

UNDERSTANDING REFERRAL BARRIERS:
A SCOPING REVIEW OF PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PATHWAYS FOR
EAL STUDENTS

By

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in School Psychology

at

Mount Saint Vincent University

Halifax, Nova Scotia

September 5, 2025

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Abstract

This scoping review explores systemic inequities and missed opportunities in the psychoeducational referral process for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students in Canadian school systems. While research has focused on distinguishing language acquisition from learning disabilities, limited attention has been given to how institutional tools, policy frameworks, and educator perceptions collectively shape referral decisions. Guided by Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), this review synthesizes findings from 14 empirical studies and 18 Canadian grey literature sources to examine how the intersecting dimensions of race, language, and ability influence whether, how, and when EAL students are referred for assessment. The analysis identifies four key themes shaping referral dynamics: bias and misclassification, multilingual and sociocultural considerations, inadequate professional knowledge, and limitations in referral decision-making tools and practices. These themes operate across two interrelated dimensions: *Educator Perception*, referring to how educators perceive and respond to student difficulties, and *Systemic Instruments*, encompassing the institutional structures that formalize or reinforce those perceptions. Despite increasing policy emphasis on inclusion, the review highlights persistent variability in practice, a lack of Canadian empirical research, and entrenched structural norms that privilege Whiteness, monolingualism, and normative ability. Recommendations include embedding culturally and linguistically responsive frameworks into referral policy, expanding professional learning grounded in cultural humility, and generating context-specific research to support more equitable and linguistically responsive assessment pathways for EAL learners.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the unwavering support of the incredible people around me. First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisor, Dr. Christine Doe, for her steady guidance, patience, and encouragement throughout this journey. Christine, your insights into inclusive education have deeply shaped how I think, not just as a researcher, but as a future clinician. You gave me space to learn, stumble, and improve (sometimes all in the same week), and I'm so grateful for that. To my committee members, Drs. Sara King and Krista Ritchie, thank you for pushing my thinking in all the right ways. Your thoughtful questions and feedback challenged me to go deeper, and your perspectives were truly invaluable.

To my cohort, professors and practicum supervisors: thank you for letting me ask too many questions, make mistakes, and entertain my mini existential crises, all while still cheering me on. To my friends: thank you for being my hype team, reminding me to keep going, and pretending to understand what my thesis was about when I tried to explain it at 11 p.m. on a random Tuesday.

And finally, to my family and partner: thank you for reminding me (constantly) that I was capable of finishing this, even on days when I was pretty sure I'd never figure out APA formatting. Your support was invaluable, thank you tremendously!

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past two decades, Canada has experienced sustained growth in immigration, reinforcing its commitment to fostering a diverse and multicultural society. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, 2023) reported welcoming a record 437,539 permanent residents in 2022, following a previous record-setting year in 2021. Many newcomer families have settled in both major urban centers and smaller communities, contributing to demographic shifts that are increasingly reflected in public schools. In Ontario, for example, over 25% of students are identified as English language learners (Statistics Canada, 2020), with British Columbia and Alberta reporting similarly high proportions (Alberta Education, 2019; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018). This rise in linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for educational systems. When appropriately supported, multilingualism can enrich classroom environments and enhance students' cognitive and social development (Cummins, 2000; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Genesee, 2008). However, many schools struggle to meet the diverse needs of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students due to inconsistencies in policy and terminology across school systems (Harper & de Jong, 2004; Roessingh, 2016). These inconsistencies undermine the implementation of coherent, evidence-based approaches to instruction and assessment (Cummins et al., 2012).

The implications of this ambiguity extend to psychological services, where fair and accurate referrals for psychoeducational assessments depend on culturally and linguistically responsive practices. In the absence of standardized definitions and clear procedures, schools face significant challenges in distinguishing between language acquisition, adjustment, acculturation, and potential learning disorders, particularly among long-term English learners.

These students are particularly vulnerable to being either misidentified or completely overlooked for special education services (Rhinehart et al., 2024).

Defining English as an Additional Language Students

As the EAL population grows, the terminology used to describe these students varies significantly across provinces and states, school systems, and research literature, reflecting a lack of standardization in how EAL students are defined and supported (Webster & Lu, 2012). In Canada, the term *English as an Additional Language (EAL)* is commonly used to describe students whose first language is not English and who are developing English proficiency; definitions, however, differ by region. For instance, Manitoba Education defines EAL students as students whose primary language is not English and who require targeted support and specialized programming to succeed in school (Manitoba Education, 2025). Saskatchewan provides further differentiation by categorizing Canadian-born EAL students, such as First Nations and Métis students who speak an Indigenous language or a variation of English, separately from foreign-born learners, including immigrants and refugees (Saskatchewan Rivers Public School Division, 2019). These regional variations highlight the complexity of categorizing EAL students and the importance of context-specific approaches to identification and support.

Across research and policy, the terminology used to describe this student population is equally inconsistent. Terms such as *English Language Learner (ELL)*, *English as a Second Language (ESL)*, *Second Language Learner (SLL)*, *Limited English Proficient (LEP)*, *Language Minority Student*, and *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Student* are often used interchangeably, contributing to confusion among educators and researchers (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010; Webster & Lu, 2012). In response, scholars at the University of Alberta have proposed the term *Learner of English as an Additional Language (LEAL)*; this term reflects

students' multilingual identities and emphasizes their full linguistic repertoires rather than defining them solely by their English proficiency (Webster & Lu, 2012). This is just one example of ongoing efforts to develop inclusive terminology, as no single definition has achieved universal consensus. The current work adopts the term *English as an Additional Language (EAL)* to describe the population of interest, as this term aligns with terminology commonly used in Canadian education systems and reflects an additive model of language development (Cummins, 2000; Webster & Lu, 2012). Rather than framing students in terms of deficiency or lack, *EAL* recognizes the expansion of students' linguistic repertoires and honours the multiple languages they bring to the classroom. The term *multilingual students* will also be used to refer more broadly to linguistically diverse students, including those who may not currently require formal EAL support but still navigate school systems shaped by monolingual norms.

Canadian Education and EAL Students

In Canada, education is primarily governed at the provincial and territorial level, resulting in distinct education systems and policies across the country (EduCanada, 2025). Although this decentralization allows for localized responsiveness, it also creates significant variation in how EAL students are identified and supported. EAL students include Canadian-born children from multilingual households, as well as immigrant and refugee students who are newcomers to Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). These students bring considerable resilience and potential, contributing valuable assets to schools such as bilingualism, cultural knowledge, and adaptability (Rhinehart et al., 2024). Despite regional differences, most provinces implement some form of initial and ongoing English language proficiency assessment to guide programming decisions (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2018). These assessments

typically evaluate students' speaking, reading, and writing skills in English and are used to determine the level and type of language support required. In addition to language instruction, these supports are often intended to promote broader integration into the academic and social life of schools.

Across Canada, there is increasing recognition that EAL students are a highly diverse group whose educational needs vary significantly. Students may arrive with interrupted schooling, possess high levels of literacy in a first language or be long-term residents of Canada who still benefit from continued support in developing academic English. As such, provincial and territorial education systems emphasize the importance of ongoing, classroom-embedded assessments and flexible support structures that evolve in response to student progress (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015; Council of Ontario Directors of Education [CODE], 2024).

Frameworks like Ontario's Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) exemplify this approach, offering a model for integrating assessment data with classroom planning and individualized goal setting (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Recent policy and implementation reports also stress the value of culturally responsive assessment practices, teacher collaboration, and student voice in creating inclusive programming that supports both linguistic development and social belonging (CODE, 2024; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). Guo, Maitra, and Guo (2021) emphasize that successful integration must include emotional and social dimensions, especially for refugee and newcomer students who face challenges related to traumatic experiences, displacement, and cultural dislocation. Schools that fail to consider these factors may reinforce exclusion despite offering linguistic support. Similarly, Kaur and Szorenyi (2022) argue that multilingual immigrant youth often grapple with racialization, feelings of unbelonging, and identity negotiation, particularly when school environments operate within a monolingual or

Eurocentric framework. Kaur and Szorenyi's (2022) work underscores the emotional toll of linguistic marginalization and the critical need for affirming pedagogies that recognize students' home languages and cultural identities as integral to learning.

Affirming multilingual identities and incorporating student voice into curricular and institutional decision-making are essential for fostering belonging and engagement. When EAL students see their languages, cultures, and lived experiences reflected in the classroom, they are more likely to actively participate, persist through challenges, and achieve academic success (Guo et al., 2021; Kaur & Szorenyi, 2022). Although approaches vary across provinces, a common shift toward dynamic, asset-based practices highlights a growing recognition of EAL students as holistic individuals navigating complex sociocultural landscapes. Building on these inclusive frameworks, increasing attention is now being directed toward a more specific concern: the persistent academic challenges faced by some EAL students, especially given the difficulty educators often encounter in distinguishing between typical patterns of language acquisition and signs of an underlying learning difficulty (Hass & Brown, 2017). This complexity underscores the need for clear, culturally responsive frameworks that can guide educators in making informed, equitable decisions about support and referral.

Roles of School Psychologists in the Public Education System

School psychologists are integral members of the public education system, offering expertise that spans academic, behavioural, social, and emotional domains. Their training equips them to work collaboratively with educators, families, and communities to support inclusive, data-informed learning environments (Canadian Psychological Association [CPA], 2023; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2020). The NASP Practice Model (2020) identifies ten domains of practice, including consultation, assessment, intervention, and school-

wide systems development, emphasizing the comprehensive nature of their role. School psychologists apply practices informed by best available evidence to assess student needs, implement targeted interventions, and inform system-level change, often through multidisciplinary collaboration.

In Canada, the CPA's guidelines underscore the importance of school psychologists in prevention, assessment, and mental health promotion. They are described as the most highly trained mental health professionals in school systems, uniquely positioned to bridge individual-level support with broader systemic reform (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000; CPA, 2023). Their responsibilities include conducting psychoeducational assessments, providing support for crisis intervention, engaging in program evaluation, and developing policies that promote equity and well-being across diverse student populations. However, the scope of practice for school psychologists varies considerably across provinces and territories due to differences in educational policies, resource allocation, and service delivery models (King et al., 2022; CPA, 2023). For example, in some jurisdictions, school psychologists are primarily tasked with conducting psychoeducational assessments for special education eligibility, while in others, their work extends to direct intervention, teacher consultation, and family engagement initiatives (Saklofske et al., 2007; Eklund et al., 2019). Despite this variation, a shared emphasis remains on using assessment data to guide individualized support plans, contribute to multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), and monitor the outcomes of interventions.

Recent research has highlighted the evolving role of school psychologists in meeting the rising mental health needs of students and addressing equity concerns. Eklund et al. (2019) argue that school psychologists are well-positioned to respond to the growing mental health demands in schools; however, they often face systemic barriers, such as limited time and high assessment

caseloads, which constrain their ability to engage in preventive work. The CPA (2023) similarly notes that while school psychologists are increasingly expected to contribute to wellness promotion and culturally responsive practices, their capacity to do so is shaped by contextual factors such as staff shortages, budget limitations, and school-wide priorities. Given these demands, the psychoeducational assessment process remains a core mechanism through which learning needs are identified and addressed. School psychologists play a critical role in determining eligibility for special education services, developing individualized education plans (IEPs), and ensuring that assessments are valid, equitable, and aligned with students' sociocultural contexts (CPA, 2023).

As the field continues to evolve, school psychologists are called upon not only to apply technical expertise but also to serve as advocates for inclusive, equitable, and systemically informed approaches to student support. Among their most critical and frequently enacted responsibilities is conducting psychoeducational assessments, which play a central role in identifying learning needs and determining eligibility for special education services. As educational systems increasingly adopt data-driven models, these assessments have become key tools in diagnosing Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs) and informing the development of individualized supports. Their significance is amplified in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, where assessment practices must be grounded in cultural responsiveness to account for the intersecting factors that shape the academic experiences of EAL students (Grigorenko et al., 2020). However, despite growing recognition of these complexities, there remains a lack of cohesive, evidence-based guidance on how school psychologists and interdisciplinary teams should approach referral practices for EAL students in a linguistically and culturally responsive manner (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Velasco Leon & Campbell, 2020; Carriero, 2024). This gap

is particularly pressing given the persistent risks of misidentification, delayed support, and exclusion from appropriate services that disproportionately affect EAL students in schools structured around monolingual, Eurocentric norms (Annamma, 2013; Rhinehart et al., 2024).

Understanding and Defining Learning Disorders

Timely and accurate identification of learning needs is essential for supporting student success, particularly for those who face systemic barriers related to race, language, and socioeconomic status (Guo et al., 2021; Rhinehart et al., 2024). Early intervention is consistently associated with better long-term outcomes (Ehrhardt et al., 2013), yet the path to identification often hinges on how learning difficulties are defined and interpreted within both clinical and educational systems (Grigorenko et al., 2020). Definitions of learning disorders shape not only diagnostic decisions, but also influence the tools used, the allocation of resources, and the nature of the supports provided (Schroeder et al., 2020). When these definitions fail to reflect the realities of culturally and linguistically diverse learners, the risk of misidentification or exclusion is heightened (Kangas, 2021; Martínez-Álvarez, 2015). To understand how these dynamics unfold, it is necessary to examine the major frameworks that currently guide the identification and diagnosis of learning disorders in Canada.

Two widely used frameworks guide the identification and diagnosis of learning disorders: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-5-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022) and the model advanced by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC, 2015). These frameworks differ in terminology, conceptual foundations, and diagnostic criteria, contributing to variability in how learning disorders are identified and addressed across educational and clinical settings. Whereas the DSM-5-TR uses the term *Specific Learning Disorder (SLD)*, LDAC refers to *Learning*

Disabilities (LD). In Canada, where education falls under provincial jurisdiction, no nationally unified definition exists. Nonetheless, both frameworks have significantly influenced provincial and territorial policies and practices related to assessment and support (Schroeder et al., 2020). For clarity and consistency, the term *SLD* will be used henceforth when referring to learning disorders. However, when discussing research, policies, or practices that explicitly use the *LD* framework and where the distinction is relevant, the term *LD* will be used accordingly.

DSM-5-TR Definition

According to the DSM-5-TR, SLD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent difficulties in acquiring and applying academic skills (reading, writing and/or math), typically emerging during the early school years and continuing despite targeted instruction. These difficulties may involve inaccurate or slow word reading (e.g., frequent guessing, difficulty decoding), poor reading comprehension, spelling errors (e.g., omitting or substituting letters), disorganized written expression (e.g., grammatical mistakes or unclear ideas), and challenges in number sense, calculation, or mathematical reasoning. To meet diagnostic criteria, these difficulties must persist for at least six months, significantly impair academic or daily functioning, and not be better explained by intellectual disability, sensory impairments, mental health conditions, or inadequate instruction. Diagnosis involves a comprehensive clinical assessment that includes reviewing the individual's developmental, educational, and medical history, as well as standardized academic testing.

The Learning Disability Association of Canada Definition.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada defines LD as a group of neurologically based disorders that affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, or use of verbal and nonverbal information. These difficulties occur in individuals with average or above-

average intellectual ability and are distinct from intellectual disabilities. LDAC attributes LD to impairments in cognitive processes, including, but not limited to, language and phonological processing, memory, attention, and executive functioning (e.g., planning and decision-making). These impairments may affect oral language, reading, writing, mathematics, and social perception and interaction (LDAC, 2015). LDAC conceptualizes LD as a lifelong condition, with its presentation varying according to environmental demands and individual strengths. The definition emphasizes that these difficulties do not stem from socioeconomic disadvantage, sensory impairments or a lack of motivation. Diagnosis requires formal psychological assessment, including measures of cognitive and academic ability, to confirm that the individual meets the intellectual criteria and to distinguish LD from other forms of impairment (LDAC, 2015).

Both frameworks recognize SLD or LD as distinct from intellectual disability and emphasize the importance of individualized, targeted intervention (APA, 2022; LDAC, 2015). However, they differ in key respects; The DSM-5-TR defines SLD as a single condition with multiple academic manifestations, whereas LDAC views LD as a cluster of related but distinct disorders linked to a broader range of cognitive processes (APA, 2022; LDAC, 2015). Regarding intellectual criteria, LDAC requires individuals to demonstrate average or above-average cognitive ability, verified through formal assessment (LDAC, 2015). The DSM-5-TR does not mandate cognitive testing, but it specifies that an intellectual disability must not better explain the learning difficulties (APA, 2022). According to the DSM-5-TR, intellectual developmental disorder is characterized by deficits in both intellectual functioning (e.g., reasoning, problem solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and learning from experience) and adaptive functioning, which result in failure to meet developmental and sociocultural

standards for personal independence and social responsibility. Onset typically occurs during the developmental period, and the deficits must impair functioning across multiple environments, including home, school, and community (APA, 2022). The frameworks also differ in their inclusion of associated features: LDAC incorporates social, organizational, and oral language difficulties into its definition, while DSM-5-TR limits organizational difficulties to academic skills and treats oral language impairments as separate conditions (APA, 2022; LDAC, 2015). In terms of symptom severity and persistence, DSM-5-TR classifies SLD as mild, moderate or severe based on the level of support required and requires that difficulties persist for at least six months despite intervention. LDAC, by contrast, does not include severity ratings but emphasizes the enduring nature of the condition (LDAC, 2015). Even though both frameworks serve as foundational tools for diagnosis and support planning, their conceptual differences have important implications for school-based identification practices.

In summary, although both frameworks highlight the academic challenges associated with SLD and the need for individualized intervention, they diverge in their conceptualization of underlying causes, diagnostic thresholds, and associated features. The DSM-5-TR presents SLD as a single disorder with varying degrees of severity and focuses narrowly on academic skill acquisition. In contrast, LDAC frames LD as a collection of distinct but related difficulties influenced by a broader range of cognitive processes. These definitional differences result in notable variation in how SLD is recognized, assessed, and supported across clinical and educational contexts (Schroeder et al., 2020). Consequently, developing a nuanced understanding of both frameworks is essential for school psychologists and educators aiming to implement equitable, culturally responsive, and evidence-based assessment practices (Grigorenko et al., 2020; Evans & Taylor, 2025). While these frameworks provide critical foundations for

diagnosing learning disorders, their application in educational settings is often inconsistently shaped by jurisdictional policies, school-based practices, and resource availability. In multilingual and culturally diverse classrooms, standardized definitions frequently fall short in capturing how intersecting factors, such as language development, prior educational opportunity, and cultural background, influence student performance (Martínez-Álvarez, 2015; Kangas, 2021). These complexities are compounded by regional inconsistencies in the identification of learning disorders and by varied interpretations of criteria related to instructional adequacy, academic persistence, and exclusionary factors. Examining how these definitions are operationalized in real-world contexts is critical for recognizing the systemic conditions that currently constrain fair and accurate referral and assessment practices.

Understanding Specific Learning Disorders in Educational Contexts

Current research depicts SLD as a multidimensional condition shaped by the interaction of biological and environmental factors. Genetic predispositions can influence reading-related cognitive processes, just as early literacy experiences and the quality of instruction strongly affect eventual outcomes (Catts & Petscher, 2022). Correlates such as deficits in working memory, attention, and executive functioning are common, although they are not considered direct causes (Swanson & Siegel, 2011). In classroom contexts, SLD manifests as persistent difficulty in reading, writing, or mathematics despite adequate instruction and intervention (APA, 2022; Grigorenko et al., 2020). Students may struggle with decoding, reading comprehension, spelling, written expression, numerical operations, or mathematical reasoning. Exactly what counts as “adequate” intervention, however, differs across jurisdictions. Tannock (2016) notes that DSM-5-TR does not require formal evidence-based models such as Response

to Intervention (RTI) before diagnosis; the intent is simply to rule out a lack of instructional opportunity, whether support was informal, school-based, or home-initiated.

This variability in how key diagnostic criteria is interpreted contributes to inconsistencies in identification outcomes. As a result, there have been growing calls for greater standardization in SLD assessment practices across jurisdictions (Schroeder et al., 2020). At the same time, international differences in identification practices reveal how cultural and institutional contexts shape the diagnosis and support of learning disorders. In Canada, the United States, and Australia, SLD is most often identified through school-based processes that involve tiered interventions, teacher observations, psychoeducational evaluations, and multidisciplinary collaboration (Nehra et al., 2024). In contrast, countries such as India follow a more medicalized model, requiring formal neurological evaluations and disability certification. In parts of the Arab world, including Jordan and Oman, identification tends to be informal, relying largely on observable academic struggles without standardized assessments (Abu-Hamour & Al-Hmouz, 2014).

Although many Western education systems prioritize early screening, standardized assessment, and structured intervention plans, their application is mediated by institutional norms and cultural assumptions that may not align with the lived realities of all students (Grigorenko et al., 2020; Nehra et al., 2024). In Canada, where education is provincially and territorially governed, identification frameworks have been shaped by both the DSM-5-TR and LDAC models, with an emphasis on early intervention and data-driven decision-making (Nehra et al., 2024). Yet in multilingual and multicultural contexts, these frameworks often struggle to account for the complex ways in which race, language, and prior educational opportunity shape student performance and educator interpretation. As assessment practices evolve to reflect a broader

range of learner experiences, questions of fairness, validity, and contextual responsiveness have become increasingly central (Evans & Taylor, 2025). Although these frameworks provide foundational guidance for diagnosis, their application becomes more complex in multilingual contexts where standardized criteria may obscure underlying sociocultural factors. These tensions are especially evident in the referral and assessment of EAL students, whose academic challenges may not fit neatly within existing diagnostic categories. Understanding how school psychologists and educators navigate these complexities is essential to advancing identification practices that are not only evidence-based but also culturally responsive and equitable.

Identification of Learning Needs for EAL Students

Although language-acquisition supports are designed to foster both social and academic integration, a subset of EAL students continues to struggle in ways that exceed what is generally expected during second-language development. Distinguishing between a delay that naturally accompanies EAL students and a difficulty that signals an SLD is notoriously complex because linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors shape how students engage with academic tasks (Martínez-Álvarez, 2015). This complexity is magnified for learners whose schooling has been interrupted, who lack familiarity with academic discourse, or who have experienced marginalization. Such students may exhibit patterns that resemble an SLD, yet the root causes can lie in limited prior instruction, traumatic experiences or school cultures that suppress home languages and/or have low teacher expectations (Guo et al., 2021; Kaur & Szorenyi, 2022). Consequently, academic underperformance must be interpreted within a broad sociocultural and developmental framework, allowing educators to recognize the diverse experiences of EAL students and respond with informed, supportive, and strengths-based approaches. A genuinely holistic, culturally responsive assessment considers each student's linguistic history, prior

schooling, and current learning environment, an approach that is essential for mitigating implicit bias and ensuring that low achievement is not mistaken for disability (Guo et al., 2021; Kaur & Szorenyi, 2022). However, most school-based identification policies provide little research-informed guidance on when and how to refer EAL students for psychoeducational evaluation (McCardle et al., 2005). Teachers, who are pivotal in initiating referrals, frequently report feeling unprepared to decide whether observed difficulties reflect normal language development trajectories or warrant further assessment, especially when clear, culturally attuned protocols are absent (Rhinehart et al., 2024; Klingner & Harry 2006). Furthermore, EAL students are often referred later than their monolingual peers, which delays access to targeted interventions and exacerbates existing inequities (Guo et al., 2021; Rhinehart et al., 2024). These patterns suggest that the referral process itself, rather than just individual knowledge gaps, may reinforce systemic disparities in how student needs are recognized and addressed.

Navigating the Referral Process for EAL Students

The referral process is the first and often most consequential step in determining which students receive psychoeducational assessment and subsequent support. For EAL students, this process is shaped not only by observable academic challenges but also by the knowledge and assumptions held by educators, the institutional structures within which they work, and the extent to which students' sociocultural and linguistic contexts are considered (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014; Grigorenko et al., 2020). While many Western education systems emphasize early screening and standardized criteria to promote consistency, these frameworks often fall short when applied to culturally and linguistically diverse learners whose developmental trajectories may not align with monolingual norms (Nehra et al., 2024; Rhinehart et al., 2024). In the absence of culturally responsive protocols, referral decisions risk being shaped by deficit-

oriented interpretations rather than a full understanding of students' learning histories. As such, navigating the referral process requires more than diagnostic expertise—it demands an ability to recognize and respond to the broader educational, linguistic, and social conditions that influence how learning needs are identified (Evans & Taylor, 2025; Guo et al., 2021).

Psychoeducational assessment is one of the most critical mechanisms through which learning needs are formally identified and addressed in educational systems. These evaluations typically involve a combination of standardized academic and cognitive tests, curriculum-based measures, behavioural observations, rating scales, teacher input, and student interviews (Fletcher et al., 2019; Grigorenko et al., 2020; King et al., 2022; Maki & Adams, 2022). Conducted most often by school psychologists, this multimodal approach is designed to differentiate between SLD and other sources of academic difficulty such as language barriers, attention-related concerns, intellectual developmental disorder or emotional challenges. Assessment findings inform Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), determine eligibility for special education services, and shape collaboration between families, educators, and school-based professionals (Fletcher et al., 2019; Maki & Adams, 2022). Yet, despite the diagnostic utility of psychoeducational assessments, the referral process that precedes them is where equity often falls short. In many school systems, referral teams often lack formal expertise in second language acquisition or cross-cultural assessment, which limits their ability to interpret the diverse learning trajectories of EAL students accurately (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Scott et al., 2014). Without shared procedures between EAL and special education departments, practitioners often operate in silos, using inconsistent frameworks that fail to capture the full range of EAL student needs. This fragmentation is further compounded by the absence of culturally adapted screening

tools and decision-making resources specifically designed for EAL populations (Scott et al., 2014; Velasco Leon & Campbell, 2020).

Some international models have attempted to address these gaps. In the Australian context, Khawaja and Wotherspoon (2022) introduced a framework that prioritizes the systematic collection of psychosocial and linguistic background information prior to formal assessment. Their approach emphasizes intake interviews, detailed language histories, and a consideration of environmental context, factors that are often overlooked in conventional referral processes. Similarly, Rhinehart and Gotlieb (2023) demonstrate that early screening tools can support equitable identification of EAL students when interpreted through a linguistically informed lens. In their study, EAL learners performed comparably to their non-EAL peers on foundational reading tasks such as blending, nonword repetition, and rapid naming. When gaps emerged, most notably in vocabulary and rhyming, they argued that these reflected cultural and linguistic bias rather than actual learning difficulties. Their findings caution against excluding EAL students from early identification processes and instead advocate for timely, context-sensitive assessments that avoid perpetuating a *'wait-to-fail'* model. Further research highlights the benefit of assessing core reading skills in both a student's first language and English, particularly in bilingual or dual-language programs where cross-linguistic transfer supports academic development (Collier & Thomas, 2004; Branum-Martin et al., 2006).

Delays in referral have particularly severe consequences for long-term EAL students who have acquired conversational fluency but continue to experience academic challenges. Rhinehart et al. (2024) found that many such students remain in EAL-designated programs long after their language needs have diminished, resulting in missed opportunities for academic intervention. This issue is exacerbated by the continued reliance on English-only assessments, especially in

contexts where bilingual personnel are limited and culturally responsive tools are lacking (Grigorenko et al., 2020; Evans & Taylor, 2025). Carrierio (2024) argues that resolving these challenges requires more than technical improvements to tools; it demands broad-based capacity building. Educators, school psychologists, and support staff must be equipped with foundational knowledge in second language development and culturally responsive pedagogy to make sound and equitable referral decisions. Without this knowledge, even well-meaning teams risk defaulting to deficit-based interpretations that ignore the complex ways language development intersects with instruction, curriculum access, and opportunity structures

These challenges are not merely technical, nor are they confined to individual educators. They reflect broader structural inequities that shape how students are perceived, categorized, and supported within educational systems (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Race, language, and ability do not operate in isolation; they intersect in ways that influence who is identified for assessment, how identification occurs, and what types of support are ultimately provided (Annamma et al., 2013; Grigorenko et al., 2020). Even though individual studies have introduced promising tools and frameworks, the research base remains fragmented. Much of the literature focuses on assessment practices, professional training, or tool development, rather than examining how these elements converge within the broader referral process (Sullivan, 2011; Ortiz & Yates, 2001). As a result, there is currently no cohesive, evidence-based framework guiding how school teams should navigate referrals for EAL students in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner. Addressing this fragmentation requires a critical examination of the institutional assumptions and systemic norms that shape everyday referral decisions, particularly for EAL students whose needs may fall outside dominant expectations.

The Intersection of Race, Ability, and Identity in EAL Education

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) provides a compelling framework for understanding how racism and ableism intersect to shape the educational experiences of EAL students (Annamma et al., 2013). It foregrounds how policies and practices that appear neutral, such as English-only testing or deficit-driven referral protocols, actually reinforce dominant norms of whiteness, able-bodiedness, and monolingualism as benchmarks of academic competence (Annamma, 2016; Sullivan, 2011). Within this framework, the common go-to question posed by educational professionals is: *Is it language or is it disability?* This question presumes the root of academic struggle lies within the student, rather than reflecting broader inequities in schooling structures (Kangas, 2021).

Rather than treating the language/disability binary as a technical problem to be resolved through better tools, DisCrit reframes it as a symptom of systemic power dynamics (Annamma, 2016). The framework calls attention to how institutional decisions, such as allocated resources, development of assessment tools and professional training routinely produce racialized and disability labels that converge disproportionately for EAL students (Carriero, 2024; Rhinehart et al., 2024). These patterns are not random; they emerge from systems that pathologize difference while overlooking the educational structures that marginalize EAL students. Kangas (2021) critiques this dichotomy as an expression of entrenched ableist and monolingual norms, which situate failure in the student and obscure the systemic barriers that limit access to equitable instruction. In the absence of linguistically and culturally responsive assessment frameworks, school professionals often rely on subjective interpretations and fragmented services, which contribute to inconsistent and inequitable identification outcomes (Carriero, 2024). These practices reflect institutional practices rooted in dominant cultural and linguistic norms in

contrast to the perception of independent and isolated decision-making by educational professionals. DisCrit helps to reveal how such frameworks reinforce structural biases rather than account for the diverse learning trajectories of EAL students (Annamma et al., 2013; Kangas, 2021).

These patterns are particularly evident among long-term EAL students who have developed conversational fluency but continue to struggle with the academic language required for success in school. Roessingh (2016) underscores that the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is often poorly understood in educational contexts. As a result, students who appear fluent in everyday English are frequently assumed to be fully proficient, even when they lack the academic language needed to engage with complex curricular content. When this gap is overlooked, persistent academic difficulties are easily misinterpreted as indicators of a learning disorder rather than as manifestations of incomplete language development (Roessingh, 2016 & Haas & Brown, 2017). Compounding this issue, educators are frequently constrained by narrow diagnostic categories that fail to account for the complex interplay of language development, racialization, socioeconomic status, and instructional access. Rhinehart et al. (2022) highlight that EAL students with persistent academic difficulties often present with overlapping language and literacy profiles, which can obscure accurate identification, particularly when educators lack training to recognize how linguistic and academic development may diverge. These challenges are amplified at the secondary level, where intensified academic expectations and a shrinking window for intervention increase the likelihood of inappropriate referrals. Without culturally and linguistically responsive tools, educators may pathologize expected stages of second-language acquisition, especially among students from racialized backgrounds (Hudspeth-Niemi & Conroy,

2013; Hass & Brown, 2017). This results in a self-perpetuating cycle in which EAL students are misidentified, excluded from appropriate supports, and routed into remedial or special education programs that fail to address the root causes of their difficulties, ultimately reinforcing systemic patterns of educational inequity.

Thus, DisCrit provides a conceptual framework for understanding how these patterns are not accidental but systematically produced through institutional logics that privilege whiteness, able-bodiedness, and monolingualism. Four of its tenets are particularly relevant in this context (see Table 1). The first tenet, *Interdependence of Racism and Ableism*, highlights how invisible racism and ableism normalize exclusion, explaining why marginalized EAL students are disproportionately labelled as needing special education services (Annamma, 2016). Within this framework, linguistic and racial differences are frequently perceived as deficits, perpetuating the students' marginalization within an educational system that fails to recognize their multifaceted, socially constructed identities. (Chu & Flores, 2011; Barrio, 2017). The second tenet, *Valuing Multidimensional Identities*, emphasizes the importance of multidimensional identities, challenging singular views based on race, disability or language. This perspective is essential for understanding the experiences of EAL students, whose identities are shaped by their status as English learners and their racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. DisCrit posits that the intersection of these identities compounds their marginalization, urging educators and policymakers to consider how various forms of oppression intersect to influence these students' educational experiences (Annamma, 2016). The third tenet, *Social Construction of Race and Dis/ability*, recognizes the social constructions of race and ability, acknowledging the material and psychological impacts of being categorized within these frameworks. EAL students, particularly those from racialized backgrounds, bear a dual burden, as their linguistic differences

become pathologized, leading to misclassification as having cognitive or learning disabilities (Samson & Lesaux, 2009). This false dichotomy can contribute to their disproportionate representation in special education programs, where students may be placed in segregated or restrictive settings that limit access to rigorous curriculum and meaningful inclusion. While practices vary across jurisdictions, and some models such as MTSS aim to promote more inclusive approaches, in many contexts these placements offer limited academic or socioemotional benefit, thereby perpetuating systemic inequities (Barron et al., 2024). Lastly, the fourth tenet, *Whiteness and Ability as Property*, critiques the notion of whiteness and ability as forms of property, arguing that educational advancements for students with disabilities often center around the interests of white, middle-class families (Annamma, 2016). This dynamic further sidelines the needs of EAL students, particularly those from non-white backgrounds, exacerbating their disproportionate placement in special education and perpetuating inequitable educational outcomes. These tenets help explain why EAL students are disproportionately routed into special education programs that do not reflect their actual learning needs.

Although existing research has illuminated many of the structural inequities shaping the educational experiences of EAL students, significant gaps remain, particularly at the point of referral. As the first and often most decisive step in determining access to psychoeducational assessment and services, the referral process has received limited critical attention through an intersectional lens. Although scholars have examined how racialized and ableist assumptions influence special education placement (Annamma, 2016; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) and how deficit-based views distort perceptions of EAL students (Kangas, 2021; Martínez-Álvarez, 2015), few studies interrogate how race, language, and dis/ability intersect during referral itself. Much of the existing literature isolates components such as assessment tools, educator beliefs, or service

delivery structures, without fully addressing how institutional frameworks and team-based decision-making jointly contribute to patterns of misidentification and exclusion (Carriero, 2024; Velasco Leon & Campbell, 2020). Moreover, there is a marked absence of cohesive, evidence-based referral frameworks to guide interdisciplinary collaboration between school psychologists, educators, and EAL specialists in culturally and linguistically responsive ways.

This chapter has examined how dominant assumptions about language proficiency, academic competence, and normative development shape the identification of learning needs for EAL students. Rather than attributing academic difficulty solely to individual students, the literature highlights how inequities are produced and sustained by institutional practices, biased diagnostic criteria, and limited educator preparedness. Though school psychologists play a central role in navigating these processes, their efforts are often constrained by fragmented protocols, siloed departments, and systemic policies that fail to account for students' full sociocultural contexts. Theoretical frameworks such as DisCrit offer a critical perspective for unpacking how whiteness, monolingualism, and normative constructions of ability become embedded in referral systems, structuring who is assessed, how, and with what consequences.

Taken together, the research and frameworks outlined in this chapter position psychoeducational referral as a site where systemic inequities are both reproduced and potentially contested. DisCrit shifts the focus from technical refinements to a broader critique of how difference is constructed and operationalized within schools. Ensuring equitable assessment access for EAL students will require more than procedural changes; it demands a fundamental rethinking of how competence is defined, how support is allocated, and how educational systems engage with linguistic and cultural diversity. Chapter 2 extends this inquiry by mapping the empirical and Canadian grey literature on psychoeducational referral for EAL students,

identifying how structural, procedural, and conceptual barriers shape decision-making and revealing missed opportunities for more equity-focused intervention.

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CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING REFERRAL BARRIERS: A SCOPING REVIEW OF PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PATHWAYS FOR EAL STUDENTS

Despite longstanding commitments to inclusive education, many school systems continue to rely on frameworks that inadequately reflect the realities of diverse student populations. Educational structures often fail to account for how intersecting identities, such as race, language background, and perceived ability, shape students' access to support (Gross et al., 2016). As Crenshaw (1991) argues, when policies isolate these categories, they obscure how oppression operates at their intersections. This is especially evident in the psychoeducational referral process, where standardized protocols frequently overlook the complex sociocultural and linguistic realities of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students (Welpy, 2022). Despite their considerable cultural and linguistic assets, EAL students are disproportionately delayed in receiving services, misidentified as having disabilities, or excluded from referral altogether (Carriero, 2024; Kangas, 2021). These patterns are shaped not only by individual educator discretion but also by systemic constraints, such as fragmented service delivery models, English-dominant assessment tools, and limited culturally responsive practices (Scott et al., 2014; Stairs-Davenport, 2023).

In the Canadian context, these disparities are particularly concerning given the growing linguistic diversity of school populations (Cummins, 2014). Across provinces, EAL students include not only recent immigrants and refugee arrivals, but also Canadian-born multilingual youth whose needs are often overlooked by policies that narrowly frame English learning as a transitional issue (Gérin-Lajoie, 2012). As such, psychoeducational referrals cannot be understood in isolation from the broader sociopolitical forces that shape how learning challenges are recognized and acted upon. This chapter aims to explore how current referral practices may

perpetuate systemic inequities by critically analyzing the barriers and missed opportunities that emerge at the intersection of race, language and ability in the Canadian school context.

Conceptual and Diagnostic Foundations

This study uses the term *English as an Additional Language (EAL)* to describe students who are developing proficiency in English while speaking one or more other languages at home. In this study, EAL includes both newcomer immigrants and refugees, as well as Canadian-born multilingual students who may need support in acquiring academic English. These students arrive with a range of cultural, linguistic, and educational experiences. Their language learning often occurs alongside the challenge of navigating unfamiliar school expectations, social norms, and classroom practices (Araujo, 2007; Meyer, 2000). Much of the existing research has focused on distinguishing between language acquisition and learning difficulties, which is a significant concern, especially given the risk of misidentification or delayed support (Tagen & Spooner-Lane, 2008; Haas & Brown, 2019). However, this study takes a different approach by centring the broader, intersecting sociocultural pressures that influence how learning challenges are perceived and responded to in school contexts (Kangas, 2021). A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for developing more equitable and contextually grounded models of support for EAL students.

To better understand how schools respond to academic difficulties among EAL students, it is necessary to examine how learning disorders, particularly Specific Learning Disorder (SLD), are defined and diagnosed within educational contexts. This study draws on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR) to define SLD (APA, 2022). According to the DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022), SLD is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent difficulties in reading, writing, or

mathematics that interfere with academic achievement, despite adequate instruction and intervention. These difficulties may manifest as problems with decoding, reading fluency, spelling, written expression, number sense, or mathematical reasoning (Grigorenko et al., 2020). To meet diagnostic criteria, challenges must persist for at least six months and significantly impair academic functioning. Although, other definitions, such as the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) model, are also used in policy and practice, this study prioritizes the DSM-5-TR definition for consistency and clarity. The term *SLD* will be used throughout for consistency purposes.

In classroom settings, SLD may appear as frequent guessing during reading tasks, poor spelling, disorganized writing, or difficulty remembering mathematical procedures. However, identifying these patterns is particularly complex for EAL students, as similar behaviours can result from limited exposure to English, interrupted formal schooling, or unfamiliarity with academic vocabulary (Roessingh, 2016). The diagnostic requirement that learning difficulties persist despite targeted support adds another layer of complexity, particularly in diverse and under-resourced classrooms. As Tannock (2016) argues, the DSM-5-TR does not clearly define what qualifies as adequate or appropriate intervention, leaving significant room for interpretation. This vagueness makes it especially difficult to determine whether EAL students have received meaningful support prior to referral and may contribute to inconsistencies in how learning difficulties are identified and addressed in practice (Klingner & Eppollito, 2014). This complexity is even more pronounced for long-term EAL students, whose conversational fluency may obscure persistent difficulties with academic language and literacy (Rhinehart et al., 2024). In the absence of clear, culturally and linguistically responsive guidelines, educators are often

left to make high-stakes decisions without adequate tools or training. As a result, referral practices risk becoming inconsistent, subjective, and misaligned with students' actual needs.

A DisCrit Approach to Understanding Referral Inequities

These diagnostic challenges do not occur in isolation but are situated within broader institutional structures that shape how student needs are interpreted and acted on. To fully examine how systemic forces influence the referral process for EAL students, this study draws on Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). DisCrit offers a conceptual framework that moves beyond individual bias or technical limitations to highlight how institutional practices systematically privilege certain profiles of language, race, and ability, often to the detriment of those who do not fit these normative expectations (Annamma, 2016; Kangas, 2021). DisCrit highlights how racism and ableism operate together in ways that appear neutral but serve to reinforce normative ideals of Whiteness, able-bodiedness, and monolingualism (Annamma et al., 2013; Sullivan, 2011). For example, English-only assessments and fragmented EAL–special education services are not merely policy oversights; they embody broader systemic assumptions about who is viewed as teachable, normal, or requiring intervention. The referral stage, within this framework, becomes a critical but often overlooked site where such institutional logics are put into practice (de Valenzuela et al., 2006; Annamma et al., 2013).

Even though research has increasingly emphasized culturally responsive assessment practices and the need for better professional training, limited attention has been paid to the referral process itself as a structural barrier. Most studies focus on improving identification tools or evaluating post-assessment supports, rather than investigating how EAL students are, or are not, referred for psychoeducational evaluation in the first place (Scott et al., 2014; Carriero, 2024). This lack of synthesis across the Canadian context has left a gap in understanding how

referral decisions are made, what systemic forces influence them, and where opportunities for more equitable practices may exist.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

Despite growing recognition of the need for culturally responsive assessment and intervention practices, the referral stage remains a critically underexamined component of psychoeducational services (Harris et al., 2015; Klingner & Harry, 2006). Much of the existing literature concentrates on refining diagnostic criteria, developing assessment tools, or improving post-identification supports such as targeted instruction and intervention. However, there is limited research examining how systemic and institutional conditions shape whether EAL students are referred for assessment in the first place (Sullivan, 2011; Ortiz & Robertson, 2018). For example, although disproportionate identification patterns have been widely documented, they are often attributed to practitioner error or assessment bias, without adequately considering pre-referral factors such as lack of early intervention, under-resourced multilingual programming, or the absence of clear referral pathways (Burr et al., 2015; Ferlis, 2012; Harris et al., 2024). Teacher education programs tend to focus on instructional and assessment strategies for students already identified as having learning needs, rather than preparing educators to recognize and respond to structural inequities at the referral stage (Ortiz & Robertson, 2018). This lack of attention limits our understanding of referral as a systemic gatekeeping mechanism that affects which students are seen as eligible for support. Even though substantial research has explored the difficulty of distinguishing between language acquisition and learning difficulties (Klingner et al., 2006; Scott et al., 2014; Sánchez et al., 2010), there remains a notable gap in studies that examine how intersecting factors such as race, linguistic background, and perceived ability shape referral decisions. This is especially true in the Canadian context, where education

is provincially governed, and no empirical studies have synthesized referral-related knowledge across jurisdictions. As a result, policy coherence, educator guidance, and equity-informed practice remain limited.

To address these limitations, this study conducted a scoping review of both peer-reviewed and grey literature on psychoeducational referral practices for EAL students in Canada. A scoping review is particularly suitable for this study because it enables the mapping of conceptual complexity, synthesis of diverse forms of evidence, and identification of knowledge gaps within an emerging area of educational practice (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018; Daudt et al., 2013). Unlike systematic reviews, which focus on evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, scoping reviews offer a broader, exploratory approach well-suited for examining fragmented policy and practice landscapes, such as referral and identification processes. Guided by DisCrit, this study explored how institutional, procedural, and conceptual factors shape referral decisions for EAL students. By centring the referral stage and the systemic forces that govern it, this research contributes to a more equitable and contextually informed understanding of how schools identify and support EAL students with potential learning needs. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What barriers and missed opportunities emerge from the empirical and grey literature about the referral process for psychoeducational assessments of EAL students?

Method

To explore how EAL students are referred for psychoeducational assessment in Canadian school systems, this study followed a scoping review approach. The study was conducted using the five-stage framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which provides a structured and transparent process for gathering and synthesizing evidence. The five stages

include: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. Each stage was applied systematically to ensure a comprehensive study of both peer-reviewed and grey literature relevant to EAL referral practices.

Identifying Relevant Studies

To identify empirical literature, systematic searches were conducted across five academic databases: PsycINFO, ERIC, EBSCOhost, LLBA, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined key concepts such as: (“EAL” OR “ELL*” OR “ESL” OR “CLD”) AND (“Psychoeducational Assessment” OR “Educational Assessment” OR “Assessment”) AND (“Referral Process” OR “Identification Process” OR “RTI” OR “MTSS”). An iterative and flexible approach was employed to refine search terms based on the initial results, resulting in the inclusion of terms related to Response to Intervention (RTI) models and pre-referral practices. For example, the following Boolean search was used in PsycINFO: (Specific Learning Disorder*) AND (English language learners OR ELL OR ESL OR English as a second language OR second language learning) AND (referral* OR identify* OR RTI OR MTSS). Similar customized search strings with minor variations were applied across the remaining databases, such as using broader terms like "educational assessment" in ERIC and Google Scholar. Filters were restricted results to English-language publications from 2000 to 2025.

Grey literature searches were targeted at publicly accessible documents from Canadian provincial government websites, provincial ministries of education portals, and educational organizations. Specifically, searches encompassed four provinces: Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia. Targeted keyword searches were conducted using each site’s internal search functions and Google’s advanced search operators (e.g., site:.gov.on.ca AND

“Curriculum and Resources”). Provincial government websites included provincial ministries such as the Ontario Ministry of Education, Alberta Education, British Columbia’s Ministry of Education and Child Care, and Nova Scotia’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Educational organizations included national bodies such as the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, and the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. Relevant documents retrieved encompassed policy briefs, referral guidelines, strategic reports, implementation frameworks, and special education guidelines that directly addressed the referral and identification processes of EAL students in K–12 settings. Limiting the scope to these four provinces ensured a manageable volume of data and supported in-depth thematic analysis. This focused approach aligns with scoping review principles by balancing comprehensiveness and analytical feasibility (Pham et al., 2014). Additionally, given Canada’s decentralized educational governance, this selection enabled a meaningful analysis of regional policy variations and their implications for referral practices.

Study Selection Process

The study selection process occurred in two stages: initial screening and full-text eligibility review. During the first stage, the primary researcher applied the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1) to titles and abstracts across all sources. This resulted in 26 empirical articles from databases, 30 articles from Google Scholar, and 26 grey literature documents from provincial or organizational websites meeting initial inclusion criteria. At this stage, 91 empirical articles, 10 Google Scholar articles, and 3 grey literature documents were excluded for not meeting the criteria.

In the second stage, full texts of the remaining 26 empirical articles, 20 Google Scholar sources, and 23 grey literature documents were retrieved for eligibility screening. Four empirical

articles, 12 Google Scholar sources, and three grey literature documents could not be retrieved. The remaining 22 empirical articles, 8 Google Scholar sources, and 20 grey literature documents were reviewed in full. Nineteen sources were excluded at this stage, most often because they focused exclusively on the assessment phase of psychoeducational evaluations without addressing referral or pre-referral processes. Following this process, 32 sources met the final inclusion criteria: 14 empirical studies and 18 grey literature documents. Screening and selection decisions were cross validated with the supervisor, and any uncertainties were resolved through discussion. Figure 1 outlines this process.

Data Charting and Coding

Following study selection, a structured data charting process was employed to extract and summarize descriptive details for each source systematically. Both empirical and grey literature were charted using structured Excel spreadsheets, with field categories tailored to the type of source. The empirical literature was charted using 19 clearly defined fields designed to capture methodological variation and content relevant to the scoping review's conceptual focus. Examples include Year of Publication, Purpose of Study, Time in School/Country/EAL Program, and Intervention Prior to Referral. Grey literature was charted using 13 fields, such as provincial considerations, multilingual considerations, alignment with research practices, pre-referral interventions and tools, and noted barriers or cautions. This approach allowed for transparent documentation and enabled both descriptive (e.g., jurisdiction, document type) and analytical (e.g., level of procedural clarity, presence of EAL-specific guidance) comparisons. The complete list of charting fields is provided in Appendix A and Appendix B.

Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting Results

The empirical and grey literature were coded sequentially using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The empirical literature was analyzed first using a deductive-inductive coding approach. Deductive codes were informed by the research question and existing literature on referral systems, RTI/MTSS models, and the misclassification of EAL students. Inductive codes emerged iteratively after close reading of the texts, enabling the identification of unanticipated codes grounded directly in the data (e.g., variations in referral criteria across jurisdictions, specific interventions before referral). After the initial coding framework was established, the framework was then applied deductively, with flexibility, to the grey literature. While maintaining core codes, the framework remained adaptable to account for the unique language, structure, and practical focus of the grey literature documents. Once the coding was complete, all codes and interpretative notes were reviewed with the supervisor and grouped by considering the context and content of the data to develop coherent themes. This structured yet responsive coding process enabled the identification of converging and diverging practices regarding how referrals and identifications of EAL students are conceptualized and operationalized across empirical and grey literature. The findings were then organized through a narrative synthesis, facilitating a cohesive integration of findings across diverse sources, enabling an accessible yet rigorous presentation of the reviewed literature. A final step included applying the DisCrit framework against the findings to consider the systemic inequities present for EAL students in the referral process. The alignment of the research findings with the DisCrit framework is presented in the discussion.

Results

Descriptive Numerical Summary

Of the 33 articles and documents selected, 14 were peer-reviewed empirical studies and 19 were grey literature documents. For the empirical articles, 13 studies were conducted in the United States and one Australian study, using qualitative ($n = 6$), quantitative ($n = 5$), and mixed-methods ($n = 3$) designs. These studies concentrated on students from kindergarten to grade 8 and drew perspectives from classroom teachers, special educators, EAL specialists, and school psychologists. The 19 grey sources originated from Ontario ($n = 9$), British Columbia ($n = 7$), Alberta ($n = 1$), and Nova Scotia ($n = 2$) and focused on inclusive education frameworks, referral protocols, and service-delivery guidelines. Fourteen of the 19 grey sources outlined general referral procedures, whereas six offered targeted strategies that explicitly addressed linguistically and culturally responsive referral steps.

Major Themes

Across the reviewed materials, four interrelated themes consistently emerged, *Bias and Misclassification*, *Referral Decision-Making Tools and Practices*, *Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Confidence* and *Multilingual and Sociocultural Consideration*, across both empirical and grey literature sources, indicating that the issues are systemic rather than isolated.

The four themes illuminate two interlinked aspects of the referral process: *educator perceptions* and the *systemic instruments* that formalize those perceptions into decisions. The first aspect, educator perceptions, refers to how educators recognize and evaluate student challenges. These early judgments are often informed by limited training in multilingual development, dominant norms around language and behaviour, and minimal integration of students' cultural and linguistic contexts. Within this space of educator perception, the themes of

Bias and Misclassification, Multilingual and Sociocultural Considerations, and Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Confidence emerge as key forces shaping how student needs are understood and whether they are recommended for formal assessment. These initial impressions do not remain isolated; rather, they may become embedded within systemic instruments such as institutional tools, referral protocols, and assessment procedures, which can in turn reinforce or disrupt earlier educator interpretations. This interaction is not unidirectional; systemic tools also shape educator judgments, creating a dynamic feedback loop.

Systemic instruments explain how these early interpretations are formalized through institutional frameworks, referral policies, and assessment tools. At this stage, *Referral Decision-Making Tools and Practices* enter as a distinct theme, as it captures the procedural mechanisms through which referrals are enacted. The other three themes re-emerge, highlighting how early educator judgments are often validated and perpetuated by these formal processes. However, this aspect also reveals that systemic instruments do not always reproduce bias. In some cases, institutional tools and policies, such as multilingual assessment guidelines, team-based decision-making processes, or culturally responsive screening protocols, can prompt educators to reconsider initial assumptions. By introducing structured opportunities to account for language development, trauma history, or sociocultural context, these tools may disrupt misinterpretations and redirect referral pathways. As illustrated in Figure 2, the interaction between these two aspects forms a feedback loop through which informal interpretations and formal systems continually influence one another. This model allows for a layered interpretation that traces how referral barriers for EAL students are shaped both by educator perceptions and by the systemic instruments intended to guide equitable decision-making.

Educator Perceptions

Educator perceptions matter not only because they initiate the referral process, but because they shape how a student's needs are interpreted. In the absence of structured guidance, these perceptions are often based on intuitive judgments that may conflate language learning with dis/ability. They influence the questions asked, the data prioritized, and whether concerns are escalated or dismissed, ultimately shaping the trajectory of support long before formal tools are applied.

Bias and Misclassification

Educator judgments frequently reflect bias and misclassification when ordinary additional-language behaviours are treated as learning disorder markers. Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2017) documented how bilingual (e.g. Spanish-English) classrooms with quiet demeanour, low initial reading scores, and slow response times, all typical of early language acquisition, were interpreted as specific learning disorders (SLD). Klingner and Harry (2006) found that school-based referral teams, such as child-study teams, often reframed academic struggles as behavioural or emotional problems, sometimes directing EAL students to counselling rather than instructional support, despite referrals for academic difficulty. Large datasets reinforce these findings. Sullivan (2011) reported relative-risk ratios of 1.82 for SLDs and 1.63 for mild intellectual disability among Black and Latinx EAL students. Samson and Lesaux (2009) identified a 15 to 20 percent over-representation of EAL students in high-incidence disability categories. Canadian evidence from the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Right to Read* inquiry reveals a similar misclassification pattern in a distinctly procedural form (Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2022). Investigators reviewed referral files from eight English-language school boards and found that low EQAO reading

scores were often the sole basis for initiating special-education referrals (OHRC, 2022). Simultaneously, most boards followed an unwritten practice of delaying referrals for EAL students until at least grade 3 or after several years of English exposure, a practice the report identified as both unnecessary and discriminatory. This pattern illustrates how inconsistent benchmarks for English proficiency can restrict access to support while still enabling premature disability labelling based on standardized academic performance. Similar dynamics were observed internationally. Khawaja and Wotherspoon (2022) described an Australian case in which a referral proceeded without caregiver input or cultural history, reflecting how monolingual norms can shape assessment decisions. Several sources attributed such misidentifications to the absence of systematized procedures for documenting students' language backgrounds, migration histories, or culturally mediated learning behaviours.

Multilingual and Sociocultural Considerations

Although bias and misclassification often stem from subjective interpretation, they are also shaped by what information is, or is not, available to educators. Key details about students' language development, migration history, and cultural background are frequently missing from referral decisions. This theme highlights the lack of systematized processes for gathering and applying such contextual knowledge. Its absence during the interpretive process limits educators' ability to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disorders, leading to inconsistent and inequitable referrals. Across policy, practice, and assessment tools, multilingual and sociocultural information is rarely documented. Instead, educational professionals rely on standardized test scores and classroom behaviours, often without the background needed to interpret these data meaningfully.

In an audit of multi-district U.S. files, Harris et al. (2024) found that referral packets typically included grades, behavioural notes, and English-only test scores, while fewer than half recorded any of an EAL student's language-learning history, migration background, or home literacy practices. Even at the multidisciplinary team stage, tools used by school psychologists offered few prompts to capture bilingual proficiency, culturally mediated learning behaviours, or migration-related stressors. Additionally, family interviews were rarely conducted, and norm-referenced assessments and English-only classroom observations primarily shaped referral records. Classroom-level practices reflected similar oversights. In linguistically diverse schools studied by Heath and Connell (2024), none of the six teachers interviewed or observed used district-provided language-descriptor tools when working with EAL students. Consequently, details such as first-language literacy, resettlement experiences, and family cultural practices were excluded from pre-referral discussions, leaving teams to rely on monolingual benchmarks when evaluating student needs.

Internationally, Khawaja and Wotherspoon (2022) found that psychometric practices in Australia rarely embedded structured procedures for documenting students' language histories or cultural reference points. In the absence of clear protocols, educators and school psychologists were often left to improvise, increasing the risk that critical contextual factors remained undocumented. Bur et al. (2015) similarly reported that misidentification was more likely when referral teams failed to consider four foundational factors: 1) the quality of prior instruction, 2) the student's rate of English-language development, 3) the cultural normativity of observed behaviours, and 4) the influence of first-language literacy and migration background. Without systematized prompts to address these areas, educators relied on informal heuristics, increasing the likelihood that typical second-language development or culturally situated learning

behaviours were misinterpreted as signs of disability. To address these documentation gaps, Khawaja and Wotherspoon proposed a structured three-phase intake model that includes over 40 probe questions related to language use, prior schooling, trauma exposure, migration history, and cultural beliefs about disability. Operational supports, such as extended interview sessions, trauma-informed pacing, and mandatory use of accredited interpreters, are built into the protocol. Although the model offers a concrete example of how to embed sociocultural information into referral practices, the authors note that it has not yet been widely implemented.

A similar gap in the structured collection of sociocultural information is evident in Canadian policy and district documents. Even though several provinces reference the importance of cultural responsiveness, they fail to operationalize it within the referral process. For example, British Columbia's *Inclusive education services: A manual of policies, procedures and guidelines* (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care [BCMECC], 2024) encourages attention to language-acquisition timelines but lacks a referral-specific rubric. Similarly, Nova Scotia's *Assessment, evaluation, and communication of student learning policy* (Halifax Regional School Board [HRSB], 2008) advocates for culturally sensitive interpretation yet provides no procedures to embed this information into formal referrals. In contrast, the Toronto District School Board references a more concrete model: the *English language learners: School-based Considerations Prior to Referral for Psychological Assessment* protocol developed by the ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario [ERGO] (2011), which requires documentation of first-language benchmarks and caregiver input, demonstrating how such information can be meaningfully integrated. However, most other policy documents omit key components such as interpreter use, parental voice, and prior educational experience, reflecting the same gaps in contextual information seen during the interpretive stage of referral. In the absence of clear

policy direction, the responsibility for deciding when and how to refer EAL students rests with individual educators, further highlighting the significance of educator training and confidence in navigating these complexities.

Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Confidence

The absence of structured policy guidance around multilingual and sociocultural factors leaves individual educators responsible for complex referral decisions. This burden is compounded by widespread gaps in professional training related to additional-language development and culturally responsive assessment. Across the reviewed studies, educators consistently demonstrated limited confidence in distinguishing between typical language acquisition and potential SLDs, particularly during the early interpretive phase when concerns first arise.

Without standardized criteria, teachers frequently relied on informal markers such as time spent in the country, classroom fatigue, or inconsistent academic performance. Gordon (2018) found that elementary educators often interpreted student frustration or slow literacy progress as signs of disability without consulting additional-language development tools. Similarly, Ferlis (2012) reported that secondary EAL teachers regularly documented student challenges, only to face skepticism or inaction from special education teams uncertain about how to interpret these concerns through a multilingual lens. In both studies, educators described a cycle of gathering additional data or trying new interventions without resolution, resulting in prolonged delays or abandoned referrals. Broader survey findings mirrored these trends. Samson and Lesaux (2009) reported that teachers often relied on early reading scores and general academic indicators, with little attention to students' stage of English acquisition. Many lacked the training to differentiate or understand the interplay between limited English proficiency and genuine learning difficulties,

leading to premature or inappropriate referrals. At the policy level, Scott et al. (2014) found that few states required professional development in linguistic or cultural competence for educators involved in referrals. This lack of mandated training further entrenched the uncertainty and inconsistency observed at the school level. These studies point to a consistent pattern: educators across grade levels and jurisdictions are tasked with high-stakes referral decisions without systematic preparation in multilingual development or culturally responsive assessment. As a result, early interpretations of student difficulty, central to initiating the referral process, are often shaped by personal judgment rather than evidence-based frameworks. This increases the likelihood of misidentification, referral delays, or students failing to receive appropriate support.

This concern is also reflected in policy and procedural documents, where clear expectations for educator knowledge and skills rarely support broad commitments to inclusion. Although many provincial documents reference inclusive education and cultural responsiveness, few articulate clear expectations for educator competencies or provide structured guidance on supporting EAL students with potential learning difficulties. For example, both British Columbia's *Inclusive Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* (BCMECC, 2024) and the Toronto District School Board's *Special Education Plan 2024–2025* (Toronto District School Board [TDSB], 2024) emphasize collaboration among educators, administrators, and specialists and reference the importance of differentiated instruction. However, neither provides specific requirements for EAL-focused training or outlines how professional capacity in this area should be developed or evaluated. Although the B.C. manual (BCMECC, 2024) encourages in-service training related to linguistic and cultural diversity and acknowledges that misunderstandings of EAL students' backgrounds can lead to misidentification, it does not specify delivery mechanisms or role-based expectations. Similarly,

the *Special Education Plan* (TDSB, 2024) references EAL descriptors and promotes the use of Appendix B in decision-making but leaves the interpretation and application of these tools to individual educators, without providing dedicated professional learning supports.

This pattern extends across other Ontario-based documents. The *English Language Learners: ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario elementary and secondary schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12* policy (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2007) requires school boards to develop procedures for identifying EAL students with possible special education needs but does not specify the professional knowledge or skills necessary to carry out these procedures. Likewise, the *English Language Learners and Special Education Support in TDSB Elementary Schools: Q. and A.* document (Toronto District School Board [TDSB], 2023) highlights the importance of avoiding misidentification and encourages programming adaptations yet offers no direction on how educators should be prepared to make such determinations. The ERGO protocol (ERGO, 2011) goes further in outlining a detailed referral process, including structured interviews that consider trauma, migration history, and first-language development. However, it similarly lacks provisions for training or mechanisms to ensure consistent application across schools. One of the few documents that offers a more targeted support structure is *"Identification, Assessment, and Instruction of English Language Learners with Learning Difficulties in the Elementary and Intermediate Grades: A Guide for Educators in Ontario School Boards"* by Adelson, Geva, and Fraser (2014). This resource includes decision-making flowcharts, guidance on distinguishing second-language development from SLDs, and a direct acknowledgment that many educators lack the training required for these decisions. Still, like the ERGO (2011) protocol, it is not a mandated policy and does not appear integrated into formal referral pathways. These documents

reflect a shared recognition that misidentification is a risk when language development is not clearly understood. Yet across jurisdictions, there remains a lack of coordinated, enforceable structures to ensure that educators are adequately prepared to apply referral criteria equitably for EAL students.

Systemic Instruments

The themes of Bias and Misclassification, Multilingual and Sociocultural Considerations, and Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Confidence establish a consistent educator perception that guides how educators perceive EAL students' difficulties. However, these perceptions do not operate in isolation. They carry forward into the next phase of the referral process, where formal tools, frameworks, and institutional procedures begin to shape outcomes. The following section examines how these early judgments become codified through systemic instruments, revealing how referral tools may either reinforce or complicate initial assumptions.

Referral Decision-Making Tools and Practices

When a concern about a student escalates to a formal referral, the tools and protocols that shape decision-making become pivotal. Ideally, frameworks like Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) ensure that struggling learners receive culturally responsive and linguistically adapted Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction before being considered for psychoeducational assessment. Yet, large-scale and close-up evidence shows this is not always the case. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort ($n = 6,000$), Samson and Lesaux (2009) found that grade 1 teacher ratings of language and literacy were the strongest predictor of later special education placement. EAL students who were rated as below grade level were nearly twice as likely to be placed in special education by grade 3, even when controlling for socioeconomic status and reading achievement. Despite this, school

records showed no evidence that core instruction had been adapted to meet the needs of EAL students. The authors identified a trend: although EAL students were initially underrepresented in special education, by grade 3, they became overrepresented across all disability categories. This shift was attributed to the lack of linguistically responsive progress-monitoring practices. Klingner and Harry's (2006) ethnography demonstrated how referral meetings transform such numbers into high-stakes decisions. Across 21 child study team sessions in nine schools, additional-language acquisition was discussed in only two instances; most deliberations assumed the difficulty resided within the child. One psychologist stated, "He can't be referred until he's ESOL Level 4; they won't accept it", despite this not being the case for other students, thus revealing an unwritten gate-keeping rule that postponed evaluation regardless of classroom data. Moreover, when bilingual assessments were conducted, only the English-language scores were included in decision-making discussions, while interpretation of scores and translation for families were sporadic. This demonstrates that multilingual and sociocultural considerations were not prioritized in referral decisions. Policy-level analyses further reveal gaps in structured guidance. Scott et al. (2014) found that even though RTI frameworks are widely referenced in state policy, few jurisdictions offer concrete implementation guidelines tailored to EAL populations. In states where resources such as checklists, flowcharts or data-interpretation rubrics were available, they were rarely standardized or mandatory, leaving individual districts and schools to determine how, or even whether, to adapt RTI for EAL students.

Huang et al. (2011) highlighted these same deficiencies, arguing that the assessment landscape for EAL students with potential learning disabilities is characterized by a lack of linguistically appropriate pre-referral practices. The authors emphasized that tools like Curriculum-Based Dynamic Assessment (CDA), which measure a student's learning potential

rather than static knowledge, offer promising alternatives. They advocate for early screening and intervention using culturally responsive models that integrate language acquisition variables into decision-making frameworks. Yet their findings show that these tools are rarely adopted, and referral decisions often hinge on static, English-only assessments that disadvantage EAL students.

Grey literature offers a similarly mixed picture. The OHRC (2022) *Right to Read* report criticized the lack of clear, research-aligned referral pathways for students with reading difficulties. It recommended that referrals be based on RTI data, rather than on arbitrary criteria such as student age or length of English exposure and emphasized that persistent reading difficulties should trigger referral no later than grade 1, even for EAL students. British Columbia's *Inclusive Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* (BCMECC, 2024) document outlines structured referral protocols including pre-referral team consultations, use of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and access to extended assessments. It promotes a collaborative model that involves school-based and community services. However, the manual applies broadly to all students and does not explicitly address the needs of EAL students. Similarly, British Columbia's document (BCMECC, 2024) includes a brief mention of psychoeducational referrals but omits any reference to language learners, missing an opportunity to ensure equitable procedures. Nova Scotia's *Special Education Policy* (Nova Scotia Department of Education [NSDE], 2008) outlines a multi-step referral process involving school-based team meetings, intervention tracking, and decisions informed by various data sources. Although it acknowledges the importance of cultural responsiveness, it offers no specific guidance on how to incorporate language background or migration history into referral decisions.

RTI is not explicitly mentioned, and the procedures remain generalized rather than linguistically differentiated.

Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Confidence

Although educator knowledge and confidence initially influence how student needs are interpreted, they also play a critical role during the formal stages of referral. At this stage, the concern shifts from initial impressions to how structured tools, such as RTI data, language assessments, and intervention tracking, are used or misused in the absence of adequate professional preparation. These gaps in assessment literacy and procedural knowledge often result in subjective practices being embedded into formal documentation.

Roen (2015) conducted a mixed-methods dissertation study in a Midwestern U.S. school district, analyzing referral documentation and interviewing 15 school-based professionals, including general educators, EAL teachers, administrators, and a school psychologist. Of the 75 student referral packets reviewed, only 12 included quantifiable evidence of Tier 2 progress monitoring, and none adhered to a standard RTI protocol. Interviews indicated that 11 of the 15 participants relied on professional intuition to initiate referrals, often substituting informal strategies, such as rearranging classroom seating or sending home generic worksheets, in place of structured interventions. These improvised actions were then retroactively documented as sufficient pre-referral steps, despite lacking fidelity checks or measurable growth targets. One teacher described using a "gut feeling" as the basis for referral, a practice corroborated by the school psychologist, who admitted that subjective judgments frequently outweighed inconsistent or missing benchmark data (p. 180). Roen (2015) also found that this pattern had systemic consequences. Once referred, EAL students were often placed into skill-remediation pullout groups that emphasized isolated decoding drills, thereby reducing their exposure to grade-level

language-rich instruction. This placement decision was rarely revisited, and academic trajectories were effectively altered based on initial, unverified concerns.

A parallel pattern of tool misuse is evident in Heath and Connell (2024), whose qualitative case study focused on six elementary teachers working in linguistically diverse U.S. schools. Despite having access to the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA ACCESS) tool, which is designed to offer a nuanced profile of English language proficiency, teachers in the study focused almost exclusively on the overall composite score. If the score plateaued for a second year, they inferred that English acquisition was complete and any continued difficulty indicated a SLD. This assumption led to premature referrals, often without considering the scale-score breakdowns or instructional descriptors included in the WIDA framework. Teachers also expected that gains in oral language should automatically correspond with gains in reading, and when this did not occur, they interpreted the mismatch as a sign of disability, rather than a known lag between conversational and academic language development. Wilkinson et al. (2006) provide further insight into the systemic dimensions of these challenges. Their study, which explored the assessment practices of school psychologists working with EAL students, found that most practitioners used standardized, English-only tools that were not normed for bilingual populations. Despite existing mandates for non-biased testing, few participants adjusted procedures to account for additional-language development. Moreover, dynamic and curriculum-based assessments, which are better suited for distinguishing between language acquisition and disability, were rarely used. Many practitioners reported feeling underprepared to interpret assessment data for EALs and expressed uncertainty about whether observed academic difficulties were due to a disorder or limited English proficiency. These findings underscore that even when tools are available, their diagnostic potential is constrained

by professional gaps in training and institutional pressure to make quick decisions. Wilkinson et al. also noted that educators often defaulted to traditional referral routes due to systemic constraints, such as limited time for pre-referral consultations and inadequate collaboration between language specialists and psychologists.

These patterns are further reinforced by findings from recent policy reviews and practitioner guidance, which identify persistent gaps in educator training related to linguistically responsive referral practices. The OHRC (2022) *Right to Read* report highlighted widespread inconsistencies in the implementation of screening tools and progress monitoring systems across schools, linking these variations to insufficient professional learning. It specifically notes that many educators lack the necessary training to interpret RTI data for multilingual learners, resulting in both premature referrals and harmful delays. Similarly, the *Supporting English language learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators, Grades 1 to 8* (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2008) stresses the importance of training teachers to understand and apply English language proficiency descriptors and formative assessments. Without this foundational knowledge, educators may default to generalized benchmarks or instinctive judgments, increasing the likelihood of misidentification. Both documents emphasize the importance of collaborative decision-making, highlighting that when classroom teachers and EAL specialists operate in silos, they limit their capacity to assess language development accurately and in context.

This concern is echoed in Adelson et al. (2014), who point to a systemic disconnect between the availability of linguistically appropriate tools, such as Curriculum-Based Dynamic Assessment (CDA), and educators' confidence or preparation to use them effectively. Their review found that even when culturally responsive models are accessible, the absence of formal

training in RTI interpretation, bilingual language development, and equitable assessment practices undermines their implementation. As a result, schools continue to rely on norm-referenced, English-only assessments, further entrenching disadvantage for EAL students within the referral process.

Multilingual and Sociocultural Considerations

Documentation audits and policy reviews reveal that even when formal referral processes exist, multilingual and sociocultural considerations are often absent, thereby compounding earlier interpretive misjudgments. Wilkinson et al. (2006) found incomplete prereferral records in nearly half of the student files they reviewed, whereas Harris et al. (2024) showed that many state or provincial policies fail to mandate the collection of essential background data, including language history, migration experiences, and cultural learning norms. Without structured prompts to gather this information, referral teams' default to standard assessment forms that do not capture the contextual factors shaping EAL students' learning profiles.

Ontario offers a notable exception. Two grey literature documents provide concrete illustrations of how language-responsive referral practices can be embedded within policy and district-level procedures. The Ministry of Education's *English Language Learners* policy (OME, 2007) integrates multilingual data-gathering checkpoints at key stages of the referral process, from initial intake through to placement decisions. Complementing this at the district level, *Special Education Plan* (TDSB, 2024) includes a phased checklist that explicitly requires documentation of first-language proficiency, prior schooling, and acculturation factors before any psychoeducational assessment can proceed. These tools not only provide procedural clarity but also help educational professionals avoid premature or inappropriate referrals by ensuring that language and cultural data inform every step of the decision-making process.

However, Ontario's model remains the exception rather than the rule. Most provincial and district policies contain only broad aspirations toward equity without offering the actionable tools needed to realize them. For example, Alberta's *Standards for Special Education: Amended June 2004* (Alberta Education, 2004) and Nova Scotia's *Special Education Policy* (NSDE, 2008) omit any mention of English-language proficiency or interpreter use. The *Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines* (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCME], 2013) advises gathering developmental histories and using interpreters; however, these recommendations are not embedded in referral forms, resulting in inconsistent and optional implementation. Similarly, the *School Psychologist Services* document (Greater Victoria School District [GVSD], 2024) lists language background as a general consideration but provides no tool or protocol for documenting it. This gap is echoed in its capacity-building section, where the *School Psychologist Services* guide (GVSD, 2024) recommends in-service training yet omits content on second-language development. In Nova Scotia, the *Special Education Policy* (NSDE, 2008) outlines detailed procedures for assessment and requires the use of qualified personnel yet does not address English-language proficiency or interpreter use. Likewise, the *Assessment, Evaluation, and Communication of Student Learning Policy* (HRSB, 2008) stresses fairness and consistency in assessment but does not provide guidance on the adaptation processes for bilingual learners. In contrast, Ontario's *Supporting English Language Learners* guide (OME, 2008) devotes full chapters to cross-language transfer, multilingual data interpretation, and sample protocol sheets, offering a more integrated and actionable model.

Discussion

This scoping review examined the question: *What barriers and missed opportunities emerge from the empirical and grey literature about the referral process for psychoeducational*

assessments of EAL students? The findings point to fragmentation, inconsistency, and embedded structural inequities that affect how EAL students are identified and supported. Across both empirical and policy sources, referral decisions often rest on discretionary judgment rather than standardized, linguistically and culturally responsive protocols. This inconsistency renders EAL students vulnerable to misidentification, exclusion, or delayed intervention—outcomes shaped not only by what educators do, but by what systems fail to provide. Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) reframes these challenges as systemic outcomes, not technical oversights, shaped by institutional structures that define and respond to student difference through racialized and ableist logics.

Identified Barriers from a DisCrit Perspective

Absence of Canadian Empirical Evidence

This study indicated a complete absence of Canadian empirical studies meeting the inclusion criteria, representing a substantial gap with critical implications. Without local research on psychoeducational referral practices for EAL students, educational professionals and policymakers must rely on frameworks developed in contexts that may differ significantly from Canada's unique sociolinguistic and academic landscape. This absence is more than a simple knowledge gap; it prevents meaningful evaluation of whether existing referral processes are equitable, linguistically responsive or culturally relevant to Canadian students.

From a DisCrit perspective, this research silence exemplifies Tenet 4, highlighting how whiteness and normative ability operate as forms of institutional property. When experiences of EAL students remain undocumented, dominant interests and systems are shielded from accountability. As Leonardo and Broderick (2011) argue, dominant definitions of *smartness* are not objective measures, but socially constructed forms of capital rooted in whiteness and middle-

class values. Within educational contexts, these norms are seldom questioned and thus continue to legitimize policies and practices that privilege dominant ways of knowing.

This silence also demands action aligned with Tenet 7, which calls for diverse forms of resistance, including scholarly and community-based activism. As Ladson-Billings (2005) argues, the dominance of race-neutral education research produces *epistemological erasure*, reinforcing white supremacy under the guise of objectivity. In this light, research that foregrounds the voices and needs of EAL students becomes not only a scholarly task but a political act. Yet the diversity within EAL populations complicates unified advocacy efforts, leaving them structurally fragmented and frequently underserved. Still, as Stovall (2006) argues, critical scholarship has little value unless it leads to coalition-building and concrete efforts to challenge oppression beyond academia. Addressing this research gap is therefore both a knowledge and justice imperative, which is essential for disrupting systems that maintain inequity through inaction as much as through misrecognition.

Variability and Inconsistency in Referral Practices

The absence of localized, evidence-informed research directly contributes to procedural inconsistencies in schools. Without clear, context-specific guidance, educational professionals often rely on generalized frameworks that overlook the sociocultural and linguistic contexts of EAL students. This creates significant variability in referral practices, resulting in differences not only across provinces but even between schools within the same district (Scott et al., 2014; Sullivan, 2011). Educators frequently express uncertainty and low confidence when distinguishing between additional language acquisition and potential learning difficulties, highlighting the need for targeted professional development (Gordon, 2018; Heath & Connell, 2024).

When professional training neglects linguistic and cultural diversity, educators commonly interpret English fluency, verbal assertiveness, and familiarity with classroom routines as primary indicators of academic competence. Consequently, behaviours typical during early stages of English acquisition, such as silence, hesitation, or slower verbal processing are frequently misunderstood as signs of SLDs or behavioural concerns (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2017; Klingner & Harry, 2006). These educator-level decisions, though seemingly individual, are shaped by systemic factors including incomplete prereferral documentation and ambiguous eligibility criteria, indicating broader institutional neglect of EAL students' diverse profiles (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Referral teams often omit critical student background information, such as home-language proficiency, previous schooling or migration history, reinforcing monolingual and monocultural assumptions that pathologize differences rather than recognize them as natural aspects of language development (Wilkinson et al., 2006; Ferlis, 2012; Huang et al., 2011).

DisCrit Tenet 2, which emphasizes the value of multidimensional identities, draws attention to the risks of reducing students to single, deficit-oriented categories. The omission of key cultural, linguistic, and experiential data in referral processes contributes to misidentification by presenting an incomplete picture of the student.. In reality, many EAL students navigate multiple cultural worlds simultaneously, and their educational needs cannot be understood apart from these intersecting dimensions of identity (Annamma et al., 2013; Kangas, 2021). When referral practices fail to acknowledge how race, language, ability, and migration status co-construct student experience, they not only obscure strengths but reinforce the very inequities they seek to resolve. Embracing identity as intersectional demands a more holistic and

responsive approach, one in which student narratives and cultural assets are treated as essential, not supplementary, to educational decision-making (Sleeter, 2012).

This erasure is not merely a procedural oversight but has historical and legal antecedents, as highlighted in DisCrit Tenet 5. Canadian immigration policy has long linked linguistic conformity with social and civic legitimacy. Up until the 1960s and 70s, immigration laws openly discriminated against non-European populations through explicit racial and ethnic quotas (Arat-Koç, 1999). Although these overt barriers were dismantled, they were replaced by more covert exclusionary mechanisms, most notably the formal requirement for English or French language proficiency. The points-based immigration system, and more recently programs like Express Entry, continue to prioritize high scores in official language tests, embedding language ability as a central legal criterion and privileging applicants from Anglophone or Western countries (Ferrer, 2024; Arat-Koç, 1999). This points-based system reinforces the notion that linguistic fluency equates to social value and civic readiness. As Fong (2004) observes, these expectations persist post-migration, with racialized newcomers pressured to conform to dominant norms while their multilingual capacities are devalued or pathologized. This legacy extends into education systems, where language continues to function as a gatekeeping mechanism, determining not only who is welcomed into the country but also whose knowledge, communication styles, and learning trajectories are recognized and validated within schools. Understanding these historical and policy-based origins helps reveal why certain identities are persistently excluded or misread within contemporary referral systems. These exclusions are not merely reflections of flawed interpretation; they are outcomes of institutional structures that embed inequity into the very processes of identification, assessment, and support. These

dynamics are further reproduced through policy frameworks, diagnostic criteria, and normative practices that systematically disadvantage multilingual and racialized students.

Structural Inequities

Although referral inconsistencies may appear as localized or individual challenges, they reflect deeper structural conditions embedded in educational systems. From a DisCrit perspective, these patterns are not random or benign; they are sustained by the intertwined forces of racism and ableism that shape institutional policies, diagnostic norms, and professional routines (Tenet 1) (Annamma et al., 2013). For example, when multilingual assessments are treated as optional rather than essential, or when documentation requirements vary widely, discretion becomes a mechanism through which dominant norms are reinforced (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013; Roen, 2015). This broader critique is deepened by DisCrit Tenet 3, which highlights that race and dis/ability are socially constructed categories shaped through institutional processes (Annamma et al., 2013). Assessment tools, including standardized tests, rating scales, and eligibility criteria, project an illusion of objectivity, yet they privilege culturally dominant forms of knowledge, communication, and learning. As a result, students whose expressions of competence fall outside these normative expectations are systematically disadvantaged, with difference itself misread as deficit (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Huang et al., 2011; Vázquez et al., 2023).

DisCrit Tenets 4 and 6 deepen this critique by exposing how institutional legitimacy is disproportionately granted to those who align with whiteness and normative ability. These traits function not merely as implicit preferences but as forms of property, conveying access to supports, recognition, and credible interpretations of student behaviour (Annamma et al., 2013). Within referral systems, this logic manifests through institutional memory: entrenched norms

embedded in forms, team protocols, and evaluative rubrics that persist even when equity policies evolve. As Hammond et al. (2025) demonstrate, schools rarely dismantle these default expectations unless leadership explicitly interrogates and rewrites the everyday practices that define competence and need. Thus, students who diverge from monolingual, middle-class norms are not just overlooked but rendered illegible within systems built to center dominant identities. Crucially, this exclusion is not limited to how students are interpreted but extends to whose voices are granted epistemic authority. Despite equity discourses that promote collaboration, families and students, especially those from racialized or immigrant backgrounds, are often excluded from referral discussions or positioned as passive informants. Hallaran (2023) illustrates how such exclusion forecloses alternative ways of framing difficulty, silencing experiential knowledge that could disrupt deficit-based interpretations. As Adelman and Taylor (2007) argue, meaningful reform cannot occur without reorienting the institutional mission of schools to actively counteract marginalization rather than accommodate it. This requires shifting not only who is assessed, but who defines what counts as evidence, success, or support in the first place.

Despite the clarity with which these structural dynamics reproduce inequity, many referral systems continue to operate without seriously engaging the perspectives of those most affected. The failure to interrogate institutional norms, particularly those that render multilingualism and racialized knowledge as secondary, results not only in misrecognition but in overlooked opportunities to create more just and responsive practices. These embedded inequities manifest in concrete ways during early referral processes, where the absence of culturally grounded interpretation and reciprocal engagement limits the accuracy and inclusivity of decision-making. Without deliberate efforts to centre lived experience and cultural

knowledge, systems remain bound to dominant frameworks that obscure rather than illuminate student potential.

Missed Opportunities from a DisCrit Perspective

Addressing Systemic Bias

Although the literature suggests that structural norms shape how EAL students are perceived, a critical missed opportunity lies in the failure to reimagine referral as a relational, interpretive process. Current frameworks tend to treat educators' interpretations as neutral or objective, yet these judgments are made within institutional logics that systematically devalue multilingualism and racialized ways of knowing (Annamma et al., 2013; Kangas, 2021). Even when educators are aware of these dynamics, referral systems rarely support practices that invite shared meaning-making across cultural and linguistic boundaries. For example, although families and EAL professionals may be consulted, they are seldom positioned as co-authors of student narratives. Instead, student needs are filtered through standardized forms, observation checklists, and eligibility criteria that reflect dominant norms rather than diverse learning trajectories (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2017; Klingner & Harry, 2006). This breakdown in reciprocal engagement limits not only diagnostic accuracy but also the potential for culturally grounded intervention. The cultural reciprocity model (Paul et al., 2012) underscores the importance of mutual learning between professionals and families, yet such approaches remain peripheral in practice. From a DisCrit perspective, this exclusion of counter-narratives represents a profound systemic bias (Tenet 6). Until students, families, and cultural partners are recognized as legitimate interpreters of need, referral decisions will continue to reinforce dominant interpretations of difference and miss opportunities for equity-oriented change.

Equity-Oriented Professional Learning

Whereas earlier findings indicate how structural norms and discretionary judgment shape referral outcomes, a further missed opportunity lies in how educational professionals are prepared to interpret and respond to differences. Professional learning remains a crucial, yet underused, avenue for advancing equity in psychoeducational referrals (Beam & Mueller, 2017). Although educators frequently report uncertainty in distinguishing language acquisition from disability, this is not merely a knowledge gap. It reflects a broader system-level failure to embed cultural and linguistic responsiveness into training frameworks (Gordon, 2018; Heath & Connell, 2024). Frameworks like MTSS and RTI offer inclusive aims, but they cannot counteract educator bias when professionals are not equipped to assess EAL students through contextually grounded lenses (Ferlis, 2012; Vázquez et al., 2023). As discussed earlier, dominant norms continue to frame English fluency and familiarity with classroom routines as proxies for competence, while behaviours typical of early language development are pathologized (Roen, 2015; Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2017). Addressing this interpretive deficit demands more than content knowledge, it requires a shift in how professional learning is conceptualized.

One critical direction involves cultivating cultural humility, a stance that emphasizes ongoing self-reflection, recognition of power imbalances, and openness to being taught by those most affected by institutional decisions (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Lekas et al., 2020). Unlike static models of cultural competence, cultural humility recognizes that referral decisions are shaped by educators' positionalities and the systems in which they operate. This approach aligns with DisCrit Tenet 1 by foregrounding how racism and ableism operate through daily professional routines and interpretive acts. Equally important is the inclusion of linguistically responsive tools that allow students to demonstrate understanding through their full linguistic

repertoires. Strategies such as translanguaging samples, language maps, and identity texts not only make multilingualism visible, but reframe it as a cognitive and cultural asset rather than a barrier (Cummins et al., 2015; Leung & Valdés, 2019). The persistent exclusion of these tools from referral practices renders equity rhetorical, not operational.

Professional learning must also be enriched by counter-narratives and experiential knowledge. Integrating student and family voices into both pre-service and in-service training humanizes referral decisions and challenges deficit-based assumptions. As DisCrit Tenet 6 emphasizes, the inclusion of marginalized perspectives is essential for disrupting institutional logics that privilege dominant forms of knowledge. However, the transformative potential of such training depends not only on its content but on the composition of the professional field itself. Diversifying who enters education and school psychology programs is a critical but often overlooked equity strategy. Recruiting professionals from multilingual and racialized communities introduces epistemological diversity into systems that have long privileged whiteness and normative ability (Tenet 2) (Kim et al., 2024). These professionals bring lived experience and linguistic expertise that can challenge dominant norms and inform more just identification processes.

Finally, equity-oriented professional learning must be ongoing, collaborative, and critically reflective. One-off workshops or compliance-based sessions are insufficient. Educational professionals need sustained opportunities to interrogate case studies, analyze multilingual assessment data, and reflect on how their positionalities influence referral decisions (Harris et al., 2015). Structured reflection questions, such as “What sociocultural assumptions am I making?” or “Whose knowledge is missing from this referral file?”, can help reorient practice from individual diagnosis toward collective responsibility. Taken together, these shifts reposition

professional learning as a cornerstone of systemic reform. By rethinking how professionals are trained, supported, and selected, educational systems can begin to dismantle the interpretive and structural biases that disproportionately affect EAL students. In doing so, referral becomes not only more accurate but also more accountable to the diverse realities it seeks to assess.

Enhancing Institutional and Systemic Supports

Although, addressing educator bias is essential, these efforts must be accompanied by structural reforms that embed equity into the broader frameworks guiding referral decisions. Reliance on individual discretion is insufficient; systemic approaches grounded in linguistically and culturally responsive policy are needed. One foundational barrier is the lack of shared conceptual language: labels such as “EAL,” “ESL,” or “language delay” are inconsistently defined and applied, undermining coherence across jurisdictions and limiting the comparability of data (Cunningham, 2020). Diagnostic categories like Specific Learning Disorder (SLD) are similarly filtered through monolingual, racialized frameworks that obscure the social construction of both race and ability (Gillborn, 2008; Jackart, 2022). These conceptual inconsistencies enable systems to default to English fluency, verbal assertiveness, and familiarity with Western classroom norms as proxies for academic competence. Behaviours typical of early bilingual development, such as reduced vocabulary, pauses, or unfamiliar syntax, are thus routinely misinterpreted as indicators of cognitive impairment, particularly when assessment practices lack linguistically responsive criteria (Vázquez et al., 2023). In this context, standardized protocols perpetuate the marginalization of EAL students by rendering their communication styles and cultural identities illegible within dominant frameworks of *normal* development.

To advance equity, linguistically responsive tools must be central to the referral process, integrated into standard practice rather than treated as optional add-ons. Approaches such as dynamic assessment, translanguaging protocols, and Curriculum-Based Measurements (CBMs) capture how EAL students make meaning across languages and contexts, offering more accurate and nuanced insight into whether an EAL student is demonstrating signs of an SLD or acquiring an additional language (Cummins et al., 2015; Sandberg & Reschly, 2011; Dutton & Rushton, 2023). However, these tools are only as effective as the institutional contexts in which they are used. CBMs, for example, must be designed with linguistic authenticity, accounting for dialect variation, orthographic conventions, and culturally specific knowledge rather than simply translating English-language measures (Vázquez et al., 2023). Without these conditions, even well-intentioned tools risk replicating the very biases they aim to disrupt. Implementing such tools requires more than technical training; it demands leadership and system-level commitment to redefining validity, competence, and support in multilingual terms.

Jurisdictions can play a transformative role by mandating multilingual data collection, requiring home-language assessments, and embedding EAL professionals as core members of referral teams (Ferlis, 2012). Promising models such as the English Resource Group of Ontario (ERGO) guidelines and the protocols used by the Toronto District School Board demonstrate that linguistically responsive practices can be institutionalized when political and administrative will align. However, the success of such policies depends on their enforceability, consistency across schools, and the resourcing of teams equipped to apply them with fidelity. Where these supports are lacking, reforms remain symbolic rather than substantive, and EAL students continue to face marginalization through assessment practices that fail to account for their full linguistic and cultural realities.

Centring the Role of School Psychologists in Systemic Reform. School psychologists are uniquely positioned to lead this transformation. As both assessment specialists and equity advocates, they hold the capacity to guide the use of dynamic assessment practices, support referral teams in implementing linguistically inclusive approaches, and co-develop decision-support tools aligned with culturally responsive frameworks (O'Bryon & Rogers, 2016; Harris & Sullivan, 2020). Their expertise enables them to bridge general education, special education, and EAL support, facilitating more holistic interpretations of student need. When included as central contributors to team-based decisions, school psychologists can help shift schools away from individualistic understandings of difficulty and toward systemic analyses that account for race, language, and socio-political context. This approach aligns with distributed models of leadership where families and EAL professionals are not treated as peripheral advisors but as co-interpreters of student trajectories (Hammond et al., 2025). These models reject the notion of linguistic and cultural expertise as supplementary; instead, they recognize such knowledge as essential for valid and just referrals.

Yet structural change requires more than leadership; it demands critical introspection. As Vaught and Castagno (2008) argue, educational professionals often deflect responsibility by framing equity failures as isolated incidents or personal misunderstandings. DisCrit Tenets 1 and 3 remind us that racism and ableism are not exceptional anomalies but systems that are reproduced through everyday institutional routines, from how referral forms are completed to how eligibility criteria are interpreted (Annamma et al., 2013). Therefore, technical improvements in tools and procedures are insufficient without accompanying changes in the frameworks that shape their use (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

Lasting transformation requires that schools reimagine referral not as a bureaucratic step toward assessment, but as a shared act of justice-oriented inquiry. As DisCrit Tenet 7 emphasizes, equity cannot be achieved through procedural compliance alone. It must be pursued through sustained coalition-building with racialized communities, co-creation of inclusive assessment protocols, and the intentional dismantling of exclusionary practices (Annamma et al., 2013; Paul et al., 2012). This involves asking difficult questions: Who defines what counts as “evidence”? Whose ways of communicating and learning are centred or erased? And who benefits from the current systems of identification and support? Without this sustained engagement, even the most innovative policies risk becoming hollow gestures. Referral systems must become spaces not only of support, but of accountability, where dominant norms are interrogated and the diverse realities of EAL students are made central to how learning needs are recognized and addressed (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011).

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this scoping review. First, the included studies varied significantly in research design, participant demographics, and types of data collected. While this diversity contributed to a broad understanding of the topic, it also introduced challenges in drawing direct comparisons or generalizing findings across contexts. To mitigate this, a thematic approach was adopted to organize the data, focusing on recurring patterns rather than attempting uniform evaluation. However, this approach may have obscured subtle differences between studies that used different methods or operated in distinct policy environments. The review's broad scope offered insight into systemic trends, but the trade-off was limited depth in any single area. As a result, conclusions should be interpreted as directional rather than definitive. Second, the study did not

evaluate the quality of the studies; therefore, it did not identify the practices that produce better outcomes for students. The goal of the study was to map and describe the current landscape of literature on EAL referrals for psychoeducational assessment in Canada.

Third, although all empirical studies included in the review explicitly examined EAL students in the context of psychoeducational referrals, a significant gap remains in Canadian-based research. Most empirical studies originated from the United States or Australia, where educational structures, service delivery models, and demographic realities differ from those in Canada. This limits the applicability of findings to Canadian contexts. The scope of this grey literature was also confined to publicly accessible documents from four provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, and Nova Scotia. While these jurisdictions were selected for their demographic relevance and geographic diversity, other provinces and territories, including those with distinct linguistic and cultural dynamics, were not represented. Taken together, these limitations underscore the need for localized, process-specific investigations across a wider range of Canadian educational contexts to inform equitable and contextually grounded referral practices.

Furthermore, most of the included sources emphasized institutional or professional perspectives, such as those of teachers, administrators, or policymakers. The voices of students, families, and community members were largely absent, despite their central role in understanding referral outcomes and lived experiences. This exclusion reflects a broader gap in the literature and raises concerns about the completeness of the evidence base. From a DisCrit perspective, the absence of marginalized voices reinforces the systemic invisibility of those most affected by inequitable practices. Including student and family perspectives would enrich understanding of how referrals are experienced on the ground and how power dynamics shape

these interactions. Future studies should prioritize participatory and community-engaged methodologies to address this imbalance. Finally, while analytic decisions in this review were guided by a transparent and systematic process, the interpretation of themes involved a degree of subjectivity. Although efforts were made to ensure consistency and reflexivity, different researchers might have emphasized alternate themes or framed the findings differently. Despite these limitations, the review provides a meaningful foundation for advancing research and policy reform related to equitable referral practices for EAL students.

Conclusion

Equitable change in referral practices requires more than procedural reform, it demands a redefinition of how difference is understood and addressed in schools. Achieving equity requires moving beyond surface-level inclusion efforts to interrogate how racism and ableism co-construct student outcomes. To address the gap in Canadian empirical research, future research must prioritize longitudinal, qualitative studies grounded in students' cultural and linguistic contexts. Disaggregated data are needed to identify disproportionality and ensure systems are held accountable (Sullivan, 2011; Harris et al., 2024). DisCrit-informed practices such as translanguaging and cultural reciprocity should be empirically evaluated, not simply theorized. Ultimately, shifting the referral process toward justice requires structural, epistemic, and political transformation. Centring the perspectives of marginalized communities challenges the presumed neutrality of existing systems and redistributes interpretive authority. This is not just a matter of improving practice—it is a question of whose knowledge and needs are valued and what voices shape educational decision-making.

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Table 1*Tenets of DisCrit and Their Meanings*

Tenets	Meaning
1. Interdependence of Racism and Ableism	Racism and ableism operate together in ways that appear neutral or invisible but reinforce dominant notions of normalcy.
2. Valuing Multidimensional Identities	DisCrit resists singular notions of identity and embraces intersections of race, ability, gender, class, and other markers of difference.
3. Social Construction of Race and Dis/ability	Both race and dis/ability are understood as socially constructed categories with real material and psychological impacts.
4. Whiteness and Ability as Property	Whiteness and ability confer societal advantages and have historically advanced only when aligned with dominant group interests.
5. Historical and Legal Contexts	It recognizes how law and history have jointly used race and dis/ability to deny the rights of marginalized groups.
6. Centering Marginalized Voices	DisCrit privileges the perspectives and experiences of individuals from marginalized communities, emphasizing counter-narratives.
7. Commitment to Activism	DisCrit promotes diverse forms of resistance, including scholarly, pedagogical, and community-based activism.

Note. Annamma, S. A., Connor, D. J., & Ferri, B. A. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.730511>

Table 2*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Type	Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Empirical Literature	Time Period	Articles published between 2000 and 2025	Articles not written in English
	Language	Documents in English	Papers published before 2000
	Population	Studies involving students from kindergarten to grade 12 (ages 5–21)	
	Study Focus	Studies examining English as an Additional Language (EAL) students Studies investigating students referred for psychoeducational assessments Studies addressing the referral and/or identification process	
Grey Literature	Time Period	Most recent reports available (2000–2025)	Documents not in English
	Language	Documents in English	
	Population	Grey literature from Canadian educational systems (K–12 students)	
	Study Focus	Government reports, policy documents, conference proceedings	Informal documents (e.g., news articles)

Table 3*Sources Informing Key Referral Themes*

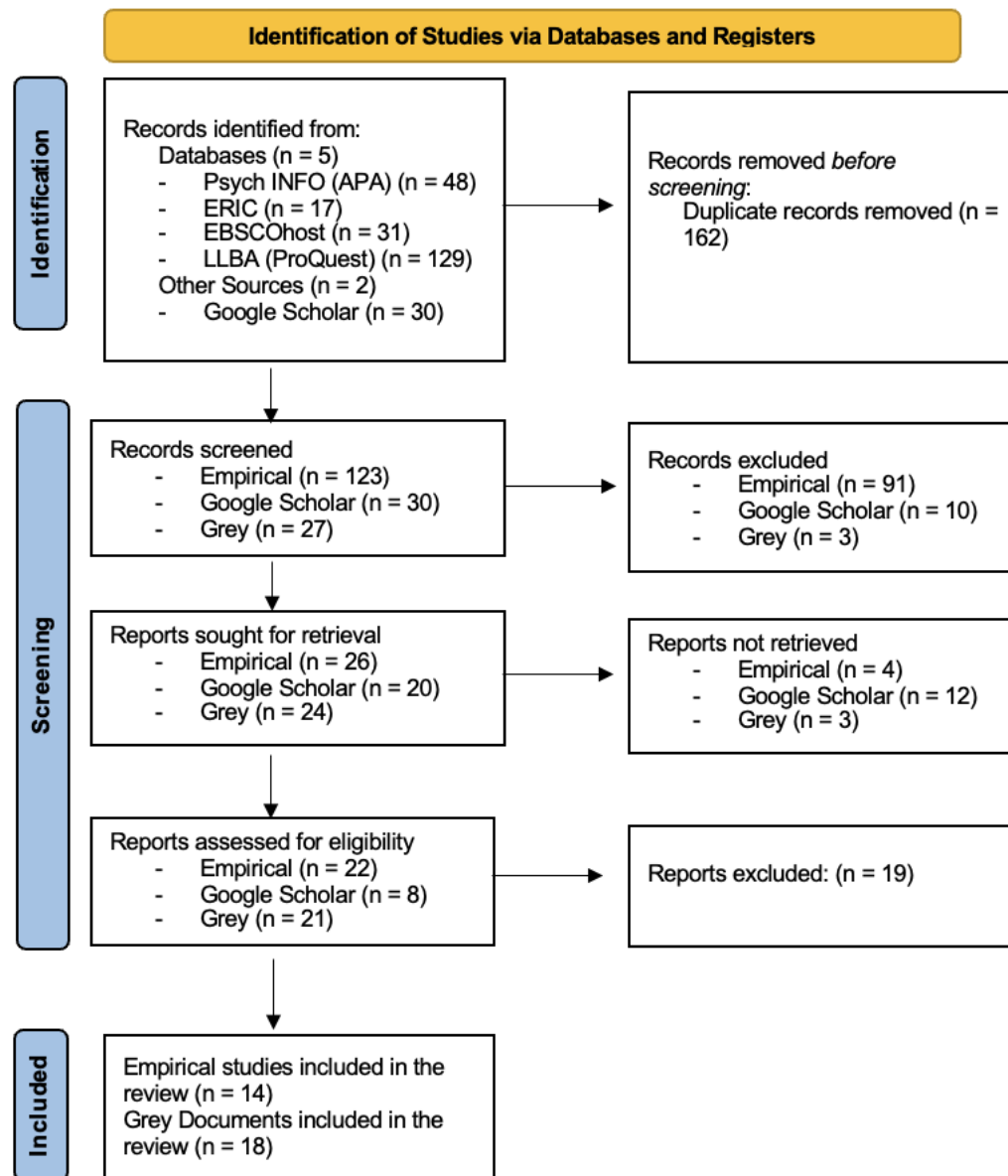
Themes	Description	Empirical Literature	Grey Literature
Bias and Misclassification	Refers to the tendency of educators to misattribute language acquisition challenges to learning delays, leading to inappropriate referrals or misclassifications.	Klingner & Harry, 2006; Samson & Lesaux., 2009; Sullivan, 2011; Ferlis, 2012; Scott et al., 2014; Burr et al., 2015; Roen, 2015; Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2017; Gordon, 2018; Khawaja & Wotherspoon, 2022; Harris et al., 2024; Heath & Connell, 2024	Surrey LST Handbook (2021); BC Special Ed Manual (2013); Victoria Psych Services (2024); NS Assessment Policy (2008); NS Special Ed Policy (2008); TDSB Referral Protocol (2007); TDSB ELL/SpEd Q&A (2023); Ontario ELL/ESL Policy (2007); ERGO Referral Protocol (2011); Ontario ELL Guide (2008); Right to Read Report (2022)
Inadequate Professional Knowledge	Refers to insufficient educator training in second language acquisition, sociocultural assessment, and linguistically responsive referral decision-making	Klingner & Harry, 2006; Wilkinson et al., 2006; Samson & Lesaux., 2009; Sullivan, 2011; Huang et al., 2011; Ferlis, 2012; Scott et al., 2014; Burr et al., 2015; Roen, 2015.; Rodríguezv& Rodríguez, 2017;	Alberta Standards (2004); BC Inclusive Descriptions (2024); Sunshine Coast Handbook (2025); NS Assessment Policy (2008); BC Inclusive Services Manual (2024); Surrey LST Handbook (2021); C Special Ed Manual (2013); NS

		Gordon, 2018; Khawaja & Wotherspoon, 2022.; Harris et al., 2024; Heath & Connell, 2024	Special Ed Policy (2008); Ontario ELL/ESL Policy (2007); TDSB ELL/SpEd Q&A (2023); ERGO Referral Protocol (2011); TDSB SpEd Plan (2024–2025); Right to Read Report (2022); Shuswap Parent Guide (2020).
Referral Tools and Practices	Reflects the uneven or ineffective implementation of RTI/MTSS models, lack of adapted tools, informal decision-making, and premature referrals without interventions.	Klingner & Harry, 2006; Wilkinson et al., 2006; Samson & Lesaux., 2009; Huang et al., 2011; Ferlis, 2012; Scott et al., 2014; Burr et al., 2015; Roen, 2015; Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2017; Gordon, 2018; Khawaja & Wotherspoon, 2022; Harris et al., 2024; Heath & Connell, 2024"	Alberta Standards (2004); BC Inclusive Descriptions (2024); Sunshine Coast Handbook (2025); Victoria Psych Services (2024); BC Inclusive Services Manual (2024); Surrey LST Handbook (2021); BC Special Ed Manual (2013); NS Assessment Policy (2008); NS Special Ed Policy (2008); Ontario ELL/ESL Policy (2007); TDSB ELL/SpEd Q&A (2023); ERGO Referral Protocol (2011); TDSB Referral Protocol (2007); TDSB SpEd Plan (2024–2025); Ontario

Multilingual and Sociocultural Considerations	Refers to limited integration of students' language backgrounds, migration histories, and cultural contexts in referral data or decision-making.	Klingner & Harry, 2006; Wilkinson et al., 2006; Sullivan, 2011; Huang et al., 2011; Ferlis, 2012; Scott et al., 2014; Burr et al., 2015; Roen, 2015; Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2017; Gordon, 2018; Khawaja & Wotherspoon, 2022; Harris et al., 2024; Heath & Connell, 2024.	ELL Guide (2008); Right to Read Report (2022); Shuswap Parent Guide (2020) Sunshine Coast Handbook (2025); Victoria Psych Services (2024); BC Inclusive Services Manual (2024); NS Assessment Policy (2008); NS Special Ed Policy (2008); BC Special Ed Manual (2013); Ontario ELL/ESL Policy (2007); TDSB ELL/SpEd Q&A (2023); ERGO Referral Protocol (2011); TDSB Referral Protocol (2007); TDSB SpEd Plan (2024–2025); Right to Read Report (2022).
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Figure 1

The PRISMA Flow Diagram for Selected Empirical and Grey Literature



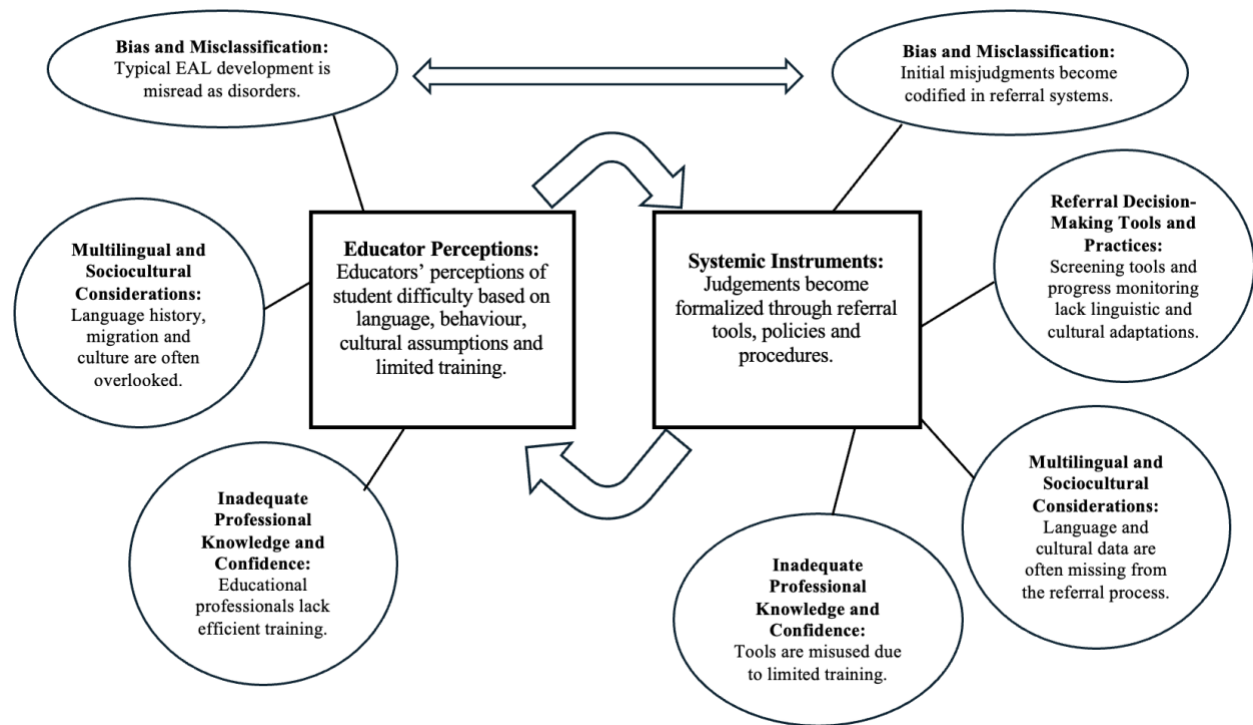
Note. From Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al.

The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*

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Figure 2.

From Educator Interpretation to Systemic Codification



Note. This figure illustrates the cyclical interaction between educator perceptions and systemic instruments in shaping referral decisions EAL students. The four major themes: Bias and Misclassification, Multilingual and Sociocultural Considerations, Inadequate Professional Knowledge and Confidence, and Referral Decision-Making Tools and Practices, emerge across both domains, highlighting how informal judgments and formal tools co-construct the referral process.

Appendix A: Grey Literature Included in the Scoping Review

Reference	Type of Document	Referral Criteria Specified	Pre-Referral Interventions and Tools	Multi-lingual Considerations	Role of EAL Professional in Referral	Barriers or Cautions Noted	Alignment with Research-Based Practices
Alberta Learning. (2004). Standards for Special Education	Standards / Policy Manual	Requires early identification, screening, and referral procedures. Referrals must be based on a variety of indicators, and informed written parental consent must be obtained.	Requires documentation of classroom strategies, support services, IPP development, and progress monitoring. Tools include checklists, observations, teacher and parent input, and early assessments.	No specific mention of EAL students, broad inclusivity referenced.	n/a	n/a	Emphasizes student-centered planning and documentation.
British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2024). District inclusive education descriptions.	Service Delivery Overview/Role Description Manual	Lists indicators and tiers of support tied to academic/social development	Tiered interventions to be documented before referral. Includes MTSS procedures.	No specific mention of EAL students, broad inclusivity referenced.	Not mentioned explicitly. just discusses the role of a EAL professional.	No EAL-specific cautions, though system barriers are implied.	Reflects RTI/multi-tiered supports model.

School District 46 – Sunshine Coast. (2025). Inclusive education: School District 46 handbook	District Resource Guide / Inclusive Education Handbook	Referrals for psychoeducational assessments occur via the School-Based Team (SBT) process, prioritized by grade level and functional need.	Requires instructional adaptations, targeted interventions, and collaboration with inclusion support team. Tools include observations, interviews, CBM, informal testing, and RTI documentation .	Not explicitly addressed – EA+F4L services are discussed but the document does not detail how cultural/linguistic factors affect referrals or assessments.	EAL teachers conduct language assessment and support planning, but are not mentioned as part of the referral team for psychoeducational assessments.	n/a	Uses tiered interventions , case management , universal design for learning, and collaborative assessment planning
British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care. (2024). Inclusive education services: A manual of policies and procedures.	Policy and Procedures Manual	Referral processes begin with classroom observations, pre-referral interventions, consultation with school-based teams, and then can progress to extended assessments	Teachers are expected to try instructional adaptations, consult with parents, and seek resource team input before proceeding to referral Tools include classroom observations, informal assessments, and	Recommends cultural, linguistic, and experiential sensitivity in assessment and mentions use of interpreters during extended assessments	Not specified – Although cultural and linguistic sensitivity is mentioned, no explicit role for EAL professionals is outlined.	n/a	Promotes collaborative consultation, multi-step assessment, and integration of pre-referral strategies, which aligns with inclusive education best practices

			collaboration with school-based teams before formal referral				
Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board. (2021). Learning services teacher: Handbook of guidelines and procedures	Practice and Procedures Handbook (LST-Specific)	Pre-referral process requires teachers to demonstrate differentiated instruction, data collection, and documented intervention efforts before bringing a student forward to the SBT	Pre-referral differentiated instruction, small-group or individual support, and demonstrate the use of evidence-based intervention Tools include universal screening, CBMs, classroom observations, informal data, and collaboration with Learning Support Teachers prior to referral.	n/a	LST and EAL specialists are responsible for language assessments and must contribute to AIP development and student reporting	Emphasizes the use of multiple data sources to avoid misinterpretation and acknowledges varying levels of language proficiency in different domains.	Promotes RTI, Universal Design for Learning, differentiate d instruction, and the use of development al continua and progress monitoring
British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2013). Special education services: A manual of	Policy Manual	Referral begins after teacher observation, pre-referral interventions, and	Teachers are expected to try varied instructional strategies and consult with the school-	Strong emphasis on cultural, linguistic, and experiential factors. Advises using interpreters, first-	While EAL professionals are not explicitly named, the use of interpreters,	Warns against misidentifying students from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds due to standardized test	Aligns with inclusive education principles, school-based teams, differentiate

policies, procedures and guidelines.		consultation with the SBT. Extended assessments are only requested after classroom strategies have proven insufficient.	based team. Collaborative planning and evidence of classroom interventions must precede referral. Tools include systematic classroom observations, in-depth student evaluation, consultation with parents, learning assistance support, and Level B assessments	language history, and culturally appropriate assessment interpretation	culturally sensitive assessment practices, and input from culturally relevant support staff is encouraged	bias. Advises caution in interpreting test results	d instruction, and universal design for learning. Incorporates tiered supports and culturally responsive planning
Government of British Columbia. (2020). Supporting students with diverse needs: A parent/guardian guide to inclusive education.	Parent Handbook/ Inclusive Education Support Overview	Referrals are initiated through the SBT process, based on student performance and documented interventions	Teachers are encouraged to use classroom-level interventions and problem-solving with the school-Based Team before referring for formal assessment.	n/a	Not mentioned – EAL staff or language specialists are not referenced in the referral or assessment process.	n/a	The guide promotes tiered support, problem-solving, and individualized planning through IEPs, aligned with inclusive education

			Tolls include Curriculum-based assessments, standardized Level A, B, and C assessments, observations, and collaboration with teachers and school psychologists.				best practices
Greater Victoria School District. (2024). School psychologist services: Roles, responsibilities, and referral process	Role Description / Referral Guidance Document	Referral occurs after pre-referral assessment (e.g., Level A/B tools), intervention (e.g., in-class support), and consultation with parents and school psychologist. Priority is given to students with new/unidentified challenges or requiring updated assessments	Pre-referral assessments and interventions include differentiated instruction, extra support, and in-class strategies, must be documented and considered before referral. Tools include Level A and B assessments, file review, classroom-based data,	Language/educational history, including EAL or French Immersion status, is listed as a key factor that must be considered during referral and assessment processes.	Referred generally to consultation with relevant professionals (e.g., SLP, School Psychologist).	Cautions include the impact of attendance, home environment, vision/hearing, medical issues, and cultural/linguistic differences on assessment validity and reliability	Emphasizes RTI/MTSS framework, collaborative consultation, multi-source data, and culturally responsive assessments

			consultation with families and staff, and classroom observations.				
Halifax Regional School Board. (2012). Assessment, evaluation and communication of student learning policy (Policy C.007). Halifax Regional Centre for Education	Policy and Procedures Document (HRSB)		States early intervention systems for struggling students, no further detail.	Briefly discusses that linguistic and cultural factors should be taken into consideration during the interpretation of assessment result.	Encourages collaborative input from language specialists and other professionals.	Risk of misidentification from premature reliance on English tests. encourage that cognitive assessments are not used until they have acquired enough English.	Emphasizes the importance of collaborative work, involving families in the process and not using cognitive tests before language acquisition.
Nova Scotia Department of Education. (2008). Special education policy.	Provincial Policy	The policy outlines an 8-stage process for identification, program planning, and referral. Formal psychoeducational assessment is considered when adaptations are	Requires differentiated instruction and documentation . Referral follows program Planning Team (PPT) decision-making. Tools include observations, student work, checklists, and	States that assessments must be free from language, culture, or race bias, and programming must reflect student diversity. Collaboration with parents and interpretation of data in a cultural context is implied	All planning is conducted through Program Planning Teams, and involvement of specialists is based on the student's identified needs, which may or may not include language specialist.	The policy emphasizes that informal and formal assessments must be interpreted without bias, and teams must avoid outdated or irrelevant data. Cautions are provided around decision-making based on multiple sources.	The policy promotes a team-based, student-centered, data-informed planning process aligned with MTSS principles, differentiate d instruction, and

		insufficient, and the Program Planning Team decides whether to initiate further assessments. Parental informed consent is required for assessments.	formal assessments.				inclusive education frameworks. Frequent reference is made to collaboration, IPPs, and bias-free assessments
Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). English language learners: ESL and ELD programs and services—Policies and procedures for Ontario elementary and secondary schools, kindergarten to grade 12.	Policy Document / Administrative Procedures Manual	The policy allows for referral when initial or ongoing assessment indicates possible special education needs. It emphasizes that such referrals should involve linguistically appropriate psychoeducational assessments and the use of bilingual	Refers to assessment for placement and monitoring without specific referral protocols.	Strong emphasis on using the student's home language in assessment and instruction, recognizing cultural background, and providing orientation in the family's first language when possible.	Discussion around the board having a responsibility to have access to PD, to translators and providing them with training to support EAL students.	Warns against premature or inappropriate referral based on language acquisition needs. Linguistically appropriate testing (i.e., avoid misinterpreting poor English as a disability). Use of multiple assessment tools. Consideration of prior learning opportunities.	The document demonstrates general alignment with research-based practices, especially in assessment and instructional support. However, the lack of operational detail in areas like inclusive programming and educator

educators
when possible.

training
limits its
ability to
fully meet
evidence-
based
standards for
equity and
responsiveness in EAL
education.

Toronto District School Board. (2023). English language learners and special education support in TDSB elementary schools: Q. and A.	Q&A / Administrative Guideline	If information from home country, initial assessments, or teacher observation indicates potential special education needs, referral to the school team is initiated.	Adapted programming and ESL/ELD support must precede referral. Tools include adapted IEPs, phased protocol, and culturally appropriate assessments.	Linguistically appropriate assessments, use of bilingual educators, strategic use of first languages, dual-language resources.	ESL/ELD teachers and programs involved from initial adaptations to assessment; ESL/ELD indicators on report cards are also noted when IEP is in place.	Risk of misinterpreting language acquisition/acculturation as disability; need for careful observation over time to avoid inaccurate labeling.	Cites best practices in culturally responsive assessment and programming (e.g., Caslon 2007; Growing Success 2010)
ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario. (2011). English language learners: School-based considerations prior to referral for psychological assessment.	Guidance / Referral Protocol	Provides a clear three-phase process that should be followed before referral, outlining when referral is appropriate. Referral may be considered	Referral must follow a tiered system (3 phases) , they must monitor and document interventions such as differentiated instruction, accommodation	Emphasizes the importance of using first-language assessments and cultural responsiveness. First-language assessments are highly recommended.	The ESL/ELD teacher participates in initial assessment and placement decisions. They collaborate with classroom	Warns against misidentifying language acquisition as a SLD. Emphasizes the importance of allowing time for English development. States that behaviours	Promotes differentiated instruction, universal design for learning (UDL), and tiered interventions . Encourages

		if: Previous educational documentation indicates an exceptionality; The student is not adjusting socially/culturally after several months; The student is not progressing in an adapted program with supports. It notes that students with self-evident exceptionalities (e.g., physical, communication, or diagnosed intellectual disabilities) may be referred without delay.	ns, and frequent assessments. Tools include student profile, first language and English proficiency assessments, academic/social data, and case conference procedures.	Parents should be interviewed using an interpreter when needed. Instruction in the student's dominant language is encouraged if helpful.	teachers, special education staff, and administrators . They communicate with parents/guardians and participates in case conferences	resulting from limited prior schooling or acculturation may mimic exceptionalities. Warns against over-reliance on standardized test results	data collection over time and collaborative , interdisciplinary problem-solving. Suggests use of assistive technology, thematic instruction, and alternative assessments.
Toronto District School Board. (2007). English language learners: School-based	Guidance / Referral Protocol	Referral to School Support Team occurs if the student is not progressing in	Outlines adaptations, ESL/ELD support, and ongoing assessment	Standardized tests may have linguistic bias; culturally responsive methods	ESL/ELD teachers involved in initial assessment and program	Risk of misidentification due to second language acquisition or acculturation;	Aligns with literature on second language acquisition, and calls for

considerations prior to referral for psychological assessment (Adapted from the ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario)		the adapted program and after review of academic, developmental, medical, and social factors (Phase II & III).	before referral. Uses OSR data, interviews, observations, and academic samples in a phased process.	encouraged; info from student's first language and background considered.	development (Phase I); collaborate in ongoing support.	standardized test bias; variation in educational background; equitable access stressed.	triangulated data and cultural-linguistic considerations.
Toronto District School Board. (2024). Special education plan 2024–2025.	Special Education Plan	Referrals must follow a tiered process: Individual Learning Plan (ILP), In-School Team (IST), School Support Team (SST), possible referral to Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). Parental consent and documentation of interventions and observed student needs are required prior to referral	Requires implementation of tiered interventions. These include Tier 1 (UDL, CRRP, DI), Tier 2 (targeted small-group support), and the implementation and monitoring of an ILP over 6–8 weeks. IST and SST meetings are also required prior to assessment referrals and ILP. Tools include DRA, CASI, STEP, observations,	Language acquisition is assessed using STEP and ERGO tools; interpretation services are used as needed. Assessments must account for cultural/linguistic background, and standardized tools must be selected or interpreted to reduce bias.	ESL/ELD professionals contribute to early identification through language proficiency tools (e.g., STEP). While not explicitly involved in making referrals, their assessments inform programming and decision-making prior to referral.	The plan notes the importance of avoiding cultural and linguistic bias in assessment. It stresses that assessments must reflect students' lived experiences, and warns against misidentifying language acquisition issues as disabilities	The plan incorporates principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP), and Differentiated Instruction. It emphasizes trauma-informed, identity-affirming, and evidence-based practices in both

			interviews, and culturally responsive assessments. This is in relation to being placed in a special education program.				teaching and assessment.
Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008). Supporting English language learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators (Kindergarten to Grade 12). Queen's Printer for Ontario.	Instructional Resource / Practical Guide	Reference to a three-step protocol for Pre-Referral for Psychological Assessment developed by ERGO (ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario). Referral is made if the EAL student is not progressing in the adapted program and focuses on: Review of student information Interpersonal skills	Before referring a student, educators are guided to use varied assessments, differentiated instruction and observation across different classrooms. A three-step protocol is encouraged. Tools encouraged are structured interviews, Collection of multiple sources of evidence and Observations	Assessments and teaching must be linguistically and culturally appropriate. Allow use of the first language where appropriate. The document highlights that results of tests may reflect lack of English proficiency or cultural mismatch rather than ability.	Collaboration is encouraged between classroom teachers, ESL/ELD teachers, special education staff, and guidance counselors.	Caution against misinterpreting behaviours or academic struggles as indicators of a SLD. Examples are provided showing how behaviour could result from language learning vs. SLD. Standardized tests may give invalid data due to linguistic and cultural mismatch.	Promotes differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and the use of assessment for/as/of learning frameworks Endorses practices such as: Use of portfolios Peer and self-assessment First-language supports.

		Collection of information from multiple sources Academic progress.	across varied settings. Where necessary, the document recommends the involvement of ESL/ELD specialists and the use of culturally and linguistically responsive frameworks to ensure fairness in screening decisions.					
Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2022). Right to read: Public inquiry into human rights issues affecting students with reading disabilities.	Public Inquiry Report	Psychoeducational assessments should be timely and based on clear, transparent, written criteria that focus on the student's response to intervention. Professional assessments should never be required for interventions	Emphasis on early identification through universal screening and evidence-based Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions before considering psychoeducational assessment Tools include early	n/a		n/a	Warns of systemic barriers affecting multilingual and racialized students. Cautions against relying on outdated curriculum, invalid screening tools, and unstructured instructional approaches	Emphasizes structured literacy and science of reading. Advocates for multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), explicit instruction, early screening, and data-informed

		or accommodatio ns	standardized literacy screeners and RTI framework.				interventions .
Adelson, V. L., Geva, E., Fraser, S., & Lindsay, J. (2021). Identifica tion, assessment, and instruction of English language learners with learning difficulties in the elementary and intermediate grades: An Ontario perspective	Research Report	Recommends flexible, context- sensitive interpretation of assessment data for EAL students; encourages use of early literacy screening tools, curriculum- based measurement (CBM), dynamic assessment, and culturally responsive learner profiles.	Emphasizes early literacy screening, progress monitoring, and targeted interventions before referral.	Strong emphasis on first language proficiency, cultural context, and language development trajectories.	Encouraged as part of multidisciplin ary collaboration; consultation with ESL/ELD teachers is recommended.	Warns against over-reliance on standardized English assessments; notes risk of misidentification and systemic bias	Stresses culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate, and evidence- based instruction and assessment approaches.

Appendix B: Empirical Literature Included in the Scoping Review

Article	Publication type / Research Design	Purpose	Results	Time in School	Grade/Age /EAL Program	Educational Professionals Included	Intervention Prior to Referral	Assessment/ tools used Prior to Referral	Recommendations
Klingner, J. K., & Harry, B. (2006). The special education referral and decision-making process for English language learners: Child study team meetings and placement conferences.	Peer-reviewed journal article. Qualitative ethnographic study.	To examine how school personnel determine if EALs who struggle have SLDs, particularly during CST and placement meetings, and the extent to which language issues are considered.	Findings revealed minimal attention to pre-referral strategies and significant variability in understanding second language acquisition. Decisions were often based on within-child deficit views rather than contextual or instructional factors	Varies; many students were recent immigrants (see Table 2)	K-Grade 5	General education teachers, special education teachers, psychologists, bilingual assessors, administrators, counselors	Rarely implemented; only 2 of 11 first CST meetings discussed strategies, and they were superficial	No specific tools were recommended. There was a reliance on ESOL levels to determine if students were 'ready' for English-only assessments, with suggestions for bilingual assessments made inconsistently and without clear criteria	Improve training on second language acquisition; reduce overreliance on English-only assessments; ensure culturally responsive pre-referral strategies; involve bilingual professionals in referral and evaluation processes
Wilkinson, C. Y., Ortiz, A. A., Robertson, P. M., & Kushner, M. I. (2006). English language learners with	Peer-Reviewed Journal Article - Exploratory study - Case Analysis of 21 Spanish-speaking EAL students,	To examine eligibility decisions for special education for EALs with SLD and compare	Expert panel disagreed with 48% of school team decisions; significant concerns noted with referral, assessment, and	Varied; half entered in pre-K or Kindergarten	Elementary school students	Bilingual teachers, educational diagnosticians, school psychologists, speech therapists,	Not consistently documented; in many cases inadequate or missing	None - referral information was available for 18 students; one was based off of a parent request, and the rest were by	Use multiple data sources for eligibility decisions; improve prereferral documentation; incorporate

reading-related LD: Linking data from multiple sources to make eligibility determinations.	compared eligibility decisions from district multidisciplinary teams vs. expert panel.	school-based decisions with those of an expert panel	eligibility processes			expert panel (university-level)		teachers due to perceived struggles in reading or student achieving 'below grade level'	culturally appropriate assessments; involve families meaningfully; improve centralized recordkeeping
Samson, J. F., & Lesaux, N. K. (2009). Language-minority learners in special education: Rates and predictors of identification for services.	Peer-Reviewed Journal Article - Quantitative – Secondary Data Analysis (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Kindergarten Cohort)	To examine predictors of special education placement among language-minority students, focusing on kindergarten to grade 5.	Language-minority students were underrepresented in special education initially, but were more likely to be identified as having a SLD by Grade 5. Key predictors included early reading achievement and teacher ratings of behaviour.	not reported	K-Grade 5	Teachers (ratings), no direct psychologist involvement discussed	Not explicitly detailed in terms of structured RTI models; early reading performance is used as an implicit indicator	Kindergarten-level assessments of reading and behaviour were used as predictors, but specific tools for language ability were not named	Improve early academic monitoring for EALs; Caution against relying solely on teacher judgment; Consider multiple indicators for referral
Sullivan, A. L. (2011). Disproportionality in special education and placement of English	Peer-reviewed journal article - Quantitative: Descriptive Statistics + Regression Analysis of state-level	To examine racial and linguistic disproportionality in special education identification and placement	EALs were underrepresented in special education overall, but patterns varied by race/ethnicity.	not reported	K–12	Not directly specified; uses national database of school placements	not discussed. Highlights lack of adequate supports (language instruction, bilingual programs) as	N/A	Use disaggregated data to monitor intersectional disproportionality and adopt culturally responsive;

language learners.	educational data	among EAL students using a nationally representative dataset	For example, Black EALs were overrepresented in categories like intellectual disabilities, while Asian EALs were underrepresented. Identifies key concerns in the assessment of EALs, including inappropriate use of standardized English assessments, lack of educator training, and the need for assessments that are culturally and linguistically responsive.				contributing factors.		linguistically appropriate identification practices.
Huang, J., Clarke, K., Milczarski, E., & Raby, C. (2011). The assessment of English language learners with learning disabilities: Issues, concerns, and implications.	Peer-reviewed journal article - Theoretical Review - Policy analysis	To discuss issues and concerns in the referral and assessment of EALs with SLD, as well as suggest implications for educators and assessment professionals.	EALs, including inappropriate use of standardized English assessments, lack of educator training, and the need for assessments that are culturally and linguistically responsive.	not reported	K–12 (general reference, not grade-specific)	Teachers, special educators, school psychologists (discussed in general terms)	Mentions RTI frameworks and classroom-based supports as needed before formal identification	Highlights the lack of appropriate tools; critiques the use of standardized English assessments without consideration for students' language proficiency	Develop culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment tools and ensure educator training in EAL and SLD differentiation.
Ferlis, E. C. (2012). ESL teachers' perceptions of the process for identifying adolescent	Dissertation - Qualitative - Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	To examine EAL teachers' perceptions of the prereferral process for identifying adolescent	Nine emergent themes identified regarding EAL teachers' perceptions of the prereferral	Not specified in detail for all cases, but refers to adolescent students	Middle and high school	EAL teachers (n = 6) from secondary schools	participants described the use of instructional supports and interventions in the prereferral	Language proficiency discussed but no specific tools named; assessment	Increased professional development; use of native-language assessments; more inclusive

Latino English language learners with specific learning disabilities		Latino EALs with SLDs in districts with small EAL populations.	process, collaboration, and challenges. - Teachers described inconsistent use of prereferral processes; gaps in progress monitoring; limited RTI usage; challenges with parental participation; insufficient collaboration with special education departments; systemic barriers due to misconceptions around language acquisition versus SLD.			process. there were 9 types of instructional supports and interventions described. such as Individual tutoring, Research based reading strategies, read-aloud, etc.	inconsistencies noted.	collaboration with EAL teachers.	
Scott, A. N., Hauerwas, L. B., & Brown, R. D. (2014). State policy and guidance for identifying learning disabilities in	Peer-reviewed journal Article - Qualitative document analysis of state policy documents	To analyze the extent to which state policies and guidance documents align with recommended practices for identifying LD	Policies were generally vague and lacked specificity in addressing the needs of EAL students. Only a few states provided	N/A	K-12	Not directly specified; policy documents generally target school districts and educational staff broadly.	Some policies referenced RTI, but often without guidance on how to adapt interventions for EAL students	Rarely specified in policy. Some mention of using multiple data sources but not specific tools	States must provide more explicit, culturally responsive referral guidance and training on distinguishing

culturally and linguistically diverse students.		in EAL students, particularly regarding culturally responsive frameworks.	concrete procedures or training guidelines. Most states did not differentiate between language acquisition and LD.						language acquisition from disability.
Burr, E., Haas, E., Ferriere, K., & West, E. (2015). Identifying and supporting English learner students with learning disabilities: Key issues in the literature and state practice.W	Technical Report - Research review and policy scan (descriptive synthesis of empirical literature and state-level policies)	To describe research-based elements and state practices for identifying, assessing, and supporting EAL students with potential SLDs	Identified inconsistent referral processes and limited teacher understanding as key issues; recommended multi-source data, clearer policy, professional development, and pre-referral strategies	N/A	K-12	General educators, bilingual/EAL educators, special education personnel, child study teams, administrators	Response to Intervention (RTI); use of child study teams; culturally responsive instructional strategies	Recommends gathering language proficiency data in both English and the student's first language, as well as classroom observations and multiple data sources (not specific tools)	Comprehensive synthesis of peer-reviewed research and multi-state policy analysis.
Roen, L. (2015). Twice challenged: Differentiating between English language acquisition and learning disabilities.	Doctoral Dissertation - Qualitative – Interview-based study	To examine educators' experiences and perceptions related to the referral of ELs for special education services, including challenges with	Educators voiced widespread concerns over the inadequacy of the child study process to address ELs' needs. Barriers included lack of leadership,	N/A	Elementary and Secondary	EL teachers, general education teachers, school psychologists, special ed directors, curriculum directors	Two instructional interventions were required before CST could initiate evaluation	Not specified; focus was more on CST processes and intervention attempts	Improve CST functionality; integrate EAL services with rigorous curriculum; restructure secondary supports, enhance collaboration

Rodríguez, A., & Rodríguez, D. (2017). English learners with learning disabilities: What is the current state?	Peer-reviewed journal Article - Qualitative - Literature-based commentary with practitioner insights	To identify key practices and frameworks that support appropriate identification and instruction of English Learners (ELs) with learning disabilities.	pre-referral and rigid CST processes	N/A	K–12	General education teachers, EAL educators, special education teachers	Encourages implementation of RTI and culturally responsive instruction prior to referral	Strong advocacy for bilingual assessments, language history gathering, curriculum-based dynamic assessment (CDA)	Identifies major issues in prevention, early intervention, referral, decision making, assessment procedures, teaching strategies, and disproportionality related to EL students with LD. Highlights systemic gaps	Prioritize early interventions; Implement RTI with fidelity; Train personnel in bilingual assessment; Culturally responsive assessment procedures; Avoid over-reliance on standardized tests; Differentiate between second
			scheduling, inconsistent CST functioning, and inappropriate academic supports for EALs proposed a new decision-making model incorporating language acquisition factors before special education referral.							

			and best practice recommendatio ns.					language acquisition and true disabilities.	
Gordon, N. N. (2018). Elementary general education teachers’ decision- making process during the referral of English learners to special education: Distinguishing between English language acquisition and learning disability.	Dissertation - Qualitative multiple-case study	To examine how general education teachers distinguish between English language acquisition and learning disabilities when referring English learners (ELs) for special education, focusing on Tiers 1 and 2 of RTI.	Teachers relied heavily on oral language proficiency and length of exposure to English to make referral decisions. They faced collaboration challenges, inconsistent support from ESOL teachers, and lack of access to appropriate Tier 1 interventions	Considered as a factor; used by teachers to judge readiness and possible LD.	Grade 3 and 4 students	General education teachers, ESOL teachers, reading specialists, school instructional team (SIT), parent liaisons	Informal Tier 1 interventions used inconsistently; often teacher- created or found online.	Oral language proficiency and informal academic observations primarily used; formal tools not consistently described.	Increased teacher training in second language acquisition, stronger collaboration between general education and ESOL staff, improved SIT process with clearer guidance, better documentation of interventions, focus on students' language development stages.
Khawaja, A., & Wotherspoon, T. (2022). Learning challenges of culturally and linguistically diverse students in Canadian	Peer-reviewed journal article - Qualitative research using document analysis and casestudy	To examine how culturally and EAL students are identified and assessed for learning disabilities in Australian	The study found that inconsistent assessment frameworks, lack of training in language acquisition, and rigid policy	Not consistently reported; some discussion of newly arrived vs. long-term and EAL students	K–12; specific cases focused on primary and secondary students	Teachers, school psychologists, and administrators	Informal observations and behaviour monitoring; lack of formal RTI-like structures	no consistent tools were used before referral; decisions often based on classroom performance or general English ability	Schools should implement a structured, multi-phase referral process that includes psychosocial and linguistic profiling,

schools: Toward equity and inclusion.		schools, with a focus on structural and systemic issues that influence referral and assessment outcomes.	mandates contributed to the marginalization of EAL students. The proposed referral framework emphasizes the importance of psychosocial and linguistic profiling prior to formal assessment.					involve EAL experts early, and adapt policies to reflect cultural and linguistic diversity	
Harris, B., Kulkarni, T., & Sullivan, A. L. (2024). Review of state policies and guidance for the identification of culturally and linguistically minoritized students with specific learning disabilities.	Peer-reviewed journal article - Archival policy review and narrative analysis	To examine how U.S. state policies operationalize the federal exclusionary clause when identifying CLM students with SLD and the degree to which these policies align with best practices.	Wide variability in how states interpret and implement the exclusionary clause. Most guidance lacks clarity and fails to address multilingual learners' cultural and linguistic needs effectively.	N/A	N/A	School psychologists, multidisciplinary teams	Limited mention of specific pre-referral interventions. Most state policies lacked explicit guidance on what Tier 1 or Tier 2 supports should be in place before referral.	States often failed to provide guidance on culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments	States should provide clearer, more consistent guidance incorporating linguistically and culturally responsive practices throughout the referral process.

Heath, S. M., & Connell, T. (2024). Teacher perceptions of literacy instruction and SLD identification for English learners.	Dissertation - Qualitative case study	To explore how general education and EL teachers understand and implement Tier 1 instruction, and how they approach referral decisions for ELs within an RTI framework.	Teachers lacked training to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities. Referral decisions were often based on reading outcomes without nuanced understanding of second language development.	N/A	K-5	General education teachers, EAL teachers	Tier 1 reading instruction implemented but inconsistently adapted for EALs.	No consistent use of formal language proficiency assessments mentioned. Teachers often based referral decisions on reading achievement without assessing language acquisition.	Increase teacher training on second language acquisition and the referral process; implement clearer, culturally responsive RTI procedures.
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