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Educator Perceptions of the Disproportionate Experience of African Americans in Special Education

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EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE DISPROPORTIONATE

EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

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To Bennster, Climmie, Tatyonna, and all my other students of the resource room from the

Class of 2018. It is through you that I discovered a lifelong vocation in education.

"In order to teach you, I must know you." – Lisa Delpit

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Special education. As a young student, I always used to wonder where that name came from. It's not like my privileged, private-school upbringing gave me much meaningful firsthand exposure to the concept. Sure, I remember when the classmates of mine who received speech services or who seemed like they may have needed a little more help with the math lesson we were learning would inconspicuously step out of and back into the classroom growing up. But beyond that, special education was always shrouded in this sense of mystery. What about it made it so *special*?

Being a product of private, largely affluent, and Catholic educational institutions all the way from kindergarten to the completion of my undergraduate degree, I had extremely limited exposure to America's public education system as a student. My understanding of who was involved with and what went on in special education programs was essentially nonexistent. In fact, it was only even a field I considered joining until a time long after I made the decision to pursue a career in education.

In March 2009, my road to teaching began with my acceptance into a program called Teach For America (TFA). Teach For America is an organization that provides an alternative route to teaching certification, often for recent college graduates or others looking to become a teacher via a career transfer. It explicitly targets advancing educational opportunities in underserved communities. While the last few months of

college were a bit of a whirlwind, I took some solace in the knowledge that I'd be moving back to my home state, where I was placed by TFA and firmly rooted by a network of friends and family. Since I did not study education in college, I knew my learning curve would be steep. I spent that summer teaching remedial 8th grade math to an all-Latino group of students in East Los Angeles during the mornings and receiving crash courses in educational pedagogy in the afternoons. This was my first experience standing up in front of a group of students. While I loved both the challenge and the rewarding feeling it afforded me, it was hard to miss the obvious disconnect between my group of students and I. Here I was, a white, privileged, Midwesterner trying to teach algebra to a group of urban, primarily low-income, Latino teenagers. Although my middle school experience was confined to a mainly white, middle-upper class bubble, there was still something striking about seeing such a different racially-homogenous group of students in my classroom. Growing up, the students all looked like me. This time, our appearance and cultures were visibly different. Perhaps it was just adverse attitudes about being stuck in summer school or math, in general, that I was up against, but I really struggled to connect with many of my students that summer. And I would soon learn that this would not be the last time I'd experience this racial/cultural dissonance in my teaching career.

By fall 2009, I'd begun taking classes at Hamline University and working toward acquiring my full teaching license. Right around that time, I was also hired to teach in a general education setting at a relatively new charter school serving students and families primarily from the north side of Minneapolis. Our student community was 91% African American (96% students of color), 97% eligible for free or reduced price meals, and we had 24% of our students qualifying for special education services. These figures are

high across the board. Our complete lack of diversity also seemed eerily reflective of enrollment numbers during a pre-*Brown v. Board* segregated era.

Throughout my almost four years working as a special education teacher at this school, I case managed thirty-some different students, all but one of whom identified as African American. I understood that, given the lack of racial diversity in our school, the proportion of African American students I worked with in special education with was not inconsistent with our overall population. In other words, given that the school served almost all Black students, it would be reasonably consistent that my caseload of students would be predominantly Black. However, I also knew that not every school was like mine and had 24% of the student population receiving special education services. Many of the teacher contacts and acquaintances I spoke with from other schools expressed that their special education populations were in the 10-20% range, with most toward the lower end of that spectrum. Our 24% percent seemed so high. I reasoned that if there were other schools like ours that served primarily African American students and they had high eligibility numbers for special education too, then it could be the case that, generally speaking, more African American students are being referred for, receiving, and becoming stuck in special education service programs than their white counterparts.

Adding to the challenge of navigating through my early years as a teacher, almost all of the middle-school students we served in special education were already performing between two to five years behind grade-level. When the three-year timeline for a student's reevaluation rolled around, it was essentially guaranteed that student would re-qualify for special education services. Even with special education intervention, students

rarely showed the type of significant growth necessary to place them on track for successful long-term academic outcomes.

Another phenomenon I observed while working in this setting, which was formative in developing this research proposal, is the relative cultural dissonance occurring between the students and teachers of the school. I joined the staff in the second year of its existence and to say it was a struggle would be an understatement. By October of my first year, the school had totally spiraled out of control. One of the two special education teachers on staff had quit and I was asked to step out of my general education classroom, which was a train wreck, and into the resource room. Since I was so early into my certification coursework at Hamline, switching to a special education licensure track didn't set me behind at all. In fact, I wholeheartedly welcomed the change. Yet that and other staffing transitions did little to stabilize the overall toxic learning environment of the school. Students were sent out, suspended, or transferred schools often. Other teachers periodically burned out and quit. Administrators didn't know how to address the issues and resigned. There were a great number of problems that needed fixing to get us started on the journey to becoming a functioning school, but one that stood out, that there wasn't really a quick fix for, was the breakdown occurring between our young, mostly white teaching staff and our overwhelmingly black student population.

After four years of teaching in that building, and eventually witnessing some very promising growth in the school along the way, I decided to relocate to a similar position in a nearby first-ring suburban district. Recently, I completed my third year as a middle school special education teacher there. Through the transition, I noticed some stark contrasts between the communities at my previous and current school. An example of

this is that most of the families I work with now are white and from a middle-upper class socioeconomic status. Yet other aspects are not so different. Of the students I directly serviced in my first few years there, 17% identify as African American. Looking into the demographic data of the school, roughly 11% are African American. While this is not a staggeringly wide gap, it is worth noting and emphasizing that African American students are again disproportionately represented in the special education population. Knowing that this is the reality for both the schools at which I've taught, I've gradually began to think more about how my experience with special education disproportionality could be reflective of broader inequities across the public education landscape.

Although many classroom experiences have had a hand in cultivating my growing interest in this topic, other developments have come from my lived experiences outside of my role as a teacher. Some of the most significant factors contributing to my interest in disproportionality have occurred in conjunction with the gradual awakening of my racial consciousness. The stage was set for this by some classes I took and experiences I had throughout high school and college. In these, I gained awareness of and empathy toward many groups of people that didn't share my dominant culture background. That said, I don't think I truly began to grapple with my privilege and understand the significance of my identity and whiteness until the years after my teaching career began. I've become more politically and civically engaged since that time. Connecting with other like-minded people in person or on social media also helped expand the diversity of voices and perspectives I was exposed to. As I learned about and experienced more of the ways in which race impacts our society, I became more attuned to issues like the school-to-prison pipeline, biases in the criminal justice system, and the generational effects of mass

incarceration. These issues struck a persistent and nagging chord in me. I came to see racially-imbalanced outcomes in schools as the catalysts for many of these broader societal ills. All the while, special education, the vocation I had chosen to spend my life doing, appeared to be both a cause and a manifestation of those racially-skewed educational results. To some degree, it's difficult to avoid the thought that I'm a part of and contributing to a system that regularly produces such inequitable academic outcomes. So the activator in me wants to do something about it.

After devoting the last seven years to a field I am passionate about, the etymology of *special education* is no longer such a mystery to me. I've had the immense privilege of working alongside some profoundly *special* teachers and *special* students thus far in my brief teaching career. I've been in awe of and humbled by the significant educational growth that many of my students, regardless of their shade or color, have achieved. And I'm incredibly proud to work in the field of special education. At its theoretical core, as a service-delivery structure to provide struggling students with the individualized support they need, special education is a tremendous thing. But there are also some uncomfortable truths lying dormant beneath the surface that we, as special or any type of educators, can no longer ignore. If special education is truly as effective as it's ideal form professes to be, then parents would be lining up to get their children into it. Instead, there exists a very real stigma and a pernicious belief about the type of child that belongs in special education. As educational stakeholders, we must face the reality that we have too-often used special education as a location, rather than as a service-delivery model. Explicitly, it's been the location where the public school system has deposited its most challenging and needy students, a disproportionately high number of whom are Black.

And once an African American child is placed in special education, the chances of him/her making significant enough growth to exit out are not only slim, but significantly less than the chances of doing so if he/she was White. This doesn't happen because we lack good intentions. Most of the special educators I've met are remarkably kind, patient, and nurturing people. Yet it is time we face the truth that, when it comes to systemically raising the achievement of the African American students entrusted to us and reducing rates of racial disproportionality, we are decidedly *un-special*. The research will show that we don't yet even have an agreed-upon understanding of why disproportionate outcomes happen in the first place, much less a coherent solution for reducing them. For these reasons, an in-depth exploration of overrepresentation in special education is something I feel compelled to do.

The research to follow will attempt to answer the question: *What are educators' perceptions of the causes of the disproportionate experience of African Americans in special education.* Embedded within the term "disproportionate experience" are two concurrent and concerning trends. The first manifestation of the disproportionate experience is the rate at which African American students are over-identified as candidates in need of special education, relative to their White peers. Admittedly, this is a topic that has been substantially excavated in previous educational research. The second trend constituting the disproportionate experience is the fact that African American students generally experience less successful outcomes as result of the special education services they receive. In other words, our special education system is more effective at servicing White students than it is at servicing Black students. The hope of this research is to try to develop a more thorough understanding of the types of factors

different educators perceive to be causing these racially-discrepant trends. Additionally, I'm hoping the insight my research participants will share will provide some sort of explanation for why, in spite of decades of previous empirical research and groundwork, there is little evidence that rates of special education disproportionality have improved in schools.

To meet these objectives, I'll first provide an exhaustive synthesis of the many ways disproportionality has already been explored in the educational research. In the Methods section, I will break down my action plan for gathering new data to shed light on this research question. Following that, the findings of my data collection will be shared, analyzed, and interpreted. Finally, the Conclusion will offer a reflection on what was learned and discuss any implications of the study for practice or future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

In seeking to answer this question, the following literature review will define disproportionality, as well as its synonyms, and address the ways it has previously been explored in the literature. Current and longitudinal disproportional trends between school and special education populations will be addressed. Potential short- and long-term effects of disproportionality will be presented. The research will provide an overview of the spectrum of causes already put forth by educational researchers attempting to describe this phenomenon. Finally, potential solutions for bringing about school systems in which the overall representation of students of color in special education better aligns with their representation in the larger school population will be put forth.

Historical Context

The disproportionate representation of students of color in special education has long been a central focus of education researchers and practitioners. Dunn's (1968) seminal study first brought the issue to light, citing that "about 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by [teachers in mild mental retardation or MMR classes] are children from low status backgrounds—including Afro-Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Rican Americans" (p. 6). With the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), a precursor to the contemporary Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA), policymakers and civil rights advocates followed that lead in emphasizing the effect of disproportionately on inequitable educational outcomes. Over the course of the past four decades, that groundwork has been built upon and widened in scope by seemingly countless researchers trying to understand the phenomenon and justify whether or not it is even problematic. Yet despite the prevalence of special education disproportionality in education research, some have argued there is both still widespread limited understanding of this complex issue (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011) and little evidence it has systematically been addressed in American schools (Cartledge, 2005).

Disproportionality exists when students' representation in special education programs or within individual special education eligibility labels exceeds their proportional enrollment in the overall student population (Blanchett, 2006). "Overrepresentation" is a synonymous term in the literature to describe the same phenomenon. "Disproportional rates and outcomes" and "disproportionate experiences" are also terms that will be used interchangeably in this research to describe these previously-mentioned trends. Over the years, disproportionality has been quantified different ways by different educational researchers. A number of studies covering this topic have used a comparison of percentage enrollment between the total school and special education populations for a targeted demographic to calculate disproportionality. One meta-analysis of previous research done on the topic report that numeric differences of between 5 and 8.3 percentage points have been used to define significant disproportional representation from a given racial/ethnic group between the total student and special education populations (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). Ulterior studies have

calculated disproportional representation using an odds ratio, defined in this instance as the extent to which membership in a particular ethnic/racial group affects the likelihood of being identified with a given disability condition (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). Despite the various methods of defining and measuring disproportionality in the existing literature, evidence suggests consistent trends of its presence across racial groups in school populations. By many metrics, the gap has historically been most prevalent and troublesome for African American students.

<div align="center">**Rates, Trends, and Effects of Disproportionality**</div>

Overrepresentation of African Americans

Over the years, various governmental organizations have regularly collected and analyzed special education placement data in school districts. This data demonstrates that African American students are routinely among the groups at a greater risk for representation in high-incidence disability categories, including cognitively impaired [CI], learning disability [LD], and emotional behavioral disorder [EBD] (Donovan & Cross, 2002). This and other research suggests that African Americans are overrepresented in these high-incidence disability categories at the national level (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006) and have been since placement data has been systematically collected. Conversely, and by comparison, relatively ignored in the literature, this same group is severely underrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005).

A 2010 report released by the U.S. Department of Education suggested that Black students are two times as likely to be identified as EBD and 2.7 times as likely to be

identified as CI than their White counterparts nationally (as cited in Sullivan & Bal, 2013). African American students are also 1.13 times as likely to qualify as learning disabled (Blanchett, 2006) and more likely to qualify for services with multiple disability labels (de Valenzuela et al., 2006). With the lower-incidence disability categories, including "orthopedic impairment", "deafness", and "visual impairment", disproportionalities have been found to be far less common (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). Perhaps not coincidentally, these categories have more of a biological etiology than the high-incidence categories utilized most often for special education qualification. They typically involve medical personnel and have more acutely defined eligibility criteria and understood methods of diagnosis (Blanchett, 2006). Finally, racial disparities have been largely ignored in Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) research until recently (Sullivan, 2013). Different data sets reveal some variability in the degree of disproportional likelihood for the high-incidence disabilities of LD, EBD, and CI, but all of the larger patterns remain overwhelmingly consistent.

Enrollment Figures for All Students of Color

Although not an explicit focus of this research, disproportional rates for other racial demographics are worth noting. Native American rates of special education representation tell a similar story to those of their African American counterparts. This group is likely to be overrepresented in special education across the high-incidence eligibility labels previously mentioned. Explicitly, the U.S. Department of Education report (2010) indicated that Native Americans are about 60% more likely to be identified as CI and nearly two times more likely to be identified as LD than their White peers. On the other hand, Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander students tend to be proportionately

underrepresented across the high incidence disability labels (as cited in Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Other Factors Affecting Rates of Disproportionality

More recently, disaggregated demographic disparities have also been explored in the literature, with males and students from low-income backgrounds found to be at the greatest risk of identification for a majority of disability labels (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Other studies have found similar connections between English Language Learners and disproportionate representation (Artiles et al., 2005). Yet, when considering any research findings, it is important to note that using only national special education enrollment data neglects to acknowledge state-to-state variability. Many of these racial disproportion placement trends are more or less pronounced when viewing at the individual state level than when looking at national data as a whole (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002). Furthermore, as some researchers have pointed out, attempts to make sweeping comparative statements regarding disproportionality rates between different states or regions can be difficult. This is in part due to the fact that not all states use the same disability categories and some types of disorders are identified and named in a number of different ways (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014).

Recent Trends

Given disproportionality's lingering prevalence within special education academia, some researchers have shifted their focus to analyzing longitudinal trends in representation rates. One study analyzed national placement data and found that in the five-year time period from 2004-2008, African American overrepresentation slightly worsened across all categorical labels (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014). The

news was not all bad, though, as a notable reduction in the number of African American students categorized as having intellectual disabilities did occur. Yet when looking at data from a ten-year window (2004-2014), the researchers found that all racial groups experienced virtually no change in their overall rate of representation in special education. This suggests that any previous attempts to explain or quantify disproportionality by educational researchers have had a negligent effect on altering imbalanced rates of representation in practice.

Effects of Disproportionality on Educational Outcomes

In terms of future outcomes, disproportionate representation in special education populations has lasting detrimental ramifications for historically underserved demographics. The students that are affected by this phenomenon make less academic growth and graduate out less frequently than their White peers in special education (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). They are more likely to be educated in separate, more restrictive settings than their White classmates, even while controlling for disability categories (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Blanchett, 2006). Further, this trend of highly restrictive African American placement is greater in districts with a higher overall percentage of African American students. Due to these service placement disparities, students victimized by disproportionality typically receive a lack of access to an engaging and rigorous curriculum and are more likely to remain in more restrictive settings for the remainder of their educational careers (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Zhang et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, situations hardly improve for these students once they are out of school. Research suggests African American students coming from restrictive placements receive fewer supports related to employment, education, and community

living and are less applicable for admittance into postsecondary institutions (Chamberlain, 2005; Harry & Klinger, 2006). Black students in special education are also at greater risk for dropout and face diminished future employment opportunities. Kemp (2006) was among those to note that while the total U.S. dropout rate is roughly 11%, it is considerable higher for students receiving special education services for a Learning Disability (LD) (33%) or an Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (EBD) (between 50-59%). Wagner's (1995) research suggests that 73% of African Americans with EBD are arrested within 3 to 5 years of dropping out of school (as cited in McKenna, 2013).

From a social-emotional perspective, students serviced through special education face a social stigma of being labeled with a physical, intellectual, or emotional impairment. This can be especially significant for African American students with EBD (McKenna, 2013). On top of all these issues, the effects of disproportional representation are magnified by the fact that special education has not been particularly effective at narrowing the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities (Algozzine, 2005; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Research by Donovan and Cross (2002) also addressed this point by describing disproportionate representation as a "paradox" of special education. While special education is meant to allocate appropriate and necessary services to learners, in actuality it may also lead to "stigmatization, segregation, exposure to low expectations, receipt of weak curriculum, and constraint of postschool outcomes" (as cited in Sullivan & Bal, 2013, p. 476).

A final point alluded to earlier, but still worth explicitly addressing, is that the high incidence disability categories of LD, EBD, and CI, in which racial disproportions are so pronounced, are often described as "judgmental" by education researchers. What

is meant by this is that diagnoses of these conditions are dependent on clinical decisions of educators. According to Artiles et al. (2010), "[b]ecause these disabilities often lack clear biological etiologies, their definition and operationalization (including eligibility criteria and the validity and reliability of measures and assessment processes) can be fraught with ambiguity uncertainty, and bias" (p. 281).

Previously Cited Causes of Disproportionality

Education scholars have long recognized that disproportionality in special education is a complex, multi-dimensional problem shaped by a multitude of environmental, cultural, social, interpersonal, and institutional forces (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). As such, a plethora of causes have been put forth by researchers over the last forty years. To the extent possible, a disaggregated view of disproportionality is best to try to explain the complexities of the phenomenon. The work of Harry and Klinger (2006) separated the prospective causes of disproportionality into three distinct phases of the special education process—"children's opportunity to learn prior to referral, the decision making processes that led to special education placement, and the quality of the special education placement" (as cited in Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011, p. 2238). School personnel's failure to focus on prevention across all three levels has contributed to the severity and lasting nature of the disproportionality problem (Cartledge, 2005).

Unfortunately, the desire to arrive at a singular principle reason for the existence of disproportionality would drastically underestimate the effect of other factors at play. Researchers have acknowledged that answers to this complex problem are hardly straightforward. The findings of a National Research Council (NRC) panel on

disproportionality determined that it is dually and simultaneously affected by "biological and social/contextual contributions to early development that differ by race and that leave students differentially prepared to meet the cognitive and behavioral demands of schooling" and by a "school experience itself contribut[ing] to racial disproportion in academic outcomes and behavioral problems that lead to placement in special and gifted education" (as cited in Artiles et al., 2005, p. 284). The specific proposed causes to follow fall into either of these two realms.

Poverty

The relationship between disproportionality and poverty is one that has received extensive coverage in special education literature. Although poverty and placement in special education are correlated, research indicates that poverty can contribute to both school failure and special education, either directly or indirectly (Artiles et al., 2002; Skiba et al; 2008). The thought here is that students growing up in low-income communities are more likely to experience developmental threats and stressors which adversely affect school readiness and increase the likelihood of student failure in school. Donovan and Cross (2002) examined the performance of children growing up in low-income households and found that they may experience greater hardships in several areas relevant to educational success, including literacy, language development, numeracy skills, content knowledge, and social/emotional skills. Many contemporary educators are well aware of these data points and the fact that students living in poverty typically have "more needs stemming from disabling conditions than majority populations" (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 282). As the percentage of people living in poverty is greater for

racial/ethnic minorities than it is for Whites, it would seem there are very real

implications for a link to disproportional representation in special education.

In spite of poverty's traditional role in the literature, a sect of recent research has

challenged some of the assumptions connecting the association of poverty and

disproportionality. For example, Losen and Orfield (2002) maintain that although

Latinos are disproportionately more likely to live in poverty, they are not overrepresented

in special education on a national level (as cited in Artiles et al., 2010), though they are

overrepresented in certain regions or states (Chamberlain, 2005). Other studies, which

cite an inconsistent link between poverty and special education identification, argue that,

at the very least, most research fails to take into account the complex nature and impact

of poverty (e.g., durations, timing, magnitude) and make overgeneralized assumptions

about its predictive power (Artiles et al., 2002; Artiles et al., 2010). In one qualitative

study critiquing the poverty hypothesis, teachers working at two suburban school districts

in New York were interviewed about disproportionality. Despite generally not being able

to provide an explanation for how poverty might cause a learning disability when asked

by the researchers, teachers nonetheless readily cited it as a cause (Ahram et al., 2011).

Also worth mentioning is that their respondents (teachers) were generally reluctant to

attribute disproportional trends to race and instead used socioeconomics and culture as an

explanation for student demographic variables leading to special education placement.

Cultural Discontinuity

A growing area of recent research has analyzed disproportionality as a symptom

of frictions between the different cultures of students and teachers. As mentioned above,

a majority of students receiving special education services are poor, male, and/or ethnic

minority; American educators are primarily middle class, female, and White (Artiles et al., 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005). Seeing as traditional public schools are typically governed under the cultural norms and expectations of dominant teacher demographic, when the cultural backgrounds of teachers and students differ, it can lead to misunderstandings and bias. Both general education and special education teachers fall victim to this, suggesting cultural discontinuity contributes to disproportionality in both referrals before special education and educational outcomes once students qualify. Some research suggests that educational professionals whose culture or social class differs from the students they serve are likely to misinterpret the students' behaviors, often responding to the student with more punishment or consequences than warranted (Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Cartledge, 2005). Perhaps the origins of this intercultural friction is most acute when viewed through the lens of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), which states that students who have learning difficulties stemming from "cultural or economic disadvantage" do not have learning disabilities. Nonetheless, socioeconomics and culture are often cited by teachers as causes of special education disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2011).

One study attempting to explain cultural discontinuity as a potential factor in special education placement explored how the concepts of the "normal child" and a student's "ability" have become racialized and produced cultural-deficit thinking in the beliefs of educators (Ahram et al., 2011). The findings of these researchers suggest that cultural-deficit thinking (the belief that poverty affects cognitive ability) is consciously or subconsciously at play in many educators and that efforts to address disproportionality often result in institutional or structural "fixes", but not necessarily changes in the

mindsets of educators (Ahram et al., 2011). Related to this, the work of Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) examined the effects of African American movement styles on teachers' perceptions. In this study, teachers watched a short clip of two students walking to their locker, each with a different movement style. One student was European American and walked consistent with dominant culture norms and the other was African American and walked in manner that researchers described as a "stroll". After watching both videos, participants completed a questionnaire on their perception of the student's achievement, level of aggression and need for special education. The findings indicate that teachers perceived those students who walked with a stroll as lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to require special education than students walking with standard movement styles (Neal et al., 2003).

Other work builds on the need to focus on the underlying views of culture when addressing disproportionality (Artiles et al., 2010; Irvine, 2012). In her research, Irvine (2012) focused on the role of cultural misunderstandings in creating tensions between home and school from the perspective of African American families. In reviewing student records in an urban school system, she reported that teachers refer students of color for special education more frequently than their White peers and that minority referrals were more likely to be founded in behavioral, rather than academic, needs. These findings support the previous results of Coutinho and Oswald (2000). Yet these are hardly the only studies documenting a racial imbalance in regard to disciplinary referrals or consequences. The research of Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, and Tobin (2011) reveals that African American students are 2.19 (at the elementary level) to 3.78 (in middle school) times as likely to receive disciplinary referrals to the office than

their White peers and that Latino students are more likely than Whites to receive

expulsion or out of school suspension as consequences for the same or similar types of

behaviors. As McKenna (2013) points out, these types of pre-referral disciplinary trends

lead to the misidentification of many African American students as EBD and over-inflate

their presence in that specific special education population.

Teacher Perceptions and Bias

Closely related to the sect of the research emphasizing lack of cultural awareness

between teachers and students, teachers' perceptions and biases have also been identified

as contributing factors to disproportionality. As most special education processes begin

with a teacher's referral, there is legitimate concern over potential biases in the referral

selection. This is especially true for referrals of students with significant emotional or

behavioral challenges. Review of one study suggests that while White students are more

likely to receive a special education referral from their parents for EBD programs,

teachers are substantially more likely to refer African American students than their White

counterparts (Cartledge, 2005). Other research suggests that some general education

practitioners continue to view special education as their escape route (Chamberlain,

2005). These teachers may succumb to the belief that there is a certain type of student

that is too unlike his/her peers, is unfit for the general education population, and simply

belongs in special education. When special education programs are designed to be very

restrictive and isolated from the general education environment, having separate "parallel

systems" (p. 112) of general and special education can often encourage those misguided

beliefs.

An equally concerning trend is that schools in high poverty, racially-segregated urban areas are more likely to be afflicted by high rates of teacher turnover. The resulting open positions are more likely to be filled by a greater number of uncertified or provisionally licensed teachers, too often with limited meaningful intercultural experience (Blanchett, 2006). These educators face a greater likelihood of succumbing to cultural-deficit thinking toward the students they serve. Perhaps not surprisingly, relatively inexperienced teachers have also been found to have a lower sense of self-efficacy regarding their ability to meet the needs of racially diverse students with learning difficulties. This can have drastic results for their referral decisions (Chu, 2011). The findings of Chu's (2011) study suggest that teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy are more likely to consider the general education environment a more suitable location than a pull-out setting. This trend holds true for students with learning difficulties prior to referral and for students already being serviced with identified disabilities. It appears that teacher self-perceptions, aided by the pedagogical skills and multicultural awareness to legitimize them, could play a role in both reducing the disproportionality of students referred on the front end of special education as well as reducing disparate rates of setting restrictiveness for students already receiving services.

In an alternate inquiry into teacher perceptions, Shippen, Curtis, & Miller (2009) found that a majority of the teachers included in their research displayed a lack of understanding of racial special education overrepresentation. In their interviews conducted with general education teachers, two thirds of respondents attempted to explain disproportionality based on various "susceptibility labels". The most commonly cited of these labels were poverty and a lack of parent involvement. As previously

mentioned, while these identifiers can be beneficial in helping educators to indentify potentially at-risk students, alone, they cannot be justified as a cause for special education qualification (Shippen et al., 2009).

Assessment Bias

Potential assessment biases, leading to the first phase of disproportionality, have been a controversial component in the special education literature. In their analysis of the legacy of racial disproportionality, Ferri and Connor (2005) demonstrated how "scientifically objective" standardized tests have historically been used to justify beliefs about White intellectual superiority. These are beliefs that have been thoroughly debunked in the years since. Critics of IQ standardized tests used to qualify students for special education have raised concerns about linguistic and cultural biases within the test norms, which have traditionally been based on the supposedly universal values and experiences of White and middle class students (Ferri and Connor, 2005). Other research has also questioned the accuracy of intelligence assessments as predictors of achievement in evaluations, especially when used for qualifying African American students (Proctor, Graves, & Esch, 2012).

As Artiles et al. (2002) point out, "[t]here is considerable evidence about the inadequacies of traditional assessment models with culturally diverse groups", yet "research about the role of norming, content, linguistic, and cultural biases and test result uses on minority placement in special education is scarce" (p. 7). In their exploration of the role of assessment in explaining disproportionality, Skiba, Knesting, and Bush (2002) also concluded that cultural biases did not appear likely to solely explain differences in minority special education rates. In spite of this, they pointed out that the absence of

overt test biases did not guarantee that commonly employed assessment tools would be used in a "culturally competent manner" (p. 65). Further, multiple studies have found evidence of racial bias in more subjective social-emotional ratings of educational professionals in special education assessments (Skiba et al., 2002; Linton, 2014). A relevant, and growing, area of literature related to this discussion is the issue of "stereotype threat". The concern here is that, when placed in a testing environment, certain minority students may experience situational anxieties and physiological responses that adversely affect test performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This phenomenon may provide a rationale for the underperformance of minority students on standardized tests, thus resulting in a greater likelihood of special education placement.

Legacy of White Privilege and Racism

An ulterior field of the research contends that disproportionality in schools cannot be adequately understood or addressed outside of the context of the White privilege and legacy of racism that is endemic to American society as a whole. The work of Chamberlain (2005) put forth the view that disproportional representation in special education is a predicament that is inherently intertwined with a number of social and historical issues (e.g., unequal access to loan mortgages and wealth accumulation, lack of access to quality education, institutional bias, and inequitable treatment of racial minorities). Indeed, he argues, part of the reason why educational researchers and practitioners alike have failed to successfully address disproportionality since the issue was first presented in the research decades ago is that it is often treated as a purely technical issue (e.g., as a problem that is primarily caused by insufficient teacher knowledge or assessment results). In reality, it is connected to a larger contentious

narrative about America's history, which groups have been entitled to civil rights, and how various resources of the government have been allocated to different communities (Chamberlain, 2005).

Other researchers likewise stressed the importance of viewing the disproportionality problem through a historical lens. In their work analyzing the factors leading to overrepresentation in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Ferri and Connor (2005), classified the practice of "ability tracking" as a strategy used by districts and school boards to intentionally resegregate within schools throughout the second half of the 20th century. It was an approach meant to appease White parents, who assumed that integration would result in watered-down academic standards for their children, as well as to curb increasing rates of "White flight" into suburban and private schools. Perhaps not coincidentally, this same sentiment of diversity as burden or drain on the "normal" students in class surfaced again in later decades, carried forth by those arguing against inclusive delivery models for students with disabilities (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Yet in the wake of these "ability tracking" programs, since many African American students were exposed to a less rigorous curriculum prior to *Brown* and historical concerns of IQ assessment biases against African Americans have been established in the literature (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Proctor et al., 2012), an overwhelming majority of African-American students were filtered into the lowest academic tracks. The effects of this racially hierarchical system are still felt in the present day. For example, even when controlling for issues like social class, Southern U.S. states repeatedly rank among those with the highest rates of disproportionality,

supporting a possible connection to its longer legacy of racial segregation (Ferri &

Connor, 2005).

These historical factors back up research conducted by Blanchett (2006), who

argued that America's legacy of White privilege and racism manifests itself in three main

areas within the contemporary school system. The first is imbalanced resource

allocation. Gross imbalances in per pupil funding by school districts across the U.S. are

well-documented (Kozol, 2005). Due to the pattern of resegregation in public schools

over the last few decades, African American students are typically on the short end of the

stick in regard to discrepancies in school district funding. The second manifestation of

White privilege and racism in schools exists in inappropriate or culturally unresponsive

curriculum and pedagogy. In these classrooms, students are exposed to only the

historical perspectives of the dominant culture. The stories and voices of important

counter-cultural African American figures are either indirectly omitted or intentionally

muted. This contributes to the school disengagement and disassociation of many African

American teens. Blanchett's (2006) third example of racism's manifestation in present-

day schools exists in the prevalence of inadequate teacher preparation. Students in high-

minority low-income schools are typically taught by teachers with less experience and

qualification. Despite calls for greater infusion of multicultural education in teacher

training programs, graduates of those programs are continuously underprepared to

effectively teach African American and other students of color. Some research indicates

that many teacher education candidates enter the workforce with their previous negative

perceptions of "Blackness" and their sense of entitlement surrounding White privilege

too intact and unchallenged (Gay, 2000). Although overtly admitting negative biases or

perceptions about the intellectual inferiority of African Americans is now widely considered taboo, research indicates that many teachers may still subconsciously harbor these beliefs and display them by holding African American, or other students of color, to lower academic expectations (Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005).

Special Education Inefficacy

While many of the previous potential causes of disproportionality apply to both general and special education settings, the final one to be explored is purely a special education concern. Any study attempting to explain the disproportional academic outcomes of students in a post-qualification phase would be incomplete without explicitly addressing the possibility of fundamental special education inefficacy for the African American students it purports to serve. Special education has been described by some as one of the most discussed, but least analyzed issues in education (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivken, 2002). Viewing it with a reflective and critical lens is critical to understanding the scope of the disproportionality problem. Some research suggests that many African American students, and especially those being serviced for significant behavior challenges, are the recipients of a special education program that fails to meet their needs (Algozzine, 2005; McKenna, 2013). For the African American students receiving services, these discrepancies manifest themselves in lower academic achievement and lower rates of dismissal, as well as increased disciplinary referrals and school dropout rates, when compared to their White special education peers.

Perhaps no more glaring of an example of affording African American students an inadequate opportunity to learn exists than in the differential rates of placement restrictiveness. The research is clear that, within many disability categories, African

American students are traditionally serviced in more restrictive settings (Artiles et al., 2010; de Valenzuela et al., 2006; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Blanchett, 2006). The most drastic gaps of racial restrictive placement have typically existed for the most severe impairments, such as intellectual disabilities [ID] (Kurth et al., 2014). While previously-cited research suggests the number of African American students labeled with an ID is diminishing (Zhang et al., 2014), a majority of school systems have not yet enacted changes to where kids are placed and the rigor of the content that they are taught (Kurth et al., 2014).

Potential Solutions to Disproportionality

Multicultural Education and Training

Despite the magnitude of the causes and challenges disproportionality presents, researchers have yielded a number of potential solutions for combating it over the years. A growing number of studies cite a need for greater emphasis on teacher training and multicultural education to curb disproportionality trends (Neal et al., 2003; Salend & Duhaney, 2005; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Ahram et al., 2011; Irvine, 2012; Griner & Stewart, 2013). As previously addressed, because special education qualification often begins with teacher referral, the growing imbalance between the overwhelmingly white teaching corps and the ever-increasing diversity of the American public school student population is a lingering concern for both researchers and practitioners aiming to thwart disproportionality. Evidence suggests that most educators are aware that racially disproportional trends exist in special education outcomes (Griner & Stewart, 2013). However, while this problem has received considerable attention in the professional literature, there is still little systematic proof it is being successfully

addressed through practical application in schools (Cartledge, 2005). Too often lacking meaningful understanding of and a connection to their racially and linguistically diverse students' cultural experiences, many white educators simply lack the mindset, strategies, or instructional tools to be truly effective multicultural educators.

Most educators agree that effective instruction, by definition, meets the learning needs of the student populations being targeted. Providing students with inadequate opportunities to learn is one driving force of special education disproportionality (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). This pitfall exists in general education teachers, whose more effective planning and delivery of engaging and appropriate instruction could prevent unnecessary referrals from happening in the first place. Yet it is also present in special education teachers, who too rarely employ the same sound instructional techniques that would cultivate the sustained academic growth in students necessary to exit special education once they are in it (Cartledge, 2005). To achieve multicultural proficiency, educators must shed traditional pedagogical practices. Any instructional programs or techniques based on a sample population of white, middle-class children are likely to be inadequate when taught to students from diverse backgrounds (Cartledge, 2005). Untargeted or culturally insignificant instruction simply exacerbates gaps in learning outcomes for these students relative to their White, dominant culture peers. Teachers of diverse young children need to be prepared to deliver developmentally-appropriate, engaging, interactive lessons that promote critical thinking and 21st century skill problem-solving for all learners. Research reviewed by Salend and Duhaney (2005) identified several explicit culturally-responsive teaching practices to use with African American students including promoting verbal interactions, incorporating movement activities, teaching

students to engage in self-talk, providing small-group or cooperative learning opportunities, and grounding work in real-world tasks.

In addition to employing these specific strategies, culturally responsive educators consistently hold themselves and their students to high expectations. They work together in collaboration with others in the school and community to tap into all available "funds of knowledge" to ensure the curriculum they plan is appropriate and engaging (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzales, 1992). Successful multicultural general and special educators display asset-based thinking in regard to all parent interaction. They explicitly look for opportunities to reach out to parents and guardians of diverse students to maximize the caregivers' advocacy and involvement, knowing those caregivers can provide invaluable insights about the children educators are trying to reach. Finally, they seek out ways to bridge the home and school cultures and intentionally attempt to orchestrate a classroom environment that values diversity.

It may be a difficult truth to hear, but most contemporary teachers need far greater ongoing intercultural understanding and training (Cartledge, 2005; Blanchett 2006). There is some evidence suggesting preservice teachers can select culturally-responsive interventions to use with struggling African American students when given a hypothetical case study and a list of potential responses (Siwatu & Polydore, 2010). Yet there is little evidence suggesting this low-level ability translates to teachers actually employing culturally-responsive strategies on their own outside of a controlled research setting. New teaching candidates need to be better trained on why and how to harness the power of students' home culture, language, heritage, and experiences to facilitate learning and development in the classroom. They need to become more attuned to their own

subconscious racial or cultural biases. Lastly, they need to identify and use curricular materials that are more reflective of the perspectives, norms, and traditions of the diverse student demographics in their classrooms. As Blanchett's (2006) work suggests, these educational resources should provide alternatives to the mainstream White historical narratives, perspectives, and traditional canon of literature typically studied in school.

Culturally Responsive Response to Intervention

Similar to developing greater culturally responsiveness in teachers, an ulterior sect of the solution-oriented focus on disproportionality has to do with the need for creating a more "responsive" Response to Intervention (RTI) model. The work of Harris-Murri et al. (2006) was among those to explore and critique the "wait to fail" approach of traditional, behavioral or discrepancy-modeled academic special education programs. They contend that most interventions are enacted too late in a student's career, often after that student has experienced a pattern of repeated school failure. Related studies suggest that interventions in the form of special education commonly start at a point when it is too late to produce the significant academic or behavioral gains necessary for meaningful future school and life success (Cartledge, 2005; Kemp, 2006). To truly remedy disproportional trends, intervention needs to begin early in childhood. Children born into families with characteristics typically associated with school difficulty (e.g., poverty, premature parenthood, parent criminality, lack of familial organization) need to be targeted for early-childhood supports including health services, family education, lasting high-quality care, and activities promoting regular cognitive stimulation (Cartledge, 2005).

In addition to early intervention, the work of Harris-Murri et al. (2006) and Proctor et al. (2012) also advocated for greater cultural responsiveness of the RTI team in its traditional school sense. In many ways, the increasing popularity of RTI versus the more traditional IQ-achievement discrepancy model as means for qualifying students under a learning disabled label is seen as a favorable shift for remedying disproportionality. When implemented with fidelity, RTI models place a greater onus on general education teachers to identify struggling students earlier and help ensure those teachers take an active responsibility for delivering high-quality research-based interventions (Harris-Murri et al., 2006). Addressing learning gaps of core foundational skills in children earlier in their educational careers is a proven way to reduce the likelihood of inequitable academic outcomes later on. Additionally, RTI provides an ulterior approach to using IQ testing as qualification justification for African Americans, which, as discussed, is an issue riddled with controversial precedent in the American educational system (Proctor et al., 2012).

Despite its benefits, RTI is not immune to the types of educators' biases that contribute to disproportionality. In their study of multi-disciplinary pre-referral teams in schools that serve predominantly African American students, Harry and Klinger (2006) found that during meetings to discuss student concerns, educators frequently talked about students as problems and attributed their academic deficits to personal characteristics such as low intellect, poverty, or lack of family functioning. Scant few discussions focused on items within the teachers' locus of control, such as the instructional practices of the referring classroom teacher. To bring about authentic reduction in rates of

disproportionality, RTI teams, just as classroom practitioners, must adopt a culturally responsive approach.

Gender-Based Solutions

Some recent efforts to curb rates of racial disproportionality have taken to approaching the issue through the lens of gender. Largely overshadowed by the quantities of studies targeting racial overrepresentation, gender discrepancies within the population of students who qualify and receive special education students have been an area of increasing prominence over the last decade. In their synthesis of the literature addressing disproportional rates of both students of color and males in special education, Piechura-Couture, Heins, & Tichenor (2013) found that the variation in ratios of males to females receiving services typically hovers between 2:1 and 3.5:1, depending on the disability label being targeted and the severity of the disability. For students diagnosed with a severe emotional or behavioral disorder, the ratio is on the higher end of that continuum, with Black and Hispanic students averaging a 3.42:1 and 3.65:1 male-to-female ratio, respectively (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005). The primary reason put forth for this imbalance bears a resemblance to some of the same factors contributing to racial disproportionality. Explicitly, Piechura-Couture et al. (2013) attributed the male-female discrepancy to bias in the referral system, differences in how the two genders are socialized, and certain biological conditions that make males more predisposed to various disorders. As a result, the more active male nature, while encouraged outside of the school setting, is both less likely to be tolerated and more likely to be interpreted as misbehavior by school staff within the classroom environment. These findings are supported by the work of Linton (2014), who studied the differential interpretations of

various behaviors African American students in special education among different respondents. She found that, on subjective social-emotional assessments, all respondent parties (teachers, parents, and the students themselves) consistently rated males' hyperactivity, oppositional, and conduct behaviors as significantly higher than their ratings of females. Data analyzed suggested males receive approximately five teacher referrals for every one referral that females receive and that males are thus over-identified for certain medical conditions such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which often serve as prerequisites to special education qualification (Linton, 2014).

To address the gender-specific discrepancies in referral patterns, Piechura-Couture et al. (2013) explored the use of single-gender classrooms as a means to reduce disproportional rates of identification. They hypothesized that certain innate differences between males and females manifested themselves in students' classroom behavior, and these differences can have very real implications for the pedagogical approaches of classroom practitioners. Their findings suggest that single-gender classrooms, which allow for boy-friendly lessons embedded with more movement, higher-noise levels, and direct teacher talk, resulted in both fewer behavior referrals and higher academic scores for the targeted male population. As there is considerable overlap between the generalized preferred learning styles of males and many African American students (Neal et al., 2003; Piechura-Couture et al., 2013), these findings support the claim that single-gender classrooms are an option that should be explored in attempts to reduce disproportion of both males and students of color in special education.

Other Solutions to Disproportionality

Although not appearing frequently in the literature as lone-standing solutions,

other preventative methods have been proposed by researchers to reduce rates of

overrepresentation. Among these include recruiting and retaining special education

teachers of color, rethinking the ways in which students with behavior challenges are

disciplined, and reforming basic practices to make special education more effective. The

work of Valle-Riestra, Shealey, and Cramer (2011) heralded the benefits that a diverse

teaching workforce can have on academic engagement and achievement for many

students of color in special education. Other studies suggest that changes in the way

schools think about and apply disciplinary practices are needed (Skiba et al., 2011,

McKenna, 2013). Rather than embrace more traditional zero-tolerance models for certain

behaviors, school systems may be better off adopting graduated or flexible approaches to

discipline. These would include approaches that actually teach students the

developmental and regulatory skills that they are missing. Finally, the work of Algozzine

(2005) suggests a more no-nonsense approach to disproportionality is needed to bring the

reality of special education closer to its lofty rhetoric. If special education actually

delivered on its promises, few stakeholders would be worried about any racially-

imbalanced distribution of services. Simply making special education more effective by

improving the quality of teaching and learning would reduce its persisting gaps in

educational outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Research Question

The preceding literature review sought to explore the existing research on enduring racially disproportionate rates and outcomes in special education. In this chapter, I describe my action research methods in which I gained insight via interviews from various key figures that experience and can affect part of this issue firsthand. These procedures were conducted in an effort to shed light on my research question: *What are educators' perceptions of the causes of the disproportionate experience of African Americans in special education?*

Research Paradigm

The process of carrying out this research was done through a qualitative lens. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative paradigms are appropriate when a phenomenon needs further exploration and the researcher seeks to draw out its meaning and significance from the perspective of the research participants. This type of inquiry entails immersion into the natural setting to gather authentic data and information. In qualitative designs, the researcher plays a direct role in the data collection process through examining documents or observing/interviewing research subjects firsthand. While researchers can begin qualitative research with basic hypotheses about a particular phenomenon, they need to remain flexible throughout the investigative process and adapt

to novel information as it is discovered. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to develop a holistic understanding of the topic of study.

A qualitative design was appropriate for this research project because, while the topic of disproportionality in special education has been at play in the literature for years, it continues to be a problem that education researchers and practitioners have failed to adequately address. The existing research suggests there continues to be a widespread lack of understanding and/or disagreement of the pertinent causes among the educational practitioners on the front lines of this issue (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Thus, an explicit empirical attempt to unearth the spectrum of causes educators perceive was warranted. Qualitative methodology, such as the interviews I conducted, is strategically designed to tease out personal, specific, and elaborate data from its research subjects.

Further support for a qualitative approach came from the fact that much of the existing literature in this area has been focused on overrepresentation before or during special education qualification. Previous empirical research has yet to fully embrace the more uncomfortable topic of why special education programs continue to perpetuate and exacerbate disproportionate results and experiences for our African American learners. Accurately collecting data for such a research question can be a sensitive endeavor. An impersonal, quantitative framework could bias or limit both the quantity and quality of data received. Instead, a qualitative approach appeared best suited to elicit genuine insight, honest opinions, and candid perceptions of respondents that may or may not previously have been expressed by other outside sources.

Research Methods

This study utilized the phenomenological research tradition. Phenomenological research attempts to depict a phenomenon by describing the lived experiences of relevant individuals (Creswell, 2014). Typically, data collection is done through interviews, as was the case here. A phenomenological framework was chosen because, through this research, I hoped to better understand this disproportionality phenomenon through the perspectives of a diverse assemblage of education professionals. To collect my data, I conducted interviews of special education teachers, general education teachers, and school administrators. By targeting different respondent groups, I sought out to bring to light a wider array of prospective perceived causes for continuing disproportional rates and outcomes than would have been possible by interviewing respondents only from one group (e.g., special education teachers).

I would be remiss to neglect to mention that an additional rationale for using a design involving interviews comes from my personal beliefs, experiences, and interest in disproportionality. As alluded to earlier, addressing this topic can be a difficult and uncomfortable undertaking for some people. I am of the mindset that in order to acknowledge and later tackle large and uncomfortable educational issues, such as this one, it is best to do it in small and controlled environments. That way, educators can feel safe and make themselves vulnerable enough to have an honest and meaningful dialogue. Of course, this type of design is not without its drawbacks, including that the researcher's presence may impact responses, not all subjects are equally perceptive to educational trends, and that information collected represents the opinion of only one individual.

Critical to the set up of this endeavor was an attempt to collect information with the slightest risk of bias or influence on the manner in which I elicited information from the research participants. Indeed, in truly authentic qualitative design, the researcher must keep the focus on pulling out the participants' meaning about the topic, rather than looking to confirm the meaning that the researcher or existing literature suggests (Creswell, 2014). Like so many other issues in contemporary education, most stakeholders would agree that there is not one sole cause or silver-bullet solution to the disproportional experiences of African American students in special education. I viewed an interview data-collection format as one of the best ways to pick up on the plethora of factors contributing to disproportionality and, by selecting it, hoped to develop a more holistic understanding of this complex issue.

The interviews for this research were conducted in a one-on-one format in an off-campus setting (restaurant or coffee shop) during summer 2016. This procedure detail was chosen because I hoped it would allow participants to devote their full energy and concentration to the interview questions being asked of them. Additionally, administering the interviews outside of the school year and school setting reduced the likelihood that any interruptions would arise throughout the interview process. Thus, I have reason to believe that participants were able to remain fully engaged when responding to the questions posed to them and that the data collected represents a valid and reliable measure of their genuine perceptions of the factors that cause disproportionality.

Participants and Setting

The setting for this research was two school environments located in or just outside of a large metropolis in the northern Midwest. Both of these two educational settings are middle schools. School A is a public charter school in a largely-segregated neighborhood of a sizeable urban city. A distinguishing feature of this charter school is that it attempts to adopt a "no excuses" approach. The disciplinary system is rigid and the school utilizes an extended school day and extended school year calendar. School A serves a population of 215 students, with 93% identifying as African American, 92% qualifying for free/reduced price lunch rates, and 24% receiving special education services, as of an October 1st child count during 2015-2016 school year. Conversely, School B is a traditional public school located in a first-ring suburb just outside the boundary of that same urban city. Its disciplinary system and school calendar reflect what would be considered typical across school districts found anywhere in the United States. School B serves a slightly more diverse and notably more affluent, on average, student population of 420 pupils. At School B, African Americans make up roughly 11% of the total school enrollment and are part of the 32% of students identifying as students of color. Additionally, 26% of School B's kids qualify for free/reduced price lunch rates and 9% receive special education services.

These particular schools were chosen because, despite the notable differences in their clientele, both are affected by rates of overrepresentation of African American students in their special education programs. Further, in testing this research question, I was interested in trying to see if the differences in school demographics had any effect on the responses of the educators who worked at that school. In other words, I was curious

if the staff members working at School A, with an overwhelming majority of Black students, would perceive differing causes to disproportionality than the staff members working at School B, where only 11% of the student body identifies as Black. In an effort to control for some other variables, the two schools I selected share attributes about their special education programs' size (number of special education teachers employed at school and number of students receiving services) and structure (a preference toward servicing students in an inclusive setting).

The participants of this research involve three educators at both school settings. At School A, one general education teacher (Teacher A), one special education teacher (SpEd Teacher A), and one school administrator (Admin A) were interviewed. The same three roles (Teacher B, SpEd Teacher B, and Admin B) were interviewed at School B. Another hope of the research, along with attempting to determine if a school's racial demographics affected educators' perceptions, was to see if any patterns emerged within or between the responses of educators in similar roles across both schools. For example, perhaps the perceptions of general education teachers about causes of disproportionality would differ from those of special education teachers. To try to isolate the variables I was most interested in exploring, I did my best to take into account demographic data of the participants and norm them across both settings. Some of these factors taken into consideration when selecting participants included number of years of experience, race, gender, background in a traditional or alternative pre-licensure certification program, and my perception of their multicultural experience/understanding. However, given that interviews took place outside the bounds of the school year and participants were volunteering their personal time, some selections did not fit the mold perfectly and more

hinged on a subject's willingness to be interviewed. Nonetheless, each participant is held in high regard by the researcher and believed to be a conscientious, effective, and reflective educator. Finally, all participants have substantial experience with and knowledge of the special education referral, qualification, and service delivery phases in their respective school setting.

Research Instruments

As previously expressed, the primary goal of this research was to identify the types of factors that teachers and administrators believe contribute to the disproportional rates of representation and outcomes of African American students at various levels in the special education experience. While similar methodological endeavors do exist in the literary record (Shippen et al., 2009; Kearns et al., 2005), these few studies also focused on the perceptions of school counselors and school psychologists and were specific to regions within the southern United States. Therefore, potential regional variation in contributing factors to disproportionality merited exploration.

The questions posed to participants were built off some of that existing research (Shippen et al., 2009) and are coupled with inquiries specifically crafted for the purposes of this research project (see Appendix A). My questions focused on probing for potential perceived causes of disproportionality prior to, during, and after special education referral. Moreover, I was also interested in determining each participant's vision of what each of these phases would look like in a hypothetical utopian school system, rather than operating solely within the limits of the status quo. Finally, my interview questions prompted respondents to list all the barriers they could think of that are preventing the

realization of that hypothetical utopia, as well as the actions specific groups with a stake in educational outcomes can take to reduce rates of disproportionality.

The interview questions were created in such a way to attempt to identify whether or not systemic biases exist anytime in the pre- or post-special education qualification phases, without explicitly asking participants if such biases might be present. This was done to reduce the likelihood of leading a participant toward a particular answer that I, the researcher, was looking for. Respondents were provided the questions in advance of the interview to allow time for processing and with the hope of eliciting more thorough and nuanced responses later on. The downside of this approach was that it potentially compromised the likelihood of receiving candid or gut-reaction responses from the participants.

It is important to note that the list of questions found in Appendix A simply served as a guide over the course of the interview process. Throughout my research, I attempted to stay true to the phenomenological tenet of maintaining an emergent design. At the onset, the breadth of responses my participants would offer was unknown. I tried to use an approach that would not only avoid limiting those responses in any way, but also would remain flexible enough to allow my research question or procedures to shift course as the data I collected warranted. As a result, the interviews were not conducted in a robotic or formulaic manner. I allowed time to probe for follow-up questions to participants' responses and insights whenever it appeared that doing so would be valuable to the data I was hoping to collect.

Ethical Considerations

Protecting the identities of my participants was extremely important for me to remain cognizant of throughout this research. The people involved in this study spoke openly and honestly about themselves, different racial identities, and their beliefs about their schools and our educational system in general. It was important they felt they could be vulnerable and knew that their contributions to this study would remain anonymous. Before the research began, the Human Subjects Review process was completed through Hamline University. Prior to each interview, I sent a letter to the principal of each school explaining the study and requesting consent of their organization's participation (see Appendix B). I then sent a letter to each participant detailing the research proposal (see Appendix C) and requested that each sign one and return a consent form expressing their willingness to participate in the study. This form also stated that I would protect each participant's anonymity and that he/she could choose to withdraw from the study at any time, absent of any negative consequences (see Appendix D).

Data Analysis

All interview content was recorded on a digital audio recording device. This decision was made to attempt to limit the note-taking need of the interviewer, to allow the conversation to flow freely, and to preserve the integrity of the participant responses. Upon concluding all six interviews, the long process of data analysis began. The first steps were to re-listen to and transcribe the interviews, look for the big ideas within the scripted responses, and start to organize those main ideas by theme. I then coded this data by grouping similar patterns of information according to shared themes. Through this coding process, I was able to sort all relevant participant content into six different

thematic "buckets", each one representing a different area respondents believed

contributed to the disproportionality of African Americans in special education. I made

note of which respondents offered a response that fit into each thematic bucket.

Additionally, I was able to get a very crude idea of how strongly correlated each bucket

was toward explaining disproportionality for each of my participants by documenting

how many times their responses touched on a particular theme. This process was

difficult and notably non-linear. I found myself replaying recordings and rereading

transcripts multiple times in deliberating the most applicable bucket in which to sort

responses. When a response seemed to fit in multiple thematic buckets, it was placed in

both. Although this coding method was by no means scientifically objective, it allowed

me to weave basic themes together and develop a more comprehensive understanding of

disproportionality based on the expertise and experience of these education professionals.

What I found will be discussed at length in the chapter to follow. Lastly, the insight I

gained will be compared with the previously-cited causes in my literature review and

instances of alignment will be explicitly noted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

This study was done to attempt to describe and interpret educators' perceptions of the causes of the disproportionate experience of African American students in special education. I interviewed six educators, representing two contrasting school environments, to collect data toward that end. All but one teacher (SpEd Teacher B) expressed having significant firsthand knowledge of this issue. Two interview subjects (Admin A and Admin B) also expressed familiarity with the scholarly research on disproportionality and admitted to completing previous graduate or doctoral degree work in the area. Though the individuals I interviewed each contributed a unique perspective and degree of insight to the research process, there were no doubt underlying themes that emerged and connected their various responses together. In this chapter, I describe those responses, how they relate to one another, and areas of commonality within the existing literature. When discussing the relevance of each theme, I'll first share the responses of staff at School A and then express the responses of staff at School B. A brief discussion of how those responses compare and/or contrast will follow. Following, interpretations of and connections between each theme will be presented. Finally, the six themes will be addressed through the lens of the previously-mentioned causes addressed in the literature review. I do this with the hope that by examining and synthesizing all my participants'

responses into one tapestry of information, a richer understanding of the factors contributing to disproportionality will be realized.

Themes of Disproportionate Experiences

Inadequate Teacher Knowledge

One theme that consistently appeared among the responses of participants and thus suggests a strong correlation to the disproportionate experience of African American students in special education is the idea of teachers possessing inadequate knowledge or experiences. This is especially true when it comes to having multicultural awareness/proficiency. Yet many subject responses also touched on ineffective general education teacher training programs or a lack of special education content knowledge. It should be noted that this is a rather broad thematic category, and because of that fact, multiple interview questions could have led to interview participants offering a response in this area. Nonetheless, all interview subjects suggested inadequate teacher knowledge as a cause on at least one occasion. It was also mentioned the greatest collective number of times over all interview sessions.

School A. All three participants at School A offered responses that repeatedly spoke to a lack of multicultural proficiency on the part of many general and special education teachers. SpEd Teacher A cited the presence of an "obvious disconnect between how Black students are raised and how they are taught in school" (personal interview, July 6, 2016) as a critical factor in explaining disproportionality. This disconnect exists in the norms, communication styles, and expectations for behavior between the home culture and the school culture. Sometimes a "perfectly acceptable behavior or method of communicating at home is viewed as an overly-loud or aggressive

behavior at school" (Admin A, personal interview, July 15, 2016). Admin A was also quick to make the connection that this dissonance likely helps explain why Black students are over-referred for EBD labels at much higher rates than they are for addressing and SLD or other labels. SpEd Teacher A also spoke to this fact, stating that one phrase she hears a lot coming from the overwhelmingly young and white teaching staff at her school is the phrase "attention-seeking behavior". "I never heard that phrase when I taught in New York [with a more diverse student body at my school]. Who are we to say what behaviors are attention-seeking?" she explained. SpEd Teacher A then provided the context that some teachers at school classify any behavior that interrupts the lesson they have planned as "attention-seeking" (personal interview, July 6, 2016).

Teacher A addressed the cultural breakdown between primarily White teachers and Black students by offering that the American public school system undoubtedly has a "racialized curriculum". She went on to elaborate that what we teach in the K-12 standards is largely from a White perspective. "We need to take time to educate teachers on race and make sure they have meaningful exposure to different cultures and recognize the positives that those different cultures bring to the table." This learning needs to happen in undergraduate programs and continue in onsite training for school staff members. We can "never have enough learning" (personal interview, June 20, 2016).

Beyond the multicultural breakdown between teachers and students, staff members at School A also addressed the problem of inadequate teacher knowledge through more of a lens of receiving insufficient pre-classroom training. While all three interview subjects at School A mentioned this cause at least one time, the emphasis primarily came from Teacher A. Her interview responses repeatedly came back to the

fact that teachers are not prepared enough to recognize the signs of a disability or to select/deliver effective interventions for struggling students, regardless of their race. She noted that many general education teachers need to be better about identifying students in a non-subjective way. "What interventions have I put in place? Do I know what to do if they are struggling? If not, is it really a disability?" are just some examples of questions that Teacher A believes educators should be asking themselves all the time before submitting a student's name for referral (personal interview, June 20, 2016).

School B. Insufficient teacher knowledge was also a reoccurring theme in School B's staff responses. Throughout his interview, Teacher B routinely addressed lack of teacher multicultural proficiency by making the point that our whole education system is set up for the dominant White culture. This hasn't changed over the course of the 20th and early 21st centuries to reflect changing school demographics. According to Teacher B, "We still believe the best way to educate kids is to sit in a chair, give them a piece of paper, and tell them to do the work. That approach fails a lot of students, especially Black students. We know the results, but we keep doing it anyway" (personal interview, June 29, 2016). When asked what solutions are needed to make the system more racially responsive, Teacher B called for more empathy and exposure to different cultural groups before actually stepping into a classroom. "We need apprenticeship training for student teachers with true community involvement." Teacher candidates need to be immersed in more than one type of culture. "We need to see what goes on outside the school day with these kids and need to actually believe that all students can learn" (personal interview, June 29, 2016).

Similarly, Admin B repeatedly referenced a cultural breakdown between teachers and students when explaining disproportionality. She spoke at length about the experience of being on the school's Student Assistance Team (SAT) and how some students are brought before them for problem-solving in a biased way. For instance, this past year, just under 50% of the names grade-level teams submitted to SAT for problem-solving were Black students at School B. Many of these students were flagged for behavioral reasons. "Only 11% of our kids are Black. That's a huge problem" (Admin B, personal interview, June 21, 2016). The dilemma doesn't stop there, however. When the SAT team took the names on the list of Black kids identified by the teachers and cross-checked them with other metrics of school performance (GPA, attendance, state assessment scores), Admin B reported that, more often than not, they saw evidence suggesting those students with a high number of behavioral referrals were doing just fine or performing very highly in other areas.

Admin B went on to explain the differences in how her staff generally responds to disengaged or academically failing students, who aren't spiking for behavioral reasons. When a White student shows signs of school failure, Admin B reported receiving "overly-empathetic" responses from her staff members. They'll say things like, "We're so worried about this student" or "We called this many times to connect with home about it" (personal interview, June 21, 2016). Meanwhile, there are a whole bunch of Black students in the school not flagged by the teachers, but every other metric (GPA, attendance, state test scores) shows them absolutely floundering, and teachers don't say anything about it. Admin B explains this by referencing the existence of a culture of not wanting to "poke the bear" when it comes to the school's Black students. If they are a

nice kid and compliant, then our teachers won't say anything about their academic struggles and simply pass them along. These types of "implicit biases" are a real problem at our school (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

   Connections between schools. Due to the broad nature of this category, at least one response from each participant suggested a link between inadequate teacher training and disproportionate outcomes in special education. Focusing only on the lack of intercultural training, staff at School A were approximately 57% more likely to offer a response emphasizing the role of cultural dissonance between home and school environments. However, these figures were affected by the fact that SpEd Teacher B provided no responses suggesting a lack of multicultural awareness contributed to disproportionality. It seemed to be a topic she hadn't considered before. Comparatively, the staff at School B was 33% more likely to mention a response suggesting general insufficient teacher prep (such as in recognizing disabilities, selecting interventions, or possessing adequate pedagogical tools) was a significant contributor to disproportionality. Interestingly enough, teachers at School B seemed to display more metacognition about their own sense of multicultural proficiency and efficacy when it comes to developing it. According to a response SpEd Teacher B offered during the interview, "I know I'm contributing to the problem [of disproportionality] when I'm answering your questions with 'I don't know'" (personal interview, July 18, 2016). Additionally, more teachers at School B explicitly stated the fact that it needs to be teachers' responsibility to own this problem and change their personal beliefs and behaviors if rates of disproportionality are hoped to be reduced.

SAT Intervention/Assessment Biases

The second theme of the responses relating to factors contributing to disproportionate experiences has to do with breakdowns in the SAT/Child Study process in schools and biases in special education standardized assessments. This was an area in which all respondents across both schools offered responses.

School A. Participants at School A all spoke to biases in the actions of SAT/Child Study teams in their responses to interview questions. SpEd Teacher A indicated that, too often, she has seen culturally or racially homogenous people involved in the SAT process. More generally, breakdowns between how SAT should operate in theory and how it actually does operate in practice have been common in the experiences of School A's interview subjects. According to Admin A, "Most teachers are not trained well enough to deliver and track effective interventions" at the same time as juggling all the other responsibilities of teaching a class of thirty students (personal interview, July 15, 2016). Similarly, Teacher A expressed that, "It is often unclear who owns the SAT process." Breakdowns happen because the people making decisions about which interventions to provide to a struggling student are not always the same ones delivering them to that student (personal interview, June 20, 2016).

A different point of interest related to SAT breakdowns and overrepresentation, which both Teacher A and Admin A brought up, was that School A seems to have limited resources when it comes to making the legally-mandated SAT work a priority. As previously mentioned, School A is a small charter school with 24% of its students receiving some sort of special education service. According to Admin A, their school psychologist is only on campus one day a week and much of her time is devoted to

administering or writing up assessments for reevaluations. Additionally, the special

education staff seems to be stretched thin. Teacher A only recalled conducting one or

two initial special education evaluations among the students she worked with over the

last few years. "I have faith in the interventions delivered in my classroom, but I don't

think students always receive the same quality across the board" (Teacher A, personal

interview, June 20, 2016). Other SAT complaints shared by Staff A include the long

length of time (6-8 weeks) needed to collect intervention data on a student, instances of

parents not consenting to services after all the work of administering and writing up an

evaluation was already completed, and times when the intervention process has been

interrupted by summer vacation.

Beyond SAT breakdowns, potential biases in the standardized assessments used

for making special education eligibility decisions was also a topic that all three

respondents at School A addressed. Each one mentioned that fidgety or highly-active

students, often Black boys, are more likely to be labeled with an ADHD diagnosis. This

is a trend they have seen that in multiple schools throughout their collective teaching

experiences. At her current school, Teacher A spoke to the fact that there is a top-down

belief, although not shared by all, that kids need to sit and look a certain way to be

learning. She shared an anecdote about how one of her highest-performing students was

treating his pencil like airplane during one of her formal observations. At the observation

debrief, this point was the only area of constructive criticism she received from her

administrator. However, because Teacher A had taken the time to get to know the

student and talk at length with his parents about his learning style, she understood he was

still learning and not distracting others. Allowing him to attend in a very hands-on way

was an accommodation she was okay to provide. But to an outside observer, that sort of

behavior too often gets kids categorized as "hyperactive", inattentive", and "branded as

ADHD" (personal interview, June 20, 2016).

  School B. SAT and assessment biases were also reoccurring themes in the

responses of the staff at School B. Both Teacher B and SpEd Teacher B spoke at length

about the difficulties of delivering effective interventions to identified students in the

SAT pipeline on a daily basis, while simultaneously managing the seemingly endless

other responsibilities of a classroom teacher. In recent years, SpEd Teacher B expressed

having more experience in a cotaught environment and this shift from her first year in the

classroom has made her more empathetic to all the demands of a classroom teacher. She

confessed that, through no one's fault or lack of good intention, interventions sometimes

"fall by the wayside" amidst the hustle-bustle of accomplishing everything she and her

co-teacher have prepared for class that day (personal interview, July 18, 2016).

  Additionally, both Teacher B and SpEd Teacher B expressed concerns about the

type of people typically encompassing the SAT process. SpEd Teacher B indicated that

she'd like to see more people with medical or mental health expertise involved in the

SAT process, which is something that is lacking at her current school. Teacher B

reported that he sometimes feels that interventions are chosen for the SAT process

without a real understanding of the reasons why or how it will specifically address the

learning needs of that student (personal interview, June 29, 2016). The racial

composition or expertise of the people involved in SAT may also be a problem.

According to Teacher B:

The referral teams I've dealt with are all made up of White people. And they're

all of the dominant culture. We don't have true community liaisons involved in

process. We don't have experts in all the pieces of the puzzle. We take the best

of what we can find in [educational] settings. We may be experts in teaching, but

we're usually not experts in learning and we need people to teach us the different

ways kids can learn (personal interview, June 29, 2016).

In regard to assessment biases, Teacher B also responded to cultural/linguistic

biases of various assessment questions. He recalled a memory from when he first was

cued into the idea of how assessment questions could be biased, years ago, when he was

teaching in Arizona. There was an assessment question that read: "What is the volume of

the hot tub?" and it was accompanied by a scaled out drawing of one. One of his students

came up to Teacher B mid-test and asked, "What's a hot tub?" After that incident, his

perspective on assuming a lack of neutrality of state assessment language changed. "I

don't always know [assessment bias] is there, but I believe it's there even when I can't

pick up on it" (Teacher B, personal interview, June 29, 2016).

Perhaps the respondent with the most to share about assessment biases was

Admin B, who actually did some of her doctorate work on culturally-relevant

assessments. When asked about using assessment results to identify students as

intervention candidates, Admin B reported that, "Regardless of screener chosen, the data

will show predictable gap [between average White and Black student outcomes]. So

using any one metric to screen is a flawed approach from the start" (personal interview,

June 21, 2016). The same disproportionality that exists in special education rates and

outcomes can be seen in grades, MCA scores, behavioral referrals, attendance rates, and

in many other areas between Black and White students. Admin B went on to describe that the approach employed in the SAT process at School B is more of a triage model, where multiple data points for the student are taken into collective consideration before intervention or evaluation decisions are made. When asked what steps would need to be taken to solve this complex issue of biased assessments, Admin B responded that we "need to examine the historical context of how we have previously built assessments with an embedded confirmation bias that kids of color are not as smart as white kids." It's a tough problem to solve when everything in our society reinforces that message (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

Connections between schools. The area of SAT breakdown, possibly along racial or cultural lines, was a topic brought forth as a potential cause of disproportionality by each interview respondent at both schools. Concerns existed in the composition of that interview team, the degree to which it selects culturally-appropriate interventions, as well as shortcomings between the planning for and execution of effective interventions. School B participants seemed to have much more to say in this area, and referenced it in their responses at a rate almost double to that of School A participants. This could suggest School B participants are more knowledgeable about the SAT process at their school, have a more clearly-defined system for it, or believe it to be more relatively highly correlated with disproportional special education outcomes than participants at School A.

With consideration to the role of potential assessment biases, both School A and School B referenced this theme a nearly identical amount over the course of their collective input. However, one respondent (SpEd Teacher B) did not appear

knowledgeable about this area, didn't reference it at all, and couldn't say whether or not it was a factor contributing to disproportional trends. Interestingly, when asked about assessment biases, the responses of all participants at School A stuck to a discussion of Black boys, their movement styles, perceived hyperactive/inattentive behaviors, and over-referral for ADHD. Given the same prompt by the researcher, the responses of School B addressed a much wider array of topics in addition to African American males and ADHD over-identification. Some of these ulterior topics included the culturally-biased language of assessments and the historical lens of White racial superiority through which many assessments were initially made and continue to be affected by.

Lack of School and Dominant Culture Access/Awareness

The third theme to emerge within the respondents' input as a potential cause of disproportionate experiences is a lack of school or dominant culture access/awareness for many African American parents and caregivers. It was mentioned, in some fashion, by all the research participants of both schools.

School A. When asked about the ways in which home/family factors could be contributing to disproportionality, two out of the three respondents at School A expressed some hesitation with answering the question. According to input from Admin A, the home life question is a dangerous topic. It's a prime spot to lay blame. Some home factors have a very real effect (e.g. lack of access to health care, pre-natal counseling, or trauma). Yet we have "no data saying Black families are more dysfunctional than White families, but our society says that all the time" (personal interview, July 15, 2016).

The biggest barrier respondents at School A spoke to was the fact that, too often, parents or caregivers of African Americans evaluated for or receiving services simply

defer to the school staff when it comes to special education decisions for their student.

The jargon and complex procedures of special education can be confusing and

overwhelming. School staff members are typically perceived as the experts on the

subject. So rather than speak up, agree, or disagree, parents instead passively defer to the

suggestions of the other IEP team members. Parents need to feel comfortable asking

questions when confused about the IEP so they are knowledgeable and are aware that

their child is getting best education possible, rather than getting stuck in a restrictive

setting or in a class lacking appropriate instruction (SpEd Teacher A, personal interview,

July 6, 2016). On the surface, it can look like disengaged parents, but it's actually a

matter of parents not knowing how to use the system to their advantage. Most parents

don't know the power that they actually have in terms of the rights that an IEP affords

them and their child (Teacher A, personal interview, June 20, 2016). Because the system

was not set up for them, generally speaking, people of color don't have the same

understanding of the system, the options available, or the resources they can request to

best advocate for their children.

For some parents and guardians, who are not satisfied with their student's special

education experience, it comes down to a matter of "not being aware of what they signed

up for" (SpEd Teacher A, personal interview, July 6, 2016). SpEd Teacher A went on to

share the story of one African American parent with whom she works closely.   This

person is a smart woman and she has a college degree.   But she is also a single woman

and that presents a lot of challenges. Four out of her five children are in special

education.   Providing for her family is her number one priority and she works full-time

to do that.   She is in survival-based mode most of time, which takes up all of her

bandwidth. She is upset about the fact that nearly all of her children have been identified as having "learning challenges", but she doesn't know what to do about it, so most of the time she just defers to her children's teachers (personal interview, July 6, 2016).

School B. When addressing the role that home factors play in contributing to the disproportionate experience of African Americans in special education, all three respondents at School B were also adamant about avoiding the temptation to allocate blame on parents and caregivers. According to SpEd Teacher B, simply articulating that, "Your kid is being over-identified and it's your fault and you should do something about it" makes it apparent how bizarre of a sentiment that really is (personal interview, July 18, 2016). Admin B expressed a similar mentality in stating that it's dangerously easy to "blame individuals for systemic problems" (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

For Teacher B, a student's home life gets no blame when considering disproportionality. Throughout his interview responses, there was a reoccurring connection to a large breakdown between African American home culture and the school culture we make those students operate within. These two cultures don't mesh very well. He explained that we have no issues with asking African American students and families to adapt to the norms, expectations, and values of the school culture, but rarely do anything to adapt the way we do things at school to African American culture (personal interview, June 29, 2016). "When I think back on all the times a parent has contacted me to try to get extra help for their kid over the years, I'd guess 90% were from the dominant culture," Teacher B indicated. "Is that because White parents care nine times more? I don't think so." We need to teach all families to navigate the school system (personal interview, June 29, 2016). When asked what that might look like, Teacher B responded

by sharing an anecdote about a new idea that has been implemented by a different school

he has read about. Teacher B indicated that every time a new family comes to that

school, they are formally paired up with an existing family from within their same

culture. They meet a certain number of times during the year so the new family can learn

the "tricks of the trade". Empowering our families to help one another seems like such a

simple, but effective, solution (Teacher B, personal interview, June 29, 2016).

In approaching the topic of disproportionate experiences in special education from

a slightly different angle, Admin B also shared insightful commentary about differing

levels of cultural access and awareness in parents. The flip side of having an

overrepresentation of African American students in special education is that we see a

nearly identical trend of having an overrepresentation of White families requesting 504

Plans for their children (Admin B, personal interview, June 21, 2016). These families

want the supports and testing accommodations (especially for college entrance exams)

for their kids, without the stigma of subjecting them to special education programs. In

doing this, they are really trying to manipulate the system to their advantage. "Not in a

bad way of course," she explains, but just in a way that "families outside the dominant

culture might not be as aware of" (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

Connections between schools. There was considerable overlap between the

responses of participants at School A and School B with regard to a lack of school and

dominant culture awareness as a potential contributor to disproportionality. Multiple

respondents at both schools referenced the pitfalls of assigning blame to individual

parents, the fact that school systems are not set up in a way that caters to families outside

the dominant culture, and that actors within those school systems haven't done enough to

change things and make them more responsive over time. Additionally, respondents agree that, once a parent or guardian is knowledgeable enough to advocate for his/her child, it is their responsibility to do so at every chance they get.

When discussing personal anecdotes about the school/home culture breakdown, staff at School A seemed to limit their responses to the experiences of African American families. Conversely, staff at School B discussed both the experience of Black families, who disproportionately feel left out of the inter-workings of school system dynamics, as well those of White families, who are more easily able to use that system to their advantage. Overall, staff members at School B referenced a lack of dominant culture awareness or access about 50% more often than the staff at School A. This could suggest that at least some individuals at School B have greater awareness of this theme of disproportionate experiences in special education or that they believe it to contribute more significantly to the problem than staff at School A. However, these results could also simply reflect the more heterogeneous student demographics that are present at School B. In that environment, four different ethnic groups make up at least 9% of the total school population (Admin A, personal interview, June 21, 2016). Faced with this greater ethnic variety, the discrepancies between different families' ability to access school resources could simply be more visible for School B's staff members. Conversely, given that 93% of the student body is Black at School A, it might be more understandable that its staff's responses were more limited, in both scope and frequency, to generalizations about the Black experience.

Systemic Inequities

The fourth theme participants brought forth as a contributor to the disproportionate experience of African Americans in special education encompasses various systemic racial inequities. Admittedly, this is quite a broad category. While the border separating it from the other themes that have been and will be discussed can be porous, various statements the participants made warranted the formation of it as a stand-alone theme. Within the research process, five out of six respondents cited at least one systemic inequity as a cause of disproportionality.

School A. One undercurrent in the responses of the participants at School A was an attempt to explain a portion of the pattern of disproportional rates and outcomes on the imbalanced allocation of educational resources in our society. According to SpEd Teacher A, using property taxes to fund schools inherently creates an unequal system. The result is that schools in wealthier, typically White, areas have more resources than schools in less affluent areas, which typically serve students of color at higher rates (personal interview, July 6, 2016). Similarly, Admin A invoked the trend toward public school resegregation seen in many metropolitan areas over the last few decades in her attempted explanation of disproportionate special education experiences. According to Admin A, in order to really understand this issue, we need to take a look at the reality of the schools to which we're sending a high number of Black students. Often times these schools are staffed by less experienced teachers and administrators, have larger class sizes, and have fewer resources to support students who come with higher needs. These realities change outcomes for all students, not just those in special education (personal interview, July 15, 2016).

The effects of these resource discrepancies between different communities are exacerbated by the fact that other systemic biases further disadvantage students of color. As previously mentioned, schools and other institutions in our society still operate under the umbrella of White, middle-class norms (Teacher A, personal interview, June 20, 2016). Teacher A went on to elaborate that we have a societal mindset that the "White way of doing things is the best way of doing things." Admin A agreed that this systemic preference for White culture creates countless unconscious privileges in the daily realities of White people. The flip side of that coin is that each instance of White privilege does further damage to "level[ing] the playing field" for those outside the reach of those unseen benefits (personal interview, July 15, 2016).

When prompted to provide solutions to address some of these systemic inequities both Teacher A and Admin A stressed the need for educators to continuously stay on the journey of learning about identity, privilege, and anti-racism. According to Admin A, there must be adults who are culturally-sane or at least have some culturally-relevant understanding of all student demographic groups served at a school. If not someone from within that culture, we need to have someone very much "woke" to that culture. Educators need vast amounts of training on the most objective measures of evaluating students. Finally, there needs to be multiple safety nets that catch biases and catch inexperience, when considering the identification of students as candidates for special education (Admin A, personal interview, July 15, 2016).

School B. Mirroring some of the sentiments at School A, the responses of participants at School B also emphasized the role that systemic factors have in creating disproportional outcomes in schools. Teacher B re-emphasized that that the institution of

school was set up for White families and that reality hasn't really changed over the latter half of the 20th century (personal interview, June 29, 2016). When asked to elaborate on what needs to be done, Teacher B stated:

> Until we change things, I don't know if we'll be able to get rid of the disproportionality in our society anywhere. It's not just in special ed, but in healthcare, housing, who gets to go to and graduate from college. We set it up that way. I don't know if our education system has done enough to educate kids that such racial inequalities exist. Until we address it, the way the culture of power works is [that] those who have the power will try to keep it. People in power don't want to give it up (personal interview, June 29, 2016).

Much of what Admin B had to say on systemic inequities centered on the importance of creating an environment where the lens of equity work is embedded within all the professional development done in a school. Too often teachers see professional development as a checklist. They receive the new information, perhaps make an artificial change to their instructional materials, and think they can check it off the list (Admin B, personal interview, June 21, 2016). Addressing teachers' implicit biases around race is a process and cannot be done in an hour, a day, or completed in only one school year. According to Admin B, the fact that the predictable gap between Black and White outcomes can be found everywhere in our society is further evidence of the influence of systemic factors. There is even an identifiable gap between races in test results for diabetes. Our minds are subconsciously receiving messages that suggest racial stratification all the time in America. Although not totally pessimistic about the future,

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Admin B simply closed her interview by asking rhetorically, "How do we undo the culture that we've all been raised in?" (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

Connections between schools. Overall, there was a good deal of similarity between the collective responses at both schools in regard to the prevalence of systemic biases. Both School A and B had at least one educator cite factors leading to an "unequal playing field" between Black and White students. "Systemic racism", "unconscious/implicit bias", and "white privilege" were all phrases documented during interviews of respondents at each school. Due to the broad, subjective nature of the category, it was slightly difficult for the researcher to make judgments about which types of statements did and did not fall under a "systemic inequity" classification. When the dust settled, though, the total number of times systemic equities were mentioned by staff members at School A and School B were identical. However, given that all three participants at School A referenced one or more systemic influence and only two participants at School B did, the data could suggest that staff members at School A are more attune to systemic biases as contributors to disproportional rates and outcomes than staff members at School B.

Status Quo Special Education Inefficacy

The fifth theme of participants' responses to the interview questions was an underlying sense of special education ineffectiveness. While special education typically doesn't deliver exemplary results for any demographic, this is especially true for the African American children it attempts to serve. Contributing to this category are issues that have been previously mentioned, including a lack of educator multicultural proficiency and the practice of subjecting students to curricular programs devoid of

cultural relevance. However, other factors bringing about a general theme of special

education inefficacy were mentioned throughout the interview process. Included in

theme are responses that cast light on potential reasons why the problems of

disproportionality continue to exist. In all, five out of the six interviewees mentioned

some way in which special education fails to deliver on its promises in their responses.

School A. A major component of special education's ineffectiveness, brought up

by multiple participants at School A, is the use of overly-restrictive settings for students

receiving services. This practice affects African American students, who are more likely

to be placed in those restrictive settings than their White counterparts, at greater rates.

According to Admin A, too often students are placed in separate settings, not for their

own benefit, but "for the benefit of everyone else" (personal interview, July 15, 2016).

Their learning is not the priority in making those placement decisions and that mindset

drives the way in which resources are allocated to serving them. SpEd Teacher A noted a

similar concern in her discussion of the divergent goals of various forces in education. In

her opinion, the goal of special education is to provide kids with the support they need to

succeed in a setting alongside their peers. Yet sometimes, various people or forces in the

general education environment operate with totally opposite intentions and either covertly

or overtly try to "get kids out" of the mainstream and into separate special education

environments (personal interview, July 6, 2016). Of course, as she was sure to

emphasize, this is not the case for all stakeholders in the process.

When asked about potential breakdowns in the current special education delivery

process, Teacher A took a different route. To her, special education is not as

individualized as its idealized form claims to be. According to Teacher A, we label

students in need of special education and typically give them more or less the same

support as every other student under that umbrella. In doing so, we never really develop

a coherent understanding of what is happening in the students' brain or get a grasp of

their specific learning needs, which are the reasons students qualify for special education

in the first place (personal interview, June 20, 2016). Additionally, both Teacher A and

SpEd Teacher A indicated that it could problematic to blame special education, as an

entity, for the disproportionate experiences it produces.   Their reasoning for this that the

racial achievement gaps seen in special education are really just a microcosm of the racial

achievement gaps produced by America's education system overall.

In responding to the changes that need to be made to the system to bring special

education closer to its ideal, among the solutions proposed by School A staff include

time, leadership, and more responsive mental health supports. Only one out of the three

called for an increase in teacher diversity. When specifically asked why the system has

been so slow to evolve and address disproportionality in the wake of decades of research

about it, staff members mentioned the possibility of doing away with special education

and the separating effect it creates, as well as a need to embrace uncomfortable truths in

our school system.

School B. Input compiled from staff at School B reveals some common

perceptions about areas of inefficiency within the special education status quo. Admin B

touched on the fact that, despite maybe being more compassionate and nurturing than a

typical general education teacher, many special education teachers have similarly

insufficient levels of intercultural awareness. This adversely affects students outside the

dominant culture. Related, Admin B questioned whether or not the "big heart" that many

special education teachers possess is always an asset when it comes to educating young people. She contends that the typical compassionate special education persona sometimes results in more sympathy than empathy and inadvertently causes teachers to lower the bar for their students. "As soon as that label goes on, there is an assumption that [the students] can't do it," she explains. As an educator, "If I don't expect them to, then they won't. Special education teachers are really good at speaking up about what kids can't do, but not as effective at advocating for what they can do" (Admin B, personal interview, June 21, 2016).

In her response to shortcomings of the status quo for African Americans in special education, SpEd Teacher B cited the different work experiences of special education teachers working in urban and suburban districts. She contended that districts in large urban areas, where a higher percentage of Black students could attend, might be staffed by less experienced teachers who are given larger caseloads to manage than teachers in districts in other areas. SpEd Teacher B also expressed additional sentiments that have been shared before. Explicitly, these included that special education's disproportionate outcomes mirror those seen throughout the education system overall and that more mental health supports are needed in schools.

When asked why the system has failed to adequately respond to disproportional trends, staff at School B had two notable insights. The first is that staff members misdirect a lot of time and energy at school. According to SpEd Teacher B, instead of focusing collaborative time on what matters in school, like student learning and what teachers are/aren't doing to contribute to that, staff members often waste time discussing other less important topics during meetings (personal interview, July 18, 2016). Second,

Admin B expressed that we need to remove the biased and negative ways of thinking that are so engrained in us to really make headway on this issue. According to her, we need to stop seeing this issue as marginalized students' problem and start seeing it as everyone's problem. There are not enough "truth-tellers" in education. We need to get rid of our "Minnesota nice" mindset, in which we avoid taking on uncomfortable issues, and really start to collectively own the problem (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

Connections between schools. The theme of ineffectiveness within the ways special education programs currently operate was addressed by members at both schools. Staff members at School A provided responses addressing it 66% more often, however. This is no doubt in part due to the fact that only two of the three respondents at School B brought it up as a potential cause of disproportionality. Both schools had at least one staff member who made the point that overrepresentation in special education is merely a manifestation of the racial achievement gap affecting education overall. Respondents at School A placed more emphasis on how differences in placement restrictiveness contribute to disproportionate outcomes in identifying inefficiencies within the special education system. By comparison, staff members at School B were more likely to address special education ineffectiveness through the shortcomings or personality traits of the people who work in that system. School B's staff was also three times more likely to attribute a lack of teachers of color to the gaps in racial outcomes. When addressing options for potential solutions, both schools emphasized the need to face difficult educational issues like this head-on.

Poverty and Trauma

The final theme of participants' responses was environmental factors relating to poverty and trauma. According to participant testimonials, African American students face a greater likelihood of experiencing conditions of poverty and trauma, both of which are factors correlated with special education qualification. In sum, four out of six interview subjects referenced poverty or trauma while addressing disproportionality.

School A. During the interviews of School A's staff, two out of three participants cited causes stemming from poverty in their attempts to explain the causes of this issue. SpEd Teacher A mentioned the cyclical effects of "generational poverty" when listing factors from a student's home life that are potentially correlated with disproportional rates and outcomes. Similarly, Teacher A simply stated that poverty is a factor that needed to be mentioned. When pressed to explain further, she listed various conditional factors, such as pre-natal care, homelessness, access to regular food/medical care, and parent education, which can all be affected by poverty and influence a student's susceptibility to special education eligibility (personal interview, June 20, 2016).

Two out of three respondents also mentioned the correlation of exposure to traumatic events and special education disproportionality. As Admin A suggested, not only is there a connection between living in poverty and likelihood of trauma, but we've also seen how some of the symptoms of traumatic experiences (anxiety, restlessness, aggression) can resemble some of the symptoms of ADHD or other neurological disorders in children (personal interview, July 15, 2016).

School B. Only one staff member at School B addressed the issues of poverty and/or trauma during her interview with the researcher. According to Admin B, the

notion of "racialized poverty" impacts our society immensely. This means that people of color experience a higher chance of living in poverty and that race compounds the detrimental effects of poverty on the people who are marginalized by both variables. Admin B also emphasized the effect that trauma can have on a student's school performance. She mentioned that while it's certainly erroneous to assume all racial minorities have experienced traumatic events, it is true that they must navigate more negative life factors that could "prevent them from developing ways to access school as we have developed it in America" (personal interview, June 21, 2016).

Connections between schools. When comparing the responses of staff at School A and staff at School B in the area of poverty and trauma, the starkest divide emerged among all themes addressed. All three staff members at School A cited either poverty or trauma in their responses, while only one staff member at School B did. A separate staff member at School B did address some societal factors (racial discrepancies in healthcare/ housing) that could be related to poverty or trauma in his interview, but never mentioned either of those terms explicitly. Based on these results, it appears perceptions of the effect of poverty and trauma on special education experiences are more significant for staff members at School A than they are for staff at School B.

Summary of Findings

On the issue of contributing factors to the disproportionate experience of African Americans in special education, various overarching patterns emerged within the data gathered. Notably, insufficient teacher knowledge, intervention and assessment biases, and cultural discontinuities between home and school were reported to have the strongest effect on disproportionality. Each respondent referenced these factors during his/her

interview. Additional findings reveal that staff members at School A expressed greater perceived significance of causes rooted in systemic and historical issues or intercultural breakdowns. School A respondents were more likely to attribute factors that extend more broadly to society as a whole to the problem of disproportionality. Some of these issues include poverty/trauma, systemic racial biases, unequal resource allocation, and a lack of multicultural awareness between home and school communities. Conversely, analysis of the data suggests that staff members at School B expressed greater perceived significance of factors stemming from within the school setting. Among the issues participants at School B were more likely to address include SAT and assessment biases, inadequate teacher training or special education content knowledge, lack of parent awareness or access to school system culture, and a shortage of teachers of color.

Disaggregated differently, the results display other general trends. Administrators appeared the most knowledgeable about disproportionality and were able to speak to the widest variety of issues potentially contributing to it. Data analysis also suggests a positive relationship both between years of experience and amount of education on the breadth and depth of participant responses. Perhaps not surprisingly, educators with more years in the classroom appeared able to respond to the interview questions with greater ease and with more in-depth firsthand knowledge or experience. Similarly, the level of respondent education appeared to affect ease of response. The field of interview subjects contained one educator with a doctoral degree, one doctoral degree-seeking candidate, and one educator with a master's degree. Participants with higher levels of educational attainment were not only able to speak to a wider array of topics connected to

disproportionality, they also were more likely to emphasize factors relating to societal and historical inequities than other participants in their responses.

The research yielded fewer than anticipated connections between the responses of educators in the same role across school sites. One that did emerge was that school administrators were more likely to reference the impact of systemic racism or unconscious bias than respondents in other roles. Another identifiable pattern was that general education teachers had a greater likelihood of expressing a sentiment of not receiving enough training about effective interventions and the special education process. Finally, and also as one might expect, special education teachers appeared less likely to talk at length about the ineffectiveness of the special education status quo and its potential effect on disproportional rates and outcomes.

Connections to the Existing Literature

Overrepresentation in special education has long been an area of focus for educational researchers. This project built off the work of seemingly countless other studies to come before it, many of which were referenced in the literature review. Two previously-cited pieces of research stand out, however, as playing an especially influential role in the development of this research. The related work of Kearns et al. (2005) sought to understand school psychologists' perceptions of the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Their data, representing the opinion of 151 school psychologists across nine southern U.S. states, suggested that their respondents perceived a lack of parent involvement, cultural disadvantage, failures in both the general and special education systems, as well as pressures from parents and teachers as the primary reasons why Black students are placed

in special education. In a similar empirical undertaking, the work of Shippen et al.

(2009) found that a lack of family involvement, misinterpretation of assessment results,

and unclear understandings of both overrepresentation and disability characteristics were

the factors believed to contribute most significantly to disproportionality among the

participants they collected data from in Alabama.

The findings of this study both align with and diverge from those of the two

previous studies in various ways. A lack of general education understanding of disability

characteristics, assessment errors/biases, and special education program inefficacies were

replicated in my research as areas all collective participant groups agreed upon. My

findings suggest that cultural discontinuities between home and school, poverty/trauma,

and systemic biases are all at play in leading to disproportional outcomes, but none of

those were expressed to be "cultural disadvantages", as broadly-termed in the previous

research. Other ways in which the findings of my study differ from those coming before

it include a greater perception to systemic/historical inequities, a larger acknowledgment

of the need for multicultural understanding and experiences in educators, and a reduction

in the amount of blame allocated toward home caregivers by the participants of this

research.

Beyond those two seminal studies, the findings of my study also echo many of the

other contributing factors to disproportionality mentioned throughout the record of

existing literature. Multiple participants highlighted the influence of dissonance between

African American students' home and school cultures. This result lends support to the

findings of Hosp and Reschly (2004) and Cartledge (2005), who suggested these

intercultural frictions often result in educators' misinterpretation of students' behaviors.

Consequently, Black students receive more punitive and less empathetic responses to their perceived misbehaviors than White students who are more likely to share the cultural norms of the teacher. In his interview, Teacher B referenced the importance of implementing pedagogical techniques and approaches specifically-tailored to the demographics of one's students. This idea is not only a testament to the work of all researchers heralding the need for greater multicultural education in teachers (Blanchett, 2006; Irvine, 2012; Neal et al., 2003; Harris-Murri et al. 2006) but also specifically reflects the work of Salend and Duhaney (2005), who detailed a number of culturally-responsive teaching practices linked to increased achievement in African American learners. Many of my respondents cited breakdowns in the SAT intervention process, thereby reflecting the work of Proctor et al. (2012) and Harry and Klinger (2006). Those who referenced special education and standardized assessment biases also supported many previous findings (Artiles et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2002; Linton, 2014). Overall, it appeared that regardless of the factors my respondents mentioned, from systemic variables like structural racism (Chamberlain, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005), poverty (Artiles et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008), special education ineffectiveness (Algozzine, 2005; Artiles et al., 2010), or a lack of teachers of color (Valle-Riestra et al., 2011), there was indeed some trace of that factor already cited in the research. The significance of this will be taken up in the chapter to follow.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Overview

This process has been a journey. People who've made that journey before had told me what to expect, but I don't think I gained a true appreciation for the enormity of the undertaking until I began this process myself. At the onset, I was interested in exploring educators' perceptions about the types of factors contributing to disproportionality in special education. Little did I know that by taking on the role of a researcher interested in this complex issue, I was also charting down a path that would force me to become a student of history, sociology, education, and literature all at the same time. In this fifth and final chapter, I reflect upon the steps of the research journey and share what has been learned along the way. I will draw connections between the findings of my research and what has previously been written about racially disproportionate experiences in special education. Implications of this work, its limitations, and suggestions for future research proposals will also be discussed.

Lessons Learned and Implications of Research

Although I began the capstone with an interest in and some beliefs about special education disproportionality, I have learned so much throughout this process. The first big takeaway is that educators, regardless of their personal characteristics or their school demographics, believe that a multitude of causes contribute to the problem of

disproportionality. Although this might seem obvious and reinforced a existing

hypothesis I had, it is incredibly consequential. This data suggests that disproportional

experiences exist because of individual, unconscious, and systemic reasons. Any attempt

in schools to thwart the effects of disproportionality needs to be a multi-faceted approach

to strategically address the roots of all those causes. If it does not, we will continue to

repeat the same mistakes we have made the last few decades, knowing full well that

disproportionality exists, but only implementing solutions that address a fraction of it.

The second takeaway of this research is that educators at different types of

schools perceive different factors to be the most significant contributors to the

disproportional experience of African Americans in special education. The results of my

study appear to suggest that, generally speaking, staff members at schools serving a high

percentage of African American students are more attune to intercultural or systemic

biases than educators at schools serving a smaller percentage of African American

students. Conversely, staff members at schools with a relatively smaller percentage of

African American learners more-readily cite school structural factors, such as

intervention breakdowns or inadequate teacher preparation, when describing the causes

of disproportionality. That being said, in the next sub-section, I'll describe in greater

detail why those specific generalizations should be interpreted with caution. However,

across the two settings, every respondent I spoke with expressed a sentiment of not

feeling adequately prepared to teach diverse students as a result of the largely mono-

cultural training they received during their pre-service teaching programs. A few also

reported not receiving any/enough information about achievement gaps or special

education disproportionality as an undergraduate. As a result, it took them years to

become aware of this problem's existence, if they even had yet at all prior to this research

(SpEd Teacher B, personal interview, July 18, 2016). These findings suggest that far

more education and training is needed in the areas of exposing pre-service teachers to

racially-discrepant trends, the exploration of their own identities, and experiences aimed

at promoting greater intercultural awareness. Additionally, the difference in perceived

causes between staff members at both schools suggests that those in the education world

will soon need to get on the same page when it comes to disproportionality. Just because

staff at one school appeared more knowledgeable about a certain causal factor than staff

at the other school does not mean they have actually taken concrete steps to address their

disproportionate trends. But simply becoming aware of racial inequities, although still

decidedly difficult for many people in today's society, is actually the easy part. As

educational stakeholders, we'll never be able to realistically address this issue until we

first come to a consensus that disproportionality exists and is a problem and then

acknowledge the many factors that contribute to the problem. Only then will we be able

to devise and implement a strategic approach that we reasonably can hope will reduce it.

The third lesson I learned, alluded to in the previous paragraph, is that when it

comes to reducing disproportionality, so much of what we're doing is not working. Too

often, well-meaning educators resort to the traditional way of doing things, purely by

default. Teachers teach in ways reflective of how they learned as a student.

Administrators discipline according to how they've been trained and are familiar with.

As a result, it's no surprise disproportionality has not gone away over time. These

traditional approaches by educators work quite well for a vast majority of the White

student population. They are culturally-aligned with the norms of Whiteness. However,

they don't necessarily mesh as seamlessly with the culture of African Americans or other racial minorities. If we are really going to make a dent in the scope of the disproportionality problem, we're going to need to radically change how we educate kids. Among the changes that need to be made in schools include: diversifying curricular materials, incorporating more movement and communication-based instructional activities, exploring structural racism and bias in teacher professional development, adopting new approaches to discipline, and hiring a teaching force more reflective of our diverse student demographic.

The final comment I would like to make about the lessons learned in my research has to do with the satisfaction I felt to get the results I did. As I originally stated in the previous chapter, the many expressed causes my participants shared do appear elsewhere in the record of literature. First, this suggests that my participants' perceptions are valid; they reflect the factors that we can reasonably believe to be among the true causes of disproportionality. However, I was also pleased in the ways that their responses differed from the results of previous studies. Unlike the two mentioned at length in Ch. 4 (Kearns et al., 2005; Shippen et al., 2009), the respondents in my study did not attribute any of the cause of special education overrepresentation to any racial group of students or parents. Whereas previous research revealed pejorative beliefs about unmotivated learners or uninvolved parents to be at play in educator's perceptions of disproportionality, no respondents in this research expressed a desire to allocate blame onto either students or parents. Admittedly, I was quite pleased by this. It suggested to me that the educators I spoke with are no longer interested in continuing the trend of blaming other people or

variables for unacceptable school outcomes. Instead they seemed ready and willing to focus on the things within their power to change.

Limitations of Study

In spite of the fact I was happy with my results and that the considerable overlap between my findings and those of previous studies suggests some degree of research validity, this study is not without its limitations. Because of these limitations, any broad-sweeping inferences made from data are tenuous, to some degree. To begin, my sample size is far too small. There are only two schools reflected in this data. If I was hoping to make some sort of general claim about the way in which teacher perceptions differ across various types of school environments and the demographics they serve, numerous additional school sites with similar demographic data as School A and School B, respectively, should have been included in the sample. Additionally, only three teachers at each school were interviewed. While I did my best to norm for educator characteristics (gender, race, years of experience, etc.) across sites, some compromises had to be made. Further, I cannot claim to assume that the three educators I selected perfectly reflected the typical mindset and belief system of the rest of the staff at their schools. More educators in each of the three respondent roles should have been included in my data in order to strengthen any claims I was attempting to make.

Another shortcoming of this research project was that participation was hardly determined in a random fashion. Instead, interviewees were selected based on a willingness to participate and all were personally known by the researcher prior to the beginning of any action research. Having an existing relationship with each interview subject potentially biased the responses I received in two distinct, equally-problematic,

ways. First, I may have been influenced by a like-mindedness bias in selecting

participants to interview. By this I mean I may have subconsciously chosen educators

who share my personal educational ideology more so than educators selected by random

assignment at each school. Second, given that each participant had an existing

relationship with me and has some understanding of my personal beliefs about the

prevalence of systemic and racially-biased factors at play in our overall education system,

this prior knowledge could have influenced the responses they offered. Rather than being

totally candid in expressing their beliefs about disproportionality, perhaps the

respondents instead suffered from a "telling me what I wanted to hear" bias, to some

extent. Finally, it should go without saying that I've had some existing passionate beliefs

about this topic for some time. Because of that interest, I also cannot deny having my

own personal beliefs about the causes of racially disproportionate experiences in special

education prior to conducting any research. Although I have done my best to remain

impartial throughout the process, I cannot guarantee that my preconceived notions about

the causes of the issue did not influence the data I gathered or the way I've interpreted it

in some subconscious way.

In this discussion on the study's limitations, I should also acknowledge the very

real possibility of human error in the data analysis and coding process. I cannot rule out

the chance my findings were influenced by errors I made in not truly understanding a

participant's meaning when interpreting one of their responses or by errors in classifying

those statements within the theme(s) I assumed them best to fit. As mentioned briefly in

the third chapter, the coding process was very subjective and there is a definite possibility

a different researcher could have coded the exact same data differently if this study were ever to be replicated.

If I were to conduct this research process again, in addition to the things mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, there are a few things I'd do differently in an effort to strengthen the reliability and validity of my findings. I believe the three educator roles I targeted affected the types of responses I received. It would be interesting to also include school psychologists in the data collection process and see the effect that addition could have. One could speculate that a greater perceived effect of assessment biases would result. Or, were I to go through this process again, I'd also be interested in ascertaining the opinion of students and parents on disproportionality in special education. One could argue a richer understanding of educators' perceptions of the issue would result if the accuracy of those perceptions are verified against the opinions of their students and families, who are often the groups affected by disproportionality the greatest. Finally, the last change I'd make to the project would be to use a mixed method approach, rather than a purely qualitative one. In addition to the interviews I'd still conduct, I would also include some sort of quantitative survey component in which respondents ranked ten or so potential contributors to disproportionality on a Likert scale. This would allow me to gather data in relatively easy fashion from a far greater number of respondents and would serve as a beneficial supplement to my qualitative interview data.

Recommendations for Future Research

While my findings both reflect and contribute to the collective understanding of disproportionality found in the previous literature, there are still numerous areas in need

of exploration by future researchers. Among the related topics that warrant future research would be an exploration of the types of multicultural curricula or professional development experiences that have the greatest effect on educators' cultural competencies, further analysis of the ways various empathetic responses to misbehavior can reduce office referrals, or a study addressing the ways in which more talented people of color in general, and African Americans especially, can be recruited and retained to teach in the public school system.

Final Connections and Closing Thoughts

Disrupting the legacy of disproportionality in special education will be no easy task. In this research, there was a consensus among all educators that inadequate teacher knowledge, intervention and assessment biases, and cultural discontinuities between home and school are among the strongest perceived predictors of overrepresentation. Existing studies suggest that school systems focusing on multicultural education (Blanchett, 2006; Irvine, 2012; Neal et al., 2003; Harris-Murri et al., 2006), recruiting and retain teachers of color (Valle-Riestra et al., 2011), and adopting novel approaches to school disciplinary practices (Skiba et al., 2011; McKenna, 2013) will take positive steps toward mitigating disproportionality's effects. But as educators look for new ways to effectively meet the needs of *all* students and families in our schools, we must remember the historical context of how we arrived at where we are today and make a commitment to avoid repeating mistakes of the past. We can no longer view diversity as a burden and special education as the "parallel system" where the kids who don't fit are deposited (Ferri & Connor, 2005). We can no longer see disproportionality solely as a technical issue, but instead through a lens that acknowledges the role that social and historical

racial inequities have played in its development (Chamberlain, 2005; Blanchett, 2006). Yet a holistic understanding alone will not be enough to negate disproportionality's pervasive effects immediately. Truly addressing this issue will take a long-term commitment in our classrooms, our schools, and our country to reduce the educational debt owed to our African American learners (Griner & Stewart, 2012). But we must start somewhere and we must not be daunted by the magnitude of the task. We have seen throughout recent history that the adoption and implementation of interventions to address disproportionality has been slow (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). What we know is that regardless of the specific approach taken by schools to combat this convoluted issue, efforts to reverse the trends must focus on the "alterable variables" (p. 196) as opposed to continually referencing perceived economic or demographic deficiencies as reasons not to change. Only by devoting our attention and energy to the factors educators can impact, can we begin to erase the pattern of racially disproportionate experiences that has permeated America's public school system for far too long.

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Appendix A:

Disproportionality Interview Guiding Questions

1. How familiar are you with the issue of disproportionality/overrepresentation of African Americans receiving special education services? What is your perception of it? In what ways have you seen or experienced it in your practice?

2. Based on your perception, do you think a student's home environment has anything to do with disproportional rates of African Americans in special education? How so?

3. Based on your perception, do you think the referral process to the Student Assistance Team (SAT) in schools has anything to do with disproportional rates of African Americans in special education? How so?

4. Based on your perception, do you think the referral or assessment processes for special education services has anything to do with disproportional rates of African Americans in special education? How so?

5. Based on your perception, do you think the effectiveness of services students receive once they're in special education has anything to do with disproportional rates of African Americans in special education? How so?

6. In a utopian school system, what would the SAT referral process look like?

7. In a utopian school system, what would the special education referral or assessment process look like?

8. In a utopian school system, what would special education programs look like? How would services be delivered? For students with academic needs? Behavioral needs? Other needs?

9. What keeps us from this utopian school system? What sorts of barriers get in the way of making progress toward it? Think of as many factors as you can. Would overrepresentation exist even if the school system was perfect?

10. Do you have any suggestions for specific steps that students, parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, school

administrators, and/or larger school systems could take to bring us closer to this perfect school system? Answer for any/all groups that apply.

11. What would the composition of students look like if no overrepresentation of African Americans in special education existed? Composition of students referred to SAT? Composition of students in special education?

Appendix B:

Letter of Organizational Consent to Take Part in Research

Dear Mr. Geske,

The purpose of this letter is to express that I have received information regarding your research proposal on the differences in teacher perceptions of the causes of African American students' overrepresentation in special education. I understand that you are requesting to interview three educators who work at this school during the summer months of 2016.

By signing below, I give my consent to allow you to reach out to teachers at this organization to participate in the research project that is part of your graduate program. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for participants, that all individual and school identities will be protected, and that respondents can chose not to participate or stop taking part in the interview process at any time without negative consequences.

_____   _____

Signature of School Principal   Date

Appendix C:

Letter of Informed Consent Requesting Permission of Adults to Take Part in Research

June 2016

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student working on a master's degree in education at Hamline University. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research by interviewing select educational practitioners from June-July, 2016. The purpose of this letter is to ask you to take part in my study, which has been approved by the School of Education at Hamline. This research is public scholarship and the abstract and final product will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. Additionally, this research may also be published or used in other scholarly ways in the future.

My master's capstone (thesis) is targeted at addressing educator perceptions of the causes of persisting racially disproportionate rates and outcomes in special education between African American and White students. My research will be based on interviews conducted with special education teachers, general education teachers, and school administrators in various schools. I will ask participants to describe their perspective of and experience with disproportionality at various levels of the special education experience. Through this research project, I am hoping to better identify any patterns or differences that may exist between the perceived causes for educators who work in different school settings, with different populations, or in different teaching roles. These interviews will take place with me, be recorded over a one-time session, and last between 30-60 minutes. The interview questions will be provided to you ahead of time. That being said, I want the interview and writing process to be dynamic and flexible enough to allow for shifts in focus as information is gathered. The information I gain in these interviews will be reported in my final capstone.

The identities of all who participate in my research will be protected. No real names or identifying characteristics of districts, schools, or participants will be used. All information gained through interviews will be presented anonymously through pseudonyms. Further, interview content will be stored only on password-protected devices. This means there is little to no risk for you and other participants. The interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. After the

completion of the study, all interview recordings and notes will be destroyed. Additionally, I will summarize the findings of this report and present the information gained to any interested participants upon its conclusion. This could result in new knowledge or understanding of this topic, which is a potential benefit to your participation.

Participation in this process is completely voluntary. Please know you may decide not to participate, to stop the interview, or to have your interview content deleted from the capstone at any time without any negative consequences.

Please keep this page for your records and see the following letters of informed consent. One copy of that letter will need to be signed by you and returned before participating in this research. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me by phone or email. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

John Geske
St. Anthony Middle School
3303 33rd Ave NE
St. Anthony, MN 55418
jgeske@stanthony.k12.mn.us
612-706-1044

Appendix D:

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview
Return this portion to John Geske

The purpose of this letter is to confirm that I have received and read your request to participate in the research project you are conducting related to the disproportionate experience of African Americans in special education. I understand that the goal of this research is to better understand educator perceptions of the contributing factors to less desirable educational outcomes for African Americans in special education and that data will be gathered via interviews of educators in various roles.

I, _____ agree to participate in the research project that is part of your graduate program. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may stop taking part in the interview process at any time without negative consequences.

_____   _____
Signature   Date