intervention (Allor et al., 2010; Barker et al., 2013; Fredrick et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Research has identified that best practices involve the use of multiple approaches to learning in order to develop phonics knowledge (Villaume & Brabham, 2003; Westwood, 1997). Phonics knowledge encompasses phonemic awareness, as well as awareness of units of speech, such as syllables and words that rhyme (Ehri et al., 2001; International Reading Association, 2013; Lane & Critchfield, 1998; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010; Wasik, 2001). Music can be one of the approaches used to make a connection with students (Cooke, Kretlow & Helf, 2010; Ehri et al., 2001) while teaching phonemic awareness, and developing the association between letters and their matching sounds, which are necessities to help students overcome reading problems (Moats, 2010). In light of the current literature, and my interest in finding out more about this topic, this study seeks to find out if educational rap music can be utilized to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Situation to Self

I am a special education teacher and previously worked with students with mild intellectual disabilities for a period of two years. I currently serve students with emotional and/or behavior disorders but continue to have an interest in teaching students with mild

intellectual disabilities to read. An ontological philosophical assumption led me to conducting a phenomenological research study. An ontological philosophical assumption asserts that when conducting a phenomenological study, each individual participant's different experiences are reported (Creswell, 2007). Participants experienced utilizing rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified with mild intellectual disabilities, having an IQ between 55 and 70 (Bouck, 2004) as measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), and shared the experiences through their eyes, using their own voice. I was in the field gathering data from documents, interviews, observations, and a focus group discussion. A combination of pragmatist and constructivist worldviews helped in shaping this study. The pragmatist researcher looks to the "what" and "how" of the research and the constructivist relies on participants' views of the situation as much as possible (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) identified that paradigms or worldviews vary depending on the beliefs that the researcher brings to the study and that a researcher may employ multiple paradigms.

Problem Statement

The problem is that it is not known if using educational rap music has an impact on teaching phonemic awareness skills to students with mild intellectual disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities have difficulty building and retaining phonemic awareness skills and are primarily taught vocational and life skills (Farrell & Elkins, 1991; Hedrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999). In order to provide a clear awareness of the alphabetic principle, multiple approaches to instruction are needed (Villaume & Brabham, 2003; Westwood, 1997). Morgan, Moni, and Jobling (2006) postulated that literacy is formed through understanding the world by engaging "with print, oral, and multimedia domains" (p. 52) in different contexts and purposes. Because vocational and life skills are the primary focus for students with mental impairments, literacy

factors are largely ignored (Farrell & Elkins, 1991; Hedrick et al., 1999). There is a gap in the literature on whether educational rap music might impact learning of phonemic awareness skills for students identified with mild intellectual disabilities. Quantitative research conducted by Register, Darrow, Standley, and Swedberg (2007) indicated a strong link between music and its effect on learning in general. More specifically, research addressed connections between music and literacy through shared neural processing (Martens et al., 2011; Moreno, 2009; Tsang & Conrad, 2011). Other research studies identified the importance of phonemic awareness to achieve reading success (Below, Skinner, Fearrington, & Sorrell, 2010; Cooke et al., 2010; Ehri et al., 2001; Gromko, 2005; Hansen, Bernstorf, & Stuber, 2004; Moats, 2010; National Reading Panel, 2000); however, the research was not inclusive for using rap music, nor was it inclusive for teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities. Standley (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 30 studies and identified that music activities pairing alphabet letter recognition with phonetic patterns, and those that incorporate segmentation and blending skills are effective in enhancing literacy instruction. The research conducted by Standley did not involve students with low intellectual ability. Cowden (2010) believed students with severe learning disabilities have difficulty identifying letters or producing the corresponding sounds for letters. Cowden further noted that students with severe learning disabilities have difficulty blending letter sounds. Cowden conducted a limited analysis of literature consisting of six research studies conducted between 2002 and 2007. The research identified that language experiences such as word writing, word boxes, using symbols to recognize words, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, and both phoneme segmentation and manipulation were instrumental in the development of literacy skills for students with significant disabilities (Cowden, 2010); however, the research did not include experiences with any type of music. Other studies produced evidence of improvements in

language performance as a result of musical experiences (Chan, Ho, & Cheung, 1998; Ho, Cheung, & Chan, 2003; Magne, Schön, & Besson, 2006). Research indicated that phonemic awareness instruction is a critical component of a comprehensive reading program to build literacy skills (Steubing, Barth, Cirino, Francis, & Fletcher, 2008). Research conducted by Allor et al., (2010) supports the findings of Steubing et al., (2008). Allor et al. conducted a longitudinal study of students with IQs ranging from 40 to 69 that included phonemic awareness and other measures of literacy, but it was not inclusive of a music component. Findings from the research of Allor et al. indicated that students made significant progress on standardized measures of reading after implementing the comprehensive reading intervention for two years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers' and paraprofessionals' perceptions and experiences in three Smith County self-contained special education classrooms, as they use rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified as having mild intellectual disabilities. The use of educational rap music was defined as having students listen to educational rap music to learn letters and letter sounds. Learning was defined as being able to extend and generalize the information to other contexts.

Significance of the Study

The current study is significant because it addresses the use of educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified with mild intellectual disabilities. There are studies that indicate the use of rap music increases student vocabularies (Pinkard, 2001), reading fluency, and comprehension (Gilmore, 1983; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994), while other research reports negative effects of rap lyrics (Herd, 2009; Hunnicutt & Andrews, 2009). A

thorough search of the literature, however, indicates there have been no studies that have examined the use of rap music as a tool to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified with mild intellectual disabilities. It is important to find pedagogical methods that are engaging and impact building literacy skills, as well as eliminate rote memorization of sight words for students with low intellectual functioning. Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, Gibbs, and Flowers (2008) believed the need exists for a curriculum to meet the needs of students with significant disabilities in reading. The outcomes of this study may contribute to scholarly information on teaching reading to students with mental impairments and using music in the classroom. Additionally, the outcomes of this study may not only produce a means of building literacy skills in students who might otherwise have difficulty learning and retaining learned information, but also may help them achieve more than educators have previously believed possible. Results from this study could possibly be employed to support developing a curriculum that is beneficial to the identified population for literacy and other curriculum areas such as math and language arts.

Research Questions

Curiosity, excitement, and an intense interest of a specific topic or problem are the foundations for building research questions in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). Research questions should be designed in a manner to reveal the essences and meanings of experiences of the participants by engaging and sustaining "personal and passionate involvement" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). Questions should not be designed to determine causal relationships, but rather should bring to light "careful, comprehensive descriptions", and "vivid and accurate renderings of the experiences. . ." (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105). Qualitative research questions are designed to be clear and concise (Moustakas, 1994). Questions should be open-

ended, provide a framework for understanding the phenomenon, and evolving and non-directional (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, Creswell (2007) stressed that qualitative research questions start with "what" (p. 107), "in what ways" (p. 107), or "how" rather than "why" (p. 107). The questions utilized in this study are limited in number, and meet the criteria established by Moustakas and Creswell. To understand teachers' and paraprofessionals' perceptions of using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills for students identified with mild intellectual disabilities, three research questions were addressed:

1. What obstacles do the students, teachers, and paraprofessionals face while using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?

Educators should develop approaches to instruction that best meet the educational needs of the students. "Teaching reading to students with disabilities can be a difficult task" (Cowden, 2010, p. 163) and often vocational and life skills become the primary focus, while literacy skills are largely ignored (Farrell & Elkins, 1991; Fredrick et al., 2013; Hedrick et al., 1999). Perham and Sykora (2012) found that students performed better on serial recall when listening to music they disliked, because preferred music was distracting. If students enjoy the educational rap music, it may become a distraction instead of being beneficial. In one research study using rap music, younger students could not recall words, but understood the message, but older students could understand the words and messages in all types of rap music (Hall, 1998). When trying to teach phonemic awareness using rap music, not being able to understand words may influence the experiences.

2. In what ways does using educational rap music influence building students' phonemic awareness skills?

Students learn in many different ways. Kolb and Kolb (2005) noted that individuals are classified as preferring one of four types of learning: concrete learning experiences, abstract conceptualization, hands-on experimentation, and reflective observations. Since music is involved in this research study, it is important to acknowledge that the ability to recognize musical pitch, tone, and rhythm and to appreciate musical patterns was identified by Gardner (1983) as musical intelligence. Gardner noted that individuals who have musical intelligence may use song or rhythm to learn. Researchers have made the learning of sound categories, frequencies of acoustic signals in the brain, a focal point due to increasing evidence of a connection between music and phonemic abilities (Guenther & Bohland, 2002; Slevc & Miyake, 2006; Wong, Skoe, Russo, Dees, & Kraus, 2007). Phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are important because they are the best predictors of successful reading (Ehri et al., 2001; Hulme et al., 2002; Nation & Hulme, 1997; National Reading Panel, 2000).

In research studies using rap music to determine the effects on literacy, specifically reading proficiency and vocabulary development, it was identified that students made gains when music was employed (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001). Students were asked to listen to rap songs, create rap songs, analyze meanings, then read and analyze books related to the songs (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994). Results of the studies indicated that reading proficiency, vocabulary, and the amount of time spent reading increased utilizing rap music as an educational tool (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001).

3. What are educators' perceptions of the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?

Moustakas (1994) identified that the ideal teacher actively listens and hears accurately; "perceives meaning from the child's or adolescent's frame of reference" (p. 39); and creates an

atmosphere of openness, value, and trust, in which he or she is willing to disclose his or her own thoughts or feelings. Gardner (1983) acknowledged that teachers should find ways that work for the student learning specific subject matter. If educators' perceptions of the use of rap music to build phonemic awareness are positive in nature, the music could lead to greater learning opportunities to read for the students. If perceptions are negative in nature, it may prevent students from going any farther in building phonemic awareness. Barker et al. (2013) suggested that children with mild mental impairments are just as capable of approaching the tasks of learning to read as children of typical development, noting that a phonological approach is definitely a practical option for developing literacy. Researchers have advocated for the use of rap music to encourage cultural relevance, critical thinking, and critical analysis (Christianakis, 2011; Gilmore, 1983; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001).

Research Plan

A qualitative, transcendental phenomenology approach was utilized in this study to gain the essence of the experiences. The essence of the experiences is gained by focusing on descriptions of experiences of the co-researchers, instead of interpretations (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological study was the most appropriate approach to this inquiry, since the purpose of the study was to gain a deep, thick, rich understanding of participants' experiences (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Van Manen, 1990) using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students who have mild intellectual disabilities. The methodology of transcendental phenomenology used to guide this study was outlined by Moustakas (1994) and included *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite textural and composite structural descriptions.

I used purposive sampling to select the co-researchers. The number of special educators was determined at the time of the research study. Federal guidelines are in place for how many educators should be in each class, and is based upon the number of students being served. There were three certified teachers and three paraprofessionals involved in this study. Data was collected in the form of documents, semi-structured interviews, observations, and one focus group. Documents included work samples collected prior to conducting interviews, and then again after the implementation of rap music, prior to conducting post interviews. I also obtained Individual Education Plans (IEPs) with all identifying data removed, prior to implementing any other data collection. I collected documents to identify present levels of functioning and to ensure the IQ of the students enrolled in the classrooms participating in the study met the criteria of the study. Data was coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. A synthesis of the essences of the experiences with the phenomenon was written.

Delimitations

Delimitations in a qualitative study are the elements the researcher controls in an effort to establish clear boundaries (Bloomberg &Volpe, 2012). Only co-researchers in Smith County teaching students with an IQ within the range of 55 to 70, and in self-contained special education classrooms were selected for this study. A phenomenological study was chosen over other designs in order to understand the experiences of the co-researchers using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills.

Definitions

1. *The American Association on Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD*): An organization that "promotes progressive policies, sound research, effective practices, and

universal human rights for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities" (AAIDD, 2014, para. 1).

2. *Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP):* Formerly the organizations of NCATE and TEAC, now combined to comprise an organization whose mission is to advance "excellence in educator preparation through evidence-based accreditation that assures quality and supports continuous improvement to strengthen P-12 student learning" (CAEP, 2014, para. 1).

3. *Down syndrome (DS):* An individual that has a full or partial extra copy of chromosome 21, having little muscle tone, small body size, upward slanted eyes, and a deep crease across the center of the palm (National Down Syndrome Society, 2012)

4. *Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA),* also known as *Public Law 94-142 (PL94-142),* and later identified as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997):* was passed, to provide students with disabilities the opportunity for a "free and appropriate public education and related services designed to meet their unique needs" (Schimmel, Stellman, & Fisher, 2011, p. 351).

5. *Educators' Perceptions:* An awareness of elements in the teaching environment as well as an interpretation of experiences (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). For the purpose of this study, educators' perceptions are defined as environmental interpretations of engagement and relationships with students while using educational rap music for instruction.

6. *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*: A law passed in 1965 that provided funding for students with disabilities (Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006).

7. *Individual Education Plan (IEP)*: A special education document that outlines the services a student with disabilities will receive, where those services will be provided, and educational goals for the student (Council for Exceptional Children, 2014, para. 1).

8. *International Reading Association (IRA)*: "A nonprofit, global network of individuals and institutions committed to worldwide literacy" (IRA, 2014, para.1).

9. *Mild Intellectual Disability:* Having an IQ between 55 and 70 (Bouck, 2004).

10. *National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE): "*July 1, 2013 de facto consolidation of NCATE and TEAC into CAEP as the new accrediting body for educator preparation" (CAEP, 2014, para. 2).

11. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act:* A law signed by President George W. Bush that emphasized academic achievement for all students, including those with disabilities (Hayes, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2004b).

12. *Phonemic awareness: "*Tasks that require children to identify or manipulate the phonemes in words that are presented orally" (Torgesen, 2004, p. 4).

13. *Phonological awareness*: A process that "involves conscious access to the phonemic level of the speech stream and the ability to cognitively manipulate speech sounds" (Barker et al., 2013).

14. *Rap:* A form of popular music that entails talking, or "rapping" to a rhythmic musical background (Powell, 1991, p. 245).

15. *Special Education:* A program that "provides personalized, i.e. individualized, services that appropriately credentialed special educators provide directly or indirectly to individuals with exceptionalities" (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012, p. 11).

Summary

Chapter One provides an outline of the research study in this dissertation, focusing on the special educators' perceptions of using rap music during literacy instruction. Specifically, the research sought to address three research questions to arrive at an essence of the shared experiences in this qualitative, phenomenological study.

Chapter Two presents a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that are the underlying structures of this study and the literature used to establish connections between students with cognitive disabilities, building phonemic awareness skills, and the use of educational rap music.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter includes previous research and scholarly material related to the topic of study. The information is used to situate the current study in a synthesis of literature identified in relevant themes to address the gap in the literature (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). A review of the literature revealed many scholarly articles related to using music to support learning. Articles included how music affects the brain, musical intelligences, the role of learning music in literacy instruction (Martens et al., 2011; Moreno, 2009; Tsang & Conrad, 2011), the use of mnemonics (Moore, Peterson, O'Shea, McIntosh, & Thaut, 2008), and how rhythm, pitch, and prosody factor into building phonological and phonemic awareness (Huss, Verney, Fosker, & Mead, 2011; Silverman, 2010). Additionally, the review of literature encompassed two key aspects pertaining to the study: special education and rap music. This chapter begins with a discussion of three theories that are related to learning in order to help explain and understand the phenomena being investigated in the current study.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers agree that a theory should explain relationships that are relevant to the phenomenon, should bridge the observed relationships to what has already been established, and should allow for that information to be verified and revised to encourage and prompt further investigative research (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Schwandt, 2007). Schwandt (2007) stated, "Theory is a unified, systematic causal explanation of a diverse range of social phenomena" (p. 292). Three underlying structures support the research topic: multiple intelligences; sociocultural theory; and experiential learning theory. By providing the foundation for learning styles and methodology, the collection and analysis of data from the

research was focused appropriately. Gardner's multiple intelligence theory supports that students and teachers have different ways of learning, but for most individuals a predominant style emerges (Gardner, 1983; Kassell, 1998). By using rap music in the research study, those with predominant music intelligence may come to develop phonemic awareness skills when other pedagogical designs have failed. Understanding that students have different learning styles allows educators to design and employ lessons and activities that allow students to experience learning in the four stages identified in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. Allowing students to listen to musical recordings of the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds in this study provided students with an opportunity to experience what they were learning by interacting with the music, in such ways as sing along, body movements, finger snapping, or hand clapping. The students situated in the schools chosen for this study shared common characteristics, and incurred social interaction and communication based on the phenomenon of using rap music to learn phonemic awareness skills. The experience of interactions with others allowed for the integration of information into each student's own mental capacities, thus learning might have occurred (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Multiple Intelligences

Multiple intelligences (MI) theory developed by Howard Gardner (1983) posits that there are seven intelligences: musical, linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner (1983) founded the theory based on the belief that individuals possess a wide array of intelligences that could not be measured by a standard IQ test. MI theory further posits that each intelligence is independent/separate, but interacts with other intelligences to produce intelligent behaviors (Gardner, 1983). Musical intelligence is being able to recognize tone, rhythm, patterns, and pitch, and use them in performances

(Gardner, 1983). Linguistic is the ability to express oneself in verbal or written form (Gardner, 1983). Logical/mathematical is the ability to think and reason logically, recognize patterns, make deductions, and solve mathematical problems (Gardner, 1983). Spatial intelligence is the ability to recognize and manipulate patterns in both wide and confined spaces (Gardner, 1983). Bodily/kinesthetic is using the body to solve problems or create something (Gardner, 1983). Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to identify other people's feelings and motivations, and intrapersonal intelligence is having an in-depth knowledge of oneself (Gardner, 1983). MI theory was a result of evidence Gardner gathered from studying "prodigies, gifted individuals, brain-damaged patients, idiot savants, normal children, normal adults, experts in different lines of work, and individuals from diverse cultures" (p. 9). The constructs that reappear are intelligences that are independent of each other, but concurrently interact and produce intelligent behaviors (Kassell, 1998). According to Denig (2004) and Purcell-Gates (2007), the theory of multiple intelligences contradicts the notion that single constructs can determine intelligence. Denig asserted that IQ testing only measured linguistic and mathematical domains. Denig also noted that a practical application of this theory would be to recognize each type of intelligence, its importance, and consequently change instructional approaches to maximize student learning while providing for students' interests and skills.

Researchers recognized that applying MI theory in the classroom provided for an increase in student achievement (Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Gray & Waggoner, 2002; Stanford, 2003). Researchers are in agreement that there is not a single way to incorporate MI theory into the classroom, because it is up to educators to develop a curriculum that best meets the needs of the students (Gray & Waggoner, 2002; Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Stanford, 2003).

Campbell and Campbell (1999) interviewed educators in different schools and identified that there were three reasons why MI theory is readily accepted. The first reason was that MI theory contributed to educators' knowledge and belief about the human mind (Campbell & Campbell, 1999). Campbell and Campbell asserted "MI offers insight into the human mind, its abilities, and its development that teachers find tangible, accessible, and professionally useful" (p. 4). The second reason was the implication for professional practice, and the final reason being that MI programs impacted student achievement (Campbell & Campbell, 1999). Stanford (2003) recognized that incorporating MI theory into the classroom expanded teaching strategies, curricular adaptations, and how students are assessed. Educators interviewed by Campbell and Campbell utilized MI theory by creating art-based lessons, multiple entry points into lessons, team teaching, and classroom projects that promoted self-directed learning. Gray and Waggoner (2002) identified that using a matrix for planning activities allowed educators to recognize students' cognitive level of functioning and what intelligence was being utilized. Educators would base activities on the standards and incorporate MI theory (Gray & Waggoner, 2002). Stanford (2003) suggested that in a classroom where MI theory is employed, educators continually shift methods of instruction to meet the needs of the students.

Assessments in classrooms that were once just written documents were changed in classrooms adopting MI theory to include project-based, performance-based, and teacher observations (Campbell & Campbell, 1999). Stanford (2003) offered that assessments should include "logs and journals, graphic organizers, observation checklists, video samples, rubrics, miscue analysis, and portfolios" (p. 82), because they provide students alternative ways to demonstrate their knowledge. Also important to note is that schools utilizing MI theory witnessed an increase in mandated state assessment scores (Campbell & Campbell, 1999).

An important piece of information noted by Campbell and Campbell is that through the use of MI theory in the classroom, teacher perceptions have changed and expectations for student learning have increased. This information may be pertinent to the current research study. Educators view the strengths of students, even those with learning disabilities, and learning has become more personalized (Campbell & Campbell, 1999; Stanford, 2003).

While research exists to support MI theory, some researchers do not believe that this theory is legitimate (Scarr, 1985; Sternberg, 1991; Visser, Ashton, & Vernon, 2006; Waterhouse, 2006; White, 1998; Willingham, 2004). Researchers in opposition to the MI theory cite that the theory is not grounded in empirical evidence, but rather based on Gardner's own intuitions and reasoning (Visser et al., 2006; Waterhouse, 2006; White, 1998; Willingham, 2004).

Scarr (1985) identified that descriptions of the intelligences did not fit with established criteria. Additionally Scarr noted that Gardner tried to distinguish among five intellectual terms: skill, competence, performance, talent, and intelligence, but those distinctions were not clear. Scarr further stipulated that Gardner does not include emotion, motivation, or personality in MI theory, although they "all play an important role in social-cultural achievements, which are Gardner's crucible of intelligence" (p. 97).

Sternberg (1991) and Willingham (2004) both questioned whether multiple intelligences could be measured with hard data. Sternberg stated that it has been many years since the inception of the MI theory, and psychologists need to know if it "works operationally in a way that would satisfy scientists as well as teachers" (p. 266). Willingham questioned how tests of cognitive ability will be able to measure the number of intelligences. Another area of concern for Willingham is the lack of hard data to support MI theory (Willingham, 2004).

Waterhouse (2006) argued a lack of empirical evidence to support MI theory citing that studies read by Gardner may support the reasonableness of his hypothesis, but do not validate the existence of MI. Waterhouse further argued that empirical evidence of neural systems refute Gardner's claim of MI (Waterhouse, 2006). Research cited by Gardner to support his theory, such as that conducted by Astuti, Solomon, and Carey (2004), identified that natural kind conceptualization aligned with four of the multiple intelligences and cut across the boundaries of each. Waterhouse stipulated, "The research did not provide empirical support, but rather argued against the framework of MI" (p. 248). Waterhouse also noted that Gardner had not defined a set of testable psychological subcomponents for each of the intelligences. According to Waterhouse, "Without such subcomponents, the intelligences are only defined by descriptions… and those descriptions have prevented researchers from conducting studies of validity of the intelligences" (p. 248). A final argument by Waterhouse was that in the 23 years since MI was first proposed, there has been one empirical study conducted by Visser, Ashton, and Vernon (2006) who reported evidence to refute MI theory.

Although White (1998) acknowledged MI theory led to significant school reform, he stipulated that intelligences do not exist, but rather Gardner was describing forms of knowledge. It was also noted by White that MI theory was widely accepted because of the idea that more than one intelligence could be determined by an IQ test. White asserted that Gardner provided criteria for each of the intelligences of the MI theory, but never provided reasons why those criteria were selected to be relevant to the intelligences. White noted that Gardner did not establish MI theory by observations of human behavior, but rather by his own judgments of what he considered to be important aspects of intelligence. White also asserted that in a response to questions, Gardner admitted that there was a subjective element involved in his criteria.

Although controversy surrounds MI theory, Gardner (1983) identified that teachers should utilize different activities, methodologies, and exercises to better serve students, and to find ways that work for students learning specific concepts. The MI theory paves a way for educators to develop classroom activities and assessments that address multiple ways of learning. When educators have a good understanding of this theory, they become more aware of their students' individual strengths, aptitude, ability, knowledge, and skills. Additionally, teachers may become more aware of methods that allow students to demonstrate and experience the learning of subject matter.

Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) developed the experiential learning theory (ELT) that is built upon six propositions from human learning and development: learning is a process; all learning is relearning; learning is driven by conflict, differences, and disagreement; learning is holistic and occurs through thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving; learning occurs as a result of interactions between the person and the environment, assimilating new experiences into existing concepts, and accommodating existing concepts to new experience; and through the process of learning, knowledge is created. ELT is based on the premise of four learning cycles, and four learning styles (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Students are classified into four categories of learners that are based on their preferences of how information is received and internalized (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). Individuals have been noted to prefer one of four types of learning: concrete learning experiences, abstract conceptualization, hands on experimentation, and those who prefer reflective observations (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). Each stage of the learning cycle occurs in a cyclical manner that guides students from concrete experiences to the

development of concepts that will lead students to new experiences (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). Although Kolb and Kolb believed individuals have a preference of learning, they noted that all individuals experience each stage of the learning cycle. This cycle allows the individual to construct knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Due to the cyclical nature of learning, an individual can start at any stage (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

During the concrete phase the learner has an experience (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). The learner then makes a reflective observation by examining and exploring the experience, trying to determine if anything about the experience changes their perspective on the situation, or if a change to the situation would be necessary if it were to occur again (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). In following the cyclical nature of the theory, the next stage would be abstract conceptualization in which the learner synthesizes how their interaction with the experience is connected to the world around them (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). In the fourth stage, the learner uses what was gleaned from the experience and adapts it to aid in exploring and understanding new situations (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). Experiential learning theory proponents agree that individuals often prefer a specific stage in which learning occurs comfortably (Felder & Brent, 2005; Goby & Lewis, 2000) and any preferred stage can function as the origin for learning (Kolb, 1984). Major thinkers who contributed to the development of ELT are Dewey, Jung, Lewin, Piaget, and James (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory posits that learning occurs on two levels, first through interactions with others, and then the information is integrated into the individual's own mental capacities (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). The sociocultural approach attempts to be nonjudgmental and to understand and employ the practices of culturally diverse groups to foster literacy learning (Davidson, 2010). The sociocultural theory originated in the 1920s and 1930s in Russia (Davidson, 2010; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Social interaction is vital to cognitive development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Four aspects guide Vygotsky's sociocultural theory: mind, tools, zone of proximal development (ZPD) and community of practice (Mahn, 1999). The aspect of mind is based on the idea that mental habits and functions depend upon social interactions and communication (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Tools, according to Vygotsky (1981), include "language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings and so on" (p. 137) and aid in the development of communication and cognitive functioning by moving from the social to psychological planes. Vygotsky believed that cognitive development was influenced by the individual's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the discrepancy between the mental age and the level where the child is ready to explore an area of learning, but needs social and adult interaction and scaffolding of information to fully develop an understanding (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Learning a subject domain is viewed as a process of becoming a member of a community of practice. Communities of practice was defined by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) as "Groups of people who share a concern, a

set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4).

Kolb, Gardner, and Vygotsky have all made a significant impact on the way students are taught. The three theorists were all concerned with learning styles, more specifically, David Kolb and Lev Vygotsky made significant impacts in education with theories on experiential learning. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences was not far from those of Kolb and Vygotsky, and focused on the idea that individuals learn through eight different modalities. The components addressed in the learning theories of Kolb, Gardner, and Vygotsky comprised the theoretical framework for this study.

Related Literature

A literature review is needed to provide a rationale for the problem and to position the study within the literature of the topic (Creswell, 2007). Through the literature review, the gap in the research can be identified (Creswell, 2007). A review of the literature revealed a variety of themes of information. In this section, information has been identified and organized into those themes. During the review of the literature it was noted that many studies used the terms phonemic awareness and phonological awareness interchangeably as if having the same meaning. Phonemic and phonological awareness are not the same thing. For the purpose of identifying the differences, I have included them as separate themes in this review, provided a definition of each, and identified the importance of each for achieving academic success. Since the primary focus of this study is on educators who work with students with disabilities, I chose to start this review with the literature on students with disabilities.

Students with Disabilities

The Civil Rights movement brought about legislation that had a major impact on the educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Most notably, the Brown v. Board of Education verdict handed down in 1954 found that segregation of schools was unconstitutional, and violated the Equal Protections Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006). On the heels of the legislation, many organizations sued for equal protections for individuals with disabilities. Shortly thereafter, states started to address services for students with disabilities, but were not yet legally required to do so until the mid-1970s. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed, providing funding for students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2006). In 1975, the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA), also known as Public Law 94-142 (PL94-142), and later identified as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), was passed, thus funneling federal special education laws under a single legislative umbrella (Schimmel, Stellman, & Fisher, 2011; Yell et al., 2006). As noted in the preamble of this legislation, of the more than eight million children with disabilities in the United States, one million were refused an appropriate education (Schimmel et al., 2011). The new legislation provided for teacher preparation programs, special education research, and implementation of new educational programs in an effort to develop best practices in special education (Yell et al., 2006). Since the passing of the EHA, schools have had an obligation to provide students with disabilities the opportunity for a "free and appropriate public education and related services designed to meet their unique needs" (Schimmel et al., 2011, p. 351) no matter the extent of the impairment. Schools that comply with IDEA and the Rehabilitation Act (RHA) receive federal funding in an effort "to assure equal protection of the law" (Schimmel et al., 2011, p. 351).

According to the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY, 2010), a placement in special education commences with a child being identified as needing special education and related services. The child is referred for evaluation by a parent or educator, and evaluated within 60 days of the referral (NICHCY, 2010). Once the evaluation is complete, eligibility is determined when the parents and qualified professionals review the results and determine if the child has a disability as identified by criteria established under IDEA (NICHCY, 2010).

One part of the evaluation process is the determination of the mental ability. Mental ability is measured as an intellectual quotient (IQ). A school system will utilize intellectual quotients measured by a standardized assessment such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fourth Edition (WISC-IV) (Wechsler, 2003). The average score is 100, and individuals with an IQ below 70 to 75 are identified as having an intellectual disability (American Association on Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2011). Adaptive behavior, or the ability to do what other children the same age are able to do, is also considered when identifying a child with an intellectual disability (AAIDD, 2011). The American Association on Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2011) defined intellectual disability in this manner: "Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and in adaptive behavior, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18" (AAIDD, 2011, para. 1).

After the passage of PL92-142, school systems began to integrate students with disabilities into the general education classroom as a service delivery model (Mercer & Mercer, 2005; Yell et al., 2006). Then, in 2001, President George Bush signed the No Child Left Behind

(NCLB) Act that emphasized academic achievement for all students, including those with disabilities (Hayes, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2004b). The federal government was holding schools accountable for providing a quality education for all students (Hayes, 2002; Schimmel et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2004a, 2004b). The introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act caused an increased awareness of the importance of learning to read, and a drive to decrease illiteracy. Children with mental impairments are often excluded from the instructional strategies for building literacy skills. "In an effort to focus on students with learning disabilities, research on preventing reading failure has often excluded students with below average IQs" (Allor et al., 2010, p. 445). Moats (2010) acknowledged that intelligence is not a predictor of reading success in the beginning stages. Bursuck et al., (2004) stated, "Effective reading instruction begins early and includes instructional strategies that develop phonological awareness, [and] alphabetic understanding" (p. 303). Educators need to have a sufficient understanding of how to implement instructional and differentiated intervention methods that are effective for all learners, including those with mild intellectual disabilities.

Teacher Preparation for Teaching Students with Mental Impairments

In the mid 1980s, policy initiatives were employed that were designed to "increase professional standards, strengthen teacher education, and certification requirements" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 36). Initiatives were aimed at designing and implementing professional standards, enhancing and strengthening teacher preparation and certification requirements, as well as other important features for becoming a teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teacher education programs have the greatest influence on how teachers approach instructional methods in the classroom. A best-practice approach for teacher preparation programs is for theory to be tied to practice, and to allow for practice in a classroom because coursework does not provide the

opportunity for experiential lessons of what teachers actually do (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Podhajski Mather, Nathan, and Sammons (2009) suggested that teacher education programs should include theoretical foundations, along with increased understanding of literacy development and underlying structures of both oral and written language structures. Not all schools prepare future educators in the same way.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2012) created seven initial preparation standards that were approved by the former National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) now Council of Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The initial preparations standards were created in an effort to prepare special education teachers to possess specialized knowledge and skill that will make a positive impact on learning (CEC, 2012).

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), formerly known as NCATE, recently made recommendations for "urgent changes in educator preparation" (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation Commission on Standards and Performance Report, 2013, p. 5). The Council recommended that teacher education programs should be an ideal, common model nationwide, allowing for only the slightest differences (CAEP, 2013). A sound model of teacher preparation “ensures that educators enter the classroom ready to have a positive impact on the learning of all students and prepare them to compete in today’s global economy” (CAEP, 2013).

Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, and Murphy (2012) established that in order to achieve desired qualities for a special education teacher, teacher preparation programs should extend preparation in special education. Programs should build knowledge in content areas, develop the ability to apply knowledge to practice, teach candidates how to engage students, teach classroom management, and develop a sense of responsibility for the learning of students with disabilities

(Leko et al., 2012). Up until the last decade, most special education teacher preparation programs focused on working with students with disabilities in regard to behavioral and learning needs, assistive technology, inclusion practices, identifying characteristics, and assessments (Leko et al., 2012). Since then, special education teacher preparation programs started offering methods for teaching content, like reading and mathematics, areas considered to be an effective component of teacher efficacy (Leko et al., 2012).

Of particular interest to the current research study are special educators' abilities to teach reading content. Through specifically designed coursework and field experiences, pre-service teachers with and without prior experience are able to build content knowledge specific to reading, and are able to encourage student reading achievement (Leko et al., 2012; Spear-Swerling, 2009). Teacher education programs usually cover a small facet of language structure and how children are taught to acquire it (Moats, 2010). Coursework often includes learning about reading development including strategies for helping struggling readers, word structure, phonics, and assessments (Leko et al., 2012). What is lacking is the requirement for teachers to study the forms and functions of language, an important component for learning to read (Moats, 2010).

Teaching Reading to Students with Mental Impairments

Historically, children with intellectual disabilities were not expected to learn to read, and care providers did not regard reading instruction to be a priority for these students (Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Only one out of every five children with intellectual disabilities attains even a small amount of literacy skills (Katims, 2000, 2001). Reading achievement often lags behind the mental ages of students with intellectual disabilities (Barker et al., 2013). However, societal expectations for the level of reading skill that should be reached by children with intellectual

disabilities are growing (Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Additionally, evidence is growing to support that the same type of explicit systematic reading instruction found to be successful for struggling readers who do not have intellectual disabilities may be beneficial for students with intellectual disabilities (Barker et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Research indicates that children need an exclusionary program of phonics, while others claim a whole language approach is best (Barker et al., 2013; Goetz et al., 2008; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010; Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, & Dolezal, 2002).

Based on research studies of individuals with mild intellectual disabilities, Goetz et al. (2008) and Barker et al., (2013) concur that the ability to recognize sight words is considered to be a relative strength, whereas being able to decode words is often considered as an area of weakness, especially for individuals with Down syndrome (DS). Goetz et al. noted that this sketch of strengths and weaknesses is not restricted to children with DS; similar results have been reported from research studies concerning children and adolescents with other types of moderate to severe learning difficulties (Conners, Rosenquist, Sligh, Atwell, & Kiser, 2006). These findings were not supported by Lemon and Fuchs (2010), nor Allor et al., (2010) in subsequent studies.

Strong evidence exists that students with an IQ between 40 and 69 can make statistically significant progress over time and respond well to comprehensive and/or explicit reading intervention (Allor et al., 2010; Barker et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). In a study of 24 children with DS between the ages of seven and 16, Lemon and Fuchs (2010) found that overall the elements of explicit systematic reading instruction incorporated into interventions for children with Down syndrome may be beneficial. A majority of children demonstrated statistically significant growth on letter sounds, taught sight words, and decodable words (Lemon

& Fuchs, 2010). Participants who entered the study with more advanced word identification skills made greater gains in decodable word reading; those with more advanced phoneme segmentation skills made greater gains in nonsense word reading (Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). In research involving students with an IQ between 40 and 69 to determine if a comprehensive reading instruction would yield significant results, Allor et al. (2010) identified that overall students made educationally meaningful, statistically significant progress on standardized measures of reading and language after two to three years of instruction. Students participating in the comprehensive intervention outperformed students in the contrast group who received typical special education (Allor et al., 2010). Both groups made statistically significant growth across the study, performing similarly on measures of reading comprehension (Allor et al., 2010). It was noted that students required approximately three years of intensive academic instruction to reach minimum levels for ending first grade, and participants had difficulty transferring and applying skills (Allor et al., 2010). The findings of these studies strongly support the use of scientifically based reading instruction, including phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction (Allor et al., 2010; Fredrick et al., 2013; Lane & Critchfield, 1998; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010), for teaching students with intellectual disabilities to read (Allor et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). In agreement with previous research, Barker et al. (2013) suggested that children with mild mental impairments are just as capable of approaching the tasks of learning to read as children of typical development, noting that a phonological approach is definitely a practical option for developing literacy. Phonological awareness “involves conscious access to the phonemic level of the speech stream and the ability to cognitively manipulate speech sounds” (Barker et al., 2013).

Moats (2010) acknowledged that literacy is achieved through language competence, starting with the most basic sounds (phonemic awareness) and working through the overall structure of text. Moats noted a strong correlation between language abilities and reading achievement. The debate on which method to use to teach reading will undoubtedly continue in the realm of education, whether it is whole language, or explicit and systematic phonics. Regardless of the method chosen, a strong basis in phonemic awareness is an important factor. Phonemic awareness supports literacy and is essential for reading success.

Phonemic Awareness

A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech (Gromko, 2005; IRA, 2013; Ouellette & Haley, 2013; Wasik, 2001). As defined by Wasik (2001), "Phonemic awareness is the ability to auditorily recognize and manipulate individual sounds in words" (p. 128). The International Reading Association (IRA, 2013) defines Phonemic Awareness as "the ability to segment and manipulate the sounds of oral language" (para. 1). Hansen and Milligan (2012) further delineate the definition as "the beginning and ending sounds of words, and the individual sounds of words" (p. 76). In a statement made by the IRA, it was acknowledged that phonemic awareness is different than phonics, "It is not the same as phonics, which involves knowing how written letters relate to spoken sounds" (IRA, para. 1, 2013). It is important to this study to note that phonemic awareness is not merely the mastery of sounds contained in words, but rather the discernment of sounds in words, and the ability to manipulate those sounds (Gromko, 2005; IRA, 2013; Ouellette & Haley, 2013; Wasik, 2001).

Early communication skills progress into the formation of words as children are exposed to vocabulary, and as they discover and repeat familiar sounds. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Child Care Research Network (NICHD, 2005) advised

"literacy development starts long before children begin formal instruction in school" (p. 428). Other research suggests there is a strong relationship between the development of oral language and reading skills (Blaiklock, 2004; Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008; Moats, 2010; NICHD, 2005; Shaughnessy, Sanger, Matteucci, & Ritzman, 2004).

Two components of language development demonstrated most by children are listening and speaking. Children progress from repeating sounds and words they hear without any measurable comprehension to a complete understanding of what was heard (NICHD, 2005). These receptive and expressive language skills developed in early childhood, transition to written form as children enter school (NICHD, 2005). Oral language skills developed in early childhood are significant to manipulating phonemes and as students begin to transfer oral language skills into literacy skills, the connection between phonemes and graphemes becomes apparent (Moats, 2010; NICHD, 2005). As children gain the understanding of sounds and are able to manipulate those sounds, coding skills start to emerge, thus laying the foundation for learning to read (Moats, 2010; NICHD, 2005).

Alphabetic knowledge and oral vocabulary are critical to phonemic awareness (Ouellette & Haley, 2013) and phonemic awareness is a necessary skill for fluent reading (Degasperi, Micciolo, Espa, & Calzolari, 2011; Goetz, et al., 2008; Gromko, 2005; IRA, 2013). The alphabet is a system that uses symbols in the form of letters to represent speech sounds (Moats, 2010). The beginning reader has the task of developing an understanding of the link between phonemes and letters (Ball and Blachman, 1991; Moats, 2010). Children who are unable to match print to sound completely and accurately will later tend to skip over words because of the inability to decode (Moats, 2010). Automaticity is also important in the development of literacy skills. Automaticity is "the ability to execute tasks without conscious attention" (Moats, 2010, p. 7).

Children who have the ability to identify phonemes within words with automaticity are more readily apt to map the corresponding letters to the sounds (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Gray & McCutchen, 2006). Being able to identify and manipulate phonemes furthers the development of reading ability (Moats, 2010). “Without well-developed reading skills, children cannot fully participate in classroom learning” (Moats, 2010, p. 5).

Explicit and systematic phonemic awareness instruction is beneficial to the development of early literacy skills (Isakson, Marchand-Martella, & Martella, 2011; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010; Moats, 2010). In a study of the effects of the McGraw Hill Phonemic Awareness program with preschool children with developmental delays conducted by Isakson, Marchand-Martella, and Martella (2011), it was noted that results from Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy (DIBELS) subtests showed the phonemic awareness skills of all five children involved in the study improved. In both Initial Sound Fluency for a mid-year kindergartner, and Phoneme Segmentation for a kindergartener at the end of the school year, all preschool children scored in the "emerging" or "established" categories (Isakson, et al., 2011). These results suggest the explicit and systematic phonemic awareness instruction may have had positive effects on the early literacy skills for students with developmental delays (Isakson et al., 2011). Phonemic awareness and phonological awareness are often cited interchangeably, but they are not the same. Each has a different purpose, and different function in learning to read. Phonological awareness expands on letter correspondence to sounds that make up spoken words.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness has been defined as “the ability to understand the sounds of language, including the segmentation of words” (Hansen & Milligan, 2012, p. 76). It includes a system of rules in regard to the order, place, and the combination of sounds in words, and the

manner in which they should be spoken (Moats, 2010). Phonological awareness encompasses phonemic awareness. Moats (2010) identified that proficient reading requires being able to rapidly connect print patterns to phonological information that includes phonemes. Having a thorough understanding of phonological awareness and how to apply that understanding in the classroom with greater practicality will provide students a greater opportunity to build the foundational skills needed for reading. Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, and Chard (2001) noted "educators who have knowledge of phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, the structure of language, and phonics instruction, and apply these methodologies in classrooms, can affect student outcomes" (p. 99). Moats asserted that a good reader "is sensitive to language structure at the level of speech sounds, parts of words, meaningful parts of words, sentences, and text" (p. 9). Teaching speech sounds and the relationships to print includes teaching distinct features of the sounds. Features may include "pitch, intonation, and nasalization" (Moats, 2010, p. 43). Musical pitch perception and speech perception share many of the same processing requirements (Jones, Lucker, Zalewski, Brewer, & Drayna, 2009) and characteristics. Moritz, Yampolsky, Papadelis, Thomson, and Wolf (2013) indicated that music and reading acquisition share common features of timing and frequency, which includes rhythm, meter, pulse, pitch, melody, and harmony.

Research conducted by Tsang and Conrad (2011) indicated that while pitch perception was associated with phonological skills and word identification for children without formal music training, it was not the case for children with formal music training. More specifically, Tsang and Conrad found that the association between pitch perception and word identification was significant for untrained, but not for trained children, and the magnitude of the association differed significantly between groups. For phonological skill, the results were not as clear, and

although the association between pitch perception and phonological skill was significant only for the untrained children, the magnitude of the association did not vary significantly between groups (Tsang & Conrad, 2011). Music training may moderate the pattern of associations between music skills and reading, because the association with word identification was significant only for children without formal music training (Tsang & Conrad, 2011). There were no significant associations between rhythm discrimination and reading skill. Thus, the association between rhythm sensitivity and reading acquisition remains unclear. "Although relatively few studies have examined the association between music and reading, all of them noted that basic auditory processing skills are related to abilities in both music and reading" (Tsang & Conrad, 2011, p. 157).

Music

The elements of "pitch, melody, rhythm, harmony, form, timbre, and dynamics" (Lim, 2010, p. 4) are arranged in patterns resulting in what is perceived as music. Music has a temporal nature and allows for cognitive sequencing to determine which sound comes next and when it will be produced (Tillman, 2012). Researchers have found connections between music and literacy (Bolduc, 2008; Galicia Moyeda, Contreras Gomez, & Pena Flores, 2006; Paquette & Rieg, 2008; Salmon, 2010; Wiggins, 2007). Bolduc (2008) found a connection between music and emergent literacy. Galicia Moyeda, Contreras Gomez, and Pena Flores (2006) found that music enhanced language development. Paquette and Rieg (2008) identified that music was effective in building language and reading fluency. Salmon (2010) used research to support the use of music to enhance children's thinking and encourage literacy development. Wiggins (2007) asserted that with a standards-based approach to instruction and learning, music is essential in building emergent literacy skills. Additionally, the research of Patston and Tippett

(2011) provided insight into the idea that music and language processing could possibly share cognitive and neural resources. Bond (2012) conducted a literature review of eight early childhood education journals that involved music, and found that only 38 articles were relevant. The review was a synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative research articles. A major theme that emerged from the research was that incorporating music instruction in the early childhood classroom provided extra-musical benefits, such as building phonological awareness skills, listening skills, and developing vocabulary (Bond, 2012).

There are non-musical benefits to music lessons that have a direct impact for children. Crncec, Wilson, and Prior (2006) conducted a meta-analyses on the Mozart Effect and non-musical benefits to music lessons, including: music lessons and spatial ability; music lessons and mathematics; and music lessons and reading; to determine whether listening to music during instructional periods has a direct impact on educational, cognitive, and academic abilities in children. Research categorized music into three major areas, listening to complex music while performing a task; using music for instruction; and playing background music in the classroom (Crncec et al., 2006). Crncec et al. found there to be non-musical benefits of utilizing music for listening and instruction during their research. Studies examined the uses "of soothing background music in special education populations have generally shown positive results" (Crncec et al., 2006, p. 587). Background music has been shown to calm those who are hyperactive (Cripe, 1986; Scott, 1970). Additionally, it has been proven to calm individuals with an intellectual disability (Gregoire, 1984; Reardon & Bell, 1970). Research has also indicated background music improves students' concentration (Savan, 1999). In their investigations, Crncec et al. found that music improves arithmetic performance in children experiencing emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties; and Riddoch and Waugh (2003) found that

music improved art representations from children diagnosed with a severe intellectual disability. There is a plethora of literature on the use of music, but for this research study it is important to understand the physiological and cognitive relevance it has to teaching and learning to read.

Music and the Brain

Research studies indicate that musical involvement is beneficial to activating parts of the brain (Humpal & Wolf, 2003; Kuzmich, 2010; Martens et al., 2011; Patel, 2010; Snyder, 1997). Research also stipulates that music and language appear to be processed in Broca's area located in the "frontal lobes, bilaterally" (Fadiga, Craighero, & D'Ausilio, 2009, p. 448) of the brain, an area previously thought to be where only language was processed (Fadiga et al., 2009; Fiebach, Schlesewsky, & Friederici, 2005). Fadiga, Craighero, and D'Ausilio (2009) acknowledged that later experiments determined Broca's area and Wernicke's area, the temporal area known for speech perception, were "implicated in both comprehension and production aspects of language" (p. 449) and that music and language share syntactical structures.

Tillman (2012) noted the following:

> The focus on structures highlights that music and language processing require cognitive sequencing: Perceivers have to process individual events and to store them in short-term memory; they are influenced by context effects, develop perceptual expectations, perform structural integration, update the currently developed mental model, and use their knowledge about the relevant (e.g., musical, linguistic) system (p. 569).

Knowledge of the "regularities and structures" (p. 569) of the linguistic and musical systems provides an opportunity to develop expectations of those systems. Developing expectations allows for the processing of events that are expected, which is faster, more accurate, and "requires fewer neural resources" (p. 569) than processing events that are unexpected

(Tillman, 2012). Syntactic rules provides for development of those expectations for listeners and readers (Tillman, 2012). The context in which music is perceived plays a role in activating knowledge and influencing processing events, whereas words are processed more efficiently when expected in given linguistic contexts (Tillman, 2012). Cognitively, sound acts as a scaffold to support processing and sequencing temporal information heard in the environment, and influences manipulating and learning serial order information in other circumstances (Conway, Pisoni, & Kronenberger, 2009; Tillman, 2012).

Exposure to rich music experiences will aid in keeping a brain both pliable and adaptable and appears to activate processing systems shared with cognitive domains, such as memory and learning (Humpal & Wolf, 2003; Kuzmich, 2010; Patel, 2010; Snyder, 1997). The association between music and memory can be complex. Through research, Laws (2010), Patel (2010; 2012), and Patson and Tippett (2011), asserted that there is an ongoing debate relating to the extent of the overlap linking music and language processing in the brain. Laws noted that music and language have a habitual impact on auditory responses in the brain, particularly the right hippocampus, which often results in the use of music therapy for learning, increasing memory, and helping individuals with autism. The literature reviewed in regard to music and the brain was closely related to the information found in regard to music and language, thus leading to an overlap of topics.

Music and Language

There are several parallels between music and language. Music and language are both auditory operations that utilize the same vocal mechanisms in order to communicate (Anvari, Trainor, Woodsider, & Levy, 2002; Thaut, 2005). Music forms a basis for language development and building vocabulary (Paquette & Reig, 2008; Salmon, 2010; Snyder, 1997;

Towell, 2000; Van Der Linde, 1999). The results of several studies challenged the idea that music and language function independently in musicians, and brought forth the idea that music processing networks overlap language processing networks (Magne et al., 2006; Moreno, 2009; Patel, 2010; Patston and Tippett, 2011; Thompson, Schellenberg, & Hussain, 2001).

An investigation of the overlapping of syntactical and musical neural processes led to the finding of shared pathways that activated the same parts of the brain identified with language (Bidelman, Gandour, & Krishnan, 2011; Fadiga et al., 2009; Patel, 2010). Identical brain signals are produced when there is an unexpected occurrence in language and when something syntactical occurs in music (Fiveash & Pammer, 2014; Patel, Gibson, Ratner, Besson, & Holcomb, 1998). Syntax was defined as "a set of principles governing the combination of discreet structural elements into sequences" (Patel, 2003, p. 674). Music and speech structures are a combination of elements, such as notes and phonemes combining to form meaningful phrases (Anvari et al., 2002; Tillman, 2012). Music and language reach the brain as "frequency spectra arranged as pitches" produced from notes and phonemes (Jones, et al., 2009; Lim, 2010, p. 5). Being a core component of spoken language, pitch aids in redefining syntactical structures in an effort to provide semantic and pragmatic meaning, whereas musical pitch functions to convey melodic structure (Perrachione, Federanko, Vinke, Gibson, & Dilley, 2013).

How the brain perceives pitch is influenced by an individual's music and language experience (Bidelman et al., 2011). Long-term exposure to music enhances the brain's ability to encode linguistic patterns (Bidelman et al., 2011). Music provides more predictable temporal patterns than speech, making it easier to be perceived by low functioning students (Lim, 2010). Researchers have suggested that using songs for teaching language skills, building reading

fluency, and improving writing skills was essential to language development (Lim, 2010; Paquette & Reig, 2008; Salmon, 2010).

Music and Learning

Areas of the brain are developed and strengthened with the use of music, including those involved with higher-order thinking and retaining information (Snyder, 1997). Linking important information to songs and chants has been a method employed for many years to motivate students (Heywood, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). Educators are able to introduce new concepts by pairing them with music. Research emphasized a common belief that words set to music are committed to memory better than those that are spoken (Martens et al., 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). "There is also evidence that musical learning may recruit more diffuse neural pathways in individuals with atypical neuroanatomy" (Martens et al., 2011, p. 3101). Students are successful at recalling information when linked to familiar tunes or songs, thus keeping the student engaged in the learning process (Heywood, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). Researchers have made the learning of sound categories a focal point due to increasing evidence of a connection between music and phonemic abilities (Slevc & Miyake, 2006; Wong et al., 2007). For example, one researcher found that using music helped non-native speakers of English language learners distinguish between phonemes more effectively than traditional methods of teaching (Legg, 2009). Pane and Salmon (2011) studied using music to scaffold diverse children's literacy development and discovered that pre-service teachers found that students from all backgrounds could relate to music, resulting in increased confidence and comfort in their literacy learning. Additionally, pre-service teachers discovered that music heightened creativity for students when they were asked to draw or write their feelings and the drawings were much different when music was playing during the task, than when there was no

music (Pane & Salmon, 2011). The research of Pane and Salmon also identified that pre-service teachers felt that music activated background knowledge, thus increasing literacy learning. It was noted that pre-service teachers identified that the longer students were engaged with music, motivation increased for literacy learning (Pane & Salmon, 2011).

"Learning to read successfully requires three neural systems and the development of specific skills that will work together to help the brain decode abstract symbols into meaningful language" (Sousa, 2006, p. 185). Aural discrimination, as defined by Hansen and Milligan (2012), is "the ability to discern nuance in sound" (p. 76). Aural discrimination skills paired with appropriate symbols are related to the development of cognitive processing required for segmenting words into phonemes (Gromko, 2005). Gromko, Hansen, Tortora, Higgins, and Boccia (2009) conducted a study to determine the effects of temporal sequencing and auditory discrimination on children's memory patterns for tones, numbers, and nonsense words. Results from the Gromko et al. study indicated that children's aural discrimination skill was related to accuracy for recall, and supported the idea that children rely on working memory skills to learn nonsense words and tones. The findings from Gromko et al. are included in this study to support explanations for the observed connections between music and phonemic awareness.

Music may be an effective strategy for learning to read, or it may hinder the encoding process if participants are focused on the words, letter sounds, or the music. Music was found to be a hindrance in the learning process (Martens et al., 2011; Perham & Sykora, 2012). Martens, Jungers, and Steele (2011) conducted a study to determine if those who had participated in formal music lessons scored significantly better on a verbal memory task when the sentences were sung than when they were spoken. What Martens et al. found was that those who had not taken formal lessons showed no such benefit, and it was noted that increased enjoyment of music

and heightened emotional reactions to music did not impact performance on the memory task. Perham and Sykora (2012) sought to explore if liked music improved performance compared to disliked music, by asking participants to complete serial recall trials in the presence of three sound conditions: quiet, music they liked, and music they disliked. What Perham and Sykora found was that students performed better on serial recall when listening to music they disliked, because preferred music was distracting.

Some research indicates that music is beneficial in building literacy skills (Heywood, 2004; Legg, 2009; Martens et al., 2011; Pane & Salmon, 2011; Slevc & Miyake, 2006; Wong et al., 2007; Yopp & Yopp, 1996), and other research that stipulates it may impair cognitive abilities (Martens et al., 2011; Perham & Sykora, 2012). If it impairs cognitive abilities, how will the use of educational rap music impact literacy skills for students who already have mild intellectual disabilities?

Rap Music

Rap music, defined as "the joining together of words, phrases, and poetic statements in time to a musical beat" (Yasin, 1997, p.43), has been used in studies to determine what outcomes it may produce for students (Gilmore, 1983; Herd, 2009; Hunnicutt & Andrews, 2009; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard 2001). Rap music emerged in New York in the 1970s (Sullivan, 2003; Rose, 1994) as part of hip hop, "an African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture composed of graffiti, break dancing, and rap music" (Rose, 1994, p. 2). Under the umbrella of hip hop is also a "style of dress, dialect and language, and way of looking at the world" (Alridge & Stewart, 2005, p. 190). The music articulates the good and bad social, cultural, and political elements in the life of black society in America, often invoking thematic and stylistic characteristics of cultural storytelling (Rose, 1994).

There are different styles of rap music: Gangsta, politically conscious, commercial, and dance rap (Hall, 1998; Sullivan, 2003). Researchers have advocated for the use of rap music in writing instruction to encourage cultural relevance, critical thinking, and critical analysis (Christianakis, 2011; Gilmore, 1983; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001). Educators have used rap music in the classroom for various reasons, including reading, writing, and vocabulary development. More specifically, educators at all levels have utilized rap music to analyze both sentence structure and the use of grammar, paragraph formation, poetry, and writing instruction (Christianakis, 2011; Gilmore, 1983; Gooding, 2012; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001; Sundeen, 2004). Different styles of rap music have been used to teach students about the many forms of literature in a college classroom (Sundeen, 2004).

In research studies using rap music to determine the effects on literacy, specifically reading proficiency and vocabulary development, it was identified that students made gains when music was employed (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001). Students were asked to listen to rap songs, create rap songs, analyze meanings, then read and analyze books related to the songs (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994). Results of the studies indicated that reading proficiency, vocabulary, and the amount of time spent reading increased utilizing rap music as an educational tool (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001).

Rap music, categorized into four groups: gangsta rap, hip-hop (dance) rap, political rap, and commercial rap, was used in a study of students 7 to 12 years. Students were asked to listen to the songs and tell the researchers what the songs were about. Participant responses were analyzed to determine if they could remember the words and meaning in the music (Hall, 1998). Gangsta rap includes vulgar language and encourages violence and drug use; hip-hop rap, is a blended mix of jazz, blues, and rap; political rap criticizes those in authoritative positions

(police, government, etc.); and commercial rap is often played on radios and is appealing to most audiences (Hall, 1998). Research indicated that gangsta rap music instilled violence, anger, aggression, and crime (Herd, 2009; Hunnicutt & Andrews, 2009). It was found that younger students could comprehend the commercial rap, but not the gangsta, political, or hip-hop rap (Hall, 1998). Younger students could not recall words, but understood the message, and older students could understand the words and messages in all types of rap music (Hall, 1998). Although the research did not directly relate to the use of educational rap music, the findings may be a source of support for the current study, since educational rap is considered a form of commercial rap.

Summary

Chapter Two was inclusive of literature to support the current research. Music was repeatedly identified to contribute to learning. Learning is a social act, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that learning occurs through social interactions, problem-solving, and language (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981, 1986). Kolb (1984) and Kolb and Kolb (2005) identified in ELT that individuals are classified as preferring one of four types of learning: concrete learning experiences, abstract conceptualization, hands on experimentation, and those who prefer reflective observations. Neuroscience research stipulates that intelligence is shaped by experiences (Gazzaniga, 1988; Sternberg, 2012). Although most people possess many types of intelligence, musical intelligence can be nurtured and developed if discovered early in life (Gardner, 1983). Musical intelligence, as well as other intelligences continues to be a primary focus in the schools when considering how to design lessons and curriculum (Gardner, 1983). Also included in Chapter Two were research studies that both support and refute the claim that music enhances and/or improves the intelligence quotient and improves literacy. The "Mozart

Effect" (Rauscher, Shaw, & Ky, 2003) is by far the most prominent study that has led to subsequent studies of many different topics involving music and learning. The effect music has on the brain is a topic of great interest with a plethora of information available to researchers. Music has been found to share language processing mechanisms in the brain (Kuzmich, 2010; Patel, 2010; Patston & Tippett, 2011) and research studies indicated that music training aids in language and reading development, helping even those with learning disabilities (Allor et al., 2010; Conners, 1992; Cowden, 2010; Joseph & Seery, 2004). Pitch is a common element in both music and language. Music and language rely on sound categories (notes are found in music, and phonemes are found in speech) and develop over a period of time requiring continuous focus and attention (Jones et al., 2009).

There was an impressive amount of literature on students with disabilities, and an impressive amount of literature on phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and teaching reading, but not in regard to teaching phonemic awareness, or teaching reading to students with mild intellectual disabilities. The existing literature supports teaching students with mental impairments to read using a phonological approach that encompasses phonemic awareness. Students who struggle with learning to read often exhibit difficulty with phonemic awareness and other phonological components (Moats, 2010). Other literature supports using music in the classroom to build phonemic awareness skills, but it did not address using it with students with mild intellectual disabilities or using rap music to do so.

In regard to the use of rap music in the classroom, the literature supports that it has an effect on listeners, but it may depend on the individual listener or the type of rap music being used to determine if that effect is positive or negative. The ability to discriminate between what is and is not important is vital for the listener. Existing literature of interest to the current

research study indicated that use of rap music has academic benefits for students (Christianakis, 201l; Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001; Sundeen, 2004); however, other studies have indicated that gangsta rap music is detrimental and causes anger, hostility, and aggression (Alridge & Stewart, 2005; Herd, 2009; Hunnicutt & Andrews, 2009; Rose, 1994). What educational research has not investigated is the use of rap music to teach phonemic awareness to students with mild intellectual disabilities, thus leaving a considerable gap in the literature. In response to this gap, I sought to gain the perspective of educators as they shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout the study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers' and paraprofessionals' experiences and perceptions of using rap music in Smith County self-contained special education classrooms, as they taught phonemic awareness skills, and the impact it had on those who experienced it. This chapter includes a discussion of the methodology used to conduct this transcendental phenomenological study, including the rationale for the design of the study, the researcher's role, the site, the questions that were used to guide the research, participants, data collection and analysis methods, as well as trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Design

A qualitative study was chosen because it allowed for data to be collected in the natural setting, talking to people, and observing the behavior within their context (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological study was the most appropriate approach to inquiry, since the purpose of this study was to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Schutz, 1970; Van Manen, 1990) of using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students in special education self-contained classrooms in Smith County schools. More specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach was utilized for this study.

Phenomenological research requires a deep, rich understanding of the phenomenon through examinations of peoples' lived experiences (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994, Patton, 2002; Schutz, 1970; Van Manen, 1990). Edmund Husserl (1975) believed that truly understanding a phenomenon started with self-experiences of the phenomenon. Moustakas

(1994) noted, "The challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essence of the experience" (p. 49). Husserl (1931) identified that phenomenology is a science of "essential being" (p. 3) and "a science of knowledge of essences and absolutely no facts" (p. 4). Moustakas (1994) defined phenomenology as research "concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved" (p. 58).

Further contributing to Moustakas' (1994) idea that "knowledge must conform to experience" (p. 44), and that "knowledge and experience are connected to phenomena" (p. 44), Brentano (1973) distinguished between natural and physical science, citing "natural science should be thought of simply as the science of physical phenomena", and physical science should be thought of "as the science of mental phenomena" (p. 8). Perception cannot be doubted, and is regarded in phenomenology as the primary source of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Brentano stipulated that internal perceptions, not external, were viable sources for scientific knowledge. Husserl (1975) expanded on Brentano's position, and expanded on the transcendental philosophy with his transcendental phenomenology. As noted by Moustakas, it is phenomenology because it "utilizes *only* the data available to the consciousness – the appearance of objects" (p. 45). Moustakas further noted, "It is 'transcendental' because it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates" (p. 45). Transcendental phenomenology is a disciplined methodology of research that places an emphasis on the subjectivity and discovery of the essence of experience (Moustakas, 1994). I used transcendental phenomenology in this study in order to focus on a description of the experiences of the

participants in an effort to gain the essence of the experiences, instead of on the interpretations (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas stated,

> The researcher following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the *epoche* process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies – to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated (p. 22).

Before the data collection began, I practiced *epoche*, setting aside my own presuppositions that may be influenced by beliefs, customs, and prejudices (Moustakas, 1994). I accomplished this by writing my reflections in a journal (see sample in Appendix I) about using educational rap music and teaching phonemic awareness to students with mild intellectual disabilities, before I started investigating the experiences of others involved in this study. As the data collection began, I interviewed participants by saying little and listening intently, in order to prevent any influence upon responses. I asked questions only when needed for clarification, or when I want to know more about what the participant was describing. Finally, I documented all statements from participants, regardless of how the statements affect me personally. Moustakas (1994) described *epoche* as a new way of looking at things in an open and fresh way to be able to distinguish and describe. Patton (2002) described *epoche* as the process in which the researcher "looks inside to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate, or at least gain clarity about preconceptions" (p. 485).

Continuing in the process, I provided textural descriptions that were obtained from observations. According to Moustakas (1994), the descriptions are an "internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self" (p. 90). The final steps in the research were imaginative variation, then a synthesis of the essence of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

Research questions in a qualitative study should be "open-ended, evolving, and non-directional; restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms; start with a word such as 'what' or 'how' rather than 'why'" (Creswell, 2007, p. 107). The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the essence of the shared experiences of educators using rap music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What obstacles do the students, teachers, and paraprofessionals face while using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?
2. In what ways does using educational rap music influence building students' phonemic awareness skills?
3. What are educators' perceptions of the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?

Site

I conducted the research in Smith County Schools. Pseudonyms should be utilized to protect confidentiality of the co-researchers and the research site (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I utilized pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research site and the co-researchers of the study. The research site is a school district in northwest Georgia. There are

four schools in the district, but only three of the schools have self-contained classrooms in Smith County. I utilized three self-contained classrooms in this study, two from the high school and one from the elementary school. Each of these classrooms supports students with mild intellectual disabilities. The students in these classrooms are taught a life-skills curriculum that includes functional sight words, not phonemic awareness. Since the educators are not teaching phonemic awareness, they brought a fresh perspective to the research, and I feel this provided for rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon being studied.

The student body in grades K-12 is comprised of 2,342 students. Of this, 346 of which are in special education; three identified as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); and 188 in the Early Intervention Program (EIP). The site consists of 96% White ethnicity, 2% Dual race, 1% Black, 2% Hispanic and a final 2% identified as Multiracial (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2011). The research site is located in a low socioeconomic area (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2011). I chose this site due to the number of students in self-contained special education classrooms who have been identified with an IQ within the range of 55 to 70.

Participants

Participants in a transcendental phenomenological research study are often referred to as co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). Fraelich (1989) was first to identify participants as co-researchers, when attempting to have participants join the researcher on equal footing as a "truthful seeker of knowledge and understanding with regard to the phenomenon" (p. 68). I used purposive sampling to obtain the co-researchers.. Purposive sampling is utilized in qualitative research to ensure all participants share a certain criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Creswell, 2007). The sample was inclusive of three special education teachers and the three

paraprofessionals who educate students in self-contained classrooms in Smith County. I included paraprofessionals in this study because there are times when the paraprofessionals are assigned to be the primary educator in the room for specific students, or for specific subject matter, and they may be the best one who provides the data needed to accurately relate the co-researchers' experiences. In this study, the two high school classrooms each included one teacher, but there was only one paraprofessional between the two rooms. In the elementary school classroom, there was one teacher and two paraprofessionals. Patton (2002) identified that a small sample is appropriate for a qualitative study to provide "information-rich cases" (p. 230) about the phenomenon.

Procedures

Creswell (2007) advised that regardless of the research approach utilized, it is imperative to seek permission from a human subjects review board. I obtained permission from the school district prior to seeking approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once IRB approval was received (Appendix A), I completed a pilot study with a small sample outside of this study to ensure clarity of the questions, and that wording was appropriate for the co-researchers being interviewed (Creswell, 2007). Following this, I obtained consent from the principals of the three schools to be included in the study. Upon receiving consent from the principals, I recruited the co-researchers. Once I had recruited co-researchers, I obtained consent from each to participate in the study, by having them complete the IRB Consent form (Appendix B).

I conducted data collection through the use of documents, semi-structured interviews, observations, and one focus group. I reviewed documents, including Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and work samples, to determine the present levels of functioning of the students

enrolled in the classrooms selected for this research study. Students who are enrolled in the classrooms selected for this study, who do not have an IQ within the range of 55 to 70 were allowed to participate with the rest of the students. I instructed co-researchers to answer interview questions based on those who met the research criteria. Prior to the implementation of rap music, I conducted individual interviews with the co-researchers using semi-structured open-ended questions (Appendix C) (Creswell, 2007). I instructed each of the co-researchers on the procedures for implementing educational rap music in their respective classrooms. Reasons for individual class instructions on the use of educational rap music included the fact that it was difficult to gather all teachers at the same time due to teacher duties, lack of coverage for the classroom, and other responsibilities outside of school hours. By going to each classroom, the teachers and paraprofessionals were able to participate in the implementation instruction while observing the students in the classrooms during that time. Additionally, by providing individual implementation instructions in each classroom, as opposed to bringing all educators together, I was able to prevent the co-researchers from discussing the intervention with each other. Had the co-researchers been given an opportunity to discuss the use of educational rap music in this study, it may have influenced later discussions. Instruction on implementation of rap music occurred after the initial interviews, so that co-researchers' initial thoughts and feelings were not influenced. The implementation of music did not require extensive training, as it is merely playing a musical recording of the alphabet and the sounds of the letters, then having students listen and interact with the music. I asked the co-researchers to follow up with their students by having them complete phonemic awareness activities to determine if the rap music supported learning letters and letter sounds. Co-researchers were also asked to give students worksheets to complete after the last day of playing the music, and to identify student work with the same

letters used at the beginning of the study to protect confidentiality. For this study, I utilized the Alphabet Songs CD created by Have Fun Teaching, LLC. The CD consists of twenty seven songs, including an alphabet song (Appendix H) and one song for each letter of the alphabet, A through Z (see samples in Appendix H). The Alphabet Song covers all letters and letter sounds in one song as follows.

Alphabet Song

The alphabet is filled

With consonants and vowels

We write them, we read them

Each letter makes a sound

Well, we start with ABC

We go all the way to Z

The letters of the alphabet Are fun for you and me

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z

Now I know my ABC's Next time won't you sing with me

We start with ABC

And we go all the way to Z

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z

Now I know my ABC's Next time won't you sing with me

Each letter makes a sound

Let's sound them out now /a/ /b/ /c/ /d/ /e/ /f/ /g/ /h/ /i/ /j/ /k/ /l/ /m/ /n/ /o/ /p/ /kw/ /r/ /s/ /t/ /u/ /v/ /w/ /ks/ /y/ /z/

The songs for each individual letter include the corresponding sounds.

Following are two examples of the individual letter songs.

A Song

A is a vowel, a letter in the alphabet

A, A, A, A (Short Vowel A Sound)

There was a cat

Wearing a hat

Taking a nap

On my lap

A, A, A, A (Long Vowel A Sound)

I found a snake

Who was brave

Playing a game

In the rain

A, A, A, A (Short Vowel A Sound) A, A (Long Vowel A Sound)

Write an uppercase A in the air

Write a lowercase a in the air

A, A, A, A (Short Vowel A Sound) A, A (Long Vowel A Sound)

A is a vowel, a letter in the alphabet

Z Song

Z is a consonant, a letter in the alphabet

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

I saw a zebra

At the zoo

It was freezing In a blizzard

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

I did a puzzle

Of a zombie

Playing jazz

It was amazing

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

Write an uppercase Z in the air

Write a lowercase z in the air

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

Z is a consonant, a letter in the alphabet

As noted in the descriptions of the songs obtained on the Have Fun Teaching, LLC website www.havefunteaching.com, the songs were created for learning the letters and letter sounds. The music may also be accessed on YouTube by typing "Have fun teaching alphabet songs" in the search window. Although the music may be accessed for free, I purchased the CD for use in my own classroom a few years ago.

Co-researchers used educational rap music for 20 minutes, four days a week, for six weeks, to teach phonemic awareness skills. The implementation of rap music was new to the district, and was being utilized solely for the purpose of this research study. I observed co-researchers when rap music was implemented, and recorded all field notes on an observation field notes protocol (see sample in Appendix E) that included both descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell, 2007). I used observations to obtain accurate, thick, and rich descriptions as part of the phenomenological reduction phase (Moustakas, 1994). I facilitated one focus group

after all interviews and observations had been completed. The group was comprised of all educators involved in the study. I asked focus group questions based on educators' responses to interview questions (Creswell, 2007) and also based on specific behaviors witnessed during the observations. Data was collected from each of the three schools within the six week period of implementation of the rap music.

I collected documents first to ensure students met the criteria for the classrooms selected to be utilized for this study. I conducted interviews prior to the implementation of the educational rap music in an effort to prevent responses from being biased based on what the co-researchers experienced. After initial interviews were completed, only then was the music utilized in the classrooms as noted above, at which time observations were conducted. I then conducted post interviews to collect data on the experiences of the co-researchers of using the educational rap music. As the final step in data collection, I facilitated one focus group based on information gathered from interviews and observations. I utilized the focus group to gain collective information from the group after they had an opportunity to individually express themselves after the intervention of using educational rap music in the classroom.

After I had collected and transcribed all data, I analyzed it. I utilized *epoche* to bracket out my own experiences and feelings (Moustakas, 1994). Using phenomenological reduction, I derived a textural description of the essences and meanings of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I utilized imaginative variation to derive structural descriptions and synthesized the structural and textural descriptions in order to arrive at the essence of the shared experiences of the co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994).

The Researcher's Role

The researcher is a participant, and the participants are co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). I served as human instrument in this study in the capacity of non-participant observer. As the key instrument, I first taught the co-researchers the process of using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness. Next, I collected data by examining documents, interviewed participants, observed behaviors, and conducted a focus group (Creswell, 2007). Although I am not working in any of the classrooms, I am familiar with all of the teachers, some of the paraprofessionals, and some of the students. I am a special education teacher employed in Smith County, having previously taught for two years in one of the self-contained classrooms being utilized in this study. I do not have any oversight over the classrooms being utilized in this study. I continue to teach in Smith County, although in a different capacity. I currently serve students with emotional and/or behavior disorders but continue to have an interest in teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities to read. I bring to the study my own belief that students with IQs within the range of 55 to 70 can learn to read and can benefit from instruction in phonemic awareness using rap music. I believe that students in the self-contained special education classroom should be taught how to read through building phonemic awareness skills, not just through being taught functional sight words. My beliefs may influence how I view the data.

Data Collection

An important feature of qualitative research is rigorously collecting multiple forms of data rather than relying on a single source, and then reviewing that data to make sense of them (Moustakas, 1994). Data collection methods included document review, two semi-structured individual interviews, observations, and one focus group. I previously explained the reasons for

the placement of each data collection tool under the procedures section. Prior to the implementation of educational rap music, I conducted the initial individual interview with each of the co-researchers using semi-structured open-ended questions. I conducted interviews twice, once prior to implementing rap music, and then after this phase of the study. To ensure the validity of the interview questions, literature that anchors each question has been discussed (Creswell, 2007). I observed participants during the implementation of the educational rap music. Observations allowed me to obtain accurate, thick, and rich descriptions (Creswell, 2007). Following Creswell's suggestions, I recorded researcher field notes on an observation field notes protocol (Appendix E) that included both descriptive and reflective notes. After I completed all observations, I conducted a second individual using a different set of semi-structured questions. I then conducted one focus group based on specific behaviors observed in co-researchers and based on the answers to the questions obtained during interviews. I recorded and transcribed data, and later used phenomenological reduction to determine if there were emerging themes or patterns as part of the data analysis process (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Documents

Documents are a valuable source of data that can be accessed at the convenience of the researcher, and then examined in an unobtrusive manner (Creswell, 2009). Public and private documents are two types of data researchers use for data collection purposes (Creswell, 2009). To ensure students enrolled in the research classrooms had been identified within an IQ range of 55 to 70, I reviewed Individual Education Plans (IEPs). After I received approval from the Coordinator of Special Programs to obtain the confidential and obscured data, I collected the present levels of performance section of the IEPs from each co-researcher. The co-researchers

obscured all identifying information to protect student identity. If students did not have an IQ between 55 and 70, co-researchers included them in the activity; however, I instructed co-researchers to consider only those with the desired IQ when addressing interview questions. I used the present levels of performance for each individual to determine if students currently possess phonemic awareness skills. I also used the present levels of performance to identify deficits in processing ability. Knowing the present levels of performance aided me in addressing research question two: In what ways does using educational rap music influence building students' phonemic awareness skills? Additionally, for the purpose of identifying if educational rap music influences student learning, I obtained work samples based on phonemic awareness from each of the primary educators in each of the participating classrooms. Co-researchers obscured all identifying information and each work sample was labeled with an alphabet letter for each student in the participating classrooms prior to conducting interviews, and discussed with teachers and paraprofessionals during the interview process. I obtained a second work sample in the same manner as the first, after the completion of the music phase of the research, and then discussed the samples with educators during the post interviews, and during the focus group.

Interviews

I collected data from co-researchers during the semi-structured interviews by using initial interview questions, and post intervention interview questions. Semi-structured interviews consist of open-ended questioning about the topic of study, allowing the researcher to further probe the participants about their experiences, and discuss specific topics in detail (Patton, 2002). In phenomenological research, Dukes (1984) asserted that open-ended interviews should be conducted with each participant over a sufficient amount of time to capture all or most of the

phases of the experience. This type of interview design provides opportunity for dialogue between participants and the researcher, and therefore, gains more than outward reactions and thoughts. Interview questions allow the researcher to inquire about participants' "experiences and expectations related to the program, the thoughts they have concerning program operations, processes, and outcomes, and about any changes they perceive in themselves as a result of their involvement in the program" (Boyce & Neal, 2006, p. 3). Once I received IRB approval and prior to beginning this study, I established content validity by having the interview questions reviewed by other professionals not involved in this study to ensure clarity of the questions, and that wording was appropriate for the participants being interviewed (Creswell, 2007). Prior to interviewing the co-researchers, I engaged in the process of *epoche*, as mentioned earlier, so that my own biases would not influence the interviews. I audio recorded all interviews to ensure accuracy in the documentation of the collected data (Creswell, 2007). I conducted all interviews using Audacity on my laptop, and with an iPad recording application in place that served as a backup device. I facilitated all interviews in the educators' classrooms, after school on a day convenient to the co-researchers and me. I took notes as I recorded to capture my own thoughts during the interview process. Interview sessions lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. I utilized interviews to address all research questions by capturing individual reactions to, and thoughts and experiences of the phenomenon.

Open-Ended Interview Guide

Pre-intervention Interview Questions

1. What are your experiences working with students with disabilities?
2. What are your experiences working with students with mild intellectual disabilities?
3. How were you taught to teach students to learn how to read?

4. What methods were you taught to teach reading to students with disabilities?
5. In what ways, if any, have you tried specifically to build phonemic awareness with your current students? What do you feel was successful about the method(s) you have used?
6. What style of learning does each student in the class seem to prefer? (Use participant pseudonyms to address this question)
7. How do you think student will respond to the use of music to build phonemic awareness skills?
8. What are your perceptions on the ability of students with an IQ between 55 and 70 being able to read?
9. Do you perceive there to be any obstacles for educators or students when attempting to build phonemic awareness skills with rap music?
10. Is there any other information you would like to provide during this interview?

I asked questions one through four to aid in determining the experiences the co-researchers brought to the study. The amount of academic preparation and experience may factor into the experiences of the educators in this research. According to Levine (2006), teacher education programs are not preparing graduates well enough to be able to cope with the expectations of classrooms. Levine reported that schools do not prepare teachers adequately to address the needs of students with disabilities. Levine further identified that teachers should know the subject to be taught, and those with experience should be effective and qualified.

Historically, one of the biggest issues in reading instruction has been whether to teach reading from a whole language approach, or a strong phonics program relating graphemes and phonemes (Ediger, 2010). Educators' personal experiences may influence the teaching practices used in the self-contained classroom.

I used question five to determine if phonemic awareness had been taught, and if so, if best practices and theory had been a factor in the methods chosen. Knowing what methods educators feel are successful to teach phonemic awareness, may influence teaching practices in the self-contained classroom. According to the U. S. Department of Education (2005), teachers should be able to demonstrate teaching of subject matter the moment they enter the classroom, and should use strategies that are research-based. Additionally, strategies should be appropriate to the content area, and teachers should be able to make sound instructional decisions, and adapt the lessons to meet the individual needs for diverse learners (U. S. Department of Education, 2005).

I developed question six in an effort to determine how the students in the classrooms prefer to learn, and if music enhanced or hurt the experiences. Some students may learn very well with music, others may require a more traditional approach of scripted instruction, using visuals, both, or something completely different. Kolb and Kolb (2005) noted that individuals are classified as preferring one of four types of learning: concrete learning experiences, abstract conceptualization, hands on experimentation, and those who prefer reflective observations. Methods used to teach reading to students, must be in harmony with the learning style of the student (Ediger, 2010). A practical application of the multiple intelligence theory would be to recognize each type of intelligence, its importance, and consequently change instructional approaches to maximize student learning while providing for students' interests and skills (Denig, 2004). Learning occurs when individuals are motivated, and motivation is a factor when information is transferred and generalized to other settings and subject matter (Guthrie et al., 1997; Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). When there is a lack of motivation, individuals are less likely to continue a task, and success in that task is adversely affected

(McKinney et al., 1993). Pane and Salmon (2011) noted that pre-service teachers identified that the longer students were engaged with music, motivation increased for literacy learning. Questions seven through nine were developed to gain a perspective of educators' thoughts prior to implementing the rap music to teach phonemic awareness. In an effort to determine the shared experiences of all participants, I developed question eight to specifically bring forth any obstacles educators anticipated they would face- using rap music. Levine (2006) reported that schools do not prepare teachers adequately to address the needs of students with disabilities. "Teaching reading to students with disabilities can be a difficult task" (Cowden, 2010, p. 163) and often vocational and life skills become the primary focus, while literacy skills are largely ignored (Farrell & Elkins, 1991; Hedrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999). In one research study using rap music, younger students could not recall words, but understood the message, but older students could understand the words and messages in all types of rap music (Hall, 1998). When trying to teach phonemic awareness using rap music, not being able to understand words may influence the experiences.

I utilized question ten to encourage the educators to provide insight into any aspect of using rap music to teach phonemic awareness that the researcher may not have considered. Responses to this question may be pertinent for further investigation by the researcher or for future research.

Post Intervention Interview Questions

1. In what ways did the students react to learning with the rap music? (ex. Humming, singing, tapping, etc.)
2. What were your reactions (thoughts, expressions, etc.) when the rap music was implemented for building phonemic awareness?

3. In what way(s) was rap music a valuable tool as you attempted to build phonemic awareness with your students?
4. In what way(s) was rap music a detriment as you attempted to build phonemic awareness with your students?
5. Is there any evidence that information was retained by students after listening to Rap music?
6. What other information would you like to contribute to this interview?

I designed questions one, three, and four to address research question two by identifying the influence of using rap music to build phonemic awareness. Ramey and Campbell (1984) found there to be increased student achievement on IQ tests after teachers used songs and games for instruction. Nunley (2003) identified that music has been found to stimulate each side of the brain simultaneously, generating new neural pathways that are needed for building reading skills. In a study of using background music during learning, Bloor (2009) noted that, "one boy appeared too unsettled: he was wriggling in his seat, looking around him in an apparently agitated manner and seemingly unable to do anything but move to and listen to the music" (p. 261). Students performed better on serial recall when listening to music they disliked, because preferred music was distracting (Perham & Sykora, 2012).

I used question two to elicit the experiences and thoughts of the educators upon implementing rap music to teach phonemic awareness, in an effort to answer research question three. Gardner (1983) identified that teachers should utilize different activities, methodologies, and exercises to better serve students, and to find ways that work for students learning specific concepts. Linking important information to songs and chants has been a method employed for many years to motivate students (Heywood, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). Educators are able to

introduce new concepts by pairing them with music. Students are successful at recalling information when linked to familiar tunes or songs, thus keeping the student engaged in the learning process (Yopp & Yopp, 1996).

I asked question six to encourage the educators to provide insight into any aspect of using rap music to teach phonemic awareness that the researcher may not have considered. Responses to this question may be pertinent for further investigation by the researcher or for future research.

Observations

Phenomenologists agree that a valuable approach to data collection is with observations made while spending time with, and while in the proximity of the participants, as they experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Dukes, 1984; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). I conducted three scheduled observations in each classroom as a non-participant observer. The observations took place once every two weeks in the six week period of the data collection phase, in each of the classrooms for 20 minutes during literacy instruction. I conducted observations at a time designated by the co-researchers. I observed the elementary and one high school classroom between 9:00 and 9:20 a.m. on different days of the week. The other high school classroom was observed between 1:00 and 1:20 p.m. I chose different days of the week each time to allow for a different perspective. This allowed for nine total observations within the district. I noted observations on the observation field notes protocol (Appendix E) to ensure all behaviors were recorded accurately and analyzed for greater description (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) noted that during observations, the researcher will record both descriptive and reflective notes in an effort to capture the physical setting, a chronology of specific activities, and personal reactions to what is being observed. I took notes during the observations that described what I saw and heard, in what order activities occurred, and reflected on the

experience of what I observed. I used observations to address research questions one and two: What obstacles do the students, teachers, and paraprofessionals face while using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness; and, in what ways does using educational rap music influence building students' phonemic awareness skills?

Focus Group

Focus groups allow for discussion of issues or topics common to the participants in the research, who have knowledge of the topic (Merriam, 2009). Focus groups encompass a few questions that are generally open-ended in an unstructured format, and designed to elicit the outlook and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2009). I used the focus group in this study in combination with other data collection methods. I planned questions (Appendix D) carefully with thought for phrasing to ensure clarity to the individuals being interviewed (Merriam, 2009). I utilized focus groups to collect shared experiences and understandings of using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students with mild intellectual disabilities. After I completed all observations and the final interviews, I invited all educators to participate in the focus group. The focus group took place in my classroom, after school. The focus group took approximately one hour to allow each co-researcher an opportunity to answer all questions. I recorded the focus group discussion using Audacity on my laptop and an iPad as a back-up device for recording information. Richer descriptions of the phenomenon can be obtained from participants as they interact with each other and give consideration to others' views (Patton, 2002). I developed focus group prompts based on the information that I felt I would not obtain from the interviews and observations.

Open-Ended Focus Group Interview Guide

1. What did you enjoy the most from using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness?
2. What did you enjoy the least about using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness?
3. In what ways did the music impact your teaching?
4. In what ways did the music impact student learning?

I analyzed co-researchers' transcripts to create categories, synthesize the information, search for patterns, and interpret the findings. I analyzed the information for meaningful themes, characteristics, and descriptions. I assigned codes to common terms and themes to detect the presence of similarities between the interviews and observation notes recorded from observations in each of three classrooms. I attempted to address all research questions using focus group responses by applying the educators' experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Data Analysis

When analyzing the data, the process outlined by Moustakas (1994) was used. The process involves *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of structural and textural descriptions to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the continuous process of reading the data obtained, I used memoing, reflective writing, and coding. According to Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) memoing is a process that should occur simultaneously with reading, sorting, and coding that "involves recording and writing notes about certain occurrences that seem of vital interest" (p. 144). Memos may trigger thought processes and drive the coding scheme (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Coding is noting what is significant or of interest in segments of the data, and labeling them for the purpose of organizing the information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis

software was utilized for data management, and for the coding process. I attached codes to quotes from the co-researchers. I made interpretations using my own voice. According to Patton (2002), interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order" (p. 480).

Epoche

Moustakas identified *epoche* as a new way of looking at things in an open and fresh way to be able to distinguish and describe. I set aside, or bracketed my own experiences and feelings of the phenomenon in order to provide a complete description of how the participants viewed the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In order to do this, I set aside my own presuppositions that may be influenced by my own beliefs, customs, and prejudices. Patton (2002) described *epoche* as the process in which the researcher "looks inside to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate, or at least gain clarity about preconceptions" (p. 485). In an effort to bracket out my personal beliefs about the use of educational rap music, and about teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities to read, I wrote my own reflections before I investigated the experiences of others. I detailed my own experiences with the phenomenon being studied, and then focused on the co-researchers' experiences. My reflections were noted as memos in ATLAS.ti data analysis software for later retrieval.

Phenomenological Reduction

I used phenomenological reduction to analyze data (Moustakas, 1994; Schutz, 1970) after I completed each of the interviews and observations in order to prepare for the focus group. I collected data from all schools simultaneously. Schutz (1970) described phenomenological reduction as bracketing judgments of the phenomenon and reducing cognitive experiences down

to the essence. I set aside my own presuppositions that may be influenced by my own beliefs, customs, and prejudices. In doing so, I was "open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). The next step in the process was looking at data repeatedly and describing. According to Moustakas (1994), this is an ongoing process of "look and describe, look again and describe, look again and describe" (Moustakas, 1994, p 90). Describing "what" participants experienced in a qualitative research study is providing a textural description, and describing "how" they experienced the phenomenon is a structural description (Moustakas, 1994). I listened for, and listed specific statements made by the co-researchers as they experienced the phenomenon, as well as from the interviews, in preparation for the focus group discussions. I then listened for and listed specific statements made by the co-researchers during the focus group.

The next step in phenomenological reduction is what Moustakas (1994) identified as horizonalization. Horizonalization is listing statements made by participants as they experience the phenomenon, and then giving each equal consideration and value (Moustakas, 1994). Statements should be viewed and recorded as significant in regard to the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas noted that once all statements are listed, those that are irrelevant to the research, are repetitive, or overlap, should be deleted, and once the process is complete, only horizons "the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (p. 97) will remain. Those that remain will be clustered into themes and meanings (Moustakas, 1994).

Providing individual and composite textural descriptions was the next step in the research process (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994) individual textural descriptions are "An integration, descriptively, of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research

participant" (p. 180); and composite textural descriptions are "an integration of all of the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural description" (p. 180). When I analyzed the data, it was reported using textural language, focusing on the qualities of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Imaginative Variation

Moustakas (1994) asserted that the step in the research process that follows phenomenological reduction is Imaginative Variation. Imaginative Variation is using the imagination to vary possible meanings and perspectives of the phenomenon in order to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience (Moustakas, 1994). The goal is to identify how the "experience of the phenomenon came to be what it is" and accounting for "the 'how' that speaks to conditions that illuminate the 'what' of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). Describing "what" participants experienced in a qualitative research study is providing a textural description, and describing "how" they experienced the phenomenon is a structural description (Moustakas, 1994). The combination of these descriptions allowed for developing the essence of the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas identified six themes that the researcher should consider "that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others" (p. 99). Once considered and identified, structural qualities were clustered into themes, then incorporated into the textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Synthesis of Meaning and Essence

Once I obtained structural and textural descriptions from each co-researcher, they were integrated to arrive at a universal description of the essence of the experiences. This was the

final step in the data analysis phase of the phenomenological research process (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

In a qualitative study, the researcher should provide evidence that the descriptions and analysis provided is representative of the situation and persons involved (Merriam, 2009). In order to obtain this trustworthy data needs to be credible, confirmable, dependable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I utilized memoing, thick descriptions, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and an audit trail.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the researcher being able to provide accurate representation of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility includes stating any bias that the researcher brings to the study, how and to what extent the researcher was engaged in the study, providing detail about the site and participants, collecting and triangulating multiple sources of data, reporting any discrepant or negative information, member checks, and peer debriefing.

Memoing. Memoing is reviewing the data repeatedly and writing thoughts, ideas and short phrases of information into the margins in an effort to document reactions to the data collected (Creswell, 2007). Information within the memos may include ideas about patterns emerging, or descriptions of specific aspects of the phenomenon or setting of the research (Schwandt, 2007). I used memoing during all data collection methods by writing notes in the margins. I later transcribed those notes into ATLAS.ti data analysis software.

Thick description. As I wrote about the key findings of this study I used thick, rich details. I used direct quotations from the co-researchers, and included information from

observations to provide thick, rich, details. Using thick description is "to interpret data by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 296). Descriptions aid in determining if the research is transferable between the researcher and participants, as well as to other settings and environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Descriptions also provide valuable information about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Triangulation. Triangulation allows comparisons of the data to look for commonalities and provides for credibility (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I made use of multiple sources of information including documents, interviews, observations, and a focus group discussion to look for and to support emerging themes and patterns. Through the use of coding, memoing, peer debriefing, and member checks, data was triangulated. Triangulation was important to establish that validity had been met and was not only possible, but also necessary for discovery of genuine meaning found within actions or events as they were uncovered by observing them from different perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Schwandt, 2007).

Peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is defined as being when a "fieldworker confides in trusted and knowledgeable colleagues and uses them as a sounding board for one or more purposes" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 222). Utilizing peer debriefing allows the researcher to collaborate with others who are impartial to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I utilized peer debriefing by providing an analysis of the transcripts connected to the identified themes to colleagues familiar with teaching students with intellectual disabilities and some familiar with teaching reading. Colleagues were asked to review the information and provide feedback. Feedback, which ensured credibility, was then provided from the reviewers, (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). There were no changes made to the data as a result of the feedback. Peer debriefing

would have also been used to seek colleague reactions had any ethical or political dilemmas been presented during the research, to gain others' perspectives or advice (Schwandt, 2007).

Member checks. Member checking involves taking the gathered and analyzed data back to the participants to check for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Schwandt, 2007). Member checks are critical for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and are used to verify findings for confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Schwandt, 2007). Creswell (2007) identified member checks as the most critical method to establish trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). I utilized member checks after interviews had been transcribed. I provided each co-researcher with a copy of the transcripts from her interview. I asked for each co-researcher to review the transcript to ensure critical experiences were not neglected. I also asked each co-researcher to use a red pen to further elaborate on the experience(s) noted, or to schedule a time to meet with me so that I may record any additions or corrections. I once again utilized member checks after the focus group discussion. I provided each co-researcher with a copy of the transcript from the focus group discussion and the same procedure was followed as outlined for interviews. I then asked each co-researcher to specifically review her statements only. Schwandt (2007) stressed the importance that when using member checks, the researcher takes special precautions not to introduce bias so that participants are not influenced.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified dependability as being able to show consistent findings, and that findings are able to be repeated. In a qualitative research study, it is important to be able to track what processes and procedures were used for the collection and interpretation of data. By providing detailed and thorough explanations of how the data was collected and analyzed, the researcher is providing an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Audit trail. An audit trail is an organized, system of maintaining all documentation related to the research that is reviewed by an independent third-party (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2007). Maintaining an audit trail that provides transparent descriptions of thoughts and rationale for all choices and decisions made during the research is critical for dependability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I was able to achieve dependability by providing a description of how data was collected (Appendix J) and analyzed (Appendix K).

Confirmability

Confirmability is ensuring that the results reported are the findings of the research and not "the outcome of the biases or subjectivity of the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 126). In order to achieve confirmability, the researcher needs to ascertain and reveal the decision trail for public assessment and discernment (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Providing an audit trail will allow for confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Transferability

Transferability is being able to provide the reader enough information about the phenomenon of the study to use it for comparison of other cases in an effort to establish any degree of similarity in which findings might be transferred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, I provided thick, rich descriptions of the shared experiences of the co-researchers. Descriptions aid in determining if the research is transferable between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007) and also to other settings and environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Ethical Considerations

Protecting the co-researchers is an ethical concern and vital to the integrity of the research study. The researcher has the responsibility to inform and protect the co-researchers.

Creswell (2007) advised that regardless of the research approach utilized, it is imperative to seek permission from a human subjects review board. I received IRB approval prior to the commencement of the study. I obtained consent from all co-researchers by having each complete the Consent form (Appendix B). In order to protect confidentiality I used pseudonyms to identify all co-researchers and the research sites (Creswell, 2007). I explained confidentiality to all co-researchers.

I employed cautionary measures to secure research related data and records. Data is being kept in a locked filing cabinet for three years to protect the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2007). I am the only person with access to the data. In an effort to prevent any misunderstandings, I explained to co-researchers that data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for three years upon completion of the research study. All data stored on the computer is password protected. Audio recordings will be destroyed after three years after the completion of the study. I accurately reported findings to protect the integrity of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Summary

I utilized a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study to understand teachers' and paraprofessionals' experiences and perceptions of using rap music in Smith County self-contained special education classrooms, as they teach phonemic awareness skills, and the impact it has on those who experience it. I chose the site due to the number of self-contained special education classrooms containing students who have been identified with an IQ within the range of 55 to 70. I recruited co-researchers using a purposive sampling method, to ensure they were all educators in self-contained special education classrooms.

I used three research questions to guide the study. I obtained data from different sources throughout this study, including documents, interviews, observations, and a focus group. In an

effort to ensure trustworthiness the research data needs to be credible, confirmable, dependable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In order to obtain credibility, I utilized memoing, thick descriptions, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. To achieve confirmability and dependability, I incorporated a data collection audit trail (Appendix J) and a data analysis audit trail (Appendix K). Finally, in order to assure transferability, I utilized thick descriptions.

I employed the process outlined by Moustakas (1994) when analyzing the data. The process involves *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesizing structural and textural descriptions to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I interpreted the data and attached significance to what was found in order to make sense of the findings.

I gave ethical consideration to protect the co-researchers and data. Confidentiality is important and was maintained. Data is protected and secured. Findings from the research have been accurately reported.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers' and paraprofessionals' perceptions and experiences in three Smith County self-contained special education classrooms, as they used rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified as having mild intellectual disabilities. Since the purpose of Chapter Four is to present the findings from the data analysis, this chapter contains the essence of experiences provided by the co-researchers. I collected and analyzed data from interviews, observations, and one focus group discussion. I provided rich descriptions by including quotes from the co-researchers.

Three research questions were addressed to understand educators' perceptions and experiences in three Smith County self-contained special education classrooms, as they used rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified as having mild intellectual disabilities:

1. What obstacles do the students, teachers, and paraprofessionals face while using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?
2. In what ways does using educational rap music influence building students' phonemic awareness skills?
3. What are educators' perceptions of the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?

Once all data was collected and analyzed, I obtained and integrated structural and textural descriptions to arrive at a universal description of the essence of the shared experiences of the co-researchers. Data analysis went as planned as outlined in Chapter Three.

Co-researchers Profiles

Participants in this study were identified as co-researchers following Moustakas' (1994) approach to a transcendental research design. Six educators agreed to be co-researchers in this study using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities. The range of classroom experience is varied. Three educators work at the high school level, and three educators work at the elementary level. Due to conflicts with scheduling, middle school educators could not agree to participate in this study.

Jill has 20 years of experience. She has taught in grades Kindergarten through twelfth. She has worked in the self-contained setting, resource setting, and in inclusion settings. She currently teaches at the high school level. Jill has spent the last 13 years in the special education self-contained setting working with students with mild intellectual disabilities, and it is where she is currently teaching. When Jill was in school to become an educator, she learned to use strategies involving sight words and phonemic awareness to build reading skills for students. For students with intellectual disabilities, she learned a curriculum with functional words and a functional vocabulary was all that was needed to meet their daily living needs. Jill holds a Master's and Bachelor's degree in Special Education.

Tanya has taught for six years in special education, with four of those years in a self-contained classroom at the elementary level, two years in her current position, and two years in a different elementary school. Additionally, she has two years of experience in an inclusion classroom. Tanya learned to use phonics as the method for teaching students with intellectual disabilities to read, however, she also learned to have students memorize words. Tanya holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Early Childhood Elementary, and is certified in Special Education. Additionally, she has earned a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction.

Tiffany has been working with students with disabilities for 11 years, on various levels including inclusion and in the special education self-contained classroom. She is currently teaching in the self-contained classroom at the high school level, and has been for one year. Tiffany learned to use mostly phonics to teach reading to students with intellectual disabilities. It was noted though, that she had just completed a class on literacy interventions with students with special needs and the professor emphasized the use of word families for teaching reading for students with intellectual disabilities. Tiffany holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, a Master's degree in School Counseling and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Special Education. She has a clear renewable certification in School Counseling and a non-renewable transition certification in Special Education.

Sonya has only been in education for two years, working as a paraprofessional. She has worked with students with mild intellectual disabilities, severe disabilities, and emotional behavior disorders at the high school level only. Her variety of experience comes from being moved into a different setting halfway through her first year in the classroom. She has worked in the special education self-contained classroom and in the inclusion setting. She is currently working in the self-contained classroom. Sonya has had some coursework in college, but most of her experience has been hands-on. Sonya learned to teach reading by using phonetics and rote memory.

Kelly has been working in a self-contained classroom for seven years as a paraprofessional at the elementary level. She is currently working in this setting. Her experience in the classroom is with students who have intellectual disabilities. She has taught them math and reading. Kelly has never had any formal training on how to teach students to read. She has

relied on hands-on experience to teach reading. Kelly does not hold any degrees or certifications.

Carla has never worked in a classroom prior to this school year. This is her first experience working with students with intellectual disabilities as a paraprofessional in the self-contained classroom at the elementary level. She has not had any formal education on teaching students to read. Carla holds two certificates, an Accounting Certificate and a certificate in Medical Transcription.

Results

Themes

After I gathered all data and identified themes from interviews, observations, and the focus group, I analyzed the data using Moustakas' (1994) method for transcendental phenomenology. First, I wanted to provide a description of the relationship between the co-researchers and the phenomenon – using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Moustakas (1994) identified this process as horizonalization. I viewed and listed all statements made by the co-researchers first, then pulled out those that were significant to the experiences and did not change across multiple sources of data. Then, I deleted those that were irrelevant to the research, repetitive, or overlapping. According to Moustakas (1994) once all significant statements have been identified through the process of horizonalizing, they should be clustered into themes and meanings in regard to the phenomenon. Using ATLAS.ti data analysis software I coded the horizons, and then clustered statements into themes and meaningful units as shown in Table 1. Next, I reviewed the transcripts repeatedly looking for patterns in the information and for themes. Once I generated the list of themes, I gave this list to the co-researchers for feedback. The co-researchers were

comfortable with the themes identified. A discussion follows of themes identified from analyzing data collected from semi-structured interviews, observations of each classroom, and one focus group. I included quotes verbatim in the discussion, including any grammatical errors, to allow for the co-researchers' voices to be heard as intended. I used their words as a means to support the identified themes.

Table 1

Open-Codes and Themes

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Effects of Music: Positive	18	Attention or focus
Evidence of learning	10	Retention
Teacher Perceptions/Thoughts: Pre Intervention	27	Students had varied learning styles and preferences.
		Students would like the music.
		Students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read.
Teacher Perceptions/Thoughts: Post Intervention	24	Co-researchers liked using educational rap music.
		Using educational rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Note. Open-codes were analyzed using ATLAS.ti data analysis software to identify themes.

Research Question One

I designed research question one to identify what potential or existing barriers were experienced when using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students

with mild intellectual disabilities. First, although the co-researchers identified negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing as obstacles, they felt that these were minor problems and did not negatively impact the use of educational rap music in the special education classrooms.

Negative student reactions. Educators shared during data collection methods, that there were negative student reactions during the implementation of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness with students identified with a mild intellectual disability. Although the reactions are noted here, the evidence was only indicated at the onset of the study and did not occur across all data collection opportunities. The evidence was not strong enough to support major themes, but is being discussed as concerns identified in this research study.

Boredom. One of the co-researchers identified in both, the interview and focus group discussion, that her students would become bored with the music. Jill noted, "Some of the students tend to become bored with the same song over and over" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). During my first observation, I noticed that the students just looked at the co-researcher and one gave a smile, the other shrugged and sat still in her chair. After my first observation in Jill's classroom, I spoke with Jill about the ability to play more than just one song, as had been discussed at the onset of the study. After that discussion, boredom was no longer an issue. During a subsequent observation and discussion about how things had been going since my last visit, Jill revealed to me, "The students loved to sing and dance to the music. I noticed the students were moving their bodies to the music, and some were tapping feet too" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). I noted during one of my three observations in this classroom, that one of the two students in the room was tapping her toes and the other just sat and smiled. The first observation supported what Jill identified to be an initial obstacle at the high school level, but later observations witnessed students enjoying the music. At the elementary level, an

observation revealed that all but one of the students were moving or engaged with the music in some manner. The student who was not moving to the music was sitting on the rug, with arms crossed, not doing anything. The student appeared to be pouting. Tanya noticed the student and informed me later that the child was upset because he wanted to go to the computer. During later observations, this same student was fully engaged with the music.

Dislike for the music. One co-researcher noted during the focus group that one of her students did not like the music. During the discussion Jill stated, "Not all of my students like rap and did not enjoy listening to the music" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Although this was not a factor in any of the other classrooms involved in this study, Jill's statement is pertinent to address research question one.

Embarrassment. At the high school level, it was evident during observations that some students receiving services in the classrooms involved in this study were embarrassed and would not engage with the music. One of my observations revealed that after twenty minutes of playing the music, the students turned to talk to each other. I overheard one say to the other that the music was fun, but it was embarrassing to have other people in the room. Educators supported what was noted in the observations during the final interviews and the focus group discussion. Tiffany stated, "The only problem that I encountered was with older students who thought that everything we did was too babyish" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). During an observation in the other high school classroom, I noticed that the students looked at each other and giggled. I reflected that I felt this behavior was indicative of embarrassment, however, it is unclear if the student was embarrassed by the music, or by my presence in the classroom while the music was being played. There was not enough evidence across all data

collection methods, or from all educators to support that negative student reactions could be classified as an obstacle in this study, since they only occurred at the initial onset of the study.

I reviewed the data to determine if the special education teachers and paraprofessionals were in agreement that students had negative reactions. Based on the data collected, teachers were the only ones to report negative reactions.

Accessibility. During the observations, final interviews, and the focus group discussion, it came to light that some educators experienced accessibility obstacles. One educator noted there were issues with getting the music to play using the technology available in the classroom. Sonya advised, "The only detriment is that technology is required to use the music. Luckily this music was accessible via multiple avenues including CD, DVD, the World Wide Web, and YouTube" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). The CD player being utilized in this classroom was not working properly, so the educators utilized the website to be able to continue with the study.

Another co-researcher noted that it was not the technology that was the issue, but rather not being able to access the music at the same time each day, which caused behavior issues. Tiffany expressed her thoughts, "Occasionally it became difficult to fit the music in at the exact time of day the students were accustomed, which could result in an issue with the students with OCD" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). When comparing teachers' and paraprofessionals' experiences, teachers and paraprofessionals shared experiences that indicated accessibility was an obstacle.

Timing. Timing appeared to be an issue for some because of the proximity of the classroom in relation to other classrooms where instruction was occurring. When asked about obstacles during the focus group, Tanya noted, "For me it was trying to keep the noise level

down, so that I didn't disturb other classes" (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015). Based on observations in Tanya's classroom, the students would often become excited and somewhat loud, which could have been detrimental to other students in the general education classrooms located near the classroom involved in this study. Tiffany noted, "My biggest obstacle is fitting it into our schedule every day, since there are days that can be like a roller coaster ride, it can get crazy" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015).

Again, in Tiffany's situation, the students experienced issues of a different sort in regard to timing. Tiffany advised that it was difficult to fit the music in at the exact time of day in which the students were accustomed. This became an issue for the students who have Obsessive Compulsive Disorders (OCD) who need things to be predictable and exact, causing some tantrums. She noted, "We used the Promethean Board to play the music and when it would not work correctly and we could not listen to the rap music, then it set off some tendencies" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). During data collection, only teachers expressed experiences with timing issues.

Research Question Two

I developed research question two to identify any influence educational rap music had on building phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. I utilized inductive coding and analyzed the codes for significant statements and meaningful themes. The following themes were discovered from the data, (a) attention or focus and (b) retention.

Attention or focus. Educators acknowledged that the music was a valuable tool in securing the students' attention during the learning process. Carla advised, "The music holds their attention and makes learning more fun" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Kelly added, "I thought it was great because it got the kids to pay attention and want to learn. They sat

and listened and were more focused" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Tanya shared, "The music helped to engage my students" (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015). Sonya stated, "I think we should use the music more often. The students love this, and are picking up the words" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). During observations in each classroom, I noticed that students were paying attention to the songs that were playing. During one specific observation, I noticed that at first, only two students were singing along and repeating the letter sounds in the music, but after a couple of minutes of watching the others, the reminder of the students started to sing along as well. During an observation in yet a different classroom, the students were able to repeat the letter sounds after they heard them on the CD, a good indication that they were able to sustain attention for periods long enough to participate. As noted in a different observation, one student was able to sing the words to the songs being played. Again, his knowledge of the words and sounds was a good indication that he was paying attention to the music. Observations were supportive of what the educators were stating during the final interviews and focus group discussion. Teachers and paraprofessionals were in agreement that the music was beneficial to sustain student attention or focus.

Retention. Through interviews and a focus group discussion, educators identified that the use of educational rap music was beneficial for retention of phonemic awareness skills. Carla specifically stated, "Most of the students are now able to recite phonemic letter sounds" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Jill added to the idea by noting:

> My students appeared to enjoy listening to the music. They have trouble hearing vowel sounds. I think that the over the course of the six weeks, the music did help with retention. I noticed students singing the words to the songs as we worked on worksheets. (Personal communication with Jill, 2015)

Kelly affirmed, “They liked to sing and dance, they were bopping their heads to the beat of the music. Later you could hear them humming the songs” (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). In a final interview when asked if there was any evidence that phonemic awareness information was retained by students after listening to rap music, Kelly acknowledged, “I think so, because they can sing the songs they learned and do stuff to the beat without music” (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015).

Sonya disclosed, “The students seemed to pick up the phonics better with the music. Students retained information better with music, which was evident based on teacher observations and informal assessments taken after finishing with the music” (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). What Tanya noticed was a little more specific that what the other educators were stating.

Tanya noted:

> It leaves a tune in their little heads that seems to always come out again later in the day. Many of my students would recall the sounds of letters based on the songs that they had been singing. Some of my students did pretty good on an informal assessment, that second work sample I gave them the last week we used the uh, the music. They did a little better than before we started, but it wasn’t uh significantly better. I do think the music helped though, because a couple of them started singing the songs when they came to a letter they remembered hearing in the songs. (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015)

Tiffany’s experiences were similar. She noted, “Our students enjoyed the songs and would participate by singing. A steady beat keeps the sounds flowing and gives the students something to reference back and repeat to themselves when they need to figure out a sound in

reading" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). Tiffany provided an example of what she was referring to. She stated, "Two of our students sang along each time and could repeat the letters back without music" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015).

My observations supported what the educators were stating. When I entered Jill's classroom to conduct an observation, Jill was working on an assignment with the students. It was a phonemic awareness activity. I was able to listen to the students interact with Jill during the activity. When asked a question, the students would sing the song from the music we have been using that pertained to the letter and letter sound they were working on. During a different observation in Jill's classroom, she mentioned to the students, "You didn't realize you were learning the whole time you were listening to the music, and now you can complete a worksheet using the information from the songs" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). During an observation in the classroom Sonya works in, I overheard her say to one of the other educators, "I think we should use this music more often. The students love this, and are picking up the words" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). I noticed that while performing a phonemic awareness task in this same classroom, a couple of them were singing the songs they had been listening to over the last few weeks.

During the focus group discussion Kelly asserted, "I felt by having them listening to the music they were learning. Um, the music was getting inside their heads and hard to forget" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Additionally, Kelly stated, "They seemed to do a little better when given the second work sample because they were singing the songs as they worked" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Tiffany supported Kelly when she said, "My students, well, I'm sure all of our students are usually able to remember things for a very short period of time, but I . . . continued to hear them singing the songs even after we finished

with the music." (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). Tiffany and Kelly were both referring to the alphabet songs to teach letters and letter sounds (Appendix H).

Teachers and paraprofessionals were in agreement that the music was beneficial to students for retention of the material heard in the songs, and that students were later able to recall the information needed for academic tasks.

Research Question Three

Research question three sought to understand educators' perceptions of the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. I identified several themes related to this question through my analysis of the data from the interviews and the focus group discussion. These included (a) students had varied learning styles and preferences, (b) students would like the music, (c) co-researchers liked using educational rap music, (d) students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read, (e) using educational rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. What was interesting about the data was that co-researchers felt as if the students would like the music regardless of their learning styles or preferences. In addition, co-researchers shared that they felt students acquired phonemic awareness skills, even after reporting that learning from music was not the preferred learning style. What follows is a detailed discussion of each theme I identified for research question three.

Varied learning styles and preferences. I facilitated initial interviews prior to the implementation of the educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness. The interviews revealed co-researchers thought their students displayed a variety of learning styles and preferences. When I asked co-researchers about their perceptions on the ability of students with an IQ between 55 and 70 being able to read, Carla shared, "I think it depends upon the student.

Some are better with various methods. It just depends on the student" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Jill responded by stating, "Usually computer activities or hands-on, it just depends" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Kelly answered, "I think students prefer to learn from a computer" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Sonya advised, "Most of them have a combination of physical and visual" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). Tanya said, "Some do better with music, songs, and a few who do better with computers. Some do better with repetition, but they don't do as well as they do if they are singing or playing games on a computer" (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015). Tiffany offered, "They seem to do better with listening and being able to repeat it back. Auditory is probably the preferred method" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015).

Students would like the music. During the initial interviews prior to the implementation of the educational rap music, co-researchers were asked how they thought students would respond to the use of music to build phonemic awareness skills. Without hesitation, all co-researchers had positive reactions to the question. Carla noted, "I think they will respond well to it" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Jill stated, "I think they will like it" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Kelly had a little more to offer in her response when she said, "I think music is a great thing for students, and I think they will enjoy learning letters and letter sounds using the rap music" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Sonya's answer was a little more in-depth. She noted, "Music opens all kinds of doors, we have gotten really good responses with music in other areas" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). When asked what she meant by other areas, Sonya added, "I think music is definitely beneficial from behavior to any kind of learning no matter what level. I think the students will have fun with the music and learn from it" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). Tanya stated, "Many

students learn well with music, so it should be used whenever possible" (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015). She also seemed to think that her students would love the educational rap music. Tiffany shared, "What I like about the idea is that it is something they can do and stay on task. I think they are going to love it and learn from it" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). Prior to the intervention, the co-researchers liked the idea of using the music and felt the students would learn from it.

Educators liked using educational rap music. During final interviews and the focus group discussion, co-researchers revealed their reactions and thoughts after using the educational rap music for building phonemic awareness skills. Carla stated, "I saw no way that it was detrimental. I think music is a great way for children to learn. I feel like the music makes learning fun, and grabs the attention of the students" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Jill confided during the focus group, "I thought the music was engaging. I think the students liked the music and by using the rap songs to teach with it helped to engage students in learning" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Then she added, "It made learning the vowel sounds more fun and exciting" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Jill also noted during the interview, "I can't think of anyway it wasn't a good thing. Initially, I thought the students would really benefit from this" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). During the focus group Jill shared, "I think that with more time, the students would benefit from listening to the music to further build phonemic awareness skills" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Kelly confided, "I thought it was great because it got the kids to pay attention and want to learn. They sat and listened and were more focused. There wasn't anything I didn't like about it" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). During the focus group discussion Sonya stated, "I agree with Kelly, but they not only gained skills, but the anticipation of the music" (Personal

communication with Sonya, 2015). She further added, "I always knew that music was beneficial in many ways, but seeing how all the children responded and learned from it made me want to try it in other areas of teaching." (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015). Tanya revealed:

> As a teacher, I love the rap music. It provided an important piece to my teaching. It allowed me to work with phonics in a whole group setting, which also allowed me to emphasize on the phonics sounds that were needed most. (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015)

Tiffany's said:

> For me, educational rap allowed me to make learning fun for even the most severely disabled students in my class. Not all of them have the cognition to learn the alphabet but each one of them enjoyed participating with the music. I also think it was nice to have a break from rote learning, or learning in a different manner. (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015)

Students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read. In order to further address co-researchers' perceptions of using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities, I went back to the data collected during initial interviews to understand their thoughts in regard to students with mild intellectual disabilities ability to learn to read. Their answers were an important element to addressing this research question. Collectively, co-researchers felt that students with mild intellectual disabilities have the ability to learn to read. The co-researchers words shared the following. Carla felt, "I think some of them will be able to, and some of them will not" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). She added, "I have used Hooked on Phonics. I think it's a

good program. We have had some success" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Jill shared:

> I don't know if they will ever be on grade level, but if we can teach them to build from what they have, and if we can give them, help them improve anything that we, you know, are doing a good job. I think we should always give them, um, a rigorous program, something to challenge them, something to help them become more independent. (Personal communication with Jill, 2015)

Jill also offered that to teach reading, she has used "a combination of sight and phonemic. The phonemic [program] was really um, for the students with learning disabilities with higher IQs" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Kelly offered, "They can read if they really try" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). She added, "We use picture cards. We try to get the students to memorize letter sounds and letter names that go with it. At some point, some of it is successful, but some is not" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Sonya's response was short and to the point as well, "I think anything is possible." (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). She shared what she has tried in the past, "We have taught letters and letter sounds, from visual to auditory. We have used tactile methods as well. I have had good success with hands on more than just reading from a book" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). Tanya stated:

> I think that they, most of the students can learn to read, maybe not fluent, not like on grade level, but maybe on a lower grade level. I think it is harder for them, but I think they can get there, most of them (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015).

Tanya then added:

> We also use Hooked on Phonics, and then we do, um, like sight words on the smart board, just rote memory type things. With my students, a lot of them have trouble with rote memory. They may remember today, but not tomorrow. (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015)

When Tiffany was asked her thoughts on students with mild intellectual disabilities learning to read, she answered, "I think it all depends on the approach you use with them. If you find an approach that works with their learning style, they'll read, if you don't, they'll struggle" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). She further shared that she has tried Hooked on Phonics with her students.

Using rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills. During the final interviews and focus group discussion, co-researchers shared that they perceived the music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for their students. Carla shared, "I think music is a great way for children to learn. Most of the students are now able to recite phonemic letter sounds" (Personal communication with Carla, 2015). Jill further contributed, "The music made learning the vowel sounds more fun and exciting. They have trouble hearing vowel sounds. I think that over the course of six weeks, the music did help with retention" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Kelly noted, "They seemed to do a little better when given the second work sample because they were singing the songs as they worked" (Personal communication with Kelly, 2015). Kelly was referring to the students singing the alphabet songs with the letters and letter sounds. Sonya shared, "I feel that even the students with the greatest disability were even able to benefit from the music. Students retained information better with music, which was evident based on teacher observations and informal assessments taken after

finishing with the music" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). Tanya contributed a bit more with her response. She asserted:

> Some of my students did pretty good on an informal assessment, that second work sample I gave them the last week we used the uh, the music. They did a little better than before we started, but it wasn't uh significantly better. I do think the music helped though, because a couple of them started singing the songs when they came to a letter they remembered hearing in the songs. Many of my students would recall the sounds of letters based on the songs that they had been singing. (Personal communication with Tanya, 2015)

Tiffany indicated that she felt the students were building phonemic awareness skills with the rap music. She stated, "Two of our students sang along each time and could repeat the letters back without music, evidence that the students retained what they heard" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015).

Composite Textural Description

The composite textural description is derived from an examination of all of the previous descriptions provided by the co-researchers. The individual descriptions of using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities were integrated into a group, or composite description. The themes to address each research question above were discussed to develop the composite textural description.

All co-researchers were excited to begin using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. In regard to the obstacles to using educational rap music in their respective classrooms, five of the six co-researchers experienced issues. Some of the students who were being served in the classrooms chosen for

this study had negative reactions to the music. Co-researchers reported boredom, embarrassment, and a dislike for the music, causing students to not fully engage with the music in the beginning of the study. However, the co-researchers felt these obstacles were minor and they were able to overcome them with relative ease. Although the co-researchers did not explicitly state how they overcame the issues, they did confide in subsequent observations, interviews, and focus group, that students were engaged, learned the songs, and enjoyed the music. For example, Jill revealed in her final interview, "My students appeared to enjoy listening to the music," and "I think that over the course of six weeks, the music did help with retention. I noticed students singing the words to the songs as we worked on worksheets" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Additionally, Tiffany identified, "Our students enjoyed the songs and would participate by singing if they were able and one student would jump up and down with excitement" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). Tiffany also stated, "It's kind of like I said earlier, not all of my students have the ability or cognition to learn the alphabet but each and every one of them enjoyed the music. They remembered the songs, or at least parts of them, and I would catch them singing them at different times" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015).

Accessibility was an issue for some of the co-researchers, but not all. The technology used to play the music was not working properly and they had to resort to other measures to access the music. The other accessibility issue was not being able to access the music at the same time of day each day, which caused behavior issues in one classroom. All three co-researchers were forced to spend time addressing the issues before they could experience what impact the music would make for both learning and teaching.

In regard to timing being an obstacle, two co-researchers reported issues. One issue was timing the playing of the music, so as to not disturb other classrooms nearby. The other issue was not accessing the music at the same time every day during the research study. There were times when the co-researcher had to deviate from the plan, and this caused behavior issues with students in the classroom.

The co-researchers experienced positive results with the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Co-researchers overwhelmingly agreed that it had a positive impact on attention and focus. They were in agreement that the music held the attention of the students so much so that they were able to retain the words to the songs, which proved to be beneficial when asked to perform later on different assignments and assessments.

To take it a step farther than just sustaining attention and focus, the co-researchers shared that the educational rap music was beneficial for retention. All co-researchers agreed that the students in their classrooms retained phonemic awareness information from the use of the educational rap music. All co-researchers engaged their students in phonemic awareness activities and noticed that the students were singing the songs and repeating the letter sounds they heard in the songs to help in completing the activities. Gardner (1983) identified this ability as having musical intelligence. One co-researcher noted that at first her students were not into the music, but the more they utilized it, the more the students seemed to enjoy it. She acknowledged that the students performed well on an activity after the music intervention had ended.

Regarding special educators' perceptions of using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities, co-researchers advised that

regardless of the students' learning style or preference they would like the educational rap music. Additionally, co-researchers shared they liked using educational rap music and shared reasons why. Co-researchers also perceived that students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read, and upon completion of the study, co-researchers felt that using educational rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Although the following information was not a primary focus of the study, it was retrieved from the data, and I felt it was relevant to report. Co-researchers and observations revealed student engagement with the music when they were dancing, singing, bopping their heads to the music, jumping up and down, clapping, or just moving their bodies to the beat of the music. Although being engaged in itself is not evidence of student learning, the longer they engaged with the music, they increased their motivation for literacy learning, and educators noted improvements in phonemic awareness among students.

In this study, teachers and paraprofessionals shared similar experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Upon careful examination of the collected data, there was never a contradiction between the two groups of co-researchers.

Composite Structural Description

I identified a composite structural description by looking into how the co-researchers perceptions of using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities developed throughout the study. Over the course of six weeks, the co-researchers played the music in their respective classrooms for twenty minutes four days per week. This was a new concept for the co-researchers as they experienced it for the first time

through this study. The co-researchers reported that they enjoyed using the music, and found it to be beneficial for their students in different ways.

Composite Textural and Structural Synthesis

Once I established the textural and structural descriptions separately, I synthesized the information to arrive at a composite textural and structural description of the experiences shared by the co-researchers. What the synthesis revealed was that the co-researchers provided both positive and negative experiences with the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for their students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Issues with negative student reactions, like boredom, a dislike for the music, and embarrassment were initial obstacles faced by a couple of co-researchers. One researcher shared, "Not all of my students like rap and did not enjoy listening to the music" (Personal communication with Jill, 2015). Accessibility and timing created other obstacles for some of the other co-researchers. As noted by one co-researcher, "The only detriment is that technology is required to use the music" (Personal communication with Sonya, 2015). When the CD player would not work the co-researcher had to scramble to find a different way to access the music.

Overall, co-researchers embraced the use of educational rap music for building phonemic awareness skills for their students with mild intellectual disabilities, and some even went so far as to recommend it be utilized for students with lower IQs as well. One co-researcher stated, "I think for our students it is a great way to involve all of the students, at all different levels of learning" (Personal communication with Tiffany, 2015). Overwhelmingly, the special educators found the use of the music to be valuable for sustaining attention/focus, and for retention. They enjoyed having an alternative method to teach skills that they felt had a positive impact on retention of letters and letter sounds. Collectively, the co-researchers shared that they liked the

educational rap music and found it influenced the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills in positive ways for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Summary

The use of semi-structured interviews, observations, and a focus group discussion brought to light the shared experiences of six co-researchers as they utilized educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. The collected and analyzed data revealed several themes. These included (a) attention or focus, (b) retention, (c) varied learning styles and preferences, (d) students would like the music, (e) educators liked using educational rap music, (f) students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read, and (g) using rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills. To ensure trustworthiness and to verify the accuracy of themes, I utilized peer debriefing and member checks. I did not make any changes to the data as a result of these methods.

Regarding research question one; I identified concerns of negative student reactions to include boredom, a dislike for music, and embarrassment. These concerns became evident with the first introduction of the music. Older students did not initially enjoy the music, and this could be attributed to it being a new intervention – a change of routine. Co-researchers shared that students were embarrassed to be seen interacting with the music. Additionally, concerns of accessibility and timing emerged from the stories shared by the co-researchers. There were issues with the CD player working in one classroom, and the co-researcher had to scramble to find an alternative method to access the music. Timing was an issue for a couple of the co-researchers. One had issues when her students would become loud when the music was implemented and this was a disruption to the general education classrooms near the classroom involved in the study. Another co-researcher had issues maintaining a set schedule for using the

music and the change in routine caused behavior issues among her students who were known to require a set schedule due to having OCD. Although there was evidence to support these areas of concern, it was only indicated at the onset of the study and not consistent across all data collection opportunities throughout the study. The evidence was not strong enough to support major themes, so they were identified only as concerns.

Two themes were revealed when analyzing data to address research question two. Research question two focused on the influence that educational rap music had on student learning. The two themes identified were attention or focus and retention. The theme of attention or focus came to light when co-researchers shared that the music held student attention and kept them focused. The second theme for research question two was retention. All co-researchers acknowledged that the students were able to produce more letters and letter sounds when completing tasks related to phonemic awareness, after the music had been implemented. Most co-researchers related increased knowledge to knowing the content of the songs that were played.

For research question three, co-researchers shared students had varied learning styles and preferences. Regardless of learning style or preference, co-researchers felt that students would like the educational rap music. Additionally, co-researchers shared they liked using educational rap music and shared reasons why. Co-researchers also perceived that students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read, and upon completion of the study, co-researchers felt that using educational rap music supported the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. When examining teachers' responses compared to paraprofessionals' responses, overwhelmingly, teachers and paraprofessionals were in agreement

and shared positive reactions to the use of educational rap music being utilized in their respective classrooms.

Chapter Five begins with a brief summary of the findings. Following this, I present a discussion of the findings in relationship to the theoretical frameworks and relevant literature, limitations, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

Since there is difficulty for educators in building and retaining phonemic awareness skills, vocational and life skills are the primary focus for students with mental impairments, and literacy factors are largely ignored (Farrell & Elkins, 1991; Hedrick et al., 1999). There is a gap in the literature on whether educational rap music might impact learning of phonemic awareness skills for students identified with mild intellectual disabilities. In order to address this gap and determine if it this method would be a viable option, it is necessary to understand the shared experiences of educators using educational rap music for this purpose.

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand teachers' and paraprofessionals' perceptions and experiences in three Smith County self-contained special education classrooms, as they used rap music to teach phonemic awareness skills to students identified as having mild intellectual disabilities.

Three research questions framed the study:

1. What obstacles do the students, teachers, and paraprofessionals face while using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?
2. In what ways does using educational rap music influence building students' phonemic awareness skills?
3. What are educators' perceptions of the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness?

I addressed the research questions through the use of semi-structured interviews, observations, and one focus group discussion. I collected, transcribed, and then analyzed the data, and used ATLAS.ti to develop codes. I identified significant statements themes, and

subthemes. Chapter Four included an overview of the themes, subthemes, textural and structural descriptions, and a composite textural and structural synthesis. I also provided the shared experiences of the co-researchers in narrative format in Chapter Four. Included in this chapter is a brief summary of the findings, a discussion of those findings related to theoretical frameworks and relevant literature, limitations, methodological and practical implications, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Findings

The first research question brought to light the obstacles that the co-researchers faced during the study. As I listened to their stories, it was evident that some students initially had negative reactions to the use of the rap music. According to the co-researchers, some students were bored when only one song was being utilized, some students claimed they did not like the music, and other students were embarrassed to engage with the music, with co-researchers noting that some students thought it was "babyish." However, later, as the research progressed, co-researchers' statements revealed that students who initially reacted negatively did not maintain that stance, but had become positive. Additionally, accessibility created some issues for co-researchers when the technology was not working and they had to scramble to find an alternative method to play the music. The final concern revealed in regard to obstacles was timing. One co-researcher had to find a time that would not be distracting to the surrounding general education classrooms, because the students in her classroom were loud when the music was being utilized. Another co-researcher found it difficult to remain on a schedule throughout the entire study, and that caused behavior issues for students with OCD who required a set routine.

Although there was evidence that identified three areas of concern in regard to obstacles negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing they were evident at the onset of the study,

but not consistent across all data collection opportunities throughout the study. These three areas of concern were discussed in Chapter Four; however, the evidence was not strong enough to support them as major themes.

In response to research questions two and three, the data revealed several themes. The themes I identified for research question two included attention or focus and retention. I identified five themes for research question three. They included co-researchers liked the use of educational rap music, students had varied learning styles and preferences, students would like the music, students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to learn to read, and co-researchers felt the rap music had a positive impact on the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) the synthesis of meaningful units and themes in Chapter Four is to be presented in Chapter Five in order to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the co-researchers. In order to achieve this purpose, the themes found in Chapter Four have been synthesized to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon. The statements presented here reflect an overarching understanding of the research questions and theoretical frameworks guiding this study. The essence of the phenomenon is detailed below:

1. Although negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing were identified as obstacles, they were minor and did not have a negative impact on the use of educational rap music in the special education classrooms.
2. The music had a positive influence on student learning in different ways.
3. Educators' perceptions of the phenomenon supported its use in the special education classroom for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Implications and Discussions Related to the Theoretical Framework

Researchers agree that a theory should explain relationships that are relevant to the phenomenon, should bridge the observed relationships to what has already been established, and should allow that information to be verified and revised to encourage and prompt further investigative research (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Schwandt, 2007). Three underlying theoretical structures supported the research: multiple intelligences, sociocultural theory; and experiential learning theory.

Multiple Intelligence Theory

Multiple intelligences (MI) theory developed by Howard Gardner (1983) posits that there are seven intelligences: musical, linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner (1983) founded the theory based on the belief that individuals possess a wide array of intelligences that could not be measured by a standard IQ test. MI theory further posits that each intelligence is independent/separate, but interacts with other intelligences to produce intelligent behaviors (Gardner, 1983). Gardner's multiple intelligence theory supports that students and teachers have different ways of learning, but for most individuals a predominant style emerges (Gardner, 1983; Kassell, 1998). By using rap music in this research study, those with predominant music intelligence may have been able to develop phonemic awareness skills when other pedagogical designs have failed. As educators encountered the use of educational rap music in their classrooms, they learned more about their students, and developed perceptions about the benefits of using the music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual impairments. These perceptions were developed throughout the research study and came to light after analyzing data collected from interviews, observations, and a focus group discussion. Overall, the co-researchers felt the music had a

positive influence on student learning, as demonstrated by the students' ability to recall the rhythm and words to the songs and use them to complete phonemic awareness activities after the music ended. Musical intelligence is being able to recognize tone, rhythm, patterns, and pitch, and use them in performances (Gardner, 1983). This appeared to be the case based on communication with the co-researchers as they reported that students liked the beat, remembered the tunes, and learned from the songs. Co-researchers overwhelmingly agreed that the students were able to listen to music and use this knowledge in later tasks involving phonemic awareness, thus supporting their students have some musical intelligence. Prior to implementing the educational rap music in the classroom, the co-researchers identified that they thought students would enjoy learning with music, but were not aware of the influence that this might have in the students' ability to retain phonemic awareness skills. Although this ties into multiple intelligences, it is better suited to demonstrate Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory at work in this study.

Experiential Learning Theory

The experiential learning theory (ELT) is built upon six propositions from human learning and development (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). These include learning is a process; all learning is relearning; learning is driven by conflict, differences, and disagreement; learning is holistic and occurs through thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). Additionally, learning occurs as a result of interactions between the person and the environment, assimilating new experiences into existing concepts, and accommodating existing concepts to new experience. (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002). Through the process of learning, knowledge is created (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Related to this, researchers noted that individuals

prefer one of four types of learning: concrete learning experiences, abstract conceptualization, hands on experimentation, and those who prefer reflective observations (Felder & Brent, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2002).

Understanding that students have different learning styles paves the way for educators to design and employ lessons and activities that allow students to experience learning in the four stages identified in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. Having students listen to musical recordings of the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds in this study provided educators an opportunity for students to experience what they are learning by interacting with the music, in such ways as singing along, body movements, finger snapping, or hand clapping. The co-researchers shared that students engaged with the music and experienced learning phonemic awareness in a different manner than just rote memorization.

The co-researchers revealed that students were singing, dancing, and tapping their feet to the beat of the music. Although students may not have had the cognition for learning the alphabet, each of the students enjoyed the interaction with the music. According to Kolb (1984) this is a part of the learning experience.

Throughout this study, co-researchers shared their stories of their students being engaged with the music. Using the music made learning fun. Observations supported what the co-researchers had to share during the final interviews and focus group discussion. Students were engaged and experiencing learning while using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills. The co-researchers identified that the students were not only engaged with the music, but with each other as well. This is a component to experiential learning, but also ties into Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) sociocultural theory. The students situated in the schools chosen for this study shared common characteristics, and incurred social interaction and communication

based on the phenomenon of using rap music to learn phonemic awareness skills. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the experience of interactions with others allows for the integration of information into each student's own mental capacities, thus learning might occur (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Sociocultural Theory

The sociocultural theory posits that learning occurs on two levels, first through interactions with others, and then the information is integrated into the individual's own mental capacities (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). The sociocultural approach attempts to be nonjudgmental and to understand and employ the practices of culturally diverse groups to foster literacy teaching (Davidson, 2010). In this study, there were two groups of co-researchers, special education teachers and paraprofessionals, who utilized educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Social interaction is vital to cognitive development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Four aspects guide Vygotsky's sociocultural theory: mind, tools, zone of proximal development (ZPD) and community of practice (Mahn, 1999). The aspect of mind is based on the idea that mental habits and functions depend upon social interactions and communication (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Tools, according to Vygotsky (1981), include "language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings and so on" (p. 137) and aid in the development of communication and cognitive functioning by moving from the social to psychological planes. Vygotsky believed that cognitive development was influenced by the individual's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the discrepancy between the mental age and the level where the child is ready to explore

an area of learning, but needs social and adult interaction and scaffolding of information to fully develop an understanding (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Learning a subject domain is viewed as a process of becoming a member of a community of practice. Communities of practice was defined by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) as "Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). The co-researchers in this study provided an atmosphere conducive to learning according to Vygotsky's beliefs. The music brought about social interaction and communication between the co-researchers and the students in each classroom. As noted during one observation, the co-researchers were going to each student and interacting with them – holding their hands while they danced, smiling at them, singing to them, or dancing with them. Students were interacting with each other. Co-researchers shared that their students were engaged with each other and the music. They also shared that the music proved to be valuable for the other students in their classrooms as well, those with moderate intellectual disabilities. It was brought to light that the students were able to retain the songs, thus confirming what Vygotsky believed about the ZPD in regard to the need for interaction with peers and adults and scaffolding of information to fully develop an understanding (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Although they were advised not to consider any student not having a mild intellectual disability, it was presented here to support the theoretical underpinning for the study.

As noted by Vygotsky, communities of practice are an important part of the learning process. However, they are not always easily identified, nor are they explored systematically (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Learning requires mutual engagement in which the individuals share practices, but also shares those practices within the community and

organization. The co-researchers shared that they enjoyed watching the students interact and engage with the music during the intervention.

Implications and Discussions Related to the Literature

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the themes found in Chapter Four have been synthesized into three significant statements. The statements presented here reflect an overarching understanding of the research questions and theoretical frameworks guiding this study. The significant statements are as follows:

1. Although negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing were identified as obstacles, they were minor and did not have a negative impact on the use of educational rap music in the special education classrooms.
2. The music had a positive influence on student learning in different ways.
3. Educators' perceptions of the phenomenon supported its use in the special education classroom for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing as obstacles

Co-researchers experienced negative student reactions when the educational rap music was initially implemented. The negative reactions included boredom, a dislike for the music, and embarrassment. Perham and Sykora (2012) sought to explore if liked music improved performance compared to disliked music. What Perham and Sykora found was that students performed better on serial recall when listening to music they disliked, because preferred music was distracting. They concluded that music was found to be a hindrance in the learning process (Martens et al., 2011; Perham & Sykora, 2012). The co-researchers who experienced negative student reactions noted that initially they were concerned, and did not feel their students were learning anything from it. Some research indicates that music is beneficial in building literacy

skills (Heywood, 2004; Legg, 2009; Martens et al., 2011; Pane & Salmon, 2011; Slevc & Miyake, 2006; Wong et al., 2007; Yopp & Yopp, 1996), and other research stipulates it may impair cognitive abilities (Martens et al., 2011; Perham & Sykora, 2012). After repeated use of the music, the co-researchers shared positive experiences. The research of Pane and Salmon (2011) identified that pre-service teachers felt that music activated background knowledge, thus increasing literacy learning. Pane and Salmon noted that pre-service teachers identified that the longer students were engaged with music, motivation increased for literacy learning. This finding could be why one co-researcher said that her students often become excited and somewhat loud, which could have been detrimental to other students in the general education classrooms located near the classroom involved in this study. Because of this, co-researchers shared that timing could be an issue and that special education teachers need to plan to use educational rap music during non-instructional times in the near-by general education classrooms. Research indicated that background music has been shown to calm those who are hyperactive (Cripe, 1986; Scott, 1970), but this was a different story as told by the co-researchers. The music was not calm in nature, but rather upbeat, rhythmic, and fast paced, therefore causing excitability. In this research study, co-researchers acknowledged that the music was a valuable tool in securing students' attention during the learning process. Research conducted by Savan (1999) indicated music improves students' concentration. Although some research claimed to elicit excitability, other research indicated background music has been shown to calm those who are hyperactive (Cripe, 1986; Scott, 1970). Additionally, research has been proven to calm individuals with an intellectual disability (Gregoire, 1984; Reardon & Bell, 1970).

Other issues in regard to timing were noted when students would become upset when a co-researcher could not remain on the scheduled time each day. The students required a set schedule due to the nature of their disabilities.

Positive influence on student learning in different ways

Co-researchers overwhelmingly shared that the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities had a positive influence on student learning in different ways. A major theme that emerged from research conducted by Bond (2012) was that incorporating music instruction in the early childhood classroom provided extra-musical benefits, such as building phonological awareness skills, listening skills, and developing vocabulary.

Co-researchers shared that the music made learning fun. Students are successful at recalling information when linked to familiar tunes or songs, thus keeping the student engaged in the learning process (Heywood, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). Pane and Salmon (2011) studied using music to scaffold diverse children's literacy development and discovered that pre-service teachers found that students from all backgrounds could relate to music, resulting in increased confidence and comfort in their literacy learning. Linking important information to songs and chants has been a method employed for many years to motivate students (Heywood, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). Co-researchers noted that students indicated enjoyment of the music by clapping, dancing, singing, moving to the beat of the music, bopping their heads, and patting their hands on tables.

Another significant theme that I identified from this study was that students retained what they were hearing and learning, thus they were able to apply it in subsequent phonemic awareness activities. Areas of the brain are developed and strengthened with the use of music,

including those involved with higher-order thinking and retaining information (Snyder, 1997). Research emphasized a common belief that words set to music are committed to memory better than those that are spoken (Martens et al., 2011; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). The context in which music is perceived plays a role in activating knowledge and influencing processing events, whereas words are processed more efficiently when expected in given linguistic contexts (Tillman, 2012). Cognitively, sound acts as a scaffold to support processing and sequencing temporal information heard in the environment, and influences manipulating and learning serial order information in other circumstances (Conway, Pisoni, & Kronenberger, 2009; Tillman, 2012). Exposure to rich music experiences will aid in keeping a brain both pliable and adaptable and appears to activate processing systems shared with cognitive domains, such as memory and learning (Humpal & Wolf, 2003; Kuzmich, 2010; Patel, 2010; Snyder, 1997). Long-term exposure to music enhances the brain's ability to encode linguistic patterns (Bidelman et al., 2011). Music provides more predictable temporal patterns than speech, making it easier to be perceived by low functioning students (Lim, 2010). In research studies using rap music to determine the effects on literacy, specifically reading proficiency and vocabulary development, it was identified that students made gains when music was employed (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001). Results of the studies indicated that reading proficiency, vocabulary, and the amount of time spent reading increased utilizing rap music as an educational tool (Morrow-Pretlow, 1994; Pinkard, 2001).

Co-researchers' perceptions of the use of educational rap music

Co-researchers' perceptions of using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills, supported its use in the special education classroom for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Co-researchers shared they felt students with mild intellectual disabilities were able

to learn to read. Moats (2010) acknowledged that intelligence is not a predictor of reading success in the beginning stages. Historically, children with intellectual disabilities were not expected to learn to read, and care providers did not regard reading instruction to be a priority for these students (Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Only one out of every five children with intellectual disabilities attains even a small amount of literacy skills (Katims, 2000, 2001). Reading achievement often lags behind the mental ages of students with intellectual disabilities (Barker et al., 2013). "In an effort to focus on students with learning disabilities, research on preventing reading failure has often excluded students with below average IQs" (Allor et al., 2010, p. 445). Based on research studies of individuals with mild intellectual disabilities, Goetz et al. (2008) and Barker et al., (2013) concur that the ability to recognize sight words is considered to be a relative strength, whereas being able to decode words is often considered as an area of weakness. Strong evidence exists that students with an IQ between 40 and 69 can make statistically significant progress over time and respond well to comprehensive and/or explicit reading intervention (Allor et al., 2010; Barker et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). A majority of children demonstrated statistically significant growth on letter sounds, taught sight words, and decodable words (Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Barker et al. (2013) suggested that children with mild mental impairments are just as capable of approaching the tasks of learning to read as children of typical development, noting that a phonological approach is definitely a practical option for developing literacy. Phonological awareness "involves conscious access to the phonemic level of the speech stream and the ability to cognitively manipulate speech sounds" (Barker et al., 2013). This information is important considering co-researchers reported information relevant to students with an IQ between 55 and 70, the range for students with mild intellectual disabilities. In research involving students with an IQ between 40 and 69 to determine if comprehensive

reading instruction would yield significant results, Allor et al. (2010) identified that overall students made educationally meaningful, statistically significant progress on standardized measures of reading and language after two to three years of instruction. Studies strongly support the use of scientifically based reading instruction, including phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction (Allor et al., 2010; Fredrick et al., 2013; Lane & Critchfield, 1998; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010), for teaching students with intellectual disabilities to read (Allor et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). "Although relatively few studies have examined the association between music and reading, all of them noted that basic auditory processing skills are related to abilities in both music and reading" (Tsang & Conrad, 2011, p. 157). The elements of "pitch, melody, rhythm, harmony, form, timbre, and dynamics" (Lim, 2010, p. 4) are arranged in patterns resulting in what is perceived as music. Music has a temporal nature and allows for cognitive sequencing to determine which sound comes next and when it will be produced (Tillman, 2012). Researchers have found connections between music and literacy (Bolduc, 2008; Galicia Moyeda, Contreras Gomez, & Pena Flores, 2006; Paquette & Rieg, 2008; Salmon, 2010; Wiggins, 2007).

Co-researchers collectively shared that the use of educational rap music had a positive effect on building phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Students are successful at recalling information when linked to familiar tunes or songs, thus keeping the student engaged in the learning process (Heywood, 2004; Yopp & Yopp, 1996). In other literature, it was noted that pre-service teachers identified that the longer students were engaged with music, motivation increased for literacy learning (Pane & Salmon, 2011). The added benefit to all of this was that co-researchers were happy to have an alternative method to teach phonemic awareness. The music allowed the co-researchers to make learning fun. It proved to

be an important piece to their teaching, and took the burden off them for finding a way to make the information stick in the students' minds. Researchers have suggested that using songs for teaching language skills, building reading fluency, and improving writing skills was essential (Lim, 2010; Paquette & Reig, 2008; Salmon, 2010). Perhaps the best summation for this study came when the co-researchers unanimously agreed that they enjoyed using a fun and entertaining teaching method with their students.

Limitations

Elements that weaken the study are limitations, and are out of the researcher's control (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Limitations have been identified through this research study. The utilization of a sample of special educations teachers and paraprofessionals limits generalization to other populations. General education teachers may have reported different experiences and perceptions. Additionally, not every school level was represented in the overall synthesis of the data. Due to conflicts in schedules and the inability to ensure use of the intervention, the educators at the middle school did not agree to participate. Without the input of educators at this level it is not known if the essence of perceptions and experiences would have been different for educators in Smith County.

Patton (2002) identified that a small sample is appropriate for a qualitative study to provide "information-rich cases" (p. 230) about the phenomenon. The sample size was appropriate for a qualitative study, but only having six co-researchers may have prevented the results from being generalizable to other groups of educators. Additionally, the number of co-researchers in this study weakened the study by limiting the amount of data that was collected. More data would have provided more in-depth, thick, rich descriptions.

A lack of insight into personal behavior or thinking may have led to false responses during self-reporting of data when being interviewed (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Also, the length of the research study may not have produced the results that might have been discovered in a longitudinal study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Another limitation to this study was the unforeseen circumstance of inclement weather. Smith County schools were closed for a week due to the threat and occurrence of snow. The closures caused a delay in completing observations, final interviews, and also the focus group. The co-researchers had a delay in utilizing the rap music and the delay may have weakened the study. The inclement weather caused data collection to be pushed back into the week that state-mandated testing was scheduled. I, as non-participant observer, was not able to complete observations in a timely manner, since I had to administer assessments in my own classroom. As my class started testing there was a glitch in the new online testing system, which resulted in the system crashing state-wide, causing testing dates to be pushed back another week. The delay of testing resulted in a further delay of data collection, since I had to reschedule observations, interviews, and the focus group. Again, the delay may have weakened the study, because educators may have been tired of waiting and may have not provided information that was forthcoming or with as much enthusiasm.

A final limitation of this study related to the use of a qualitative research method. Qualitative research relies heavily on the researcher's input and skills, which may be heavily influenced or biased. In an effort to prevent bias, I made use of bracketing out my own feelings and thoughts by using memoing and reflective notes in the margins. I set aside my own presuppositions that may be influenced by my own beliefs, customs, and prejudices. In doing so, I was "open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their

experience of the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). In addition, throughout the analysis process, I continued to examine transcripts from "many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58) of using educational rap music was achieved.

Implications of the Study

Although it has been an ongoing problem for years, educators are under more and more pressure to bridge the gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. The problem necessitates high expectations, encouragement, appropriate support, and mostly a curriculum that meets the needs of the students. "In an effort to focus on students with learning disabilities, research on preventing reading failure has often excluded students with below average IQs" (Allor et al., 2010, p. 445). Because vocational and life skills are the primary focus for students with intellectual disabilities, literacy factors are largely ignored (Farrell & Elkins, 1991; Hedrick et al., 1999).

Co-researchers overwhelmingly shared that the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities had a positive influence on student learning in different ways. Co-researchers noted it was fun, engaging, motivating, sustained student attention and focus, and aided in retention of material being presented through songs. Knowing this information could be beneficial to districts in developing a curriculum that incorporates the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students. Prior research has identified that best practices involve the use of multiple approaches to learning in order to develop phonics knowledge (Villaume & Brabham, 2003; Westwood, 1997). Music can be one of the approaches used to make a connection with students (Cooke, Kretlow & Helf, 2010; Ehri et al., 2001) while teaching phonemic awareness, and developing the association

between letters and their matching sounds, which are necessities to help students overcome reading problems (Moats, 2010).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this researcher, there are a few recommendations for future research. First, more in-depth instructions should be provided to co-researchers prior to implementing the rap music. Educators should be specifically advised that they can utilize as many of the songs as possible and not limit the selection to just one song. Because middle school special educators did not volunteer for this study, one recommendation for future research would be to consider the perceptions of special educators at this level. Students of this age group may have different reactions to the music, and therefore results may reflect different perceptions from the educators. A greater number of participants would provide more in-depth, thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon.

Another recommendation for future research would be to use the educational rap music to build not just phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities, but also to make it inclusive of all phonological awareness skills. Phonemic and phonological awareness are not the same thing. Phonological awareness "involves conscious access to the phonemic level of the speech stream and the ability to cognitively manipulate speech sounds" (Barker et al., 2013). Bursuck et al. (2004) stated, "Effective reading instruction begins early and includes instructional strategies that develop phonological awareness, [and] alphabetic understanding" (p. 303). In agreement with previous research, Barker et al. (2013) suggested that children with mild mental impairments are just as capable of approaching the tasks of learning to read as children of typical development, noting that a phonological approach is definitely a practical option for developing literacy.

I would recommend that educational rap music be included in a study to determine perceptions of educators of students with moderate mental impairments. Historically, children with intellectual disabilities were not expected to learn to read, and care providers did not regard reading instruction to be a priority for these students (Lemon & Fuchs, 2010). Strong evidence exists that students with an IQ between 40 and 69 can make statistically significant progress over time and respond well to comprehensive and/or explicit reading intervention (Allor et al., 2010; Barker et al., 2013; Lemon & Fuchs, 2010).

My final recommendation for future research would include a quantitative study using educational rap music to build phonemic awareness. There is a gap in the literature on using rap music of any kind to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities. It would add to the scholarly data to have a study that measures with statistics how educational rap music affects learning for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Summary

The components addressed in the learning theories of Kolb, Gardner, and Vygotsky comprised the theoretical framework for this study. Gardner's multiple intelligence theory supports that students and teachers have different ways of learning, but for most individuals a predominant style emerges (Gardner, 1983; Kassell, 1998). By using rap music in the research study, those with predominant music intelligence may come to develop phonemic awareness skills when other pedagogical designs have failed. Understanding that students have different learning styles allows educators to design and employ lessons and activities that allow students to experience learning in the four stages identified in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. Allowing students to listen to musical recordings of the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds in this study provided students with an opportunity to experience what they were learning

by interacting with the music. The students situated in the schools chosen for this study shared common characteristics, and incurred social interaction and communication based on the phenomenon of using rap music to learn phonemic awareness skills. The experience of interactions with others allowed for the integration of information into each student's own mental capacities, thus learning might have occurred (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986).

Through semi-structured interviews, observations, and a focus group discussion, the data analysis process revealed significant statements in relation to utilizing educational rap music to build phonemic awareness skills for students with mild intellectual disabilities. First, that although negative student reactions, accessibility, and timing were identified as obstacles, they were minor and did not have a negative impact on the use of educational rap music in the special education classrooms. Second, the music had a positive influence on student learning in different ways, including it sustained student attention and focus and students were able to retain the information heard in the songs. Finally, co-researchers collectively shared that the use of educational rap music had a positive effect on building phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities.

As I listened to the shared experiences of the co-researchers, I gained a greater understanding of how the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities was a valuable tool for both, special educators and students. With the demand for educators to close the achievement gaps in literacy, it is imperative that those responsible for developing a viable curriculum to bridge that gap, to pay attention to the perceptions and shared experiences of special educators who have utilized educational rap music

to build phonemic awareness for students with mild intellectual disabilities, and expand the research to include other educators and students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

IRB, IRB [redacted]
Tue 1/27/2015 11:11 AM
To: Plumlee, Martha Marie;
Cc: Collins, Gail L (School of Education);
IRB, IRB;
Garzon, Fernando (Ctr for Counseling & Family Studies);

Dear Martha,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

Appendix B Co-researcher Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Special Educators' Perceptions of Using Educational Rap Music to Build Phonemic Awareness Skills for Students Identified with Mild Intellectual Disabilities: A Phenomenological Study

(***Martha Plumlee***)
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of the use of educational rap music to build phonemic awareness for students identified with mild intellectual disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a teacher or paraprofessional in a self-contained special education classroom. You were identified through personal knowledge of your position within the county. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Martha Plumlee, Education Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand teacher perceptions on the use of educational rap music to help build phonemic awareness for students who have been identified with mild intellectual disabilities.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
Provide documentation of the level of phonemic awareness for your students prior to initiating the research. Play educational rap music for 20 minutes a day, four days per week for six weeks and observe and document student behaviors during that time. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in an interview session one-on-one with the researcher, and then participate in a focus group discussion with other teachers and paraprofessionals.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risks: Risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. In the event that I become privy to information that triggers the requirement for mandatory reporting, I am obligated to disclose that information to administrators. Such information would include child abuse, and the intent to harm self or others.

The benefits to participation are: Although no direct benefit to the participant has been identified, there may be a benefit to students if the use of rap music provides a means to learn phonemic awareness.

Compensation:

You will not receive compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. All student and participant data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's place of employment, and the researcher will be the only one with a key. Some data will be stored on the researcher's computer which is password protected. When data is ready to be destroyed, documents will be shred and computer files will be deleted. Although every attempt will be made to maintain participant confidentiality, it cannot be assured that other participants will maintain the subject's confidentiality and privacy when focus groups are employed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Dade County Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study

If you wish to withdraw from the study, please email marthaplumlee@dadecs.org, or call (706)657-6165 x40355.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Martha Plumlee. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at Dade Elementary School, (706) 657-6165 x40355, marthaplumlee@dadecs.org. The researcher is a student at Liberty University under the direction of Dr. Gail Collins, glcollins2@liberty.edu, (423)667-4855.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date: _____
(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

IRB Code Numbers: (After a study is approved, the IRB code number pertaining to the study should be added here.)

IRB Expiration Date: (After a study is approved, the expiration date (one year from date of approval) assigned to a study at initial or continuing review should be added. Periodic checks on the current status of consent forms may occur as part of continuing review mandates from the federal regulators.)

Appendix C Interview Protocols

Interview Questions for Teachers and paraprofessionals before using rap music:

1. What are your experiences working with students with disabilities?
2. What are your experiences working with students with mild intellectual disabilities?
3. How were you taught to teach students to learn how to read?
4. What methods were you taught to teach reading to students with disabilities?
5. In what ways, if any, have you tried specifically to build phonemic awareness with your current students? What do you feel was successful about the method(s) you have used?
6. What style of learning does each student in the class seem to prefer? (Use co-researcher pseudonyms to address this question)
7. How do you think students will respond to the use of music to build phonemic awareness skills?
8. What are your perceptions on the ability of students with an IQ between 55 and 70 being able to read?
9. Do you perceive there to be any obstacles for educators or students when attempting to build phonemic awareness skills with rap music?
10. Is there any other information you would like to provide during this interview?

Post Intervention Interview Questions

1. In what ways did the students react to learning with the rap music? (ex. Humming, singing, tapping, etc.)
2. What were your reactions (thoughts, expressions, etc.) when the rap music was implemented for building phonemic awareness?
3. In what way(s) was rap music a valuable tool as you attempted to build phonemic awareness with your students?
4. In what way(s) was rap music a detriment as you attempted to build phonemic awareness with your students?
5. Is there any evidence that information was retained by students after listening to Rap music?
6. What other information would you like to contribute to this interview?

Appendix D Focus Group Questions

1. What did you enjoy the most from using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness?
2. What did you enjoy the least about using educational rap music to teach phonemic awareness?
3. In what ways did the music impact your teaching?
4. In what ways did the music impact student learning?

Appendix E Sample Page of Field Notes Protocol for Observations

Anecdotal Observation Record Observation 1

Name: _Tanya, Carla, and Kelly (Classroom A)

Date and Time: _ March 12, 2015, 9:00-9:20 a.m.

Lesson being Observed: Intervention being implemented

Observations of events and behaviors:

After having been in the room for approximately five minutes, Tanya announced they were going to work on letters of the alphabet as a group, and asked for all students to come to one of the area rugs and sit together. The students assembled and sat quietly waiting for further instructions. One educator placed the CD in the computer and chose one of the songs to play aloud for the students. As the music starts, some of the students are wiggling to the beat. They are watching each other and some are imitating their peers. Some are singing along with the words, clapping, and rocking rhythmically to the music. Other students are making hand movements to the beat, while one is looking at me and smiling. At first, only two students are singing along and repeating the sounds, but after watching them, the remainder of the students start singing as well. At this point, all students are repeating the letter sounds after they hear them on the CD, as if echoing the singer. It is apparent that the students have been listening to the music as requested of the educators at the onset of the study. The educators are watching the students during the playing of the music. All students are engaged while the music is playing. The educators are smiling, singing along with the words, clapping, tapping toes, and moving their bodies to the rhythm. It appears as if the educators enjoy the music as much as the students do.

After 20 minutes, the music is stopped. One student asked, "Can we please listen to one more song?" TA:"This is fun isn't it?" KE: "We will listen to more tomorrow", which was followed by groans from the students. One of the co-researchers looked at the other two and said, TA: "This has been the most I have seen them participate all day, they really like this music". The other two were in agreement.

Comments/Summary:

The classroom is painted yellow with red cabinets along one entire wall. There are three long tables and one kidney-shaped table in the classroom. There are only tables and chairs for seating, no individual desks. The

tables are located along three of the four walls to provide for center activities. There is one computer station with three computers along another wall. One wall consists of a smart board and white board. The remaining wall has the entrance door and another white board. The windows are covered with black curtains to block natural light that prohibits maximum use of the smart board in the classroom. The classroom is well lit with fluorescent lighting. The floors are tiled and there are area rugs in different locations throughout the classroom. There are decorations throughout the room including the alphabet, behavior charts, and various learning anchor charts. The purpose of this classroom is to teach a functional curriculum to students with mild intellectual disabilities.

There are nine students enrolled in the classroom involved in this study. All of the students are present on the day of this observation. All students have been identified to have an IQ between 55 and 70. Upon my arrival, the students had been divided into groups and working with one of the three educators, or working independently on a computer. I sat quietly in a chair and observed the class for about five minutes while they learned.

There are three educators working in this classroom, all of whom are co-researchers and working at the time of this observation. All educators are Caucasian females, ranging in age from late 20's to late 40's. The co-researchers were working with students on different subject matter, including environmental print, money, and handwriting.

My presence in the room may have limited educator interaction in that they may have been embarrassed to behave any way other than with the utmost professionalism. I feel as though the educators may have let loose, so to speak, and had more fun with the students while the music was playing had I not been in the room.
I personally feel that the educators were having fun with the music as much as the students were, and enjoyed using it for learning. The entire classroom was engaged, moving, and appeared to be enjoying the music.

Appendix F Permission to Use/Publish Copyright Material

Seeking permission to use your alphabet songs in research

HaveFunTeaching <info@havefunteaching.com>

Mon 11/3/2014 2:23 PM

To:

Plumlee, Martha Marie;

Hey there,

Thanks for asking! So long as you are not removing any of our copyright information or sharing the songs you can definitely use them in your study! I realize that you have already purchased your own set, so you should be good to go! Good luck with your study. I'm glad that you students appreciate our songs.

The Have Fun Teaching Team
Website: Have Fun Teaching Website
Facebook: Have Fun Teaching Facebook
Shop Online: Have Fun Teaching Shop

Mark as unread

Appendix G Request to Use/Publish Copyright Material

Plumlee, Martha Marie

Sat 11/1/2014 11:47 AM
Sent Items
Have Fun Teaching

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Martha Plumlee, and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and also a special education teacher in Northwest Georgia. I am currently writing a proposal manuscript for my doctoral dissertation, as required by Liberty University. I am seeking your permission to use your Alphabet Songs collection in my research, and to include the information about your product within my manuscript. I am proposing a study on the use of educational rap music for teaching phonemic awareness for students with an IQ between 55-70. This is a qualitative study to gain an understanding of how educators feel using this music to teach phonemic awareness to their students. Typically, students in this IQ range are not taught how to read anything other than functional words found in the community. I believe students with an IQ between 55-70 can learn to read, which begins with phonemic and phonological awareness. My goal is to gain an understanding of educators' experiences using this music to teach phonemic awareness. I would like to play your Alphabet Songs collection for the classrooms involved in my study. I own my set of your alphabet songs and my current students are always motivated by the music.

The final manuscript will only be published in the Liberty University library of doctoral dissertations. If you would like more information about my study, I would be very happy to explain it to you at your request. Thank you in advance for giving consideration to my request. Please indicate your consent by either responding to my email with your permission, or by sending me a letter at the address listed below. If you do not control the copyright on the above mentioned material, I would appreciate any contact information you could provide. If you need any additional information, please feel free to contact me at mmplumlee@liberty.edu or by calling me at (423)762-7680.

Sincerely,

Martha Plumlee

Appendix H Song Lyrics

Lyrics to the Alphabet Song by Have Fun Teaching

Alphabet Song

The alphabet is filled

With consonants and vowels

We write them, we read them

Each letter makes a sound

Well, we start with ABC

We go all the way to Z

The letters of the alphabet Are fun for you and me

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z

Now I know my ABC's Next time won't you sing with me

We start with ABC

And we go all the way to Z

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z

Now I know my ABC's Next time won't you sing with me

Each letter makes a sound

Let's sound them out now /a/ /b/ /c/ /d/ /e/ /f/ /g/ /h/ /i/ /j/ /k/ /l/ /m/ /n/ /o/ /p/ /kw/ /r/ /s/ /t/ /u/ /v/ /w/ /ks/ /y/ /z/

Lyrics to the Letter A Song by Have Fun Teaching

Letter A Song

A is a vowel, a letter in the alphabet

A, A, A, A (Short Vowel A Sound)

There was a cat

Wearing a hat

Taking a nap

On my lap

A, A, A, A (Long Vowel A Sound)

I found a snake

Who was brave

Playing a game

In the rain

A, A, A, A (Short Vowel A Sound) A, A (Long Vowel A Sound)

Write an uppercase A in the air

Write a lowercase a in the air

A, A, A, A (Short Vowel A Sound) A, A (Long Vowel A Sound)

A is a vowel, a letter in the alphabet

Lyrics to the Letter Z Song by Have Fun Teaching

Letter Z Song

Z is a consonant, a letter in the alphabet

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

I saw a zebra

At the zoo

It was freezing In a blizzard

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

I did a puzzle

Of a zombie

Playing jazz

It was amazing

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

Write an uppercase Z in the air

Write a lowercase z in the air

/z/, /z/, /z/, /z/ (Z Sound)

Z is a consonant, a letter in the alphabet

Appendix I Reflective Journal Entries

Classroom A – Elementary School

I think that if educators really apply themselves and use a method such as music for building phonemic awareness, and they show a positive attitude with it, the students will benefit immensely.

Sometimes I think how a teacher perceives what they are using reflects in the ability of the students.

I think the students in this classroom will learn something from it and be able to use it for learning to read.

Classroom B – High School

I think these students will enjoy the music, but at the same time be a little embarrassed by it. I don't think they are going to show much enthusiasm for the music, but I think they will secretly enjoy it, and learn from it.

I feel that if a student at this age level has any ability at all, the music will enhance that ability, and they will build upon what they already know.

As for the co-researchers, I think they will enjoy the music, but may be against using it for instructional purposes. I think the attitude of the co-researcher is influential on student attitudes.

The music may act as a distraction for the students at this level.

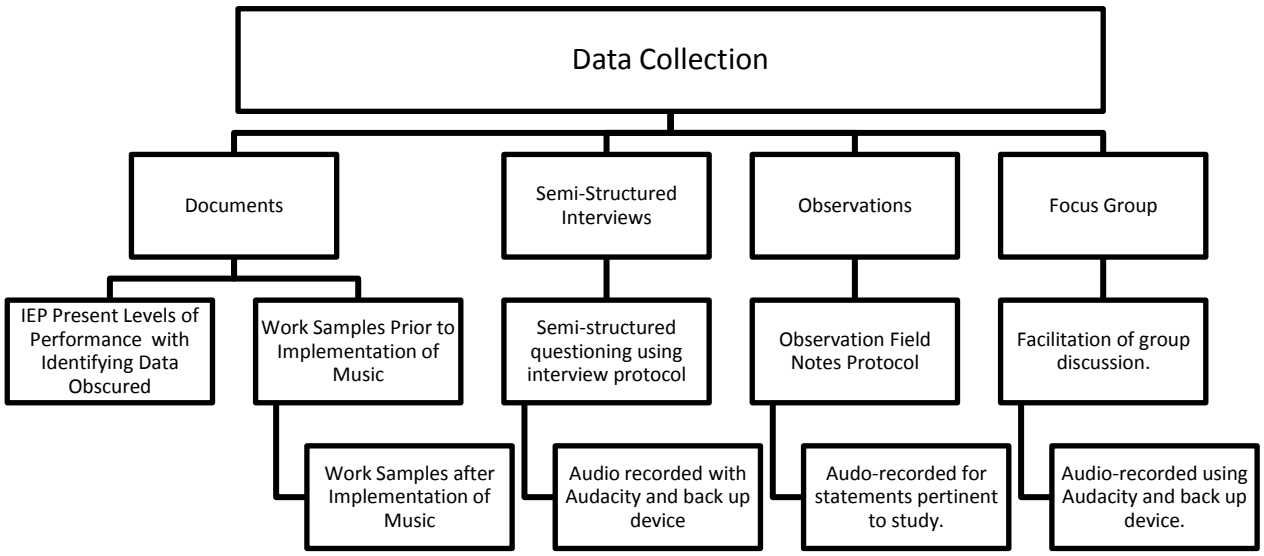
Classroom C – High School

I have worked in this type of classroom before. I feel like the students in this classroom are capable of learning to read, but it may take longer for them as opposed to someone who does not have an intellectual disability.

I think the educators may be influential in how students respond to the music being utilized in this study. I think that educators' body language and behavior will impact students' reactions, but I also think that the students will watch their classmates' reactions and respond accordingly.

Overall, I think both students and educators will enjoy the music. It is my firm belief that students with mild intellectual disabilities can learn to read using a phonemic awareness approach.

Appendix J Data Collection Audit Trail



Appendix K Data Analysis Audit Trail