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**THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS' ROLE IN
THE PREREFERRAL PROCESSES RELATED TO THE PLACEMENT OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Committee:

Jay D. Scribner, Supervisor

James Scheurich

James Yates

Nolan Estes

Edwin R. Sharpe, Jr.

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THE PREREFERRAL PROCESSES RELATED TO THE PLACEMENT OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

by

John Wesley Hamlett III, B.A.; M.A.

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DEDICATION

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as your reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. – Colossians 3:23–24

I am so thankful and all praises belong to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The blessings he has bestowed on my life through his anointing and the Holy Spirit have allowed me the opportunity to complete this dissertation and have allowed my family and me to withstand the challenge.

My beautiful wife Vanessa is an inspiration who has faithfully prayed, encouraged, and supported me through this endeavor. She is the apple of my eye, who has been there for me every step of the way. Lady Vanessa you are my best friend whom I love so much. You are my partner and co-laborer in the Kingdom of God, in which we have been yoked together to be used to touch generations by teaching and empowering the truth. Lady Vanessa you shall be used by God to reach people through loving their hurt away. I am very appreciative and blessed with how you have exemplified your love for Jordan and me throughout my experience during this process. Lady Vanessa, you are the first lady in my heart. Thank you for believing and encouraging me.

The accomplishment of this dissertation is to serve the Lord to help enhance lives of others throughout this nation. As Pastor of New Covenant Christian Fellowship of Tarrant County, educator, and Vanessa as a Licensed Professional Counselor and President of Personal Care Christian Counseling, we would like to be

used by the Lord to help students reach their potential and help alleviate the obstacles that may be impacting their education and lives.

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**THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS' ROLE IN
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AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Publication No. _____

John Wesley Hamlett III, Ed.D.

Supervisor: Jay D. Scribner

African American students represent 14.8% of the school population yet 20.2% of the students identified and placed in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Those identified with education-related disabilities have difficult experiences during their school career that negatively impact their later employment (Osher & Hanley, 1995). The management of special education has shifted to campus administrators without specialized knowledge to handle the task; yet they have direct responsibility to ensure that all students, including African Americans, are properly identified and placed in the appropriate educational setting (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Ford, 2001). The campus administrators' role prior to referral to special education may be vital in reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

This study investigated perceptions held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist relative to (a) the campus administrators' responsibility to assure there is not disproportionate

identification of African American students identified for special education, (b) the campus administrators' involvement in regular education activities prior to referral for special education, and (c) the criteria of successful regular education activities prior to referral for special education. Additionally, this study revealed campus administrators' perceptions of knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively activities prior to referral to special education.

This qualitative case study utilized a descriptive methodology involving interviews with participants directly involved in activities prior to referral to special education at multiple sites across three levels within a Texas public school district. The study revealed that campus administrators and teachers perceived the campus administrator's role of involvement as providing teachers with resources. An important finding was that campus administrators had a limited knowledge of special education, yet providing such resources was identified as a vital part of the administrator's role. Therefore, there is a clear disconnect between campus administrator's perception of their role and their perception of their own knowledge and skills. Two criteria were identified for successful regular education activities prior to referral to special education: (a) to identify the needs of students and (b) to utilize school staff expertise in the process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The role of the public school administrator was affected immensely by the establishment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. Historically, district office administrators managed special education programming, training, staffing, testing, and facilities; however, responsibility for the supervision of special education policies and practices is increasingly placed on campus administrators (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000). Recent research has indicated that the success of special education programs is dependent on the campus administrator (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Lumsden, 1992; Patterson et al., 2000). Additionally, Patterson et al. maintained that it is imperative that school administrators not only understand, but also follow all policies and laws regarding special education.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHC, Pub. L. 94-142) guaranteed the right of every student with a disability to a free, appropriate public education (S. Walsh & McKenna, 1990; Yell, 1998). The expressions used in the act demonstrated the nation's changing attitudes over the past 29 years towards persons with disabilities. The EAHC was established on constitutional principles of due processes and equal protection of the law, thus opening doors for a population

previously excluded (Yell, 1998). Strickland and Turnbull (1990) explained, “The enactment of PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, marked the significant procedural and programmatic change to educational services provided to students with disabilities” (p. 4). In 1990, as part of the reauthorization bill (P.L. 101-476), the law was amended to become the IDEA. The law required states to present a plan containing procedures for ensuring that disabled children and their parents are guaranteed procedural safeguards in decisions regarding identification, evaluation, and educational placement (S. Walsh & McKenna, 1990). In addition, the IDEA is designed to meet the unique needs of all students in the least restrictive environment in the educational setting, and the rights of the child and family are protected through procedural safeguards (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Over the past 30 years, a relatively small but growing number of researchers have studied prereferral intervention processes as they relate to the referral of students to special education programs. Prereferral intervention is a general or regular educational intervention that is necessary to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education and to reduce inaccurate identification of students referred for special services (Overton, 1992). An area of particular concern has been the identification of the school and student characteristics that may influence referral-related decision making (Meijer & Foster, 1988).

Researchers have found that the probability of an African American student’s being placed in special education is significantly increased once the referral process is initiated by the teachers, counselors, or other school staff members (Algozzine,

Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1982; McDaid & Beck, 1988; Seljan, 1991). The data showed that many African American students may be overrepresented in special education. The *Twenty-Second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA* (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) data showed that African American students ages 6–21 accounted for only 14.8% of the general population but 20.2% of the special education population. In addition, the percentage of African American students equaled or exceeded the resident population percentage in 10 of 13 disability categories. More specifically, in the state of Texas African American students accounted for 14.2% of the general population but 18.2% of the special education population.

Yates (1998) defined disproportionate representation as the existence of students from a specific group placed in special education at a higher or lower ratio than one would expect based on their representation in the general population. Artiles and Zamora-Duran (1997) elaborated by indicating that disproportionate representation includes both overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in terms of educational placement and classification and access to programs, resources, services, curriculum, instruction, and classroom management techniques. For instance, the proportion of special education students from any ethnic group should match the proportion of the school's population from that ethnic group. Therefore, African American students should comprise approximately 15% of the special education enrollment (National Association for Bilingual Education and Implementation by Local Administrators

[ILIAD] Project, (2002). For example, when examining the issue of underrepresentation using a 15% African American enrollment in a school, if African American students comprise only 10% of the special education enrollment, teachers may not be referring students who have a disability. If students are not being referred, they may not be receiving needed services to which they are entitled, thus exemplifying underrepresentation. Conversely, if African American students comprise 15% of all student enrollment but are referred to special education at a ratio of 20%, there is overrepresentation.

When examining the data for individual disability categories, Hispanic students exceed the percentages in learning disabilities but are underrepresented in categories such as mental retardation, autism, and developmental delay. Additionally, it is striking to note that Asian students are underrepresented in most special education categories and that African American students are overrepresented in the emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded categories. The *Twenty-Third Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) indicated that Hispanic students comprised 16.2% of the general student population. According to the report, 13.7% of the students were receiving special education services but were represented in the disability categories of (a) speech and language impairment at 12.7%, (b) specific learning disability at 16.6%, and (c) hearing impairment at 17.9%.

Furthermore, English language learners tend to be overrepresented in the category of learning disabled. When students are referred to special education while

in the process of acquiring English language skills, there is the issue of distinguishing between language difference and disability. For educators who may lack knowledge of processes and sequence of second language acquisition, these students may be judged to have a disability rather than simply to be in the process of acquiring a second language, English. Other students are referred because of their behavior, which may be within the norms of their native culture but may appear to be evidence of a disability to those not familiar with that culture (National Association for Bilingual Education & ILIAD Project, 2002). For instance, Ladner and Hammons (2001) found that in schools with predominately White faculty, culturally and linguistically diverse students were referred and placed in special education programs at a higher rate than White students.

In 1979 the National Research Council was asked to conduct a study at the request of Congress with the best scholars as part of the panel in this study. The initial study was conducted (a) to determine the factors accounting for the disproportionate representation of minority students and male students in special education programs for students with mental retardation and (b) to identify placement criteria and practices that do not affect minority students and males disproportionately (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). Some 20 years later, disproportionality in special education continues. In 2002 Congress asked the National Research Council to reexamine the issue. The 2002 National Research Council study (Donovan & Cross, 2002) documented at both national and state levels a consistent pattern of disproportionality across disability categories and ethnic classifications. The

committee did not view the problem of disproportionate representation in special education as one of simply eliminating racial/ethnic differences in assignment. The report concluded, however, that the entire process has sufficient conceptual and procedural deficiencies rendering it unable to ensure that appropriate students are being identified (Donovan & Cross, 2002). In addition, the studies concluded that the entire process is influenced toward referral and placement only after a student has experienced failure, therefore ensuring that the student's problems will become relatively overwhelming by the time the students are placed in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller et al., 1982; Kauffman, 1999). Hence, in the National Research Council 2002 study, Donovan and Cross recommended that schools provide earlier intervention strategies and advised that no student be determined eligible for special education without evidence of deficient response to high-quality interventions.

According to McCoy (1981), an administrator has primary responsibility for ensuring the quality of educational programs for all students, including those with disabilities. Many campus administrators are deficient in the knowledge, skills, and experience relevant to facilitating prereferral processes in general education. Moreover, often campus administrators are inadequate in critical areas such as proper planning and implementation of special education programs (Osbourne, DiMatta, & Curran, 1993). The administrator can assist in the restructuring process through financial and emotional support and through ongoing training for staff members that increases teachers' abilities to work with a diverse group of students in the classroom

(Crocket, 2002). The administrator has a leadership role in adjusting situational expectations, involving teachers in planning for change, clarifying information, and building a sense of achievement through skillful guidance of special education programs. As school districts transition responsibility for special education from district office personnel to campus administrators (Patterson et al., 2000), it becomes more important for them to develop the skills and knowledge to implement appropriate practices for students with a wide range of abilities that integrate them into general education activities. A proactive approach that enhances school practices requires administrators to employ instructional leadership in special education through monitoring student success, promoting a supportive instructional climate, managing curriculum and instruction, and supervising teaching (Hallinger, 1992). The campus administrator also can demonstrate leadership by setting high expectations for all students, emphasizing consultation between general and special education educators, and providing opportunities for staff development on topics related to students placed in special education (Burrello, Schrup, & Barnett, 1992).

Fortunately, research has indicated the importance of values and attitudes of administrators, has identified the competencies associated with effective administrative leadership, and has shown that these areas can be trained and acquired (S. Smith & Piele, 1989). Furthermore, Haller, Brent, and McNamera (1997) stated,

Compared to untrained persons, a well-trained administrator presumably knows better how to influence events on his or her campus, is able to involve teachers more effectively in school decision-making, is more knowledgeable about education processes and hence can help teachers who need assistance, is

more familiar with the methods to create an orderly school environment, and knows better how to establish shared commitment among the staff. (p. 225)

This study adds to the understanding of knowledge and competency necessary for general school administrators regarding special education placement as well as regular education intervention before referring a student for special education. This study investigated administrators' perceptions of their role in the general education prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. School districts and higher education institutions can use information from this study to help implement needed training for administrators in the area of special education. Moreover, research is limited on formal prereferral intervention programs as pertains to the administrators' role.

Statement of the Problem

A multitude of factors contribute to the problem of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. For instance, the presence of risk factors both at school and in the community, misinformed decisions and judgments by educators, and the impact these decisions have in the school system all contribute to the problem (Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000). Teachers' judgments combined with biases found in the assessment processes have contributed to the disproportionate referral and special education placement of African American students (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Further, according to J. Patton (1998), labels associated with mild mental disability, learning disability, and emotional or

behavioral disability have been invalid and have had serious negative implications for African American students. In effect, Valles (1998) made note of the additional failure by school districts to meet the needs and expectations of African American students in general education possibly because of the limited knowledge base of education and the lack of effective practices for culturally diverse learners.

Additionally, African American students in special education usually receive special education services in segregated classrooms or buildings (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Thus, analysis is needed that is specific to the disproportionate representation of the African American students in special education and the related referral and prereferral practices, including general education activities prior to referral to special education.

Due to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, there is an increasing awareness of the need to help teachers use a variety of interventions within the context of the regular education classroom to address learning and behavioral needs of the students (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Johnson & Pugach, 1990). Historically, most teachers have responded to students' having difficulty by referring them to special education for testing with the anticipation that they will be eligible for special education (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Ladner & Hammons, 2001). Now an array of prereferral intervention models can be tailored and adopted by school districts to put in place a process designed specifically to help meet the needs of students who are experiencing difficulties in the general education setting (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Fuchs et al., 1990). These interventions in general education occur before students are referred for special education assessment.

When put in place and adhered to, a prereferral intervention model can help schools reduce the number of inappropriate referrals for special education while increasing student success in general education (Fuchs et al., 1990; Nevin & Thousand, 1987). Additionally, these models are designed for use in regular education to help teachers intervene at the source of the student's problems. The intent is to instruct general education teachers to offer alternative interventions prior to referring a student for special education (Fuchs et al., 1990; Johnson & Pugach, 1990). Prereferral intervention models are referred to in the literature by a variety of names, including Teacher Assistance Team, Mainstream Assistance Team, School Consultation Model, Prereferral Intervention Model, and Instructional Support Team. Below are brief descriptions of several prereferral models. A variety of prereferral intervention models are already established. A more in-depth discussion of several prereferral intervention models is provided in chapter 2.

This study was not designed to investigate these formal prereferral models. The school district site of this study had no formal prereferral models in place. Therefore, this study examined and used the description of *prereferral processes* to investigate this one school district's activities in general education, which precede a formal referral to special education or a request for comprehensive evaluation. However, the district does have intervention teams and offers interventions for students who are struggling learners. These interventions include conferences between parents; students with difficulties; and an academic team made up of

teachers in core areas such as reading, math, history, and language arts. These stakeholders meet to discuss problems and possible solutions:

1. Teachers may shorten assignments.
2. Teachers may allow more time for students to make up classwork.
3. Teachers may assign students to an additional basic math and or reading course during the school day that focuses on identifying student difficulties and addressing those content areas.
4. Teachers may solicit the expertise of other staff members such as the counselor, school diagnostician, administrators, and instructional specialists.
5. Teachers may develop and sign contracts that help students with organization and meeting deadlines.
6. Students may receive remedial instruction.
7. Students may attend after-school tutorials according to subject.
8. Students may receive individualized reading tutorials
9. Students may receive computer-based tutorials.
10. Counseling services may be offered to the student.

Because prereferral is not a special education process, but a regular education process that occurs before a special education referral takes place, these district-level interventions need to be examined. They are the focus of this study.

The prereferral process and disproportionality are linked conceptually because the prereferral process is designed to provide teaching staff with support and strategies to improve achievement for all students and reduce the inappropriate

placement and disproportionate representation of certain groups of students in special education. Improving prereferral processes involves improving the skills of school-based staff to address student academic and behavioral needs. Those involved in the prereferral process should recognize that many variables affect learning. Instead of assuming the difficulties lie with the student, staff in the prereferral intervention process should consider a variety of variables that may be at the root of the problem, including the curriculum, instructional materials, instructional practices, and teacher perceptions (National Alliance of Black School Educators [NABSE] & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b). The prereferral intervention process can reduce the disproportionality of certain student groups (such as African Americans) in special education by first documenting difficulties a regular education student may be having and determine possible reasons for the academic problem. Second, the process provides and documents classroom modifications and strategies. Third, the process involves assessing interventions to ensure that they are appropriate and successful. Fourth, staff should monitor the student's progress for a significant period of time before referring the student to special education. Fifth, the process should identify students who may be having persist learning and behavioral difficulties in spite of the suggested interventions (NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b). In addition, the responsibility of the administrator is to monitor the effectiveness of the prereferral intervention process to ensure that students are appropriately supported and challenged in general education by putting in place a process for review of interventions and their implementation (NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b).

Unfortunately, the data show that many African American students may be overrepresented in special education. U.S. Department of Education (2000) data showed that African American students ages 6–21 accounted for only 14.8% of the general population but 20.2% of the special education population. In addition, the percentage of African American students equaled or exceeded the resident population percentage in 10 of 13 disability categories. More specifically, in the state of Texas African American students account for 14.2% of the general population but 18.2% of the special education population. In Texas African American students are overrepresented in the particular disability categories of mental retardation (30.5%) and emotional disturbance (21.9%) of the special education population (Texas Education Agency, 2003).

African American students who have been placed disproportionately in special education suffer ill effects of that placement, both short and long term. These students are removed frequently from the regular education classroom and subjected to a curriculum emphasizing behavior management, which fails to provide the students with the academic support necessary to develop needed academic skills. As a result, these students have not had the opportunity to succeed academically and develop as learners (Osher & Hanley, 1995). In other words, these students are deprived of opportunities to develop intellectual, social, emotional, and vocational skills that will help them succeed upon completing their education (Starratt, 1991). Many times, though, as in this district and similar districts, African American students are placed in more restrictive and racially segregated environments like

separate special education classrooms or resource classes (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). There are many factors that may contribute to this placement.

Donovan and Cross (2002) reported that many minority children are more than poor. They are disproportionately poor and therefore face environmental obstacles that include low birth weight and poor prenatal care along with poorer nutrition and a higher rate of exposure to harmful toxins like lead, alcohol, and tobacco in early stages of development. Also, the environment where they grow up minimally supports early cognitive and emotional development. These factors do threaten development; however, no matter their circumstances of birth, according to Donovan and Cross (2002), schooling independently contributes to “the incidence of special needs or giftedness among students in different racial/ethnic groups through the opportunities that it provides” (p. 4). Schools with a majority of poor minority students are more likely to be staffed with teachers new to teaching who have less experience and expertise. Due to the high number of students living in poverty, these schools are more poorly funded and have difficulty recruiting and maintaining both teachers of color as well as teachers in general.

Stereotypes add another dimension to cultural issues. Aronson and Inzlicht (2004) engaged in a study of the stereotype vulnerability and the academic self-knowledge of African American college students. They defined stereotype vulnerability as “the tendency to expect, perceive, and be influenced by negative stereotypes about one’s social category” (p. 12). They reported that this vulnerability obstructs the student from developing a secure concept of his or her academic

abilities. The researchers found that African American students whose efficacy was unstable—meaning “they may feel only as smart or as dumb as their most recent success or failure” (p. 830)—performed worse on a standardized test after receiving negative feedback and better after receiving positive feedback. Thus fluctuation extended further than self-confidence to actual performance. Aronson and Inzlicht suggested, “Heightened sensitivity to feedback stems from the uncertain academic self-concepts to which Black students appear prone” (p. 834). Therefore, teachers do play a part in how their students perform academically. For instance, if a teacher gives positive feedback to White students in the class and negative feedback to Black students in the class, the White students may perform better academically and the Black students may perform lower academically due to the influence of the teacher’s differential feedback to students. Ferguson (1998) found that teachers’ expectations tend to exert more influence on Black students than White students, who may give the teachers’ expectation and feedback more weight than necessary. Basing self-worth on negative feedback can decrease self-esteem (Crocker & Lawrence, 1999).

According to Gilbert and Gay (1985), because many culturally diverse students are not getting their needs met in the regular classroom and are not receiving proper (or any) interventions once they exhibit difficulties in learning, they end up being identified for special education. Likewise, they do not get their needs met in special education, either, because special education teachers, though they may have specialized training, are just as inadequate as regular education teachers when it comes to interacting with, understanding, and instructing culturally diverse students.

These students receive low-quality services and diluted curriculum rather than effective support (Ogbu, 1994).

In addition, many teachers increase the number of their referrals to special education simply out of frustration. They feel they lack adequate resources to meet the needs of their students with the most learning difficulties. These teachers may simply believe it is in these students' best interest to refer them to special education, thinking that special education is where they will get the resources they need (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2003). After being in segregated special education classes, students learn to imitate characteristics of learning disabled students and proceed to behave in the same manner (Ortiz, 1992); thus, these students may never get out of special education, no matter whether or not they have a disability. This practice has a negative effect on their academic performance, self-esteem, classroom behavior and interactions, educational and career goals, and motivation (Nieto, 1996). In other words, these students are alienated and deprived of the opportunities to develop intellectual, social, emotional, and vocational skills that will help them succeed upon completing their education (Starratt, 1991), if they complete their education at all.

The students' perceptions of alienation from their peers also can lead to a decision to drop out of school (Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Newmann, 1981). Noteworthy, these perceptions of alienation by special education students, a majority of whom may be minority students, can be due to problems getting along with teachers, a dislike of school, having other friends that drop out of school, and

preferring to work rather than go to school (Bartnick & Parkay, 1991; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Lichtenstein, 1993; Wagner, 1991). This alienation causes them to drop out of school at a higher rate than their peers in regular education (Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000). Garcia and Ortiz (1988) determined, “Unless dropout rates among LEP [limited English proficient] students are decreased and the academic achievement of these students is improved, the loss of earning power, and the concomitant drain on society’s resources, will continue to be astronomical” (p. 11). Often the impact of ineffective interventions is behavior that results in incarceration, due to confrontation with authority figures and the effects of environmental risks (Wehmeyer & Shalock, 2001). A significant number of African American students currently in the juvenile justice system have been identified with education-related disabilities: an estimated range of 20%–60% of children in correctional facilities (Rutherford, Bullis, Anderson, & Griller-Clark, 2000). Moreover, African American students identified with Emotional Behavioral Disorders are negatively impacted in terms of their future employment. Osher and Hanley (1995) indicated that students identified with Emotional Behavioral Disorder are more likely to miss classes, receive poor grades, be retained, have more discipline problems, be suspended and expelled, be placed in more restrictive educational settings, and leave school prior to graduation as a dropout in comparison to other students with disabilities. Furthermore, 73% of the African American students who dropped out of school were arrested within 3–5 years of leaving school (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Much of the data suggested that youths identified with Emotional Behavior Disorder are arrested,

adjudicated, and sent to juvenile justice facilities while in school, and in such facilities they are placed disproportionately in more restrictive settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Moreover, long-term effects are a lack of economic opportunity, lack of appropriate credentials and job preparation, and underdeveloped job-seeking skills (Campbell-Whatley & Comer, 2000).

Counterarguments

Some believe that African Americans are intellectually inferior in abilities and capabilities due to their scoring on average 7–15 points lower than European Americans on intelligence quotient (IQ) tests (Hernstein & Murray, 1994). Though the validity of their results is widely disputed, Hernstein and Murray claimed that IQ is largely genetically determined and that discrepancies in IQ between ethnic groups are made clear by genetic factors. This is how some justify their racist belief that African American students' disproportionate representation in special education validates a genetic inability to develop the skills needed to perform well academically. Jensen (2002) even alleged that early intervention programs designed to boost the IQs of African American children have failed and will continue to fail. He claimed that no amount of public or socially organized effort would improve the academic performance of African American children, because he determined that about 80% of intelligence is anchored in heredity and 20% in environmental influences. Jensen postulated that 20% is not a high enough percentage to effect a

significant change. In other words, African American students cannot truly be helped; therefore, it is acceptable to house them in special education programs.

Because African American students are not only less intelligent, but also more prone to negative environmental influences, some researchers justify their overrepresentation in special education (Grossman, 1991). According to Grossman, some argue that since children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to fail, have to repeat a grade, and drop out of school, they should be designated as having a disability in order to be eligible for greater and more specialized services. These students are so far behind that they can be dealt with as if they have a disability. They also are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods in families that are headed by single parents (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Duncan, 1996). Heath (1989) claimed that most of these children live with their mother and will continue their mother's cycle of having babies at a young age and not finishing high school. All of this leads to the argument that African American students lack the development of academic skills and correlates with the idea that African American students who may not necessarily have a disability still qualify for special education so they can receive special services.

Rushton (as cited in Jensen, 1982; Mehler, 1994), a psychology professor, contended that behavioral differences among Blacks, Whites, and Asians are the result of evolutionary assortments in their reproductive tactics. He claimed that men either have one or the other: a large brain or a large penis. He expressed that African Americans have a lot of children whom they do not care for properly, and that

African Americans tend to have larger genitals, which makes them more prone to be promiscuous. At the same time he determined that African Americans have smaller brains, causing them to function with less intellectual ability than Whites and Asians. Further, he went on to rank these races along an evolutionary scale; not surprisingly, African Americans ranked at the bottom of his list. From his studies, some developed or confirmed their belief that African American students are racially inferior and therefore will have more disabilities.

Due to these deeply embedded, racist mindsets, many educators also maintain negative attitudes, expectations, and stereotypical belief about children of color. For instance, Irvine (1990) found that White teachers had more negative attitudes and beliefs about African American children than did African American teachers. According to Pang and Sablan (1998), teachers believe African American students have less potential academically and therefore expect less academic performance from them. Research literature has identified that White teachers are more likely than Black teachers to refer Black children to special education (Coutinho, Oswald, & Forness, 2002; Ladner & Hammons, 2001). This literature led Coutinho et al. to conclude that students who are members of an ethnic minority are more likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed based on their difference rather than on a disability.

Additionally, Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) did a study that examined teachers' perceptions of African American men's aggression and achievement and the need for special education services based on African American

students' cultural movement styles (walking). The 136 middle school teacher participants viewed a video and completed a questionnaire. The results revealed that the teachers perceived students with movement styles related to African American culture, regardless of race or ethnicity, as lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to need special education services than students with standard movement styles, no matter what their race or ethnicity.

These harmful effects of disproportionate representation illustrate the importance of the prereferral process and the administrator's responsibilities regarding special education placement. As campus administrators are required to assume leadership responsibilities over the special education programs in their schools, their lack of knowledge of special education programming and students with disabilities becomes a problem. For instance, a review of studies revealed that a large number of administrators had limited knowledge of special education research and laws important for decision making in special education programming (Hines, 2001; Sage & Burrello, 1994). Administrators have a critical role in reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Special education increasingly has become the responsibility of the campus administrator, who has been given that role without specialized knowledge needed to handle the task (Bateman & Bateman, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

Many school districts have failed to address the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, since the probability of a student being placed in a special education program increases significantly once the referral process is initiated (Townsend, 2000). An understanding of activities of general education prior to referral to special education is needed. The purpose of this study was to identify in detail the perceptions of campus administrators, general education teachers, and a special education director relative to the role of the campus administrator in the general education prereferral processes. Furthermore, this study bridges a gap in existing research, which has not covered sufficiently the perceptions of the administrators' role in the prereferral intervention process. Administrators have a direct responsibility to ensure that all students, including African American students, are classified and accurately placed in the appropriate educational setting. Such intervention processes—general education activities prior to referral to special education—may have the potential to identify and address systemic problems such as inadequate instruction, misinformed decisions, inadequate decision making, and improper assessment, thus avoiding inappropriate referrals and placement in special education. Specifically, the study investigated professional educators' perceptions that may be associated with the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education. This study also assessed the link of the administrator's role in the general education prereferral intervention process to disproportionate special education placement.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this qualitative and descriptive study:

1. What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist relative to the campus administrators' involvement in activities prior to a referral to special education?
2. What perceptions are held by campus administrators relative to knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to referral to special education?
3. What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist relative to the campus administrators' responsibility to assure there is not disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education?
4. What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist of the criteria for successful general education activities prior to a referral to special education?

Methodology

This was an ethnographic case study that utilized qualitative and descriptive methodology to examine one North Texas suburban school district with a student population of approximately 12,000. At the time of the study, this district was comprised of approximately 29% African American, 47% White, 18% Hispanic, and

6% Asian American and other ethnicity students. The special education population consisted of approximately 42% African American, 35% White, 22% Hispanic and 1% other. These data were determined from the district's 2004 Public Education Information System (PEIMS) report, available from the Texas Education Agency (2004). The researcher, the primary research instrument, examined administrator's perceptions of their role in the prereferral process of general education activities prior to referral to special education, as it pertains to reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The researcher compared findings to the review of literature. Semistructured, informal, pre- and follow-up interviews were conducted with administration, faculty, and district staff directly involved in the prereferral process at multiple elementary, middle, and high school sites within the Texas school district through purposive sampling. This study utilized naturalistic inquiry methods. Through these interviews as well as observation field notes, documents and records, and journaling, data were collected and analyzed. Data analysis began immediately and continued as the researcher gathered new information in an effort to categorize emergent themes, thoughts, and ideas that would aid in constructing the qualitative narrative. Field notes, interview transcripts, and other materials were coded in order for the researcher to assemble the knowledge and understanding of the administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral process as it pertains to disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The research methods employed in this study are described more specifically in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because, despite changes in the area of special education, educational inequities in diagnosis, assessment classification, and placement continue. Any disproportionality in special education based on ethnicity results in a disproportionate number of students of that ethnicity learning a different curriculum, which leads to achievement gaps. Daniels (1998) maintained that educators must attempt to clarify educational goals by structuring an educational system that is concerned with equity for all students, regardless of ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, or ability level. According to Artiles and Zamora-Duran (1997), to reduce the disproportionality of African American students in special education and to increase the accuracy of the referral and evaluation, the educational system must educate staff on the requirements and criteria for referring students as well as current research affecting this process. Additionally, those involved in the special education referral and prereferral processes must understand how ethnic, racial, and other factors influence student performance. Therefore, the results of this study may help staff and administrators develop more accurate prereferral processes to reduce the problem of overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.

Specifically, this study addressed the need for in-depth research on the increased role of administrators in the general education prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American

students in special education. The researcher compiled information on administrators' perceptions using interviews designed to address the following characteristics found in the literature: (a) the administrators' perceptions of preservice training and staff development in the area of special education, (b) their perceptions of their knowledge in special education in decision making to reduce the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, and (c) their perceptions of their role in the supervision of special education regarding the criteria that determine a successful general education prereferral intervention process. In addition, this study is significant for the following reasons. First, this study provides additional research data to promote effective supervision in the area of implementing prereferral intervention programs. Second, it contributes to training and planning that prepare prospective administrators for their role in special education. Third, it discusses the training administrators need to work with teachers in the area of instructing culturally diverse students prior to being referred to special education. Fourth, this research establishes the need for administrators to expand their prereferral knowledge. Fifth, this study identifies systemic problems in general education activities prior to referral to special education. Finally, it supports the individual school district in the study of the growing number and diversity of the special education student population.

Limitations

The methodology was limited to a small number of participants: 7 district participants, 3 of whom were administrators from a Texas public school district. The

study was limited to interviews with these selected administrators, the district special education specialist, and selected regular education teachers. Therefore, the results do not necessarily reveal the experiences and knowledge of other district staff members. Additionally, the study is a single case study and thus may not be applied or compared to another study, because the same participants, settings, and environment cannot be replicated or generalized to other school districts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that because of the peculiarity of case studies, findings may not be generalizable to every instance in the larger population; however, case studies can establish at least the limiting cases relevant to a given situation.

Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms have been defined for the reader:

Administrators – Responsible for the performance and competence of school-based leadership and the effective management of school programs and resources (Osbourne et al., 1993).

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, PL 101-336) – Reaffirms the rights of individuals with disabilities to have equal access to facilities and opportunities (P. Wright & Wright, 2000, p. 351).

Civil rights – The lawful basis for equal opportunity, equal access, and esteem for human dignity, regardless of individual differences (Keefe & Davis, 1998).

Disability – An impairment that limits one or more major life activities (P. Wright & Wright, 2000, p. 353).

Disproportionate representation – Existence of students from a specific group in a special education program in a higher or lower level than their representation in the general population of students (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Equal opportunity in education – All students regardless of race, sex, or religion have an equal educational opportunity (Kahlengerg, 2000).

Free and appropriate education – Education at no cost to students with disabilities that includes educational services intended to meet the needs of such students to the maximum extent appropriate (Turnball & Turnball, 1998).

General and regular education – Terms that are used interchangeably to refer to the typical school and class placement organization for delivery of education to students in a public or private school; where students without disabilities would normally be assigned to receive an education (Sailor, Gee, & Karasoff, 1993).

Inclusion – Placement of students with disabilities in regular education settings integrated with children without disabilities (Huefner, 2000).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) – Federal law established in 1975 that guarantees the right of every student with a disability to a free, appropriate public education (S. Walsh & McKenna, 1990).

Learning disability – A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or applying language, spoken, or written, which

may manifest itself in a limited ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (Heward & Orlansky, 1992).

Least restrictive environment – Schools insure to the utmost appropriate extent that children with disabilities are educated with children who do not have disabilities, and that removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment happens only when this setting cannot satisfactorily meet the needs of the child (Villa & Thousand, 1992).

Modification – Substantial changes in instructional level, content, performance criteria, and test form or format, including alternative assessments (P. Wright & Wright, 2000).

Placement – Location of the delivery of education determined in relation to the individual student's needs (Hocutt, 1996).

Prereferral intervention process – An educational intervention including alternative methods and strategies that general/regular education teachers can utilize to identify and address areas of student difficulty prior to making a formal referral for special education (Overton, 1992).

Professional development – Professional training in curriculum and technical assistance that supports the concepts of opportunities to achieve at higher standards, continuous improvements, and continuous professional learning (Rude, Murray, & Stockhouse, 1999).

Referral – Formal request for students to be evaluated to determine eligibility for special education.

Reform – Efforts made to improve teaching and learning. School reform involves a set of programs and strategies requiring thorough reexamination of all parts of school life, from attitudes and culture to leadership and curriculum (McChesney & Hertling, 1995).

Special education – Specifically designed instruction, at no cost to parents, that is provided to meet the unique educational needs of students with disabilities, including classroom instruction, adapted physical education, home instruction, and instruction in a residential facility (Gable & Hendrickson, 1993).

Special education law – Legislation and case law that enforces the rights of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate education—specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the Amendments of 1997 and 2004, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Yell, 1998).

Organization of the Study

This study is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 outlined the nature and significance of the study of the administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The chapter also included a summary of the laws governing special education. Further, the need for the present research as demonstrated in the literature and the administrator's knowledge and role in special education was discussed in relation to the research. Finally, chapter 1 presented the

significance of the study, purpose of the study, research questions, limitations of the study, and the definitions of the terms. Chapter 2 presents a review of literature related to this research, and chapter 3 provides a description of the procedures and methodology of this qualitative research study. Chapter 4 provides the results of the study, including a summary of the findings and an analysis of the data collected. Chapter 5 concludes the research study with discussion and recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

Because African American students in the public school system are disproportionately represented in special education, are referred to special education more often than their counterparts, and have significantly increased chances of being placed in a special education program once the referral process has been initiated, there is a need for an effective prereferral intervention process. The responsibility of reducing the African American representation in special education ultimately lies in the hands of campus administrators, then faculty and district staff. Therefore, administrators have an active role in leading the way and determining as well as adhering to actions needed to improve these situations. Perception is a determinant factor for assessing what role faculty will accept and how successfully they determine intervention strategies to use prior to prereferral to special education. This study addressed these issues by examining the perceptions administrators have of their role in the prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate

representation of African Americans in special education as compared to the literature.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A Historical Perspective

The disproportionate representation of African American students in special education has continued to be a problem facing the U.S. public school system through the last half of the 20th century (Heller et al., 1982; Hicks-Eichelberger, 1991). For over 20 years, African American students have been represented disproportionately in special education programs for students with learning disabilities and severe emotional or behavioral disabilities (J. Patton, 1998). This issue of disproportionate representation of African American students was first raised by civil rights advocates, educators, administrators, and policymakers who found that children of ethnic minority backgrounds were overrepresented in classes for the mentally retarded (Harry, 1994).

Historically, the American educational system has allowed the exclusion of certain students, some with disabilities and some without disabilities. The 1960s provided landmark legislation and court decisions regarding these exclusions that continue to influence education today. Since the 1960s, federal legislation on disability issues and court decisions has provided equal protection and education for children with disabilities. In addition, major changes in this area occurred with the

civil rights movement, which resulted in legislation to ensure that students with disabilities no longer can be denied appropriate public educational services (Heward & Orlansky, 1992). The history of these changes is rooted in the U.S. Constitution and dates back to the late 1800s.

The Constitution and the Supreme Court. Discrimination of those with disabilities goes against America's Constitution. In particular, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States guarantees equal protection under the law for all citizens (Heward & Orlansky, 1992). However, one of America's major unresolved issues of the late 1800s dealt with inequality resulting from segregation.

Consequently, Homer Plessy, an African American man from Louisiana, brought the doctrine of separate but equal before the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. This suit alleged that a separate, segregated railroad car for African Americans and Whites was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court ruled that segregating the races on railway cars, as long as the facilities were equal, was not unconstitutional (Guthrie & Reed, 1991). This decision impacted America because it provided precedent for legalized segregation in the United States, which lasted for approximately 58 years. This legalized form of segregation applied to the general society, including public transportation, institutions, and organizations. Even America's public educational systems supported the segregation of students based on race.

Eventually, due to increasing injustices, the issue of then-legalized segregation made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court in one of the most famous and

most influential cases of the century, *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in 1954. The haunting question was whether segregated schools deprived Black students of equal protection under the law (Heward & Orlansky, 1992). Guthrie and Reed (1991) noted what was said in Chief Justice Earl Warren's decision for the Court:

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. (p. 97)

The Court's decision, based on the protections provided by the 14th Amendment, resulted in school desegregation and established the right of all children, regardless of race, to receive an equal opportunity to a sound education (Villa & Thousand, 1992).

The Civil Rights Act. Ten years after the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, Congress enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964 following widespread resistance to court-ordered desegregation. During the 1960s, many school districts across the nation were accused of using special education as a diversionary means of segregation (Daniels, 1998). The Civil Rights Act, then, was the first piece of federal legislation that required school districts receiving federal financial assistance to ensure nondiscrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin (Artiles, 1998). Not surprisingly, concerns over the disproportionate representation by race and ethnicity in special education gained widespread attention after the Civil Rights

Movement of the 1960s. Consequently, researchers began to accumulate extensive data that revealed the misplacement of ethnic minority children in special education classes and the flagrant inequalities in educational resources regarding special education programs and environments (Deno, 1994; Dunn, 1968; Heller et al., 1982; NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b).

Dunn and Deno. Lloyd Dunn (1968) and Evelyn Deno (1970, 1994) have worked as special education pioneers addressing the issue of disproportionate placement of children of color in special education classes, and have prompted others to investigate this issue. Whereas Dunn's contention was based on social deprivation, Deno focused on procedures used for diagnosis and placement into special education programs.

Dunn (1968) brought the issue of segregation to public awareness by documenting disproportionate numbers of African American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and American Indian students placed in classes for students with mental retardation. Dunn's paper included 1968 statistics from the U.S. Office of Education that demonstrated that 80% of the students with mental retardation were from ethnic/racial minority groups and low socioeconomic backgrounds. In general, then, serious doubts were cast about the benefits of special education for struggling students of any race or ethnicity.

Dunn (1968) challenged the field of education to eliminate segregation and labeling practices, which made the profusion of self-contained classes in schools a civil rights issue. According to Dunn, the "expensive proliferation of self-contained

special education schools and classes raise serious educational and civil rights issues which must be squarely faced” (p. 6). He continued, “We must stop segregating by placing them into our allegedly special programs” (p. 6). Specifically, Dunn noted that such action probably contributes to feelings of inferiority and problems with acceptance, and he called the public’s attention to the negative impact of labeling and removing students from the general education environment. Subsequently, Dunn called for a blueprint of change, including a concerted effort to keep more students in general education classes and to modify the role of special educators into more prescriptive teaching. Thus, because of the Civil Rights Movement, the Coleman (1966) Report, and the subsequent public indictment during a time of great concern for the disadvantaged, including a majority of African American students, Dunn’s report was seen as timely and relevant (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Similarly, Deno (1994) contended, “Change in educational practice is imperative if true equality of educational opportunity for all children is achieved” (p. 233). Deno attended to the pathological model being used to identify and serve children in special education programs and services. Her 1970 article urged less segregation and more socially inclusive support for students at risk for school failure in the educational system. This “Cascade of Services” redesigned special education. It called for resource teachers to act as consultants to regular education teachers in designing individualized instruction to meet the needs of all children (Deno, 1994). This would mean that special education students would remain in regular classrooms. Deno pointed out that the reassignment of special education teachers into general

education classrooms would accomplish two desired outcomes. First, it would increase the regular education teachers' ability to meet special needs as part of the responsibility of a teacher. Second, this model would help the struggling student feel less incompetent.

Dunn and Deno, thus, may have inspired some of the early quantitative studies on the extent to which minority students were disproportionately placed in special education (Franks, 1971; Manni, 1980; Mercer, 1973; Tobias, 1980; Tucker, 1980). Furthermore, the analysis of problems and recommendations of the two authors contributed to the emergence of a new special education service delivery model.

Relevant Litigation

Since the 1960s, several federal courts have examined the issue of disproportionate classification and placement of minority students in special education classes. The litigation investigating the appropriateness of laws used to place students in special education focused primarily on assessment, the rights of students to a free and appropriate education, and the disproportionate representation of ethnic minority individuals in classes for students with mild retardation (Hoy & Gregg, 1994; Sattler, 1988). One case in particular, the *Hobson v. Hansen* 1967 case, set a precedent for cultural fairness in testing (Luftig, 1989). This litigation confirmed the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education classes. It also addressed the issue of using the results of standardized tests, which the

court found to be biased and culturally unfair, as the sole basis for determining placement in special education classes.

Along these same lines, plaintiffs in the *Diana v. State Board of Education* 1970 case (Fagan & Warden, 1996; Reschly & Bersoff, 1999) alleged that Mexican American children were placed inappropriately in a class for students with mental retardation on the basis of biased intellectual tests. These plaintiffs, along with those in the *Guadalupe Organization v. Tempe Elementary School District* case, presented data showing that minority students were overrepresented in special education classes at a rate of 2 to 3 times their numbers in the general population (Reschly, 1991). A variety of poor and sometimes clearly unethical practices was identified: The English administration of general IQ tests to Spanish-speaking students, the omission of information on adaptive behavior when diagnosing mental retardation, poorly administered programs, and the hiring of inadequate and poorly trained personnel and teachers. As a result of these cases, students now must be evaluated in their primary language, using test instruments that are not language biased (Macmillan, Hendrick, & Watkins, 1988). The defendants did not dispute these ineffective, unethical practices, and the cases were decided by consent decrees, which delineated reforms aimed at eliminating such practices (Reschly, 1988a, 1988b).

Several extremely important and controversial decisions addressing the issue of bias in assessment in the identification of African American students with mental retardation came from the *Larry P. v. Riles* 1979 case (Fagan & Warden, 1996; Reschly & Bersoff, 1999). The plaintiff alleged that the IQ tests used were unfair to

African American students because of cultural bias. In this landmark case, Judge Robert R. Peckham of the Federal District Court of California found that standardized IQ tests were culturally biased because they did not account for the cultural background and experiences of African American children, and therefore, the California State Department of Education had intentionally discriminated against African American students (Reschly, 1988a, 1988b). Due to these findings, California school districts were prohibited from administering IQ tests to African American students to determine placement in special education classes for the educable mentally retarded (McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). The judge banned the use of IQ tests with African American children for the purpose of classification and ordered that the disproportionate representation of African American students in mentally retarded programs be eliminated (Reschly, 1997). This ruling also included the mandatory reevaluation of African American students who were previously identified as mentally retarded. Nevertheless, many parents of African American students were not in agreement with the ruling.

By 1992, the California court order that prohibited the use of intelligence tests with African American students was overturned to allow the identification of students who were suspected of having a learning disability (McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). A review of the court case revealed the citing of several violations of federal and state civil right protections. A group of African American parents petitioned the courts so they could choose to have their children tested for learning disabilities through the use of IQ tests. Apparently these parents objected to the court order that denied them

the right to voluntarily give permission for the use of IQ tests when seeking special education services or when participating in a variety of federally funded programs for children. The court allowed African American parents as well as other minority groups to give voluntary permission for IQ tests to be used to identify or to assess their children (Richardson & Day, 1994).

Legislation

A number of significant laws have influenced assessment practices (Hoy & Gregg, 1994; McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994), helped to establish procedural safeguards, improved program design (Reschly, 1991), and established the schools' responsibility for fair treatment and appropriate education for children with disabilities (Heward & Orlansky, 1992). Many of these laws attempted to address issues of special education placement by focusing primarily on assessment, the rights of students to a free and appropriate education, and the disproportionate representation of ethnic minority individuals in classes for students with mild mental retardation (Hoy & Gregg, 1994; Sattler, 1988).

The EAHC (1975) and its reauthorization as IDEA (1990) provided specific guidelines for evaluating students suspected of having learning disabilities (Heward & Orlansky, 1992; Hoy & Gregg, 1994; IDEA, 2004; McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994).

Specifically,

- (a) appropriate tests be selected for each student and administered by trained personnel;
- (b) the tests that are chosen measure the actual educational need;
- (c) students' performance on a test not be affected by their handicap;
- (d) more

than one test be administered and; (e) all areas of need be assessed. (R. Taylor, 1983, p. 92)

Other major legislation includes the IDEA, enacted in 1990 and formerly known as the EAHC Act of 1975. The IDEA was amended in 1995 and reauthorized in 1997. Drawing on this legislation, the U.S. Department of Education (1995) indicated that school districts must implement nondiscriminatory practices in the identification of children eligible for special education services. Additionally, states must monitor identification and placement rates as well as corrective action to reduce disproportionate representation. Furthermore, the definitions of disability in the IDEA clarify that children who achieve poorly due to environmental disadvantage, ethnic, linguistic, or racial differences are not to be identified as disabled (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

The existence of IDEA alone is not enough to ensure protection. The impact of implanted reforms and legislation must be evaluated by collecting data and filing reports. Therefore, the U.S. Department of Education mandated that the Office for Special Education Programs collect yearly state-reported data on the numbers of children being serviced by special education programs, the educational environments in which these children are being serviced, the personnel providing these services, and the number of special education students exiting special education programs. The U.S. Department of Education publishes an annual report to Congress on the advancements made in implementing the IDEA and current endeavors to expand educational opportunities for all students. Included in these reports is information

regarding services for specific minority populations as well as the representation of minority students being serviced as it relates to the disproportionate representation problem in special education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000).

The Office for Civil Rights also has made efforts to evaluate effectiveness. This office is responsible for enforcing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the ADA of 1990, and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Both ADA and Section 504 prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, or disability (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 1999a). Similar to the Office for Special Education Programs, the Office of Civil Rights collects identification, placement, and outcome data by ethnicity as well as data on other civil-rights-related issues in the nation's public schools. For example, biannual Elementary and Secondary Civil Rights Compliance Reports have been provided since 1968, and they are required of all school districts, as opposed to a representative sample of districts to file reports. Data from these reports are used to monitor compliance and to identify needed enforcement efforts (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 1999b). Similarly, the Texas Education Agency monitors school districts in Texas.

Disproportionate Representation

The issue of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs has been addressed by the U.S. judiciary system and has

had a definite impact on the educational system. Disproportionate representation has been defined as the existence of students from a specific group in an educational program in a higher or lower ratio than one would expect based on their representation in the general population of students (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh (1999) defined disproportionate representation as “the extent to which a person belongs to a group which affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education disability category” (p. 198). Artiles and Zamora-Duran (1997) elaborated by indicating that disproportionate representation includes both overrepresentation and underrepresentation of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in terms of educational placement and classification, access to programs, resources, services, curriculum, instruction, and classroom management techniques.

Educators have known for a long time that racial minorities are heavily represented in special education classrooms. In fact, a recent report by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University charged that racial minorities make up a disproportionate number of the students involved in special education, and that intentional as well as unintentional racial bias is often a factor (Coeyman, 2001). Disproportionate representation of African American students in special education can be traced back more than 30 years (Daugherty, 2000). Civil rights advocates, educators, administrators, and policymakers have found that children of ethnic minority backgrounds are disproportionately represented in classes for the mentally retarded (Harry, 1994). Dunn first brought to the attention of the educational research

community in 1968 that African American students were disproportionately represented in special education classes (Luft, 1995). Researchers since have supported this finding. According to Burnette (1998), African American students are more likely to be placed disproportionately in special education programs and classes.

Data on the educational performance of African American students have indicated that they are achieving below their potential (Cartledge, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). This underachievement is due to a disproportionate number of minority students being referred inappropriately and placed into special education programs (Artiles, 1998; Yates, 1998). Valdes, Williamson, and Wagner (1990) identified that White students with identical disabilities as their African American counterparts participated in regular education classes 49% more frequently than did their African American counterparts, who averaged more time in special education classes. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education (1992) found that whereas African American students represented 12% of the general education population, the population of African American students serviced in special education in 1987 was 24%: “Black youths are more highly represented in every disability category” (p. 15). Furthermore, data from the *Twenty-Second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA* (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) documented the extent and seriousness of the disproportionate representation in the nation’s schools. The data showed that African American students ages 6–21 accounted for only 14.8% of the general population but 20.2% of the special education population.

Additionally, a study by the Civil Rights Project found that African American students were 3 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation, 2 times more likely to be identified as having emotional problems, and almost 2 times more likely to be identified with a specific learning disability (Fine, 2001). However, Chalfant (1989) contended that students with cultural, environmental, and economic problems are underrepresented among the students with learning disabilities, because it is easier to attribute a student's problems in school to their more obvious social problems than to the more difficult-to-detect learning disability. Nonetheless, Robertson, Kushner, Starks, and Drescher (1994) reported that in 1992, African American students accounted for 16% of the total U.S. student population; nevertheless, they accounted for 32% of students in programs for mild mental retardation, 29% in programs for moderate mental retardation, and 24% of the students in programs for serious emotional disturbance.

State-level studies. One of the most extensive views of special education services received by individual students can be found in the California Special Education Management Information System. The file contains information on 600,000 students receiving special education services in California. African American students were mainstreamed less frequently than White students (68% vs. 57%), and African American students also were more likely to be placed in self-contained special education classes (37% vs. 24%; Parrish, 1997). Hilliard (1992), J. Patton (1998), and Barona and Santos de Barones (1987) claimed that this disproportionate

representation phenomenon results from inappropriate procedures used during the assessment of minority students.

A comparison report by Tucker (1980) of ethnic groups in special education indicated that a large number of African American students had been categorized disproportionately as learning disabled and placed in special education classes. Similarly, Harry (1992) found that the placement of African American students into special education in California and New Jersey was twice the rate of their enrollment within regular education classes. Also, Harry reported that minority students appeared to be represented disproportionately in special education programs in states with substantial numbers of minority students. Furthermore, Fine (2001) reported that in Connecticut, North Carolina, Mississippi, Nebraska, and South Carolina, African American students were 4 times more likely than White students to be placed in special education classes.

Cultural differences. Various explanations have been provided for the disproportionate representation of African American students in the special education classrooms (Serwatka, Dove, & Hodge, 1986). Hilliard (1980) shared that in the area of cultural differences, professional educators may view cultural differences among African American students as an indicator of deficiencies, and this perception can lead to a student's being identified as below normal or abnormal on measures of adaptive behavior. Gilbert and Gay (1985) suggested that African American students often have difficulty in the classroom because the environment is not conducive to the needs of culturally diverse students. Educators and service providers must develop

awareness of cultural influences on behavior and may need training to develop their knowledge of cultural beliefs, values, behaviors, and expectations. Such training helps educators understand their own attitudes, values, and perspectives toward diversity and the way their biases and backgrounds impact their decision making, instruction, and behavior (Quinn & Jacob, 1999).

The President's Commission on Special Education (2002) found in a national study of special education that several factors were responsible for disproportionate representation, including the reliance on IQ tests that have known cultural biases. Thus, more minority children may have been identified in the mental retardation or emotional disturbance categories because of behavioral characteristics associated with the cultural context in which the student was raised. The President's Commission on Special Education study found that African American students were twice as likely to be labeled mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed and placed in special education. However, a study conducted by the National Academy of Science (Heller et al., 1982) reported,

The prevalence of mild retardation is correlated with the family and the neighborhood in which a child lives (the lower the status, the higher the rate). As we have seen, mild mental retardation is also correlated with ethnicity; minority children have higher rates. The correlation of mild mental retardation with these factors is especially pronounced when IQ test scores alone are used as the diagnostic criterion. (p. 26)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2001) stated that this issue of disproportionate representation based on cultural differences and culturally based IQ tests is closely connected to the issue of professional

development. Administrators and teachers need to be better trained to identify which students are in need of special education services. Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, and Wishner (1994) contended that administrators and teachers must know who their students are before they can design appropriate programs for them. Consequently, educators must be aware of cultural differences that manifest themselves through intelligence testing and the classroom. This dilemma of the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education will not be resolved until changes are made in teacher training, new culturally sensitive testing practices are developed and used, and psychologists who understand the African American culture participate in evaluations (Peterz, 1999).

These more recent studies reflect a long-term concern. Since 1968 there has been a growing concern in regards to what action to take to prevent inappropriate referrals of minority students to special education. In 1979 a National Academy of Science panel was formed (Heller et al., 1982) to determine the factors that account for the disproportionate representation of minority students and boys in special education and to identify placement criteria and practices that do not affect minority students and male students disproportionately. The panel suggested the following: Regular education teachers are responsible for engaging in multiple educational interventions and for noting the effects of such interventions on a student experiencing academic failure before referring the student for special education assessment. Subsequently, administrators, district leaders, and school boards are responsible for ensuring that alternative instructional resources are made available.

For that matter, the assessment specialists are responsible for demonstrating that the measures employed validly assess the referred student's potential ability to function in the regular education classroom. Moreover, the placement team that labels and places a student in a special program is responsible for demonstrating that any differential label used is related to a distinctive prescription for the educational practices and that these practices are likely to improve outcomes not achievable in the regular classroom. The special education evaluation staff is responsible for systematically demonstrating that high-quality, effective special education services are provided and that the goals could not be achieved as effectively within the regular classroom. Additionally, the special education staff is responsible for demonstrating annually whether a student should remain in the special education class or exit into a regular education class. By law, a student should be retained in special education only after assessors adequately demonstrate that the student was unable to meet specified educational objectives and ensure that all efforts were made to achieve these objectives (Heller et al., 1982).

Educators such as Serwatka, Deering, and Grant (1995) have suggested that cultural differences may lead to biased diagnoses and additional causes of the pattern of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Most frequently cited are racial discrimination, a lack of reliable identification procedures, and the adherent problems of poverty. African American students are subjected frequently to a curriculum emphasizing expected behavior and student management, which fails to provide the students with the academic support necessary

to address academic skills. The students are deprived of the opportunity to succeed academically and to develop as learners (Osher & Hanley, 1995). In other words, these students are deprived of the opportunity to develop intellectual, social, emotional, and vocational skills necessary for them to succeed in obtaining a sound education (Starratt, 1991). Many African American students go through school with their needs remaining unaddressed. Teachers and school staff often deal with behavior inappropriately (Ogbu, 1994), leading to inequality in education and social class. Ogbu suggested that public policies be implemented to achieve equality and ensure that academic success and social adjustment are prevalent for all students.

The issue of discrimination by White teachers with African American students is a consequential problem. For example, Irvine (1990) identified that White teachers have more negative expectations for African American students than for White students. Bondy and Ross (1998) stated that racism has produced legions of educators with limited awareness and skills for understanding the various contexts in which children of color must function. Cultural ignorance within the learning environment has been identified as a significant contributing factor in the identification of children of color as disabled (Ogbu, 1994). An analysis of large urban school districts verified that as the proportion of African American teachers in a school district increased, the proportion of African American students assigned to special education classes or suspended decreased (Irvine & York, 1993). Other studies have examined the issue of teacher bias with African American students in the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Bahr, Fuchs, Stecher, and Fuchs

(1991) studied whether teachers' perceptions of difficult-to-teach students were racially founded. The research consisted of teachers' nominating a difficult-to-teach student out of a group of equal numbers of African American and White students most in need of referral for psychological evaluation and placement in special education. The results indicated that teachers rated African American students difficult-to-teach and more appropriate for referral to special education than White students. Shinn, Tindal, and Spira (1987) offered additional empirical evidence suggesting teacher bias in race and gender. The researchers found that teachers were able accurately to identify students with reading difficulties regardless of the student's ethnicity and gender. Nevertheless, the teachers referred a higher percentage of African American and male students in comparison to White and female students for special education services. Shinn et al. concluded that factors such as teacher decision making affect the proportionality of African American students referred for special education. Therefore, strategies such as prereferral intervention have been developed to reduce the impact of this bias and other causes of inappropriate referrals.

Prereferral Intervention Process

The term *prereferral* refers to a screening and intervention process that involves (a) identifying problems experienced by students in the regular classroom, (b) identifying the source of the problems (student, teacher, curriculum, and/or environment), and (c) taking steps to resolve the problems in the regular educational setting. Prereferral intervention has received a great deal of support in literature since

the early 1980s (Carter & Sugai, 1989). Prereferral intervention emerged from awareness of the restrictive nature of the referral process (Johnson & Pugach, 1990) and is required in or widely recommended in some educational systems (Carter & Sugai, 1989). Prereferral intervention is an educational intervention that may prevent inappropriate referrals to special education and may reduce inaccurate identification of students referred for special services (Overton, 1992). This process that can identify appropriate interventions to be tried in the regular classroom consists of alternative methods and strategies that general education teachers can use to identify areas of difficulty and make adjustments so the student can achieve academically prior to making a formal referral for special education services. For example, struggling learners may have difficulties that do not necessarily stem from learning disabilities. Some behaviors usually seen as problems may be related to factors that may cause or negate the ability and the will to learn, including cultural diversity, behavior management difficulties, language differences, delayed developmental stages, educational deprivation, and poverty (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Graden, Casey, & Christenson, 1985).

Assessment, the procedure used for gathering information about a student, aids teachers in identifying problems and targeting specific strategies to address problems. Formal, comprehensive assessment traditionally has been utilized by school systems to assist educators in examining the reason for a student's inadequate performance and prescribing special education instruction (Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Cummins, 1984; Holtzman & Wilkerson, 1991; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1981).

Additionally, the comprehensive assessment process includes evidence of the student's varied developmental achievement and behaviors through classroom observations, school reports, previous school experiences, information from teacher–parent meetings, and specific psychological assessment using a variety of appropriate clinical instruments (Board of Education of the City of New York, 1994; Collier, 1988; Ortiz, 1992; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992). Peterz (1999) explained that most testing is a biased culprit leading to misdiagnosis and disproportionate representation. Furthermore, Dillon (1994) reported that, in addition to disproportionate placement of minority students (mostly African American or Hispanic) in New York City Public Schools, 86% of the total number of student referrals to the Committees of Special Education for the school year were found eligible for some type of special education intervention within the New York City Continuum of Services.

The general education teachers who are burdened with oversized classes may not be fully aware of individual differences or be skillful enough to provide those services necessary to meet the needs of children with difficulties (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Elliot, 1997; Hilliard, 1980; Ortiz, 1992). Teachers may misinterpret certain behaviors as students' exhibiting disabilities rather than having difficulties as a result of other problems or issues. Thus, educational practice should include strategies to make school environments conducive to student's academic success and to provide teachers with tools and support necessary for effective instruction

(Algozzine et al., 1997; Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Markowitz, 1997).

Prior to referring students, teachers should seek alternative ways of instructing by adapting curriculum, varying teaching strategies and techniques, adapting material, and providing instruction for children with language differences (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Markowitz, 1997). Before the formal referral process, teachers must identify the problems that are preventing a student from achieving academically and utilize alternative methods of instructional techniques and other available resources to help that student overcome educational difficulties (Overton, 1992).

Some students may not warrant referral to special education if there have been successful prereferral interventions. Some success has been reported in school districts that have utilized Teacher Assistance Teams, Child Study Teams, Student Assistance Programs, and teacher consulting services. Consulting services may be direct or indirect to student and teacher and may be extended to include the child's parent (Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Collier, 1988; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Olson, 1991; Ortiz, 1992).

When a student begins to show signs of academic difficulties, teachers and administrators should conduct classroom observations, consult parents and other available resources, and consider modifications of the curriculum and the classroom environment. Schools that have an established leadership team on their campus should utilize this team as well as other relevant school staff as viable resources for prereferral intervention. Support of the school administration and professional staff in

facilitating a link between special education and general education personnel can alleviate many of the problems encountered by minority students and assist them in achieving academically (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Overton, 1992). Prereferral interventions can aid students in overcoming academic difficulties and also can help to monitor the high number of referrals that usually result in disproportionate representation, misidentification, and inappropriate placement of African American students in special education (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b). Additionally, implementation of prereferral interventions may serve to deter referrals that are not educationally based and in cases in which other siblings are placed in special education (Overton, 1992). A student should be formally referred to special education services only when no student progress is evidenced, despite educational interventions by the school (Collier, 1988; Ortiz, 1992; Overton, 1992). Some researchers have deemed institutionalization of preintervention profitable for the students and the schools in districts where these educational services are implemented (Ortiz, 1992). Established and well-researched prereferral intervention models are available for schools without a model in place to adapt and adopt to help reduce the number of inappropriate referrals and placement into special education.

A prereferral intervention model of service delivery is an alternative to traditional referral, testing, and placement practices. Chalfant and Pysh (1989) proposed using a Teacher Assistant Team model, which is a school-based, problem-solving model used to assist teachers in developing intervention strategies. The team usually consists of three faculty members representing various grade levels and/or

disciplines who assist other teachers. Moreover, the classroom teacher requesting assistance serves as a fourth and equal member of the team. The members may vary in each school depending on the teachers' specific needs. For instance, some teams may include principals, parents, and special education personnel. According to Chalfant and Pysh, the Teacher Assistant Team model is set up so that classroom teachers can request assistance to engage in a positive, productive, collaborative, problem-solving process to help students indirectly through teacher consultation. Additionally, teachers may request assistance from a team to help examine and derive a better understanding of classroom problems, set intervention goals, and formulate practical solutions. For example, a teacher may request assistance in teaching or managing an individual student or in creating strategies for dealing with an entire class, whether modifying the curriculum or preparing for a parent conference.

Fuchs et al. (1990) encouraged the multidisciplinary consultation model to create Mainstream Assistance Teams, which involves team members such as consultants, teachers, and students. Team members focus on generating alternative strategies to prevent inappropriate special education referrals. In the Mainstream Assistance Team, prereferral interventions are woven into a larger process of teacher consultation known as behavioral consultation. The behavioral consultation model requires a consultant to intervene indirectly with a difficult-to-teach student by consulting with the student's teacher. Consultation occurs within a series of four interrelated stages: (a) problem identification, (b) problem analysis, (c) plan implementing, and (d) problem evaluation. The consultant guides the teacher through

these stages in a progression of structured meetings; in order to progress to the next stage, specific objectives must be accomplished. During the second stage, problem analysis, the consultant and teacher collaborate to solve identified problems. During this process, the consultant and teacher mutually develop classroom-based interventions. This model contains prescriptive interventions to be implemented that the student can learn and then self-direct, self-monitor, and self-evaluate.

A formal, multidisciplinary prereferral intervention model based on consultation was developed by Graden et al. (1985). This model calls for the utilization of resource personnel such as the school psychologists and special education teachers who problem solve collaboratively with regular classroom teachers to develop classroom interventions for students. This model was developed for the purpose of systematically implementing intervention strategies in the regular classroom and evaluating their effectiveness at the point prior to referral to special education in an effort to reduce inappropriate referrals and placements in special education. The major stages identified by Graden et al. are (a) identifying, defining, and clarifying the problem; (b) analyzing the components of the classroom environment and difficulties the student has in the classroom that affect the problem; (c) designing and implementing interventions; and (d) evaluating the intervention effectiveness. Because the model is based on consultation, knowledge of consultation principles, processes, and skills is essential to effectively implement the model.

Garcia and Ortiz (1988) proposed a prereferral model for language minority students. This model calls for a team approach to the prereferral intervention process.

The team approach provides a conglomerate of perspectives that help classroom teachers and team members derive a significant understanding regarding hidden sources of student difficulties. This approach can assist educators in differentiating the reasons language minority students experience academic failure, what is called Types I and II from Type III problems. The first type of learning problem (Type I) occurs when students are in classroom environments that do not provide for their individual differences or learning styles, that is to say, problems resulting from deficiency in the teaching–learning environment. For example, limited English proficient students may need instruction in their native language or English as a second language, yet are taught exclusively in English without any adaptation of the curriculum. Type II learning problems are achievement difficulties that cannot be attributed to the student characteristics but have developed over time because instruction has not been adapted to address identified needs or gaps. For instance, a student may not have learned to read due to excessive absences. Type III students have disabilities that are the basis of their learning difficulties. Because these students have disabilities, they require highly specialized instruction and meet the criteria of eligibility for special education services (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). Ortiz and Yates (1983) and Cummins (1984) advised that failure to differentiate Type I and II from Type III learning problems results in inappropriate referrals of language minority students to special education. This failure also contributes to the disproportionate representation of these students in special education, specifically in classes for learning disabled. This language minority prereferral model showcases a series of

questions that are appropriate for all students, yet have been tailored to make them pertinent to students in bilingual education and English as a second language programs. The questions are the following:

1. Is the student experiencing academic difficulty?
2. Are the curricula and instructional materials known to be effective for language minority students?
3. Has the problem been validated?
4. Is there evidence of systematic efforts to identify the source of difficulty and to take corrective action?
5. Do student difficulties persist?
6. Have other programming alternatives been tried?
7. Do difficulties continue in spite of alternatives?

These questions must be addressed before a referral to special education is initiated (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). The goal of this prereferral intervention model is to reduce inappropriate referrals and placement in special education in order to assist teachers and students with needed intervention assistance in the least restrictive educational environment (Graden et al., 1985).

Referral Process

The formal special education referral process involves developing information to determine if a student is eligible for special services (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1990). The referral process can be extremely costly to school districts and damaging

to students, if not approached with care (Dillon, 1994). Prior to the implementation of EAHC, children with special needs were virtually ignored and denied appropriate educational services (Heward & Orlansky, 1992). Also, referrals were made exclusively by teachers who basically identified students based on their own perceptions (Marion, 1990). The number of students receiving special education is steadily increasing. Over the years, the distribution of disabilities has shifted. More specifically, the number of students identified and served as learning disabled has increased. As a mandate of the IDEA, instructional placement of students must be in the least restrictive environment. All efforts must be made to place children who do not have severe disabilities into classes with their peers without disabilities so that their academic instruction and social development may be realized (New York State Education Department, 1994). The National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002) reported specific findings to reduce the learning and behavioral problems that resulted in large numbers of students from culturally diverse backgrounds being referred to special education. The report recommended that schools should provide earlier intervention strategies to ensure that students receive quality general education services. Further, the report advised that no student should be categorized as eligible for special education without evidence of deficient response to high-quality interventions for the student to function successfully in the regular educational setting. These findings support The IDEA and its 2004 reauthorization, which require evidence of Response to Intervention.

The laws and court cases discussed earlier are a clear indication that discrimination and biases have been a major concern of parents, legislators, and the judiciary (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Stakeholders have recognized the increasing number of African American students placed in special education, but the problem has not been resolved. The number of referrals has increased dramatically since the passage of EAHC (Strickland & Turnbull, 1990). EAHC provided no specific guidelines for the referral process, but several requirements of the law provide a basis for the development of referral procedures. First, the principle of “child find” requires that each local education agency submit an application that describes how all students with disabilities are identified, located, and evaluated. Second, a referral often serves as a mechanism to fulfill the data-gathering and reporting requirements of EAHC. Third, the requirement that students remain in the least restrictive environment has influenced the decision to refer a student to special education and related services (Strickland & Turnbull, 1990).

Because of these laws and their implications, state and local school districts have developed their own requirements for the special education referral process. They use a variety of forms, informational requirements, and criteria for making a referral to special education. Because of questionable evaluation procedures and the ambiguity of decisions about placement for students with high-incidence disabilities, labeling one child disabled and another not disabled can be simply a matter of social decision making (Harry & Klinger, 1998).

These decisionmakers, namely administrators, counselors, and teachers, have legitimate concerns regarding the referral process. They need to respond more quickly to referrals, the system is too complex, paperwork is excessive, policies and procedures change too often, and assessment personnel are viewed as impeding the placements that teachers and administrators desire (Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum, & Roe, 1991). For example, as cited in the *Luke v. Nix* 1981 class action suit (J. Taylor, Tucker, & Gallagher, 1986), an estimated 10,000 children had been referred for case study evaluation but had not received these evaluations within the 60-day time limit mandated by EAHC. The plaintiffs alleged that failure to assure the provisions of timely evaluations constituted an unlawful denial of a free, appropriate public education as well as unlawful discrimination against persons with disabilities. As a result, the state of Louisiana entered into a consent decree that involved a plan to eliminate the backlog of children awaiting evaluations as well as to establish a system to assure that future evaluations would be conducted within the 60-day time limit (J. Taylor et al., 1986).

Once referred, actual placement into special education is contingent upon eligibility for services. Research has offered many indications that biases may exist in the referral stage of the special education placement process. Some of the studies focused on the attributes of the referred students. For instance, investigators have been concerned that African American students may be more likely than White students to be referred for comprehensive education. In *Lora v. Board of Education*, a 1975 case (Wood, Johnson, & Jenkins, 1986), Judge Weinstein stated that the

constitutional and statutory rights of African American and Hispanic students who were placed in a special day school for children with severe emotional disorders were violated by the assessment procedures and special education placements used by the public schools. Judge Weinstein's final orders charged the Board of Education with implementing immediate nondiscriminatory standards and procedures. Training of the instructional personnel in the referral process should be designed in such a way as to ensure that staff members give attention to linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identification (Wood et al., 1986).

Because special education referral involves perceptions of deviance from a sociocultural norm, students' physical and verbal behaviors, which may be culturally appropriate to African American and Hispanic American communities, can be misunderstood by teachers, who may erroneously refer those students for special education intervention (Harry & Anderson, 1994). This occurs quite often among young African American students who, as a result, have been disproportionately identified as appropriate for referral for resource classes in special education. These particular biased referral and assessment procedures of ethnic minority students have been reported (Cummins, 1986; Hilliard, 1990). In addition, researchers continue to report a pattern of disproportionate representation of African American students in classes for students with mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, behavior disorders, physical impairments, and speech impairments (Heller et al., 1982; Maheady, Algozzine, & Ysseldyke, 1984; W. Wright & Santa Cruz, 1983).

A referral leads to psychological testing, and testing frequently results in placement in special education (Bahr et al., 1991). Unfortunately, the chances of being placed in special education increase considerably once the referral process is initiated (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Coutinho and Repp (1999) provided information on the cultural characteristics of African American students who have been referred and diagnosed as disabled. The researchers maintained that the African American student may be diagnosed as mentally retarded because of a limited level of educational achievement and slow thinking related to lack of exposure to the dominant cultural environment and activities in the school system. The poor performance in school-related activities is because the activities are normed for the non-African American student population. As a result, African American youths may rebel against the school system because they perceive little hope for success. Coutinho and Repp noted that African American students may be diagnosed as emotionally disturbed or behaviorally disordered because of the antisocial behavior that results from their desire to assert their racial identity. As a matter of fact, African American students identified with Emotional Behavioral Disorders had difficult experiences during their educational career. In 1999 youths diagnosed with Emotional Disorders represented 8.4% of all students in special education programs, and a disproportionate number of these students were African American (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Coutinho and Oswald (1997) found that African American students were 11.55 times as likely to be identified as having an Emotional Behavior Disorder than students of

other ethnicities. This diagnosis leads to an inaccurate assessment and evaluation of the African American child's ability as a student.

Despite the law's intent to provide due process procedures with clearly defined mandates, a myriad of problems similar to those above have persisted through the 1990s in the form of disproportionate placement and disproportionate representation of minority students in special education segregated and integrated programs or in classes for students with mild retardation (Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Harry, 1992). Despite current legislation regulating classification and placement of students into special education, reports on identification of disabilities by race and ethnicity continue to reveal that high percentages of students classified as learning disabled are derived from minority groups (Robertson et al., 1994). Because schools are becoming more diverse, it is important to include more variables when making decisions concerning children of color (Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998). School counselors and social workers are in key positions to intervene in the referral process and to work directly with this population of students. Early social work and counseling efforts that address issues of referred students, especially referrals for behavior problems, may deter inappropriate and sometimes unnecessary referral, testing, and subsequent placement (Bruce, 1995). Early intervention such as a prereferral process provides an opportunity to explore student strengths and abilities and to investigate alternatives to placement that mitigate problems. Information obtained during this time can be advantageous in determining whether a referral for special education is warranted and in eliminating problems such as teacher bias

before requiring a costly comprehensive psychological evaluation (Serwatka et al., 1995).

Administrator's Role in the Prereferral Process

The need for the prereferral intervention process resulted from inadequate school district practices. In the U.S. educational system, teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders within the school community embrace great expectations for student learning and achievement. These stakeholders have a growing concern regarding the disproportionate number of African American students placed in special education, based on the percentage of culturally diverse learners in the general education population. Generally, criticism most often related to referral practices that frequently resulted in the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, in part because referrals often preceded special education evaluations and subsequent placements (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Graden, Wesson, Algozzine, & Deno, 1983). The NABSE and ILIAD Project (2002a, 2002b) suggested that the prereferral intervention processes show promise for preventing the disproportionate representation of African American students for special education referral. Such intervention processes may have the potential to identify and address systemic problems such as inadequate instruction, irrelevant curriculum, and lack of resources to avoid inappropriate referrals and placement in special education.

Ultimately, this placement process is the responsibility of administrators. Bateman and Bateman (2001) referred to the administrator as the chief advocate of special education programming. “From greeting the students as they arrive each morning to attending and participating in the development of the individualized education plan (IEP) for a particular student, the administrator sets the tone for education in the school and community” (p. 2). Administrators have a direct responsibility to ensure that all students, including African American students, are classified and accurately placed in the appropriate educational setting. Ford (2001) shared that accountability is a requirement of leadership, and effective leadership is needed at all levels—in the classroom, schoolwide, districtwide, and within the entire school community—to ensure that all students receive an appropriate education.

With the move toward reducing central authority and shifting budgetary decision making to the local school, it is of great importance that the school district’s special education department define who has responsibility for the programs at the various school campuses (McLaughlin, 1993). Clearly defined program administration and implementation are characteristics of effective special education programs (McLaughlin, 1993). Because of the increasing number of special education students and complexity of special education processes, campus administrators often abdicate the responsibility for these processes and decisions to the central office administrators and supervisors (McLaughlin, 1993). In addition, administrators’ lack of participation in the management of special education programs on their campuses

may be due in part to a lack of administrator knowledge regarding special education policy, rules, and regulations (Pellicer & Anderson, 1993).

In 1969, Sage conducted a staff development institute to familiarize public school administrators with a general overview of the roles and responsibilities of special education administration. The desired result was more integration of special education students into the regular education classroom. Sage contended that administrators would be able to change some of the existing models and procedures if they faced problems and issues and make decisions directly concerning special education programs. Nineteen administrators with no prior special education training or experiences participated in a week-long session. This study utilized the role playing of simulated environments and situations in special education to affect the belief systems of the participants. Sage found changes in the attitudes among the administrators in this study in 9 of the 10 concepts. Sage recommended that the workshop concept be expanded and a control group added to determine whether this procedure could be a beneficial tool for professionals in the field and state department personnel who seek to change administrators' attitudes and beliefs about special education.

Despite its conceptual stability over time, the application of the prereferral intervention process across states and school districts is entirely another matter. In fact, prereferral may be one of the most inconsistently employed processes in education (Buck, Polloway, Thomas, & Cook, 2003). For example, technical aspects of the prereferral process are inconsistent, such as terminology, types of problems to

address, size of the team to carry out the prereferral process, and the level of involvement of team members—including the administrator—in implementing prereferral strategies.

Carter and Sugai (1989) reported that these inconsistencies may be due to a lack of knowledge and exposure on the part of the administrators in the area of special education and the general education prereferral process. This raises two important questions:

1. Should the prereferral process be mandated, or should the decisions be left up to the discretion of various states, school districts, and campuses?

2. What should be the level of involvement of the campus administrator, regular education teachers, special education teachers, school counselors, and school social workers in regards to their roles in the prereferral process?

According to a study by Van Horn (1989), the principals' attitude toward special education was a determinant factor influencing their behavior toward their role and the function of the special education program on their campuses. The study provides support to the concept that the leadership behavior of the principal guides the direction of the campus and the attitude of the staff in the area of effective decision making in special education. Furthermore, J. Smith and Colon (1998) indicated that administrators "did not understand special education, and they delegated the responsibility whenever possible" (p. 40). For example, the administrators reported that their most complex and difficult task was understanding and implementing IDEA provisions. Additionally, in a study conducted by Patterson

et al. (2000), administrators acknowledged that they could play a significant role in special education programs if they chose. The researchers noted that because of the intricacies of special education services and IDEA, most administrators in the study preferred to remain less involved. The findings from the study revealed that some administrators viewed supervising special education and IDEA provisions to be onerous, mainly because of their lack of knowledge in the area of special education.

Principals' attitudes thus are related to their perceived preparedness to oversee special education programs. Monteith (1994) cited a study that was conducted by the South Carolina State University Department of Educational Administration. The researchers sought to discover to what extent administrators felt they already had the knowledge necessary to effectively oversee programs for students with disabilities. The researchers also were interested in identifying which administrators would be interested in training or a degree concentration in disabilities and supervision. The sample consisted of administrators and supervisors from South Carolina, southern North Carolina, and northern Georgia enrolled in the Ed.S. and Ed.D. programs at South Carolina University. One hundred and twenty administrators responded to the survey. The findings revealed that (a) 75% of the administrators had no formal training in special education, (b) what they did know about special education was gained from state or administrative office memos and correspondence or by making mistakes in the area of special education, (c) over 90% of the administrators suggested that formal training was needed to be an effective leader, and (d) 89%

indicated they would be interested in participating in a training program (Monteith, 1994).

Even though the national trend toward more inclusive practice has resulted in a call for major changes in teacher education programs, few states require special education competence, knowledge, or coursework for administrators. In addition, increased responsibility comes at a time when administrative training provides minimal information on special education programs (Patterson et al., 2000). Tryneski (1997) conducted a study of special education certification in administrative programs. The study revealed that only five states had special education requirements for administrative certification. Alabama did not have a basic certificate, but required 3 hours in survey of special education “if not completed for another certification” for the Advanced Administrative Certificate (p. 12). In Florida, candidates for administrative certificates must “complete a 6-hour emphasis in an area of choice, and exceptional education is one of those choices” (p. 29). Idaho required future administrators to complete “30 hours of graduate level credit and demonstrate competencies in several broad areas including education of the special education student” (p. 71). Administrative candidates in Maine must have only a “basic level of knowledge of the exceptional student” (p. 111). Moreover, in Missouri administrators must show knowledge or competence of “coordination of special programs” (p. 134), and four states “no longer required any type of special education for administrators” (pp. 15-16). Bateman (1998) identified a year later that most states required administrators to have nominal knowledge related to special education. She found

that of the states responding to a national survey of state licensure requirements, only nine required administrative candidates to meet competencies related to the principalship and special education. Eighteen states required an introductory course in special education to handle the many tasks associated with special education practices in the schools (Powell & Hyde, 1997). For example, Hines (2001) studied administrators in Mississippi and found that although administrators perceived their level of knowledge of special education to be sufficient, data revealed that their knowledge was insufficient. Hines found that the administrators showed disparity in their knowledge of consent requirements for re-evaluation and changes in educational placement of a student placed in special education.

Moreover, principals share responsibility for administering special education programs with central office administrators. Hayward (1989) examined the degree of responsibility administrators assumed in the area of special education in comparison to central office administrators of special education. He believed that without principals' assuming the governance role in special education, a parallel and separate system of regular and special education would be perpetuated. According to McLaughlin (1993), this dual system serves to create a sorting of students in separate educational programs. Martin (1995) argued, "Regular education definitely believes once a student is placed in special education, the students are always special education, and are the responsibility of special education" (p. 4).

Principals use particular strategies to determine which students are placed in special education. Dickson and Moore (1980) conducted a study in which 13

elementary principals were interviewed to ascertain the strategies these principals used before referring a student for special education services. These strategies included any prereferral intervention process as well as preparatory activities prior to the multidisciplinary team and IEP meetings. The researchers observed that the principals' responses regarding their roles in these meetings lacked consensus. Generally, the administrators viewed themselves as responsible for ensuring that students receive an appropriate educational placement and that students who require special education receive proper needed services.

In addition, McNerney and Swenson (1988) acknowledged that the administrator's role as a member of the multidisciplinary team may be to "challenge the importance and relevance of the information and to clarify the direction and content of the students instructional program" (p. 88). Most often, administrators perform a validating role in which their presence at the meeting imparts greater validity toward the individual educational program meetings (Dickson & Moore, 1980). Moreover, Van Horn (1989) declared that the principal essentially must assume the responsibility for implementation, maintenance, and improvement of special education programs within the building. In addition, reviewing the intent and language of IDEA, administrators shape districtwide and school-based policies and procedures; evaluate the ways in which special education programs are labeled and implemented; and assist administrators in making more informed decisions about student assessment, placement, and service delivery (Kluth, Villa, & Thousand, 2002).

Additionally, administrators who are neither informed nor involved cause legal developments that could be avoided if those administrators were familiar with policy and followed appropriate procedures (Anderson & Decker, 1993). Anderson and Decker recommended that when special education referral policies and procedures are followed, the student evaluation process is likely to have consistency and guidance. On the other hand, if the referral policies are unavailable, the current procedures may involve arbitrary decision making. Ultimately, the administrator is responsible for the educational programs of all the children on the campus. Tourgee and Declue (1992) contended that the committed principal must have support from the central office special education administrator and the central office administration in implementing effective decisions in regards to special education placement and educational environment for all students.

Although principals need support from central office and special education administrators, they have an active role in the process of special education referral. In 1994, Cleveland (1997) examined the referral of students into special education at 257 Montana schools. The author established evidence that indicated principals exhibited some control during this process. According to Cleveland, of the 257 principals interviewed, approximately 63% reported they had prioritized referrals, 60% reported they had controlled access to the referral form, and 75% reported they communicated with teachers to withdraw the referral to special education and to consider other alternatives if they believed the child would best be served in the regular education setting. Only if the student's needs cannot be met in the regular

education program should the student be referred to special education (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). Garcia and Ortiz noted the referral of a student to special education should be an indication that all other alternative interventions have been explored.

To prevent inappropriate referrals into special education, administrators should become familiar with effective prereferral intervention systems and establish one in their building. These interventions consider alternatives to special education and can lessen the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Moreover, during the prereferral intervention process, the administrator should review data and develop performance-based evaluations for teachers and students. Also, the student achievement data must be disaggregated and aggregated based on race, ethnicity, gender, and language (NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b). Furthermore, administrators should make sure that instructional staff persons have sufficient resources, skills, and professional development opportunities to understand the needs of diverse learners (NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b).

Chapter Summary

This review of literature has explored the historical perspective of special education, emphasizing the major events that led to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Special education is constantly faced with new regulations and mandates that have a great impact on programs for disabled students. The chapter 2 review of literature reviewed laws, regulations, and scholarly articles that emphasized the scope of the problems of the

administrator's role in the prereferral intervention process as well as the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Researchers, educators, and legislators have made extensive efforts to address the issue of inappropriate placement of African American students in special education. The early work of Dunn and Deno focused attention on the process of special education and led to litigation alleging discrimination in the evaluation process. The resultant legislative attempts to provide proper special education placement and services for African American students have varied.

Congress has made the issue of the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education a national priority that must be addressed decisively and with clear and compelling guidelines. Laws such as the IDEA 1997 have not always produced the intended results (such as African American students' not being discriminated against resulting in improper placement in special education). Also, the review of case law regarding special education describes a pattern of inclusiveness by the courts. Collectively, the courts and judges have shown a preference for educating students in the least restrictive environment, moving away from segregated school systems. Subsequently, according to the courts, African American students must be given the same opportunities to advance in education as their nonminority peers. Problems with inappropriate referrals in the form of disproportionate representation, misclassification, and overidentification of nondisabled African American children as disabled have been investigated for over three decades (Gottlieb et al., 1994). Furthermore, Congress indicated that greater effort is needed to prevent the

intensification of problems connected with mislabeling among minority students (Daugherty, 2000).

According to research literature, the prereferral intervention process is a critical step in reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students based on inappropriate referrals. Many scholars have described the prereferral intervention process as an opportunity to prevent the inappropriate testing, disproportionate representation, and inappropriate placement of African American students in special education. In addition, many schools have met the needs of students in a regular education classroom setting with the advent of prereferral intervention strategies. Yet, the literature indicates that African American students are continuing to be placed in special education programs at a higher rate as compared to other students. The prereferral process appears to be implemented and properly practiced in some educational settings, yet remains ineffective, underutilized, or even avoided completely in others.

The next step after the prereferral process is the referral. Unlike the prereferral process, the referral process is noted in literature as being an important component in the special education process because it functions as the gateway to special education services (Walker et al., 1990). Research has indicated that once an African American student is referred, it is highly probable that the student will be evaluated and ultimately placed in special education. Also, recent studies have shown that the referral rate of African American students has increased steadily throughout the past two decades. Ambiguous procedures and complex factors surrounding referral

decision making have contributed to the increase the population of African American students in special education programs. For example, many problems exist within the referral to placement process, particularly in the areas of assessment and eligibility criteria. Placements such as this have been shown overwhelmingly to hinge on the referral process. Consequently, the appropriateness of the referral is a key concern regarding the identification of students who may need special education services.

Prereferral intervention is designed to increase the appropriateness of the referral. Administrative support has been found to be an important element in the use and success of prereferral intervention (Graden, 1989; J. Walsh, 1989). The research literature clearly documented that the administrator plays a very significant role in the appropriate placement of students and the functioning of an effective special education program. Consequently, administrative practices have the potential to increase or decrease the level of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. For instance, a lack of support and materials to assist regular education teachers often leads to teachers' choosing to refer students for special education assessment. Subsequently, when ineffective prereferral intervention strategies fail to work, the African American student is usually placed in a special education program.

In conclusion, an administrator must be equipped to handle change and must have the knowledge base to integrate successfully the special education program and to maintain institutional integrity by complying with the laws to reduce the inappropriate placement of African American students in special education on their

campuses. Moreover, studies have focused on the management and instructional leadership role of the administrator as it pertains to the special education program. For instance, a component of the prereferral intervention process is to provide professional development training for teachers and staff members to develop skills essential in creating an effective learning environment for all students before a student is referred to special education. A variety of programs and professional development trainings have been designed to assess and assist in the leadership skills of an administrator. However, inadequate attention has been given to administrators in the area of special education leadership and training. Thus, this study was designed to fill that gap in the research literature.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain in detail the methods used for collecting data and analyzing the results of this ethnographic study examining administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral process as it pertains to reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Spradley stated, "Ethnography means learning from people" (cited in Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 3). Erickson, in discussing the ethnographic nature of schools, stated that, through participant observation, the researcher is able to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (cited in Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 42). This chapter provides a description of the research procedures and methods employed to conduct a qualitative study of the administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral process as it pertains the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The design of the study is introduced along with a description of the sample population and conceptualization. Also included in the description of the methodology are the instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. In a research paradigm, methodology "refers to the

process, principles, and procedures by which we approach problems and seek answers” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 1).

This qualitative and descriptive case study examined the perceptions of the campus administrators, general education teachers, and a special education specialist regarding the administrators’ role in the prereferral process as it pertains to reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Gay (1981) indicated that descriptive research involves collecting data to test hypotheses or answer questions concerning the current status of the subject of the study. A descriptive study reports how things are. Isaac and Michael (1984) explained that a descriptive study describes systematically a situation or area of interest factually and accurately. These definitions of descriptive study support the method of this study, which was to determine if the perceptions of the administrator’s role in the prereferral intervention process in a Texas public school district.

Watson-Greggo (1988) distinguished qualitative research as an umbrella term for many kinds of research approaches and techniques, including ethnography, case studies, analytic induction, and content analysis. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). For this reason, the researcher “becomes the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 7). On the other hand, “every new act of the investigation takes into account everything learned so far” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 121). Also, qualitative research is designed to understand the meaning of a variety of experiences. According to Greene (1993), the task of the researcher is to explain interconnections and patterns

that emerge from these different perspectives. As Silverman (1993) explained, the aim of qualitative research is to “say a lot about a little problem” (p. 3). Furthermore, the researcher can provide an in-depth, rich description or account of the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, a qualitative approach enables the researcher to get personal perceptions of participants; the story behind the data. “Qualitative approaches emphasize the importance of getting close to the people and situations being studied in order to personally understand the realities of daily life” (M. Patton, 1990, p. 46). Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that the design, and even the initial focus of the study, must be seen as emergent. Greene reinforced this concept: “A hallmark feature of qualitative research evaluation is its emerging nature, such that the boundaries, direction, and even major questions of the study can change during the course of the inquiry” (p. 38). Thus, the questions presented in this research study were maintained during the inquiry, but could be modified or added to throughout the research.

Purpose of the Study

Many school districts have failed to reduce the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education; however, the chances of a student being placed in a special education program increase significantly once the referral process is initiated (Townsend, 2000). Unfortunately, African American students may be misdiagnosed in special education because of their limited level of educational achievement, which could be related to the lack of exposure to the dominate culture

environment and activities in the school system. The purpose of this study was to identify in detail the perceptions of the campus administrators, general education teachers, and a special education specialist regarding the campus administrators' role in the prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education as compared to the review of literature. Moreover, this study bridges a gap in existing research, which has not covered sufficiently the perception of the administrators' role in the prereferral intervention process. Notwithstanding, administrators have a direct responsibility to ensure that all students, including African American students, are classified and accurately placed in the appropriate educational setting. Such intervention processes may have the potential to identify and address systemic problems such as inadequate instruction, misinformed decisions, inadequate decision making, and improper assessment, thus avoiding inappropriate referrals and placement in special education. Specifically, the study investigated the administrators' practices that affect the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education on their campus. This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist relative to the campus administrators' involvement in activities prior to a referral to special education?

2. What perceptions are held by campus administrators relative to knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to referral to special education?

3. What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist relative to the campus administrators' responsibility to assure there is not disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education?

4. What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist of the criteria for successful general education activities prior to a referral to special education?

Rationale for Method

This study utilized qualitative research methodologies to examine the “settings and the individuals within those settings holistically, understanding that the subject of the study is not reduced to an isolated variable or to any hypothesis, but is viewed instead as part of the whole” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 4). Qualitative methodology entails collecting, organizing, and analyzing text or other information that is usually nonnumerical (M. Patton, 1990). Qualitative research information often consists of “detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behavior” (M. Patton, 1980, p. 22). Additionally, qualitative researchers “seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 49). This method allows the

researcher to study issues in greater depth and detail and is best suited for obtaining information about small numbers of people or cases to arrive at a clearer, deeper understanding of the phenomenon (M. Patton, 1990). The collection of detailed information enables the researcher to provide the reader with the supportive data for interpretation and allows the reader to evaluate the plausibility of the conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this qualitative, multisite study, the intent was to gain a greater understanding of the perception of the administrator's role in the prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Case study research focuses on "discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied" (Merriam, 1988, p. 3). According to Yin (1989), a case study is preferred when the researcher's objective is to investigate thoroughly contemporary events and when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. Yin acknowledged that the distinctive need for case studies "arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena" (p. 14).

In a qualitative study the researcher functions as the prominent research instrument (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 1997). As the prominent research instrument, the researcher attempts to analyze the variables relevant to the subject under study (Polit & Hunger, 1983), in this case focusing awareness on administrators in one Texas school district rather than on all Texas school districts. As a result, this case study did not focus on generalizations but on understanding the uniqueness and specifics of the administrators in the school district. To understand the administrators

in this particular study, the researcher obtained information in regards to the administrators' demographic background such as educational and administrative experience. Also, to better understand the social culture of the district and their particular campuses, the researcher obtained information regarding values, beliefs, and the type of actions taken by each administrator in their respective position regarding special education. Hence, the design of this study included semistructured interviews with individuals who were involved in the prereferral intervention process. Furthermore, a set of semistructured, open-ended interview questions guided the framework of the dialogue during the discussions. For this reason, qualitative methodology was determined to be the appropriate research method because of the particularity of this case study and research inquiry, which requires the examination of administrators' practices regarding special education, effective school practices, and appropriate placement of students in an educational setting.

More specifically, a nonexperimental, descriptive research design was chosen for this study. The nature of a descriptive study is to determine the current situation, and this method was selected as the most appropriate approach for achieving the objectives of the study. According to Gay (1992), "The descriptive method is useful for investigating a variety of educational problems" (p. 218). The interview format was chosen for this study. Galfo (1983) noted, "Interviewing is a process of obtaining information directly from the respondents" (p. 89). Gay (1992) indicated that an interview can produce in-depth data not possible with a questionnaire. In addition, the advantages of using interviews over questionnaires include adaptability, immediate

feedback, greater depth, and more complete data (Borg & Gall, 1983). Mouly (1978) concurred, “The interview permits the establishment of greater rapport and thus stimulates the respondent to give more complete and valid answers and “promotes a higher percentage of returns (p. 202). Tuckman (1972) also discussed the advantages of using interviews as opposed to questionnaire studies. As interpreted by Tuckman, the advantages are the opportunities for response-keying (personalization), opportunities for asking, opportunity to probe (follow trends), and a good rate of return (p. 188).

Naturalistic Inquiry

This study used the qualitative narrative paradigm because it best complemented the study’s collection of small samples. M. Patton (1990) wrote, “Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a smaller number of people and cases” (p. 14). The resources of detailed information give meaning to relationships between the knower and the known and include the participants’ cultural characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ropers-Huilman & Graue, 1999). Therefore, the qualitative research paradigm referred to as naturalistic is ideographic, in that the purpose is to document strongly one particular case so readers potentially may transfer and apply the findings into their own culture (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). This qualitative naturalistic paradigm upholds the idea that social reality is reducible in the same manner as is physical reality; therefore, methods used to study social reality

must differ. The goal of the naturalistic inquiry is to understand rather than know (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). The decision to use naturalistic inquiry in this study was made upon the naturalistic assumptions and the compatibility of the process of the goals of the research.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry stems from five axioms:

1. Multiple constructed realities are studied holistically.
2. The knower and known are inseparable and interactive in nature. For example, the observation process may affect the results, even in the natural setting, because the participants know the observer is examining the behavior. Because the behavior is being watched, the participants may modify their behavior. The observer watches the knower to seek the known, but the knower has the authority of allowing specific information to transfer during the interaction.
3. The aim of inquiry is to develop an ideography body of knowledge in the form of a working hypothesis that describes the individual case.
4. All entities are in state of mutual simultaneous shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects.
5. Inquiry is influenced by inquirer values as expressed in the choice of a problem and in framing, bounding, and focusing that problem.

Defined as a thorough and timely focus on a group of people interacting with each other, with their tools, and with the environment (Hall, 1998), naturalistic inquiry permits the researcher to observe and examine human behavior and then to

weave a narrative that accurately and honestly reflects the lives and voices of a group of people (Spradley, 1978). Through extensive description, the researcher attempted to uncover meaning and provide sufficient descriptive data (Geertz, 1973).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed the utilization of the following research components related to the five axioms listed previously, which derive from the naturalistic inquiry approach: (a) natural setting, (b) human instrument, (c) purpose sampling, (d) inductive data analysis, (e) emergent design, (f) negotiated outcomes, (g) case study, and (h) idiographic interpretation.

Natural setting. Observing the subjects in their natural setting allows the researcher to understand inductively and holistically the experiences of the subjects within their context-specific settings (M. Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that the phenomena of study take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves. Thus, the methods of inquiry were interpretive and relied primarily on participation observation, field notes, and interviews; the goal was to capture and understand the participants' individual perspectives. Marshall and Rossman (1989) indicated that one cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which subjects interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Qualitative research involves seeking information from participants in their natural setting. It is identifying multiple methods of interaction with participants, with ethical and magnanimous intentions, to find information that will improve the field of study. Qualitative research develops themes that emerge from stories, ideas, and histories of the participants. The researcher and reader interpret these qualitative

data according to their experience and personal insight. Also, the qualitative researcher is empathetic to the information of the participants and uses insight to create a study that will encourage diverse reasoning and interpretation. Finally, the researcher attempts to answer the research questions by looking at how the whole affects a part within the natural setting.

Human instrument. The role of the human as a research instrument is that of participant observer who facilitates the study of real-world situations as they unfold naturally; who is nonmanipulative, unobtrusive, and noncontrolling; and who is open to what emerges (M. Patton, 1990). Additionally, the qualitative research approach permits the researcher to be close to the data, consuming and experiencing the data's richness (Filstead, 1970).

However, of great significance is the universally recognized notion that validity and reliability are the key components to good research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the challenge of the human instrument in conducting fieldwork; fieldwork requires a balance of skill, competence, and rigor with flexibility, insight, and tacit knowledge. Notwithstanding these efforts, all human beings bring an inherently unique set of beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and values into their construct of reality. These beliefs, values, and inherent biases influence the researcher's perceptions of human development, organizational behavior, and change while in the role of participant observer.

Purposive sampling. Purposive sampling maximizes the researcher's ability to acquire accurate information concerning the studied phenomenon because it involves

choosing to interview and to observe individuals who have the experience of the phenomenon as well as the capability to communicate their experience of that phenomenon. The plan of the researcher is to maximize information accumulated that is relevant to the study and eliminate the redundancy of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Inductive data analysis. Inductive data analysis was employed throughout the study to consistently scrutinize field data. This strategy involves scanning data for categories and relationships among those categories. Boyatzis (1998) defined categories as patterns in the data that may be a description of observable information or interpretations of underlying phenomena. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), “Analytic induction is employed when some specific problem, question, or issue becomes the focus of research. The data [are] collected and analyzed to develop a descriptive model that encompasses all cases of the phenomena” (p. 66). Furthermore, the initial analysis focused on the selection of the key participants in the study; as the information was obtained through observations and interviews, it was analyzed, allowing patterns to emerge from the data.

Emergent design. The emergent design allows decisions to evolve during the research process regarding what information to look for ahead of time and where to gather it. The purposive sampling is a reflection of the emergent design and guides the following steps of data collection in the research process. The process discontinues when saturation is reached for those concepts and categories considered pertinent in describing the phenomenon; in other words, continual analysis yields no

further information. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that the design of the study should emerge while conducting research. Lincoln and Guba identified four reasons why this is evident: (a) Meaning is determined by context, (b) multiple realities prohibit the development of a theory from being made only on the reality of the researcher, (c) that which is learned through the study depends on interactions between the researcher and the context involved, and (d) the nature of mutual shaping cannot be known until they are witnessed (p. 208). For this reason, the researcher approached the study with the possibility that the design could change as the research was conducted.

Negotiated outcomes. Continuously during the inquiry, the researcher consulted with the respondents regarding the data, emergent themes, and interpretations to confer over any differences between the researcher's perception and the respondents' intent. In addition, in an effort to verify and establish credibility despite the subjectivity inherent in qualitative research, written reports of areas of the research such as interviews, observations, and conclusions were given to all participants involved in the study to ensure that all information gathered was recorded accurately. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that inquiry is value bound and that the values of the respondent must be considered.

Case study. The researcher preferred the case study reporting mode because it is more adapted to a description of the multiple realities encountered at any given site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bromley (1990) defined a case study as a "systemic inquiry into an event or a set of related events, which intends to describe and explain the

phenomenon of interest” (p. 302). Similarly, Yin (1989) wrote that a case study is an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident multiple sources are used” (p. 23). Various reports in education, sociology, and psychology have studied the individual as the unit of analysis and have used the case study method to develop rich and comprehensive understandings about people (Creswell, 1997; Stake, 1978; Zucker, 2001). Therefore, education case studies can be ethnographic evaluations, program descriptions, historical interpretations, and sociological studies. Although case studies can be purely one type, they also can be combinations of description and interpretation or description and evaluation (Merriam, 1988). According to Merriam, the meaning embedded in the experiences of administrators and teachers becomes mediated through the researchers’ and readers’ own experiences. This supports the notion in qualitative research that there are multiple ways of interpreting experiences and that these interpretations constitute reality. Additionally, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited by Merriam, 1998) suggested that case study is the best form for evaluations because it provides thick description, is grounded holistic and lifelike, simplifies data to be considered by the reader, illuminates meanings, and can communicate tacit knowledge. Creswell indicated that a case study involves an extensive array of data collection as the researcher attempts to construct an in-depth picture of the case. The data collection in this case study included interviews, participant observation, direct observation, and documents (Yin, 1989).

Idiographic interpretation. The naturalistic inquirer is contingent upon idiographic interpretation “because different interpretations are likely to be meaningful for different realities” and because the validity of interpretations is depend on contextual factors such as the “particular investigator–respondent interaction” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). Lincoln and Guba further indicated that idiographic interpretation focuses on the individual case rather than generalizations. The findings in this study may or may not be considered applicable to similar situations and organizations. Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that what is found in some particular context has significance only in the ideographic sense for that context at that time.

Participants

The 7 participants of this qualitative study consist of one administrator and one regular education teacher from a suburban North Texas district’s elementary, middle, and high school as well as the district special education specialist. Purposeful sampling was utilized for this study because it “is used as a strategy when one wants to learn something and come to understand something about certain select cases without needing to generalize to all such cases” (M Patton, 1980, p. 100). Purposeful sampling also is used to find in-depth, detailed information about a case with the opportunity to generalize as needed or interpreted (M. Patton, 1980). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) indicated that this method of purposeful sampling is used for analytic induction and involves choosing particular subjects to be included because they are

believed to facilitate the development of the research. Purposeful sampling was used to select a cross-section of leaders within the district to be interviewed based upon the leadership role of administrators, their knowledge of the operational processes of the special education program and how they were introduced and implemented, and the accessibility of the administrators to information. Seven participants were interviewed: one administrator and regular education teacher from each level of school (elementary, middle, and high school) and one special education specialist from the district level.

Participant selection. The participants were identified based on input and data the researcher received from the district. The suburban North Texas district superintendent provided written permission to conduct a research study in the district through a letter to the University of Texas at Austin and the researcher's dissertation committee. He discussed the need for a research study in the area of special education. The administrators from the high school and elementary school were part of the sample based on which school had the highest disproportionate representation of African American students on their campus. Additionally, the middle school administrator selected to participate was from one other middle school in the district. The researcher is an administrator in the other middle school in the district. The researcher wanted to eliminate possible bias by not interviewing an administrator from the researcher's campus. Furthermore, the researcher interviewed one special education specialist from the district and one regular education teacher from each school who had a minimum of three African American students in his or her class.

The principal of each identified school provided teachers who had at least three African American students in their regular education classrooms. Then, a teacher from each identified school was randomly selected to participate in the study.

Participant procedures. The superintendent gave the researcher permission to present information on the purpose of the study at an administrators' staff meeting at the beginning of the Fall semester. The researcher ensured confidentiality and explained the plan of action, including research questions, purpose, and ways of gathering data. Additionally, the researcher contacted each of the possible participants to ask if they would be willing to participate in this study. Once the 7 participants were selected and approval was obtained, the researcher interviewed each participant twice. The selected participants worked with the researcher for approximately 8–12 weeks over the duration of the Fall 2004 semester. Upon the selection of the participants, the researcher had the opportunity to reflect and assess the administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral intervention process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American student in special education on their campus.

Instrumentation

As noted, the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research and inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; M. Patton, 1990). In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the characteristics that make humans the “instrument of choice” for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues and able to interact

with the situation; they have the capacity to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously; they are able to recognize situations holistically; they are able to process data as soon as they become available; they can provide immediate information and request verification of data; and they can examine atypical or unexpected responses. For this reason, naturalistic inquiry guided the research so the researcher's questions could be answered through data collection. Also, being familiar and competent in the characteristics of naturalistic paradigm and possessing the appropriate level skill to conduct such research is known as theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin further noted that the characteristics of theoretical sensitivity include the awareness of craftiness embedded in the meaning of the data, insight, the capacity to understand, and the capability to separate pertinent and irrelevant data. Strauss and Corbin recommended that this can be accomplished through professional literature and both professional and personal experiences. Of primary significance is that the credibility of qualitative research relies heavily on the confidence of the reader in the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field (Eisner, 1991; M. Patton, 1990).

Data Collection

The data collection techniques used in this naturalistic inquiry were interviewing, along with observations, documents and records, journaling, and analyzing data. Merriam (1998) suggested that triangulation of data sources,

collection, and analysis can help confirm that the findings are accurate. Additionally, Hoepfl (1997) declared that interviews and observations are the two prevailing forms of data collection associated with qualitative inquiry. Merriam noted that documents have an advantage over both interviews and observations: Documents are ready-made sources of information that exist independently of the researcher's influence.

However, the fact that documents have not been developed for research intentions can be a limitation, because the obtained materials may be incomplete from a research perspective. They may not provide the researcher with necessary continuity or closeness that is required in qualitative research, or they may be difficult to understand or to place in perspective to other data (Merriam, 1988). Nevertheless, documents provide a "behind-the-scenes" (M. Patton, 1980, p. 153) look at the study, providing depth and detail in matters such as program origin.

For this reason, documents provided data in addition to the anecdotal records of observation of administrator's activities on their campus and individual classroom observations. Additionally, recorded notes were reviewed after formal and informal interviews. Hence, the combination of individual interviews, field notes during observations, journaling, and securing documents and records achieved triangulation. M. Patton (1990) described using a tape recorder to record interview data as "indispensable." Thus, to capture the data accurately, the researcher recorded the interviews with cassette tapes and recorders for immediate transcription and interpretation. The recorded data took the form of field notes, which were descriptions of people, settings, activities, ideas, and perceptions. However, field

notes differ from other data sources in that they depend heavily upon the researcher's recollection to acquire data. This combination of data collection methods provided triangulation; triangulation strategy involves "comparing and cross-checking consistency of information derived at different times and by different means within qualitative methods" (M. Patton, 1980, p. 331).

Interviews. For this study, the participants were interviewed one-on-one in two separate interviews. "The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind" (M. Patton, 1990, p. 278). Hence, the researcher wants the participants to share what is on their mind in order to gather descriptive data in the participants' own words regarding the study. Further, the researcher can use a combination of different types of interviews. According to M. Patton (1990), open-ended interviews allow the interviewer to understand the world as seen by the respondents. Patton further described two other types of qualitative interviewing: (a) informal, conversational interviews and (b) semistructured interviews. For this study, the researcher used both types of interviewing, after preparing an interview framework with a list of questions and general topics that were investigated during the interviews. The framework guided each interview and secured that, in essence, the same information was obtained from each participant. The interview framework also ensured time efficiency and adherence to the predetermined inquiry.

The semistructured interview method was used because it gave the researcher freedom to probe and to explore within the predetermined inquiry. Furthermore, the semistructured interview allowed for systemic comprehensive coverage of the inquiry

area, while permitting the researcher flexibility to modify the focus or exclude questions the researcher found to be unproductive for the goals of the research (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

The informal, conversational interview method also was used. Informal conversational interview is an open-ended interviewing method that may occur while the researcher is observing the participant in the natural setting (M. Patton, 1990). For this study, the researcher engaged the participants in conversational dialogue so the participants were comfortable telling their stories and describing their identity. This method encourages spontaneous questions to be asked during a conversation that the researcher guides through set criteria; answers to some of the questions may bring new ideas or information important to the research topic to the attention of the researcher. With new ideas or information, the researcher may need to conduct follow-up interviews to gather as much detailed information as possible about the research topic.

Observations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) shared that observation is the most sophisticated instrumentation for collecting and interpreting situations where intentions, attitudes, beliefs, and values direct most of the human activity. Further, observation can lead to deeper understanding than interviews alone, because it provides knowledge of the context in which events occur and may enable the researcher to see things that participants themselves are not aware of or are unwilling to discuss (M. Patton, 1990). The researcher takes on the role of participant observer. Denzin (1989) defined participant observation as a research strategy that

simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents, direct participation and observation, and introspection. As the participant observer, the researcher involved himself, to the extent possible, on the various campuses to understand and document the magnitude of the perceptions of the administrators' role in the prereferral intervention process on their campuses. Some of the strategies and resources utilized during the study included monitoring verbal and nonverbal cues as well as concrete, unambiguous, and descriptive language. Also, the researcher tried to understand the participants, activities, settings, procedures, and interactions of these variables. As an aid to the participant-observation method, the researcher followed Lofland and Lofland's (1984) recommendation that, because of the difficulty of writing extensive field notes during an observation, quick notes be taken that serve as a memory aid when thorough field notes are constructed. A key strategy is that this should happen as soon after the observation as possible.

Documents and records. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified documents as any written materials that were not prepared specifically in response to a request from the researcher. Documents are valuable not only for the information they can provide, but also because they can direct the evaluator's attention during further data collection. Thus, Merriam (1988) indicated that documents provide additional assistance in helping the researcher "uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (p. 118). Documents that were analyzed in this study included meeting notes, the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report, which provides the educational breakdown of student

academic performance on standardized tests by ethnicity and also provides other general district information, the PEIMS report, district and special education reports, e-mail, Internet sources, and newspaper articles involving the district.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began immediately following the first interview and continued as the researcher gathered new information. M. Patton (1980) shared that beginning analysis at the start of the study helps to categorize emergent themes, thoughts, and ideas. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) described data analysis as the process of systemically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials accrued to increase the researcher's understanding of them and to enable the researcher to present findings to others. The information from this study was coded as a whole and guided by the opportunity to assemble the knowledge and understanding of the administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral process as it pertains to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

Further, the information found in interviews and journal documents was categorized into codes to find emergent themes. McCracken (1988) recommended a stage-based coding approach, in which the objective of the analysis and coding is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent's outlook of the world in general and of the topic in particular. The researcher examined each transcribed interview line by line and assigned labels and categories to

ideas or statements to find a common theme. For this reason, this study involved a three-stage model, involving open, axial, and selective coding.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), in open coding transcripts and other documents are examined line by line and assigned labels and categories, “giving each discrete idea, incident, or event, a name, something that stands for or represents a phenomenon” (p. 63). Also, after each interview the researcher analyzed the data and compared data to review the tentative codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes that emerged that related to the same phenomenon were grouped into categories.

Moreover, the names for categories and codes came from three sources: (a) the researcher, (b) phrases used by the research participants themselves, and (c) the review of literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the second stage, axial coding, the codes and categories were compared and probed against one another, searching for connections between categories with a view to discover emergent themes. The third stage, selective coding, eliminated categories that did not support significantly the research of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The various immense descriptions provided by coding and code categories assisted the analysis process by focusing attention on the most relevant data. Coding categories included knowledge of special education, educational practices, roles and responsibilities, support of school staff, staff development practices, quality of operational practices such as supervision/management, assessment practices, and criteria of a successful prereferral programs. These codes assisted in providing a framework for this research study.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

As defined by Merriam (1998), credibility is the connection between findings and reality. In addition, trustworthiness is the ability to persuade an audience that the results of a study are important, relevant, and worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, this approach can be accomplished by providing an array of information to validate the results and data. Further, in an effort to support the credibility of the interpretations produced through naturalistic inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1994) recommended the following:

It is believed that the probability that findings will be found to be more credible if the inquirer is able to demonstrate a prolonged period of engagement, to provide evidence of persistent observation, and to triangulate, by using different sources, different methods, and sometimes multiple investigators, the data that are collected. (p. 307)

However, trustworthiness and credibility were achieved through triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and a reflexive journal.

Triangulation. Triangulation is finding data to support the research by utilizing a combination of methodologies (M. Patton, 1980). Triangulation is an approach of finding three related incidents to support the stated conclusions. Additionally, triangulation reduces the risk of systematic distortions that often result when only one method of analysis is utilized (Maxwell, 1996). Finally, triangulation assists in strengthening certain assertions when multiple sources of data coincide (Denzin, 1978). For this reason, as noted earlier, the researcher used different

methods of data collection, including observations; interviews including the administrators, regular education teacher, and special education specialist; and different sources of equivalent information. The researcher was able to compare and cross-check the information obtained. Hence, the researcher was able to determine the extent to which the administrators' actions were consistent with their words and whether or not they were perceived by other respondents in the ways they thought they were. Triangulation was obtained in this study by comparing data among the literature review, interviews, and journals. In addition, each participant was interviewed twice and at different times.

Member checking. Member checking is a process through which respondents verify data and the accuracy of its presentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data gathered for this study were verified through testing accuracy of the data, interpretations, and conclusions with the participants from whom data were collected. For example, the researcher might ask the participants to confirm the plausibility of the findings (Merriam, 1988). Participants were able to rephrase, edit, and clarify interview statements and perceptions to present information in a fashion both accurate and agreeable to the researcher and participant. This process allowed the respondent the opportunity to correct inaccurate information and challenge possible incongruence.

Prolonged engagement. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), prolonged engagement provides a foundation of credibility by enabling the researcher to learn the culture of an organization over an extended period of time, testing for inaccurate

information by distortions by the researcher or respondent while building trust.

Through an extended time period in the district over the course of the semester, the researcher was involved with district administrators, faculty, and staff.

Persistent observation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “Persistent observation adds salience to a study that otherwise might appear to be no more than a mindless immersion; and if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth” (p. 304). The researcher implemented persistent observation with extensive observation of administrator staff meetings, classroom visits, campus visits, district and campus-level meetings, special education district and campus-level meetings, activities of the administrators on campus, and staff development training in special education throughout the district. Also, the researcher was a participant observer at different district and campus functions to allow the researcher to detect questionable behavior.

Reflexive journal. The researcher used a reflexive journal to reflect on personal experiences through journal entries, which became a component of the data and ensured credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested a daily reflexive journal: a kind of diary in which the researcher regularly records personal thoughts and information. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Erlandson et al., 1993) further indicated that the journal provides information about the researcher’s schedule and logistics, insights, and reasons for methodological decisions.

Limitations of the Study

The methodology was limited to a small number of participants in the study, 7 district participants, 3 of whom were administrators. Additionally, the study was a single case study, and thus findings may not be applied or compared to another study, because the same participants, setting, and environment cannot be replicated or generalized to other school districts. A further limitation is that the researcher served as the prominent research instrument and accumulated all the data, allowing possible bias.

Summary

This chapter focused on the qualitative research method and design that was used in this ethnographic study of administrators' perceptions of their role in the prereferral process as it pertains to reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. In particular, this study utilized naturalistic inquiry methods. The basis for rationale of the study for participant selection along with the process of interviewing was discussed. The case study methodology and strategies were described, including using the natural setting as the source data, acting as the human instrument of data collecting, and using inductive data analysis. The use of data collection and data analysis ascertained the significance of events for the participants who experience them. Some of the strategies were triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and reflexive journal. In addition, this study utilized in-depth, open-ended and

semistructured interviews; direct observations; and written documents and records. Furthermore, strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility were consolidated throughout the study. The results of this qualitative study are discussed in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY RESULTS

In this chapter, the results presented emerged from each participant's narratives gathered through interviews and observations. These narratives present the participants' knowledge, understanding, and perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the general education prereferral processes related to the placement of African American students in special education. I explained each participant's perception of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process according to the four research questions and the themes that developed from the interviews. I expounded and supported the four questions and the cross-section of themes with quotes from each participant's interviews, and in some sections have combined quotes from more than one interview.

The first section of this chapter introduces the participants, including their experience in the field of education as well as a brief description of each participant's credentials. Also provided is a demographic breakdown of the special education data of the 3 campuses participating in the study. The data are from the PEIMS the district used to report data to the state, such as special education and district demographic information. In the next section, the answers to the four research questions include data from the interviews, observations, and my self-reflexive journal. I accumulated a

reflexive journal throughout the data gathering process, which helped to give me insight in understanding the perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process related to the placement of African American students in special education. The final section of the chapter provides a summary and conclusions.

In developing this chapter, I paid close attention to each participant's expressed meaning to capture an accurate picture of their perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process. In addition, I allowed the participants to share their perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process without concerning themselves with repercussions for their beliefs. Moreover, because of the size of the district and the limited number of schools within this North Texas suburban district, the participants and district will remain anonymous in order to protect their privacy. Pseudonyms are provided to protect the privacy of the participants.

Participants

This research had a total of 7 participants: 3 administrators, 3 teachers and a special education director. Each of the participants was employed in a North Texas suburban school district with an approximate student population of 12,000. The 3 campus administrators who participated in the research study were all principals—one woman and 2 men. Furthermore, a female elementary general education teacher and two male middle and high school general education teachers participated in this

study. In addition, the special education director who participated in the study is female. Thus, the 7 participants included 3 women and 4 men.

All participants had at least 5 years of experience in the field of education. In addition, the campus administrators who participated in the study were of different ethnicities. For instance, the elementary and high school principals were African American and the middle school principal was Hispanic; the general education teachers and the special education director interviewed in this research were Caucasian. Every participant discussed the dramatic change in the district's demographics. Each participant talked with passion about the importance of meeting the needs of all students. Additionally, each participant spiritedly expressed a common attitude of determination to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of all students.

Valerie Carter. In my first meeting with the elementary school principal, Ms. Carter spoke with passion and enthusiasm about her career and the joy she gets from all she has done to impact children's lives. She spoke about how she considers herself to be a "mother of the students while at school, because for some students this is the only time they may feel secure or that their needs are being met." In addition, she spoke with great pride about her staff and the great job they are doing to meet the needs of the students prior to referring a student to special education. Furthermore, she discussed the sense of urgency in providing systems and effective strategies to meet the academic needs of the students due to rapid change in the demographics of

the district and the school. The elementary principal highlighted the philosophy and practices she had as a teacher and has continued to use as a principal.

Ms. Carter shared with me that she had no aspirations of becoming an administrator. She did not really choose to become an administrator; it chose her instead. According to her, she was a single mother and for financial reasons went through the master's program in Educational Administration to become an administrator. She stated, "As an educator we have to be the support system for the students to be successful, due to the fact that there are families that are trying to just make it, and we have to support the students in order to enhance their education." In order to do this she believes that educators must cater to the needs of the students.

Utilizing her teaching skills, abilities, and philosophy, as an administrator Ms. Carter implemented a prereferral process on campus. A major concern she emphasized was that "the students who are moving into the district are already labeled or have been placed in special education prior to coming to the district." Likewise, many of the students who are relocating into the district are assessed as performing below grade level. Therefore, she stated that it was imperative that a prereferral process be in place on her campus to address the educational needs of her students.

Ms. Carter also identified another concern: The teachers on her campus lacked skills needed to work with the African American students and parents because of their limited experience in working with this particular culture. For instance, she noted that in this district it is important to get to know the students to develop relationships with

them. Demographically, this elementary campus has approximately 36% African American, 35% Caucasian, 17% Hispanic, and 9% Asian students. However, the special education population of the African American students on this campus is approximately 48%, with 37% Caucasian and 11% Hispanic. In addition to multicultural knowledge, Ms. Carter believes it is important to have strategies in place so that students, whether they are relocating into the district or grew up in the district, “won’t slip through the cracks.”

Juan Garcia. Juan Garcia was beginning his first year as a principal on his current campus. He began his career in education with 4 years as a high school math teacher. In addition, he served as a middle school assistant principal for 4 years before accepting the position of principal in 2004. He noted that the faculty must adjust to changes in his school. He also commented that the faculty must implement the strategies provided to meet the academic needs of all students in order to be successful.

When I first met with Mr. Garcia, he seemed somewhat apprehensive but was willing to participate in the research study due to his belief that he lacked knowledge in the area of special education. He indicated that he was “not familiar with the way things are done in this district.” Mr. Garcia reiterated that he would participate in an effort to do whatever was necessary to assist in the study. As the interview progressed, he was very polite and seemed to have a pleasant demeanor and a genuine care for all students and staff members. Mr. Garcia shared how he has “a desire for all students to be successful in their educational endeavors.”

Demographically, this middle school population is 24% African American, 50% Caucasian, 20% Hispanic, and 7% other. The special education breakdown is as follows: 32% African American, 51% Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, and 2% other.

Mr. Garcia mentioned concerns he had that were unique to his campus—not shared by other campuses in the district. For example, he was concerned with how to deal effectively with the school’s high mobility rate. His campus also has the highest disproportion of African American students in special education than any other ethnic group, and it has a higher rate of Hispanic students compared to the other middle school campus in the district. For these reasons Mr. Garcia stated, “There is a need for prereferral intervention strategies for the students.”

Mr. Garcia also expressed a concern about a discrepancy in the number of African American students actually being served in special education in his school as opposed to the number of African Americans reported as receiving special education in his school. While the growth at his school has not occurred nearly as quickly as the rest of the district, Mr. Garcia has observed that African American students are transferring from the other middle school in the district. Due to this mobility, the number of African American students placed in special education is misleading; for some, the student’s special education information is received, but then that student withdraws from the school. On top of that, once some of the students’ demographic information, such as proof of residence, has been verified, it often becomes evident that they do not live in the school’s attendance zone. Thus the student transfers to the appropriate school. Hence, there is a belief that less African American students are

being served than the demographic data represents. Another concern related to mobility is that parents enrolling their child in school may fail to provide the information needed to identify whether the student was receiving special education services in the previous district. Because of the high rate of African American students moving into the school from other districts as well as those moving from another campus in the district, Mr. Garcia maintained that the campus administrator must take an active role in the prereferral process in order to prevent disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

Keith Jones. During his interview, Mr. Jones, the high school principal, spoke with confidence and excitement about what is being done on the campus. Mr. Jones was the only administrator or teacher interviewed who had a background of experience in special education. He took great pride in this background experience in special education and was thrilled to have helped in providing interventions on his campus to address the academic problems students displayed prior to being referred to special education. He stated, "I'm proud of the fact that since I have become the principal of the high school, they have not had a student referred or placed in special education." Notwithstanding, he indicated that concern with the disproportionate representation of African American students on his campus. Mr. Jones emphasized that this occurred prior to his becoming the principal of the school. He determined that while there was a need for a prereferral intervention process on the campus, many students that transfer to the school are already receiving special education

services, which may contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students on the campus.

Demographically, this high school had approximately 35% African American, 14% Hispanic, 42% Caucasian, and 6% Asian and other students. However, the special education population of African American students receiving special education services on this campus was 51%, with 36% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, and 3% other.

Mr. Jones discussed his background in education; he has been in education since 1993, approximately 12 years. In addition, he has had a well-rounded career in education, in which he has been an administrator at each level, an assistant principal at the middle and high school levels, and a principal at the elementary and high school levels. Additionally, Mr. Jones mentioned how he has used his background in special education and as an elementary principal in order to implement a prereferral process on his current campus. Mr. Jones is a firm believer that “all students can learn,” and that his staff has to address the needs of all the students by any means necessary.

Mary Allen. When I first met Mary Allen, she was extremely cooperative and willing to discuss the prereferral process on her campus. Ms. Allen is a third-grade teacher in her 2nd year with the same class—the campus has a looping concept of teaching the same class 2 consecutive years. She explained that she was somewhat concerned because she wanted to make sure that she was “able to assist in whatever

way to improve the students' opportunity to be successful." Ms. Allen expressed her joy in teaching and belief in "going the extra mile" for her students to be successful.

In addition, Ms. Allen is considered one of the leaders on the campus because she has approximately 28 years of experience in the field of education. For example, she has served on the Campus Planning and Organization Committee (CPOC), in which campus concerns are brought to the committee and a plan of action is discussed and implemented. The committee consists of teachers elected to serve 2-year terms as well as campus administrators and parents. Ms. Allen has served on the committee each year since the campus opened, with the exception of the years she had to step down when her term had expired. Furthermore, she serves on the Student Academic Review (STAR) committee, which meets to discuss students with academic problems to plan and provide intervention strategies prior to a student's referral to special education. Ms. Allen emphatically said, "I believe that this committee is needed due to the demographic changes within the school and district, and this committee has really helped students achieve." She also discussed the major demographic difference between the north and south areas of the district. The north area of the district, where Ms. Allen's elementary school is located, is experiencing high changes in demographic ethnicity; African American students are moving from other districts and may be below the average level in reading, writing, and math skills. Ms. Allen has seen the impact on the campus and classroom where she serves. Therefore, she contributes in whatever way possible to address the deficiencies students may have before they are referred to special education.

Bob Thomas. Mr. Thomas is an eighth-grade middle school Social Studies teacher with the least amount of educational experience among the participants interviewed in this study. He has been teaching for 5 years and was self-employed for 15 years prior to becoming a teacher. In addition, he serves on the technology, student recognition, and CPOC committees on the campus. He was very knowledgeable about the culture and climate of the campus and seemed to have a wonderful rapport with the students. For example, during the interviews several students stopped by to visit and remained in his classroom to help and talk with him. I observed his dedication to teaching by the way the students responded and respected him. This is a key factor teachers must exhibit in order to reach the students in the classroom.

Furthermore, by my observation, Mr. Thomas is very dedicated to the profession, because he chose to conduct the interviews after school so they would not interfere with his daily preparation to teach his students. In addition, Mr. Thomas indicated that he was willing to share what he knew about the prereferral process, although he considered his knowledge to be “limited.” He explained that he had “growing concerns regarding the changes within the district,” and that he would do whatever can be done to address these concerns in order to become a more effective teacher.

Jeff Davis. Mr. Davis was the only teacher who reported teaching in another state prior to relocating to Texas. He was a high school math teacher of Math Models, Algebra 2, and Pre-Calculus to junior and senior high students. He was the only math teacher in the district teaching a new math curriculum designed to help ninth-grade

students. He was certified to teach all sections of math and has 16 years of experience teaching math. In addition, he was currently an assistant varsity girls' basketball coach.

Mr. Davis expediently agreed to participate in the research study. The leadership role he disclosed to me was that he is spearheading a new Algebra 2 curriculum, which he is teaching to ninth graders in a math lab structured class format. He described how he completed training for this experimental program. Mr. Davis said, "Teachers have a responsibility to meet the needs of their students by identifying their learning styles, which will allow them to be more successful, and help to identify the students that are having difficulty with the content." For this reason, he indicated his class is structured in the form of a math lab in order to address the different learning styles of the students more efficiently; thus students may be able to receive more individual assistance. Additionally, I noted that Mr. Davis was easily accessible to students who came by for assistance, and he scheduled time to meet with them for extra help.

Sharon Cox. Ms. Cox has been special education director for the district for 2 years. She received her bachelor's degree in special education and described how she taught special education prior to EAHC, as well as how numerous changes have taken place in education since then. Ms. Cox said that she has "seen the process of special education develop throughout, chronologically and historically." In addition, she received her master's degree in counseling and worked as a special education counselor for 2 years. Ms. Cox described her present role in the district as "one who

supervises the special education program throughout the district to insure that students are getting their needs met, and that school personnel are following the letter of the law.”

Ms. Cox stated that it is imperative that prereferral intervention teams are developed in the district in order to address the needs of students prior to being referred to special education. She adhered to the position that while the change in demographics in the district has something to do with the population of students in special education, ethnicity does not impact a student’s academic performance. She espoused that student performance is affected by various issues and outside factors that impact their ability to be successful, regardless of ethnicity. Ms. Cox said that the district is in the process of implementing prereferral intervention teams within the district for these reasons: (a) The special education population within the district is 1,547 students, or 12% of the student population; (b) African American students receiving special education services number 504, or 32%; and (c) the average percentage of African American students receiving special education services at the 3 schools participating in the study is 43%.

The following sections describe findings from this study by research question. Four research questions guided this study concerning perceptions by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist regarding the campus administrators’ role in the prereferral processes: (a) involvement, (b) knowledge and skills needed, (c) responsibility to prevent a

disproportionate number of African American students identified for special education, and (d) criteria of successful prereferral programs.

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Research Question 1

What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district-level special education specialist relative to the campus administrators' involvement in activities prior to a referral to special education? The participants' narratives of their perceptions relative to the campus administrators' involvement in the prereferral processes were gathered through individual interviews. The participants were allowed freely to express their perspectives without prompting. This narration allowed emergent themes to develop. The emergent themes found among the four research questions build on one another rather than remaining isolated by question.

The participants interviewed discussed what they perceived to be the role of the campus administrators' involvement in the prereferral processes. Their opinions and views varied. They all mentioned that changes in demographics have increased the number of students in special education, thereby impacting the referral process. Additionally, this change has increased the role of the campus administrator in the prereferral process to that of becoming an important resource as an instructional leader on the campus. Moreover, all 7 participants felt that campus administrators should indeed be involved in the prereferral processes; however, the perceptions of

the campus administrator's level of involvement varied among the teachers and administrators.

Along those same lines, the perception of the structure of the prereferral process on each of the campuses was different for each campus and for each level of education within the district. For example, at the elementary campus the administrator has implemented prereferral intervention teams where, at this stage, the campus administrator provides the input and receives the feedback. On the other hand, at the secondary level there is more of a focus on the campus administrator's providing resources for the teacher to better serve and meet the needs of the students, rather than on the implementation of prereferral intervention teams. During the interview the secondary-level participants indicated that students are mainly identified early in elementary school if they need to be referred to special education.

Each participant spoke passionately about the importance of meeting the needs of all students regardless of ethnicity or level of education. For this reason, when I asked the administrators, general education teachers, and the district special education specialist about their perceptions of the campus administrator's involvement in the prereferral process on campus, their answers covered the administrators' role in staff development as well as their responsibility in decision-making processes. Thus, results for Research Question 1 contained three main themes: (a) providing resources, particularly regarding different learning styles; (b) the campus administrators' role in staff development, and (c) the campus administrators' responsibility in decision-making processes.

Providing resources, particularly for different learning styles. Each participant gave his or her perception of the involvement of the campus administrator in the prereferral process, which was to provide resources for the teachers. The two resources commonly shared and described by all of the participants were providing teaching strategies and instructional materials. Participants determined a link between these two resources. For instance, Ms. Cox related,

The campus administrators should be involved in the teaching strategies and be aware of resources available such as reading programs, and constantly bringing programs to the campus that could be used as one of the options to meet student's needs. In addition, the administrator should be definitely aware of teaching strategies or where to find the strategies. One person can't know everything, but the administrator should be one of the resource people who knows how to find what is needed for each child in the processes.

Moreover, Ms. Cox saw the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process as overwhelming. She stated, "A principal can't be all and do all, but can be a resource person." She shared how the campus administrator's role in providing resources is a definite way in which they can assist teachers in providing interventions needed to meet the needs of students prior to being referred to special education.

Additionally, I was able to observe a district administrators' prereferral intervention staff meeting, which included Ms. Cox, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, principals, and general education teachers. The same vocabulary of emphasis was used at the meeting, in which the administrators tried to identify the resources needed to enhance the teaching strategies of the teachers to address academic problems and improve student performance in the prereferral process. Also,

the meeting was held to coordinate and structure the campus administrators' responsibility in providing the resources that emphasize the teaching strategies relative to instructional materials to assist administrators and teachers with the prereferral processes on their campuses. During the meeting I observed the superintendent speaking with the special education director and principals in detail about providing funds the administrators needed for the teachers in the prereferral processes on their campuses.

Ms. Carter specifically indicated that administrators are responsible for resources such as finances. She indicated that it is imperative that the campus administrator be involved in providing resources for interventions that can address poor student performance. During the interview Ms. Carter defined how she saw herself involved in the prereferral process on her campus:

I believe the campus administrator should always be able to provide for their staff in areas such as connecting the teacher to programs, resources, and finances that would assist in the process. These types of programs and resources can be used as interventions to improve student performance and identify students' needs prior to a student being referred to special education. Additionally, by providing the resources for the teachers, this will assure that the services in the prereferral process are provided, and that staff members are equipped to assist students. Also, I am willing to work with my teachers or any group in the process in order to provide for the needs of the students.

The role of the campus administrator is mainly to provide the resources for the teachers, because the administrator does not know all the answers because of the tremendous amount of responsibilities we have on the campus. I don't think that the campus administrator is always in charge of the program. This doesn't mean that the administrator is always the one with the answer, because the teacher knows the student best. I must make sure that the teachers have the resources available to them to best meet the needs of the student in the prereferral process.

Ms. Carter further pointed out that the resources were to be used to enhance teaching strategies that will address poor student performance before a referral is necessary. She said she should empower her teachers in the prereferral process because “all kids can learn and we have to find out what will reach them.” She spoke passionately about her role in the prereferral process in her interviews, but she spoke of her role as a facilitator of resources and as a resource herself in that she can access and provide teaching strategies for the teachers. She then talked about establishing the prereferral intervention team on her campus for this purpose. Her prereferral intervention team is known as the Strategies to Achieve Results (S.T.A.R.) committee. Ms. Carter spoke with great pride about how she defined the purpose of the S.T.A.R. committee: to identify the problem and to identify strategically the resources in relation to teaching strategies that will meet the needs of the student in the prereferral process. Moreover, she emphasizes to her teachers that they must exhaust all interventions prior to referring a student to special education. She was clearly proud of her accomplishments and role in the prereferral processes on her campus.

Mr. Jones also identified providing resources linked to the teaching strategies as the campus administrators’ involvement in the prereferral process. He reported that the campus administrators’ role in the prereferral process is to ensure that teachers and school staff use resources in conjunction with teaching strategies as an intervention before a student is referred for special education. For example, the resources he provides teachers to aid in interventions include math manipulatives and

in particular math computer programs. During his interviews, he shared that he utilizes his background as a special education teacher to describe his perceptions and philosophy of the involvement of the administrator in the prereferral process. Mr. Jones explained,

So, I think it's our job as campus administrators to be involved in providing our teachers with the necessary resources and strategies teachers needed in the prereferral process to address the needs of the individual student to ensure that their students are successful. Further, I think these resources can be used as interventions for the students to assist in the area of difficulty they may be having. Also, I think that we should be involved as the administrator in providing those teachers with the necessary strategies to implement, such as teaching manipulatives to address the different learning styles such as the visual, kinetic, and auditory learner. Because if the teachers can't be successful with the resources and strategies provided for to address the different learners, then the students may have difficulty being successful. Because I believe there are resources such as instructional materials and teaching strategies that have been utilized by the special education teachers that can be utilized by our regular education teachers for the regular education students as well.

Mr. Jones espoused during the interview his belief that there is not much difference in teaching a regular education student as opposed to teaching a special education student. He indicated that it is imperative for campus administrators involved in the prereferral process to equip teachers to address the different learning styles of students. He reiterated that the involvement of the campus administrator must include providing resources such as instructional materials to identify various teaching strategies for teachers to address student's different learning styles.

Mr. Garcia also saw the campus administrators' involvement in the prereferral process as that of providing resources such as instructional materials and teaching strategies to address specific learning styles. Mr. Garcia said,

I think my involvement in the prereferral process is to be a resource person for the teachers and to make teachers aware of the different learning styles by providing the necessary materials for the teachers. Also, to make the teachers aware of the different kinds of teaching strategies that need to be implemented and also make them aware that every child is different and just give them an awareness that you can't teach the same way to all kids and that you are going to have to modify; every class has a different set of kids, and so you have to teach in a different manner. Even though you are teaching the same information, you've got to go about it in different ways to meet the needs of all the students.

As I said before, my involvement is as a resource person. For instance, if a teacher has any kind of questions about doing a certain thing or how do to go about getting the information, how to teach a different learning style or teaching strategy, I'm there as the administrator to be a resource and find the materials or find someone who may be able to help our teachers out with any kinds of questions they might have regarding the prereferral process.

Additionally, Mr. Garcia spoke about the importance of being a good communicator when acting as a resource for teachers. He emphasized having the ability to provide what teachers need in order to meet the needs of their students. Mr. Garcia noted that as an administrator in the prereferral process, he focuses on meeting the teacher's needs. He said his purpose is to equip the teacher especially in the area of resources such as instructional materials and teaching strategies, because teachers know best how to meet the needs of the students they teach on an ongoing basis. He stated, "If the teachers inform me of their needs to assist the students in the process, then I have a responsibility to provide those needs for the teachers to meet the student's needs."

Concurring with Mr. Garcia, Mr. Davis also declared during his interviews that the campus administrators' involvement in the prereferral process should be to provide resources for the teachers so they can address students according to their

different learning styles. Moreover, during the interviews, he described these resources as including scheduling classes in a manner that adheres to meeting the needs of students in the prereferral process with different learning styles. He asserted that campus administrators are already involved with the scheduling of classes on each campus, and this should be a component of the prereferral processes that goes along with the administrator's serving as a resource person with the aim of providing support to the teachers. Mr. Davis noted financial concerns, particularly regarding reducing class size; however, he shared that campus administrators have to be flexible and creative when implementing a schedule that will meet the needs of teachers in relation to the students' academic needs in the prereferral processes. In other words, he said that if the class schedule was addressed appropriately, then the teachers would be able to serve students in the prereferral process according to their learning styles. In addition, observation at the prereferral intervention meeting revealed that the superintendent, special education director, and campus administrators took a proactive approach by discussing the need to involve scheduling of students on the particular campuses within the district as part of the prereferral intervention process. There was a long dialogue among those in attendance in an effort to devise a sample schedule that would better meet the needs of each student academically prior to being referred to special education.

Mr. Davis was definitive that there should be a direct relationship between the teacher's teaching style and the students' learning styles:

This is where I think the campus administrator should be involved in the prereferral process, by doing more to look at the learning styles of the kid, how they learn and how they perceive things when creating the schedule of the teachers. For example, if the student is a visual learner, then schedule the student in a class where the teacher has a strength when it comes to reaching students who are visual learners, presenting information in a visual format. Also, if you have a teacher who is a strong audio teacher, then match that teacher with the student in the prereferral process who is a predominant audio learner. Simply match the teacher's technique to the predominant learning style of the student.

By being proactive in the prereferral process the administrator can put the students in a classroom environment where they will most likely succeed at learning. For example, I know students who do well in my classroom, and I have students that don't do well in my classroom. But once students move into or out of my classroom they become more successful. I don't think it's a direct reflection on me or them. I think it's because my style of teaching matches their learning style and maybe their personality as well. I think it should definitely be one of the processes that the campus administrator should be involved in. In terms of the prereferral process, administrators should look to match up students with teachers when scheduling, and maybe this will deter students from being referred prematurely or mistakenly.

Furthermore, Mr. Davis discussed the campus administrators' involvement in scheduling in prereferral processes by indicating that the campus administrator should be a resource when needed. When the scheduling is done in this fashion, campus administrators should be involved in prereferral processes by being accessible to teachers to answer their questions and concerns. Mr. Davis noted,

The campus administrator should be involved in planning the schedule as part of the process and should be a resource person as well from time to time to give their ideas for different teaching strategies to utilize with a particular student. As a resource in the prereferral process the campus administrator should be monitoring class size in relation to teaching strategies and adapting class size in order to meet the needs of the kids that may need extra interventions put in place. Also, the campus administrator should be involved in monitoring classes and making sure the placements of students in classes are appropriate and allow for the student to be successful learners. The campus administrator should also be involved in providing resources such as

varied teaching strategies along with scheduling where instruction can be adapted a little easier.

Along those same lines, Ms. Allen indicated in her interviews that the campus administrators' involvement consisted of providing resources for the teachers in the prereferral processes. She said that instructional materials for the teachers should be provided. Ms. Allen reported believing that teachers already provide many strategies in the prereferral process, and that the campus administrators' involvement should be one of being available to answer questions when needed and providing financial resources for instructional materials to meet the needs of the students in the prereferral process. She spoke about how her principal Ms. Carter emphasized trying different strategies, which proves she is involved in making sure teachers have the resources they need to ensure student success. However, she is not as involved in the prereferral process as she could be, because of her philosophy to try absolutely everything first. However, Ms. Allen stated in the interview that she finds comfort in her principal because although "she is not directly involved" she "is involved in the process by being accessible in finding instructional materials for her teachers." Ms. Allen expounded,

I think the campus administrator should be resourceful in being able to answer questions and provide information that the teacher may be unable recognize or identify. Also, I think most teachers try a lot of strategies before the students are even referred for special education. Also, they try a lot of reteaching. They even relocate students in the classroom to work with them one on one. They try to see if there is some physical problem causing the student's learning problems. Also, the administrators are a resource in assisting us when we have a problem. They should be involved as a resource when we need instructional materials to assist in meeting the student's needs, but also they should be involved only when we have a concern or all teaching strategies have been

exhausted before we refer them to special education. For example, I know as far as at our campus, our campus administrators are very good for us in the process by allowing us to go in and discuss whether we think there is a problem and to go through the process. They ask if we looked at this area or that area, and she will ask, “Are any resources we need that we don’t have that may help this student?” Ms. Carter has purchased reading materials for us to address students that are having difficulty in reading, whereas in the past they may have been referred to special education.

She spoke in depth about Ms. Carter’s involvement in the prereferral processes on her campus. There is a culture and attitude that goes with assisting a teacher in identifying a teaching strategy or instructional materials needed for the students to do well in class as a component of the prereferral processes. Furthermore, Ms. Allen credited Ms. Carter with how the teachers on the campus would exhaust all avenues and interventions in the prereferral process before speaking to her about assisting in the prereferral process. Ms. Allen explained that she identified with Ms. Carter in the prereferral process on this campus because of her desire to provide the best for all students academically, whether it involves providing instructional materials or assisting in providing teaching materials.

In contrast to the other participants, Mr. Thomas maintained that the campus administrator should have limited involvement in the prereferral process. He claimed that teachers mainly should handle the process because they work with and know the students best. He shared that campus administrators have many other responsibilities and only should be involved in the prereferral intervention meetings if the parent is involved or if there is a problem. According to Mr. Thomas, “This is due to the fact that the principal does not know the students well.” Mr. Thomas was more specific

during his interviews, when he identified that the involvement of the campus administrator in the prereferral process should be to delegate responsibilities:

I think the campus administrator should probably help delegate the program. I really don't think they need to be involved with each individual case. I think the campus administrator should delegate. But if there is a question, like if the parent has something they want resolved, then that's where I think the campus administrator should step in. The teachers should do the job and be actively involved because we know the kids better and have had contact with the parents.

The majority of the participants perceived the involvement of campus administrators in the prereferral process as providing resources for the teachers. These resources include funds for teaching strategies and instructional materials to address the different learning styles of students in the prereferral processes. Additionally, Ms. Carter provided emotional support for her teachers while being involved in the prereferral process by empowering them in identifying strategies before involving her in the process. Mr. Davis saw the need for campus administrators to be involved in the prereferral process in a proactive manner where they implement creative scheduling that utilizes teaching strategies in relation to the students' learning styles. Their perceptions of the campus administrators' involvement in prereferral processes are that the campus administrators must be willing to provide the teachers with whatever resources are deemed necessary for students. In contrast, Mr. Thomas perceived that campus administrators should be involved in prereferral processes on a limited basis, yet remain available when needed.

Staff development. During the interview process of the research study, the majority of the participants indicated that the campus administrators should take the

role of delegating staff development. Mr. Jones tactfully viewed the campus administrators' role in the area of staff development as one of spearheading the process of staff development by facilitating yet delegating responsibility of staff development when necessary. Mr. Jones expressed the importance of this concept due in part to his years as a special education teacher and current role as a campus administrator. Additionally, each participant had comparable perceptions of the campus administrators' role regarding the area of emphasis in the staff development that should take place in the prereferral processes.

A campus administrator has to make staff development available for teachers by providing a needs assessment in order to assist the teachers in the prereferral processes. As Ms. Carter noted, this can meet the needs of the teachers and students prior to the students being referred to special education. At the same time, it would be a good practice to get needs assessments from the faculty to determine their needs in specific areas such as prereferral and special education. The campus administrator should consult with the special education director or diagnostician to identify campus needs and provide the training for the campus, as Ms. Cox declared.

Also, Ms. Carter strongly shared Ms. Cox's response in the interviews to receiving input from the teachers prior to providing staff development in the prereferral processes. Ms. Carter explained in detail,

I delegate and I'm always a part of the staff development. I bring those people who work directly in those situations. We do a needs assessment and ask the teachers what needs they have as we plan staff development or professional development. Then we look at the needs assessment and prioritize the needs in planning the staff development in the prereferral intervention. I usually have

someone who is directly involved with working in that area of expertise make the presentations.

If there is an overwhelming need in some type of staff development in the area of prereferral intervention strategies or special education, then I seek professionals who can come present so my teachers may be present to ask questions. At the beginning of the year or at a designated time during the year, I proactively have my diagnostician speak to my staff about special education. Also, I have had my special education teachers present and discuss with my entire staff about modifications in special education and regular education for all students. In addition, I make sure that my staff receives staff development regarding the prereferral intervention process we have established that is necessary prior to a student being referred for special education.

Ms. Allen described the campus administrators' role in staff development in the prereferral processes:

Our campus administrator evidently makes sure we always have staff development training in an area that teachers need such as prereferral intervention, and every year we have something presented from our special education department on the referral system and special education.

For example, Ms. Allen indicated that the campus administrator should be involved in delegating the staff development to the specialist in the prereferral process. For example, the special education director came in to explain different strategies in the prereferral process and how the steps are effective, using examples and scenarios to address the needs of all students, as Ms Allen expressed. Whenever she talked about staff development on the campus in the prereferral processes, she would connect the focus of the staff development to procedural issues in the prereferral processes with knowing the learner. Ms. Allen clarified, "If the campus administrator does not focus on providing the teachers with intervention strategies to address all students' learning styles, then students may be inappropriately referred to special education." She shared

that this is the reason why Ms. Carter requires her teachers to go through particular steps before a student may be referred to special education.

Mr. Garcia described his role in staff development in the prereferral process: “I like to go out and find people that can come in and provide the expertise that is needed for our faculty.” Mr. Garcia adamantly maintained that he does not really see himself as one who comes forth and provides staff development in the area that pertains to the prereferral intervention process. He perceived his role to be to make sure that the information the specialists present to the teachers is accurate and will help teachers intervene and meet the needs of their students.

When he talked about his role in staff development in the prereferral process, Mr. Garcia related the focus of the training to the needs of the campus and district due to rapid changes on his campus and throughout the district. Mr. Garcia saw the need to equip the teachers in handling the cultural changes within the district. Additionally, Mr. Garcia stated,

As the campus administrator I must take a proactive role by providing our teachers with trainers in the area of diversity along with teaching strategies to address the different types of learners, cultural differences, and those with a low socioeconomic background....The students that are in danger of being referred to special education on our campus are the students that are from low socioeconomic and minority ethnicities.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Jones spoke about having a dual role in providing appropriate staff development related the prereferral process: delegating and facilitating. He perceived the role of the campus administrator in the staff development of the prereferral processes to be an active one. In addition, Mr. Jones

stated that the campus administrator should be responsible for the staff development by planning or coordinating the specialists who present the information to the staff.

Mr. Jones further explained,

I'm taking an active role in this because I want to, and I think as a building principal you should take that lead role, especially when it is involved in insuring that all kids are going to be successful. I again think that the campus administrator should take an active role in staff development in the area of prereferral intervention. I believe that administrators are taking an active role in the process by coordinating and planning the staff development.

Additionally, right now my responsibility is to put together many staff developments, in which many consist of strategies that can be used for all kids. Also, provide strategies that can be used towards other academic disciplines.

Mr. Jones adamantly proclaimed that campus administrators have an active role, whether they present staff development or just coordinate the speaker for the staff development in the prereferral processes. The campus administrator should provide staff development, Mr. Jones explained, to help teachers utilize teaching strategies that will help each child involved improve student performance. Mr. Thomas reiterated this sentiment in the interviews by sharing, "Campus administrators are the ones who should coordinate the staff development in the prereferral process."

Mr. Thomas believed that the staff development should be done by someone other than the campus administrator. Conversely, Mr. Jones described himself as being active in the staff development, including providing teachers with different strategies to meet their needs, such as critical thinking skills and higher learning questioning strategies, and utilizing strategies that are parallel, whether the students

are in special education or regular education, so that students will be successful. Mr. Davis identified with the majority of participants on the role of the campus administrator in the staff development as acting as a planner while delegating the actual training to specialists within the district. Along the same lines, Mr. Davis shared the opinions of his principal, Mr. Jones, “The campus administrator makes sure that everything is correct in the prereferral intervention by equipping the teachers with teaching strategies in the prereferral process in the area of staff development.”

The majority of the participants perceived the campus administrators’ role in staff development in prereferral processes as one of planning and delegating the training to specialists, such as those from the special education department or the school diagnosticians. They had some differing perceptions, however; for example, while they shared the opinion that training should occur in the area of teaching strategies for students in the prereferral process, based on the needs assessment on campus, Mr. Garcia added that staff needed to be trained in the area of cultural differences as well as on students of low socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, each participant explained that the campus administrators’ role in staff development should include making sure the staff development training takes place on the campus, for accessibility to staff. Finally, the participants agreed that the administrator should verify that the process is effective for identifying the needs of all students, through specialists to explain prereferral intervention strategies, teaching strategies, or prereferral process procedures.

Decision-making responsibility. All participants outlined how the decisions are made in the prereferral process on their particular campus, and how the campus administrators' responsibility in decision making reflects the role of the campus administrator in the prereferral process. In communicating about the campus administrators' decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process, 5 participants concurred that the campus administrators' decision-making responsibility should be that of a supportive role, where they trust the input and feedback they receive from the staff and teachers. Nevertheless, some of the participants perceived that the administrators have an active and supportive role regarding decision-making responsibility.

Participants differed regarding their perceptions of when campus administrators should become involved in the decision-making process. For instance, the 2 participants that had the most experience in special education, Ms. Cox and Mr. Jones, expressed that the campus administrators' decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process must occur at the beginning of the process. However, Mr. Garcia's idea of an active role in decision making was to keep abreast of everything throughout the process by having staff assigned to report findings and results of meetings to him directly both verbally, which was optional, and in writing; thus, he had "a hands-on attitude."

A majority of the participants believed that the decision making should include input from all stakeholders involved in the student's education, and not be solely dependant upon the campus administrator. Mr. Garcia said, "All the things that

go on in the prereferral intervention process that pertain to making decisions is really the responsibility of the teachers and the final responsibility of the administrator.”

When I interviewed the participants and asked them about their responsibility in the decision-making portion of the prereferral process, they seemed to convey that their impression of the word *supportive* meant that administrators were involved on a limited basis, but deferred much of the decision-making responsibility to the teachers because of their knowledge of their students. Mr. Davis emphatically shared that he did not perceive the campus administrators as having an active role in the decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process, because their many and varied duties keep them extremely busy doing other things on the campus. Because of this, the campus administrator needs to be able to rely on other individuals when it comes to making those important decisions. For example, the campus administrator usually depended on the expertise of the teacher and counselor who know the students on an individual basis, as reported by Mr. Davis. Mr. Garcia professed in a similar manner that it is important for the campus administrator to play an important role in decision-making, but the teachers know the students from their daily experience with them; therefore, teachers can decide more readily what steps are necessary to determine what students need in the way of prereferral intervention strategies. Likewise, Ms. Carter saw her responsibility in decision making to be a listener and observer who remains available to the teachers as needed:

I feel my responsibility is to listen and to observe. I rely heavily on my teachers because I consider my teachers to be the experts in my classrooms. They see the students on a daily basis, and I listen to them very carefully for

their input. The campus administrator needs to follow up and find out what the situation is, where we are at that moment, and whether we targeted the specific needs of the student. Furthermore, I do a lot of reflecting as the teachers dialogue with and discuss the students' needs with me. I feel the role as a group is to try to come to a common consensus in making an accurate decision that will be in the best interest of the student.

Ms. Allen indicated that the campus administrator does not really get involved in making the actual decision, which should be left up to the teacher, counselor, and campus administrator on the prereferral intervention team. Thus, the campus administrator is in actuality a part of the decision-making process. Ms. Carter and Ms. Allen acknowledged that the campus administrator should have shared responsibility in the decision making but maintain some oversight when it comes to determining the most accurate and correct decision for the students. Ms. Allen said,

The campus administrator should have input, but leave the decisions up to the teacher or committee—which includes personnel such as the teacher, counselor, administrator, parent, and special education teacher when appropriate—because they are the ones who work with the student and have the most pertinent knowledge concerning the student, as well as being the most familiar with what intervention strategies have already been utilized that do and do not work for a particular student.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Jones and Ms. Cox reported that the campus administrators' responsibility in the decision-making process should be displayed in an autocratic manner by which the administrator makes sure that all modifications and options have been explored for the students prior to being referred for special education. They developed this philosophy when they were special education teachers and both maintained that the campus administrator should take a more proactive approach to making decisions. Mr. Jones identified the campus administrators'

decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process as an important one in that they should make sure that everyone involved in the process is “on the same page.” Mr. Jones expounded on the campus administrators’ decision-making responsibility to convey that the ultimate purpose was to make sure the student is successful. He determined this success was certain if they utilized the department heads, the curriculum specialist, and the diagnostician assigned to his campus to provide input and assist him in making decisions concerning the students’ needs prior to referring a student for special education. He said,

I think campus administrators play an important role in the process, and I myself do whatever it takes as far as going above and beyond to ensure that every child is going to be successful. Due to my background in special education I think that I should be involved in the decision-making process of prereferral intervention. I believe as campus administrators, we are responsible for making those decisions, but we must make sure that everyone involved in the prereferral intervention process has enough knowledge in making well-informed decisions when appropriate to the situation at hand. For example, I take a look at the history of the student and how the student has done over time. I believe my role and the role of the campus administrator is very important, and it is to help facilitate the process such as decision making to ensure all students will be successful.

Clearly, Mr. Jones has a genuine care for all students, because of his keen focus and belief that he is responsible for being an active party in the decision-making aspect of the prereferral process.

Equivalently, Ms Cox spoke about the campus administrator taking a lead role in the decision-making responsibility by guiding the teachers, counselors, and stakeholders involved and by being responsible in the prereferral process for making accurate decisions that are best for all students. Ford (2001) shared that accountability

is a requirement of leadership, and effective leadership is needed at all levels in the classroom, schoolwide, districtwide, and within the entire school community to ensure all students receive an appropriate education. Ms. Cox reiterated this information during her interviews in the research study:

I think the bottom line is that the campus administrators' responsibility in the prereferral process is to make sure that they explore enough avenues to ensure that the students' educational needs are being met. In addition, the campus administrator is responsible for making sure that we have all the information needed to make well-informed decisions, whether it's concerning a student or the intervention committee. Also, they need to take a leadership role of guiding the group involved in the prereferral process back to where all interventions are reviewed to make sure the best decision for the student is made, and the interventions occur prior to the student being referred to special education.

As I said before, I believe the campus administrator should be involved in the decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process because I think every child deserves to have the kind of instruction for education that works best for them in order for that child to get what specific needs met.

The majority of the participants' perception of the campus administrators' decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process was that of relying on teachers and specialists who know the students best and making decisions by consensus. In contrast, due to their experiences in special education, Mr. Jones and Ms. Cox believed that the campus administrators' decision-making responsibility in the prereferral process was to take an autocratic lead and proactive role when making decisions, notwithstanding working directly with the specialists to ensure that the needs of the students are met before they are referred to special education. The administrators make these decisions rather than working to reach a consensus in a committee setting. Overall, the campus administrators believed that they should take

an active role and that it is their responsibility to make decisions regarding the prereferral process. However, there was an underlying difference in how each participant perceived the meaning of *active* and *supportive*. In all, each participant stated that the campus administrators have a decision-making responsibility to do what is best for all students in the prereferral process.

Research Question 2

What perceptions are held by campus administrators relative to knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to referral to special education? Research Question 2 specifically addressed the campus administrators' perceptions only of the knowledge and skills needed to administer an effective prereferral process for special education programs. The campus administrators shared their perceived impressions relative to knowledge and skills needed to administer an effective prereferral process. As the campus administrators explained their perceptions, three themes emerged: (a) campus administrators' perceptions of their level of current training in special education, (b) lack of knowledge and skills in special education, and (c) knowledge and skills needed to administer an effective prereferral process.

Level of current training in special education. Campus administrators described their level of training in special education they received in their educational administration preparatory program. All three campus administrators felt that their current training in special education received in their educational administration

preparatory program was very similar to that of most other campus administrators in the field of education. For example, each campus administrator indicated that they received limited training in their educational administration preparatory program. They expounded by indicating that they took the minimal requirement of coursework in the area of special education, in which the emphasis was on special education law. Mr. Garcia admitted to “not really being well versed in special education.” He noted that this is an area as a campus administrator that he should know and about which he needs to learn more. Likewise, Ms. Carter professed that she took the minimal number of special education classes, two courses, in her educational administration preparatory program, where the emphasis was also on special education law. Moreover, she indicated that most of her training was “on-the-job experience.” Mr. Jones has a different frame of reference because he received most of his formal college preparatory training as a special education teacher prior to becoming an administrator. However, he described the special education training he received in his educational administration coursework as “very limited,” with an emphasis on special education law.

The administrators in the study also shared information concerning their perceptions of the level of training in special education that they received while serving in their current positions. They all agreed that the majority of their current training is on-the-job training, which they received through attending workshops and conferences focused in the area of special education law and the ARD process. Ms. Carter reiterated, “I would say that probably a small percentage of campus

administrators received formal training in any district in their educational administration preparatory program. Many of them learned through experience.”

Additionally, Mr. Garcia related how the majority of his knowledge in the area of special education has occurred while on the job. Mr. Garcia elaborated,

I don't remember precisely the name of the course that was specifically devoted to special education in my administrative classes, but I took the minimal number of classes required for my program in which I don't have much training in special education. Obviously, I have taken a special education law class.

Now as a principal, some of my training is in things such as special education law and the ARD process, the only training I have received on special education services. Also, the training that I have received in special education services has come from whenever I've gone to some conferences and workshops in the area of special education. For example, I have attended special education law and ARD training sessions at workshops and conferences in other districts. I guess my point is much of the training is on the job. I take the courses that I need to know and rely on those that have the special expertise in special education.

Mr. Jones said it was important to stay current concerning the things that are happening in special education especially as an administrator. He discussed during the interview that he was scheduled to attend a workshop and conference in the area of special education law and the ARD process in the near future. The campus administrator must attend training pertaining to special education such as special education law and ARD process, Mr. Jones strongly maintained. Avidly, Ms. Carter shared that she thinks there must be a link between formal training and on-the-job experience that will better prepare and assist campus administrators in servicing all students. An administrator cannot do a good enough job with merely the training they received in the educational administration preparatory program, because most of the

pertinent training received by campus administrators comes from on-the-job experience. This was explained in more detail by Ms. Carter's response when I asked, "What level of special education training do you currently possess?"

Basically a lot of my knowledge is from workshops and on-the-job training experiences. I don't think the special education courses I took were adequate, because many times the things that we do once we're actually on the job had not been covered in the classroom. Many times when you are in the sterile environment of a college class it does not begin to prepare you for what you are going to face in the real world or the reality of public school. But, I feel like that as far as the administrators' college preparatory classes are concerned, there probably needs to be more visits done on campuses to actually see what the process is like and to actually see what the teachers have to deal with. The campus administrator needs to see what their role is in the prereferral process, special education, and ARD committee process. Also, they need to see what the teacher really deals with regarding students with learning difficulties and the special needs of a special education child. Additionally, I think the campus administrator needs firsthand experience and on-the-job training with special education, because it's a very complex system that's currently in place.

The campus administrators' perception of the current level of special education training was similar. The campus administrators took the minimal amount of special education courses in their educational administration preparatory program. Eighteen states require an introductory course in special education to handle the many tasks associated with special education practices in the schools (Powell & Hyde, 1997). Additionally, they discussed that in their educational administration preparatory coursework they only took a special education law class. Even Mr. Jones, who has more special education experience than the other participants, only took one special education law class in his educational administration program experience. The campus administrators clearly acknowledged receiving most of their current training

on the job by attending workshops and conferences in the area of special education law and the ARD process. Since the preparatory training is vastly inadequate, it should be linked with on-the-job training to make it more realistic and a bit more extensive and hands on, according to Ms. Carter.

Lack of knowledge and skills in special education. Related to their perceived lack of training, the campus administrators shared their perceptions of their lack of knowledge and skills in special education. They spoke about how they lack the knowledge and skills needed to identify enough modifications such as teaching strategies and resources for students who are having difficulty learning to become successful prior to being referred to special education. In speaking about the lack of knowledge and skills in special education, the 3 campus administrators explained that they work to provide the necessary resources for the students and teachers in order for them to be successful and to meet the academic needs of the students in the classroom.

When I asked this question of the campus administrators, they answered the question specifically from the point of view of the prereferral process. They all noted that they felt the word *lack* carried negative connotations that were recognizable mainly because they did not mention lacking any knowledge or skills when speaking about the technical aspect of special education, such as current special education law, procedures, and guidelines. Ms. Carter said,

Some campus administrators are continuing to learn about special education, but some still have the concept that if a student is having trouble or struggling in class, then special education is the answer. The mindset is if special

education has the funds and they are there to serve those students that are different so the student needs to be referred to special education.

Each campus administrator in this study viewed lack of knowledge and skills in special education as being in the area of teaching strategies and from an instructional standpoint, such as providing resources to address the need of diverse learners and various different learning styles. Mr. Garcia reiterated that he believes that he lacks the knowledge and skills in special education in the area of teaching strategies in meeting the needs of students in the classroom prior to referring a student to special education. In addition, he indicated that he does “not know enough strategies” and that “the campus administrators are confined by the programs available, and sometimes don’t have the time to explore or learn all the possibilities for children.”

Also, Mr. Garcia described one of the factors in the campus administrators’ lack of knowledge and skills in special education as not knowing which resources are available at their “fingertips” for assisting teachers. For example, they may not know how to utilize a particular reading program for a student and instead may have all the students read from the same reading program. Mr. Garcia proclaimed, “All options should be explored before a student is referred to special education, because if you have the correct teaching strategies, then you will be able to identify the weaknesses of the students more accurately.” Mr. Jones elaborated,

I think it would be good to know more different types of strategies that can be used. Also, the campus administrator must be able to find the strategies and creatively find the time for teachers to actually use the strategies in an effort to meet the students’ academic needs. We have several strategies to use, but I

know there are more out there. And so I guess it's just a matter of knowing what other strategies are out there that can be used to ensure that students are going to be successful. Additionally, I think the district and this campus is ready to learn about more strategies for individual types of students because of the difference in the demographics and the number of students. We are growing so rapidly that the more students you have, the bigger difference there is going to be, and there is an increased need for learning about it all because special education should only be considered as a last resort.

Moreover, the campus administrators said it was important to address the area of special education as it pertains to the prereferral process prior to a student's referral to special education. They identified how they can improve in trying to meet the needs of students prior to referral to special education. Furthermore, the campus administrators shared that because they lacked the knowledge and skills in special education, they were not doing to address the students' needs in special education. Mr. Jones noted that he but was "always willing to learn." Although Mr. Jones has the most special education experience of the participants, he discussed that he needed "to find ways to encourage teachers and to find more ways and different types of strategies to address the needs of the students prior to being referred to special education." Campus administrators need training that will help them be useful in meeting the needs of every child, according to Mr. Jones.

Ms. Carter discussed her knowledge and skills with ease, confidence, and passion.

There is still some separation between special education and regular education in that if a student can't fit in this box, and if the student can't fit in the mold of the regular education program as it stands, then go ahead and refer them to special education.

However, Ms. Carter saw herself in a constant search to help equip teachers and herself to identify teaching strategies and additional resources and to empower teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners. For instance, she emphasized the need for regular education teachers to utilize special education modifications and special education teaching strategies prior to referring a student to special education.

Additionally, she spoke about her lack of knowledge and skills needed to identify research-based resources that would meet the needs of diverse learners. Ms. Carter clarified,

The ideal would be to have a variety of research-based programs available for students who learn differently. For example, currently if the student is not succeeding in a specific reading program that we have available, they are referred to special education. I'm thinking we need a variety of possibilities, research-based programs, and if the student can't succeed in the programs or with the teaching strategies utilized by the teacher, then a special education referral may be necessary. As a principal, there has to be more knowledge and skills in special education teaching strategies and modifications utilized by the regular education teacher before a child is placed in special education. Principals have to provide all teachers with the things they need to effectively improve student performance.

Avidly Ms. Carter spoke about empowering her teachers, she described to a great extent the need for

providing resources to assist in teaching strategies to help teachers with their emotional bank in order for the teacher to know their child best and be able to identify what works best for the individual students so their needs can be adequately and efficiently met.

Ms. Carter's demeanor and care for her students was evident in how she approached educating her students. This empathy helps her realize the needs of her students. She explained further,

When I say providing resources to assist teachers with teaching strategies, I think as principals we need to continuously build on what we have. When I say resources, I must find better ways to assist my teachers in the classroom with diverse learners before they are referred to special education. It could be to help the teacher with their academic expansion. When I say academic expansion, they may already have the knowledge but I need to help expand on how they can best help that particular child. For instance, I think I was talking about having a variety of programs to assist teachers, and as the principal it is my responsibility to identify programs and teaching strategies to meet the needs of my students who learn differently.

Ms. Carter discussed how she perceived herself as hindered because there is so much emphasis on special education law and ARD procedures, because of the increase in lawsuits. Ms. Carter maintained that campus administrators must be introduced to more special education knowledge and skills in the area of special education teaching strategies and different modifications to help the regular education teachers when a student is not successful in regular education class. She stated, “This will provide the regular education teachers with alternatives instead of thinking of special education as the only option.”

The campus administrators shared what they perceived to be the knowledge and skills they lack in special education. They shared how they identified that providing teaching and instructional resources for teachers as the areas they lack in the special education. The reason for this is because the campus administrators viewed the instructional component as the area of emphasis, as opposed to the technical aspects of special education such as special education law, ARD process, and procedural issues. Additionally, the campus administrators indicated that they felt that referring students to special education should be the final option. Thus they

emphasized the need to provide regular education teachers with teaching strategies and instructional resources to meet the needs of diverse learners prior to referring them to special education.

The knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to a referral to special education. Learning about the campus administrators' background as far as training and experiences in special education helped illustrate the knowledge and skills in special education they may lack, which in turn led to campus administrators' identifying the knowledge and skills needed to administer an effective prereferral process. They did indeed provide insight into their perceptions of what knowledge and skills are needed to administer an effective prereferral process. Ms. Carter responded,

I believe the principal needs to be resourceful enough to know how to come up with intervention strategies and management strategies such as making instructional materials available, and resources and strategies for teachers to implement to meet the needs of all students. The knowledge of a variety of possible interventions and how to access them for the teachers and students, and communication with the diagnosticians as well as instructional and curriculum specialists are all important to determining success. Let me also include the ability to locate other reading programs, research-based programs that can help a regular education student that may be having difficulty. When I say management strategies, they have to have some sense of what the needs are based upon dialogue with the teacher and other people involved with the student. Additionally, the principal needs to be aware and know how to find and get the resources. Also, as a principal you have these interventions in place, and you must know how to get the resources for the teachers and students to administer an effective prereferral process.

Unmistakably, Ms. Carter made it clear that she saw that the campus administrator must operate as a resource person in order to administer an effective prereferral process. She described what she meant by resource person: "We have to be the kind

of instructional leaders on our campuses who provide the resources and materials to empower the teachers to use effective strategies that will ensure that students are successful in the classroom.” Ms. Carter felt that she has been proactive in administering an effective prereferral process on her campus because she has been able to identify various resources needed by teachers to identify their student’s academic needs.

Similarly, Mr. Jones described that in order to administer an effective prereferral process, the campus administrator has to be a problem solver. He felt that the campus administrator needs to know some of the effective teaching strategies and resources that are available to ensure students’ success in the classroom before ever considering special education. Mr. Jones’ passion became apparent when he discussed in more detail the knowledge and skills the campus administrator needed in order to administer an effective prereferral process. Mr. Jones specified,

The campus administrator must have the ability to get hands-on help with the problems a student may have, especially when it comes to identifying the student’s need. The campus administrator must know what options are available. In other words, they need to have knowledge of the different options that are available for the teachers and be able to assist the teachers. This includes being aware of the different components in the district already in place to lend a hand, such as the diagnostician, department heads, and counseling staff. By utilizing these specialists the campus administrator may be able to assist the teacher with resources to address students’ needs. They also may have to deal with such things as outside issues that may be negatively impacting the students performance in the classroom, that the teacher may not be able to address because of the lack of knowledge the teacher may have in that area of the students’ background. Also, I believe utilizing these resources will equip administrators to more appropriately reach a child who is having difficulty. One example would be utilizing the reading and instructional specialist. I have to make sure that I know and make available the different instructional materials and teaching strategies to

address the different learning styles of students and maybe even teachers as well.

Mr. Jones explained that administrators must recognize whether teachers really have the necessary tools available to them to meet the needs of the students who are having difficulty in school. If they do not, administrators must be proactive at providing such resources. Unquestionably, Mr. Jones noted that the more knowledge and skills the campus administrator has when it comes to identifying and recommending various resources for teachers, the more effective the administrator will be able at administering the prereferral process on campus.

Mr. Garcia's perception of the knowledge and skills needed to administer effective prereferral processes was dissimilar from the other campus administrators. For instance, he emphasized the utilization and the availability of school staff as opposed to the other campus administrators, who emphasized using both instructional materials and school staff as resources. Also, Mr. Garcia described the campus administrator who administers an effective prereferral process as a resource person having knowledge and skills in the technical aspects of special education, such as staying current with special education law, procedures, and the ARD process as well as what process to follow before a student is referred to special education. Mr. Garcia acknowledged that because he lacked a knowledge base in special education, he felt somewhat limited in being able to administer an effective prereferral process. Moreover, Mr. Garcia said, "I would definitely try to lean on someone who does have that background and expertise." He continued,

If the principal has a working relationship with the diagnostician, counselor, and inclusion teacher, the principal will be able to gather an overall knowledge of the information needed to oversee the prereferral process. Also, as long as the principal has an expert available in those areas, then they are going to be able to help facilitate the entire prereferral process.

As I interviewed the campus administrators, one of the common themes I observed was their perceptions that the campus administrators need to rely on other specialists in order to administer an effective prereferral process, except Mr. Garcia who stressed that campus administrators themselves needed to have knowledge and skills in special education. Mr. Garcia contended that the campus administrator should have the knowledge and skills in special education in order to be a resource for the teachers in the prereferral process. Campus administrators should have a “high knowledge” in special education in order to be able to assist and help teachers who work with poor performing students in the prereferral process.

Research Question 3

What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist relative to the campus administrators’ responsibility to assure there is not disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education?

The 7 participants of this study shared their perceptions of the campus administrators’ involvement in prereferral processes. In addition, the campus administrators spoke about their perceptions of the knowledge and skills needed to administer an effective prereferral process. Because of these presumptions and

expectations, I wanted all the participants to share their perceptions of the campus administrators' responsibility to assure there is not a disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education. In order to discover this information I asked all the participants a series of questions, and themes emerged from their answers. Those themes are (a) the perceptions of the campus administrators' responsibility to assure no disproportionality of African American students in special education and (b) the perceptions of the campus administrators' accountability in assessment of the prereferral process to ensure no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education on their campus.

The 7 participants shared why it is important that the campus administrator should be held responsible and accountable to make sure there is not a disproportionate identification of African American students being serviced in special education. All the participants spoke about the campus administrator having the responsibility of educating teachers on ways to address the educational needs of African American students by eliminating ethnic cultural biases and addressing the different learning styles of students. By doing this the campus administrator makes certain teachers and school staff exhaust all interventions necessary prior to referring a student for special education. Furthermore, the participants shared how the campus administrators must hold teachers and staff members accountable by providing data analysis, specifically in the area of evaluating failure rates; by helping them to analyze benchmark assessment results in order to diagnose instruction for all students according to students' performance level; and by evaluating the percentage of student

referred to special education broken down by their ethnicity. Hence, a successful prereferral process identifies the educational needs regardless of the ethnicity of the student prior to the student's referral for special education.

Responsibility to assure no disproportionality of African American students in special education. The 7 participants' ardor became apparent through the fervent manner in which they shared their perceptions. They purposely discussed the significance of the campus administrators' responsibility to ensure no disproportionate identification of African American students for special education through dispelling ethnic and cultural bias and ensuring that teachers exhaust intervention strategies before referring a student for special education. The participants discussed the importance of campus administrators' making a conscious effort to expand their knowledge and become better informed in discovering the needs of students according to the varying demographics of students that have relocated into the district and to their campuses. I asked why they felt it was important to dispel the ethnic and cultural bias and ensure teachers to exhaust intervention strategies. Ms. Carter shared her perception that it is indeed important for campus administrators to increase the knowledge and skills of the teachers in the area of effectively working with children of different ethnicities so that all students experience success in their school performance. This will bridge the lines of communication that may affect instruction or comprehension between the teacher and student. She said,

I feel we fall short in preparing our educators in the area of diversity. When I say diversity, I'm not talking about the color of the skin. I'm not talking about the economic aspects of where our children are coming from. Many times teachers are not made aware of different, let me say cultural differences. When I say culture, the child could be any color, but the teacher is not familiar with the habits, the climate, the experiences that child has had, then they don't really know what makes that child tick. And many times the vocabulary that is used in the classroom has a lot to do with it because the child has no idea of what the teacher is talking about. So, I feel that the teacher needs to develop a relationship with students in order to figure out strategies that will work when addressing culturally and ethnically different students.

I try to expand the teachers' knowledge concerning the people who are here on this campus and who work with our children; there is more than one ethnicity in the classroom, therefore, gaining more knowledge about students and their differences, and learning about behaviors and things of that nature help us communicate successfully with one another. The district has changed so much that many of our teachers do not have many experiences working with students of different ethnicities. Hopefully, we are adequately versed with knowledge about every aspect of the child.

Ms. Carter spoke earnestly about how many times teachers get a different response than expected from a student. For example, she felt that an African American student might feel apprehensive when responding or answering questions about an assignment or test question to a middle- to upper class Caucasian teacher. Ms. Carter discussed how she felt that the district and her campus are "playing catch-up" as far as expanding the knowledge of differences of students, the rapidly increasing ethnic demographic shift is "overwhelming and overcoming the district." Ms. Carter claimed for this reason, "we didn't in many cases take the time to look at the entire child and know our learner," which many times caused the prereferral process to be used inappropriately.

For example, Ms. Carter indicated that discipline problems may occur because the child may not be feeling successful, and thus may act out due to frustration. Then

the teacher “will not delve into the culture to find out what makes the student tick in order to help them be successful. As an administrator we must work with our teachers to expand their knowledge” in order to ensure that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. She maintained that campus administrators have a responsibility to assist teachers, as opposed to the teacher sending the student to the office because of discipline problems, referring the student to special education, or referring the student to a behavioral or emotional classroom setting. Passionately, Ms. Carter felt that the campus administrator should always make sure that the teachers have an awareness of the cultural differences and what each student needs. Further, she stated as campus administrators, “We need to find out what those demographic changes are on our campuses, and then we need to seek the sources in order to better enable our teachers and our staff members to deal with those demographic changes.” She added that her responsibility as a campus administrator is simply “to make sure that there is not a disproportionate number of students referred to special education.”

Unmistakably, Mr. Garcia’s perceptions concurred with Ms. Carter’s regarding the campus administrators’ responsibility to dispel the ethnic and cultural bias to assure no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. Mr. Garcia shared that each ethnic group looks at things differently, and it is the campus administrators’ job to make sure teachers are knowledgeable about different cultures are provided opportunities to learn more about different cultures. Mr. Garcia explained,

I provide my teachers with tidbits of information on what and how to deal with the cultural differences of the students in their classrooms. For example, I give them access to instructional and teaching strategies they can implement in the classroom, and I inform my faculty what the ethnic breakdown of the campus might be at that time. Some of the teachers might not know the breakdown. I also let them know how many students from each ethnic group are receiving special education services. Also, the teachers will be able to look for themselves at the differences and see how as a campus we can address the demographic changes such as ethnic or cultural differences prior to a student being referred to special education.

In contrast, when I asked Ms. Allen a series of questions on this topic, she was hesitant to discuss the disproportionate identification of African American students for special education. Ms. Allen said the campus administrator should be responsible for assuring there is not a disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. She said, “I hate to say disproportionate, that part kind of bothers me because it doesn’t matter what culture or ethnicity the students are, but if they have a problem we need to help them.” She indicated that the main emphasis of the campus administrator should be to provide the teachers with resources to help children. However, Ms. Allen began to open up and feel more comfortable in answering the questions. She stated, “If you look at the background of the student, you can help the student.”

I know that we are getting such a diverse society of students in the district, and the principal has addressed the differences in ethnicity, cultures, and nationalities on this campus. I think there should be an emphasis by the principal in identifying the needs of students with different ethnicities, but we must not lose focus of the big picture, which is to meet the needs of students who are not learning regardless of their ethnicity. I do believe that as teachers we need to know about the ethnic and cultural background of all of our students to better serve them. The students need to know that their ethnic and cultural background is as important as the student next to them, and the principal must provide resources and strategies to help the students. As a

teacher we have to connect with them so that they know and better understand the other students in our class. In my opinion, the principal must lead this on their campus by taking the responsibility to provide cultural awareness for the teachers.

Enthusiastically, Ms. Allen spoke about how her campus administrator has voiced to teachers the importance of ensuring that the needs of the students are being met regardless of their ethnicity; but as the demographics change at an increased rate, they must place a conscious “emphasis on equipping the teachers on how they can get to know all of our learners, especially those of a different ethnicity or culture and those of a different culture who is new to our campus.” She noted that this continual awareness effort by the campus administrator will help eliminate cultural and ethnic biases. This elimination is the key to assuring that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education.

This perception was restated by Mr. Davis during an interview. He felt that the campus administrator should encourage teachers to look at the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students they teach. He said this includes “identifying what is acceptable and what is not acceptable to the student, because it may have an effect on the student’s performance in that particular teacher’s class.” During the interview Mr. Davis acknowledged the respect that one should have for people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The campus administrator should provide training and instructional strategies for teachers to be able to work effectively with diverse learners in the classroom, Mr. Davis attested. He described the impact that his campus

administrator had assisting teachers in ensuring that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students for special education:

The principals are responsible for educating the teachers on the different demographics to help eliminate the stereotype of that group or student. For example, I have to make sure I respond to meet the particular students' needs the same in the African American community as I do those from my own ethnicity. For instance, I must monitor how I talk to them, how I see their dress or that sort of thing, what is important in their family, and how their background is different coming into my classroom so that I won't misinterpret their self-expression. If you find a high rate of an ethnic group referred to special education, then more staff development on differences and educating us as teachers on the differences in the ethnic group is needed. This educating by the campus administrator will help reduce the number of African American students being referred to special education.

Mr. Davis discussed that the campus administrator should take a proactive role to keep a current eye on the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students on campus. In addition, the administrator should provide this information to the teachers and stress their purpose, which is to meet those student's needs as the demographics within the district continue to change. Moreover, Ms. Cox indicated that the campus administrator has a responsibility to educate teachers concerning working with diverse students. Ms. Cox concurred with Mr. Davis,

We are becoming so culturally varied, and we have a broad spectrum of students, and it is important that campus administrators provide the support for our teachers so they can identify in strategies and find information they need to address the culturally different students.

Similar to Ms. Allen's notion, Ms. Cox believed that the campus administrators' responsibility is to make sure that every child gets his or her academic needs met, regardless of ethnic background. She explained in detail,

So, if a student happens to be African American or happens to be Brown, I think, or any other color, I think the campus administrator and the teacher should look at what brought the student to where they are or what got them to where they are today. It's the campus administrators' responsibility to explore every child's background to help determine what the teachers or administrator needs to do, but it doesn't really matter what color they are. I think the campus administrator is responsible for assisting the teacher in getting a broader understanding of children's backgrounds and go at it that way. I believe this will help reduce the numbers of disproportionate representations of African American students in special education.

Undeniably, understanding the students' differences helps understanding how they learn best. Ms. Cox excitedly asked, "Now that we know the differences, how does the teacher help the individual child?" She answered her own question,

I think the campus administrator should go about by keeping this issue of cultural differences before the teachers as a constant model and reminder that this African American child comes from a background that is different from the way that teacher was raised, and that they are simply different. The campus administrator must lead and remind the teachers before we determine a special education referral is in order, and help the teachers address those differences.

Furthermore, Ms. Cox indicated that one of the concerns that the campus administrators have to address is finding resources related to teaching students of different ethnicities, such as interventions and teaching strategies. In addition, Ms. Cox said to address this issue of disproportionality, the district needs more of a variety of interventions. Campus administrators have to work diligently to find and provide resources to educate teachers and school staff in the area of cultural and ethnic differences, including staff development, book studies, or resources to teach and train teachers.

Mr. Jones spoke outright about the matter. He expressed that in order to ensure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, the campus administrator must provide the teachers with different teaching strategies. In contrast to Ms. Cox, Mr. Jones stated, “There are so many different strategies that can be used to ensure that a student is going to be successful prior to being referred to special education.” Mr. Carter saw that campus administrators and teachers should use the prereferral process for the reason it is meant to be used: to make sure that disproportionate identification of African American students does not occur. Mr. Jones clarified,

I think we really have to look at the prereferral process carefully, because there is a disproportionate representation of certain ethnic groups in special education. I think teachers sometimes get so frustrated because they feel that a certain student can't learn the only thing to do is to refer that student to special education. If the campus administrator would take the time—and this is where the prereferral process can help—take the time to plan and put their heads together and identify some different strategies and activities, and teachers would use the accommodations and modifications we already have in place or know of, we'll find that we can eliminate the disproportionate representation of African American students being referred to special education. I believe the campus administrators are responsible for providing the strategies to the teachers.

Mr. Jones acknowledged throughout the interviews that the campus administrator should work alongside staff members to help teachers come up with many strategies to use to ensure that students are going to be successful. In addition, if those strategies do not work, “then we must come together to try other strategies and activities,” Mr. Jones stated.

However, Mr. Thomas had a different outlook regarding the campus administrators' responsibility in ensuring that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students for special education. Mr. Thomas stated that he "does not see where ethnicity or culture comes into play before a student is referred to special education." He maintained the campus administrator and the teacher must identify the strengths of the students, and that the ethnicity or culture of the students does not matter. Hence, if the student needs to be referred for special education, "they need to be in the special education program," Mr. Thomas declared. Mr. Thomas spoke about how the campus administrators and teachers in the profession make decisions in the best interest of students in order to meet their needs, even if they have to be referred to special education. Further, Mr. Thomas stated that the ultimate responsibility of the campus administrator is to ensure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students in special education by maintaining

an awareness of all the data available and utilizing it by sharing with the teachers to make accurate decisions in the best interest of the student regardless of ethnicity, culture, or race. And if they need to be in the special education program, then it should be done.

In summary, several of the participants shared how campus administrators have a responsibility to make sure that teachers are aware of ethnic and cultural differences of the students that they teach. This awareness will enhance the teachers' ability to identify academic needs by better understanding the students' background or multicultural differences. It was also noted by Mr. Jones that campus administrators should provide strategies for teachers in order to address the students'

needs prior to being referred to special education. However, Mr. Thomas stated that ethnicity and culture do not factor into the decision to refer a student to special education. He discussed in the interview that the campus administrators are responsible for assisting the teachers in making the best decisions for students, even if that means the decision is to refer a student for special education.

Accountability in the assessment of prereferral processes. The participants offered their perceptions of the campus administrators' accountability in the assessment of the prereferral process to insure that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. The participants shared that the campus administrators should assess and supervise data collection in the prereferral process. Participants noted that campus administrators collaborate with teachers and school staff in assessing the data collected in order to make appropriate decisions regarding student performance prior to referring a student to special education. Participants mentioned specifically that the campus administrator should collaborate with the teachers in assessing the failure rates of the students in their classroom. Moreover, they should provide benchmark tests to assess student performance based on whether the concern is instructional or related to a learning difficulty when attempting to understand a particular concept in the classroom. The participants spoke about how they felt that these forms of assessment should be a component of the prereferral process and should be utilized prior to a student's referral to special education.

Ms. Carter and Ms. Allen felt that the campus administrator, teachers, and school staff should take a period in the prereferral process to assess student behavior, look at benchmark test results, look at samples of student work, and look at any additional data available. In this way the teachers and administrator can gain a thorough picture of the total child in order to make the best decision possible that will enable the student to succeed academically before referral to special education. During the interviews with the participants, they described sharing various collections of data in an effort for the campus administrators to be accountable in assessment to ensure there is no disproportionate identification of African American students for special education. Ms. Allen spoke about how it is important for the campus administrator to work closely with the teachers in assessing and gathering data. She indicated that campus administrators should be accountable in the assessment process by making the teachers aware of the data and how to use such data to make appropriate decisions, again, prior to a student's being referred to special education. Ms. Carter said the campus administrator should be asking these questions: "What is our data telling us? What are we doing to account for this?" Ms. Carter further explained,

I think that the data is very important and it doesn't lie. Also, the data that is gathered from the teachers should be used to make appropriate decisions regarding interventions and placements of students before they are referred to special education. I believe the data tells you exactly what information is needed and we can determine what we need to do with that information. Also, I think probably one thing with relation to the number of kids that fail, I think that as a campus administrator what we need to do is look and see how many kids are being referred to special education from each ethnic group and try to

figure out some solutions to eliminate one particular ethnic group from being referred to special education more often than others.

Ms. Carter discussed how once the campus administrator collaborates with the teachers and other school staff, they should spend some time reviewing the data and “finding out what it is saying and identifying ways that the campus can work with the data and make some sense of it as it relates to the campus and the needs of the teachers.”

Through prolonged engagement and persistent observation, I was able to observe how the campus administrators spearheaded the School Net assessment system on each campus. Administrators took an active role, made sure the teachers and school staff utilized the data to assess the students on their campuses, and more specifically assessed the individual teachers’ classes. The School Net data system is a program that disaggregates data such as benchmark assessments to identify student performance. This program can break down data by classrooms or by concepts. For example, if Johnny missed Question 5, the program can identify which students missed the problem and in which teacher’s class. With this type of data the campus administrator and teacher may be able to identify whether there is an instructional issue or a learning problem.

Additionally, Mr. Garcia spoke about how the campus administrator is accountable in making sure that teachers are monitoring the failure ratio of the students and their performance in the classroom. Mr. Garcia specifically shared that during this process the campus administrator must monitor the failure ratio by student

ethnicity and by the individual teacher's classroom. He discussed how he went a step further by assessing the failure rates of the teachers on his campus each grading period by monitoring the failure rates of the student and the ethnicity of the students who fail. Mr. Garcia expounded,

What I believe a principal should consider doing is what I have done to monitor, is at the end of the first 6 weeks was look at the failure rates for each teacher, and I received feedback from teachers as far as asking them, and they provided me with reasons to why they felt the student failed their class. Also, I will review their responses and help them with providing a solution to improve the students' performance.

Additionally, Mr. Garcia claimed that a high ratio of student failures in a particular teacher's class may indicate a problem with content instruction rather than with the students' ability to learn. He was adamant that the campus administrator should oversee this process and identify those students who need assistance prior to referring them to special education. He saw the campus administrator in this process as the instructional leader on the campus who is accountable for assisting the students and the teacher in succeeding in the classroom. Mr. Garcia said,

I think the campus administrator needs to look at the failure rates. He needs to look at students that failed and figure out, as far as the ethnic group is concerned, how many of each ethnic group failed in each teacher's class. As a principal we are accountable to the state with TAKS and some other assessment tools. I have to ask, are the students being successful in school and receiving a good quality education? Also, the principal should review and assess why this happened and have the teachers evaluate what has to change. For example, if the teacher has a high amount of students in this ethnicity failing, then as an administrator I need to go back and look to see whether it is an issue of vocabulary or what not. I would have to determine the cause. It could be that the instruction is not geared in the direction of the failing students. I need to evaluate and see what I can change or what assistance the teacher needs to improve instruction so the students can be successful.

Avidly, Mr. Garcia spoke about his willingness to make sure that all students are successful in the classroom by collecting various forms of data and making appropriate decisions that are in the best interest of students. He saw this as the answer to ensure no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. To him, this is an enormous responsibility, because he knows that as the campus administrator he is accountable for student performance. However, he needs the teachers to “buy in” to the collection of the different types of data to assess appropriately the students’ needs before referring them to special education. He said, “As administrators we definitely need to monitor how many kids are being referred to special education, and we need to monitor how many students are being referred for special education testing by individual teachers.” Mr. Thomas also spoke about the importance of the campus administrator’s monitoring the failure rates of the teachers because, as he stated, “The failure rates can affect the disproportionate representation of African American students on the campus and should be reviewed by the campus administrator in relation to culture and ethnicity.” He discussed in detail that the campus administrator should monitor the correlation between the failure rate in a teacher’s class and the ethnicity of the students in that class that have poor performance. Mr. Thomas stated,

I think the administrator has to assess and to stay on top of the failure rates, and it is their job and responsibility to identify the reason why there is a high failure rate by a particular ethnicity or teacher’s class. Campus administrators need to narrow it down and determine why we have some or many students from this ethnicity failing the class. They need to assess and answer the following questions as they pertain to students in the prereferral program: Why are the grades low? Why is the failure rate low? And if the campus

administrator can specifically identify why the failure rate is low, if it just happens to be that it's one race or culture, the campus administrator might want to look at the teacher's approach.

Mr. Thomas felt that the campus administrator, when assessing student performance, should collect data such as failure rates and use benchmark testing to find out "if a certain teacher is not reaching the whole student population." He spoke about how the campus administrator must be accountable in utilizing the data collected to make accurate decisions to ensure no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. For example, he discussed how the data will help teachers to identify whether a student's performance is due to an instructional concern or a student learning concern. "As a teacher we have to make sure that all of our students are being successful and we have to identify their need on a daily basis," Mr. Thomas said. He explained,

I think one thing the campus administrators have to do is make sure that none of the teaching strategies that we're using in the classroom are culturally biased. Also, we have to make teachers aware if most of their students who are failing belong to one particular race and assist them in determining why this disproportionality is occurring. What are we doing wrong? What do we need to do to reach the students? Collecting data such as monitoring and assessing the failure rates and interpreting benchmark tests that we have in the district will help our teachers recognize a problem more readily and find strategies and other interventions prior to referring a student to special education. Further, we will be able to identify the area of need of an individual or a group of students and assist in improving their performance in school.

Mr. Thomas asserted that the campus administrator is accountable for assessment as a core component to the prereferral process by making sure that teachers address students' needs, whether it is caused by a learning difficulty or a teaching or instructional issue. In his opinion, the best way of doing this is for the campus

administrator to collect data, interpret that data, and make accurate decisions so that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education.

Mr. Davis' perceptions were similar to those of Mr. Garcia and Mr. Thomas. According to Mr. Davis, "The campus administrator should always be a part of the evaluating and assessing of student performance along with the teacher because it will help to reduce the disproportionate identification of African American students in special education." He further stated that the campus administrator is accountable for making sure a certain ethnicity is not represented disproportionately in special education. For this reason, campus administrators are accountable for making sure an assessment system is in place for making appropriate decisions in the best interest of students, Mr. Davis said. In addition, he shared that the campus administrators must take an active role in this process because they are the instructional leaders on the campus. Hence, he defined the campus administrator as an instructional leader, who should always be concerned about the demographics as far as all student success is concerned. He further explained,

The campus administrator should have a system in place on their campus to disaggregate the data, and try to figure out which subgroups are doing poorly, why they are doing poorly. We're just now getting into all that here with our School Net system and the different benchmark tests that we have throughout the year to address the student's needs and assess performance. So now we are in the process of trying to figure out which group didn't do well, and we are even looking to see which courses the students are taking to be successful. Now we are looking at those demographics and subgroups such as African American students and breaking down the data and making sure that those groups match up to where they need to be as far as the demographics of the subgroups in proportion to the student population of the school, for example,

so we will not have 80% African Americans in special education and the student population of African American students is only 5%.

Again, Mr. Davis spoke about the importance of the campus administrator's utilizing information received from the data collection "to make sure the teachers have the tools at our hands to make good decisions."

Dissimilarly, Mr. Jones felt that assisting teachers in utilizing different teaching strategies and immediate classroom assessment helps with the accountability of the campus administrator in making sure that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. Mr. Jones said, "I think my role as a principal is to make sure that my teachers come up with strategies and different assessment practices to ensure the success of my students without having to be placed in special education." Mr. Jones seemed in agreement with Mr. Davis' perception that the campus administrator is accountable in assessment in the prereferral process by "making sure the teachers have the right tools at our hands to make good decisions" to ensure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students in special education; Mr. Jones believed that the campus administrator must provide the teachers with different strategies to utilize in the classroom for teachers to assess their students. Mr. Jones was more specific in describing the different assessment practices for immediate assessment and feedback for teachers in the classroom; because students learn differently, they should be assessed in various ways. He was adamant during the interviews that the campus administrator should emphasize the strategies and assessment practices of the special

education program and use it in the regular education setting before a student has to be referred to special education. Mr. Jones explained in detail,

As a principal we must create and provide different strategies to immediately assess students in the classroom. I think as an administrator we can sit down with the teacher to take a look at the assessments and the daily work that has been given to those kids and how and why this kid is not being successful and to probably even come up with some ways and strategies to ensure this child is going to be successful in that classroom by, for example, utilizing shortened answer tests, or using the color layout over their class work, or even giving a test orally instead of assessing the student with pencil and paper. There are many different strategies and things that can be done to make certain that a student is going to be successful other than doing things the traditional ways.

Mr. Jones spoke intently about how special education should be used as “a last resort,” and some of these tools can be used to screen a student prior to referring that student to special education. Moreover, Mr. Jones noted that if the campus administrator assisted the teachers with different assessment tools and teaching strategies for the classroom, it would help to ensure there is no disproportionate identification of African American students for special education. He shared how he is accountable in monitoring this process to ensure the success of the students. Mr. Jones perceived that several methods are available for teachers to ensure there is no disproportionate identification, such as allowing private discussions about the lesson, peer tutoring, providing note-taking assistance, and allowing extra time to do the assignment. The campus administrator should do what it takes to make sure each individual is successful prior to being referred to special education, Mr. Davis maintained. Mr. Davis said, “I am accountable to every student, not only in guaranteeing success, but in determining the most appropriate educational setting

because special education is the last resort for students.” In Mr. Jones’ experience and opinion, campus administrators need “to make sure that we are putting steps in place so that the problem of disproportionate representation does not continue.”

In contrast, Ms. Cox believed that the campus administrator should not have direct accountability in assessment but should support the teacher and school staff to make certain there is no disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. She felt that the campus administrator should delegate the assessment to the specialists on the campus such as the counselor, teacher, and diagnostician. Ms. Cox noted,

I think the principal is a part of the prereferral process. The counselor and teacher may be needed to assist in meeting the students’ academic needs prior to referring them to special education. Also, they will be the primary people gathering the data and assessing the data and determining the needs. This may mean scrutinizing all the data that they bring in, and I don’t think the principal is necessarily the one to do all that, but the principal should oversee it and be a part of it. The principal should review all the data when teachers are stuck or when requested and then help in make the decision that will best benefit the student.

She also shared that other factors should be considered that may affect the students’ performance when it comes to gathering data in which the campus administrator may have limited knowledge. For instance, she thought data regarding emotional issues may need to be gathered, or an issue in the student’s home life could hinder school success. Ms. Cox, the special education director within the district, said, “The campus administrator should be held accountable when it comes to gathering data and should play a major role in making the final decision about students in the prereferral process prior to those students being referred to special

education.” She shared how the campus administrator should be a major part of the process but not alone in the process. For instance, Ms. Cox related,

I think the campus administrator should be supportive of their staff and the classroom teacher. I believe campus administrators are to be accountable and responsible for helping our teachers find out how to help our students especially those who are culturally different. They are the instructional leaders so they should delegate specific duties among the staff to have an effective prereferral process.

She discussed how the campus administrator has a responsibility to make sure that the prereferral strategies are being utilized by the teachers prior to a student’s being referred to special education. Mr. Cox saw the campus administrator as the instructional leader overseeing the entire prereferral process. Although not solely accountable to the assessment practices such as the gathering of data to ensure no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education, the administrator should be able to provide the necessary strategies for making decisions most appropriate to alleviating poor student performance.

Through my reflexive journal, I reflected on discussions with the participants and how the campus administrator must identify a way of gathering data that are difficult to measure in order to better assess the student prior to referral for special education. Some difficult to measure items may be, for example, emotional status of the student; the emotions of a student could change at different times of the year or after visiting a particular family member due to a tragic event that may have occurred in their life. I acknowledged in my journal that the campus administrators must provide the necessary tools or strategies to assess emotional shifts and mood changes

of a student as a component of the data gathered. Many times the emotional aspect of a student is assessed and data are gathered after a student is referred to special education. In that respect, a student's emotions as well as self-perceptions many times affect their performance in school. The campus administrator must spearhead the movement of accountability through assessment by making the teachers aware of this so they can make good decisions concerning students.

The participants discussed accountability through assessment as it pertains to the prereferral process as a means of ensuring there is no disproportionate identification of African American students in special education. Campus administrators must make teachers aware of how to gather data to make appropriate decisions and how to utilize data such as failure rates and benchmark tests to assess if the lack of performance is related to the student performance or instructional methods. Further, Mr. Jones said that the campus administrators should be accountable in assessment by providing the teachers with alternative classroom assessment strategies along with teaching strategies to address student performance and instructional methods. Ms. Cox believed that the campus administrator should be responsible and accountable for providing the assessment tools for gathering data. Also, administrator must rely on the specialist on campus because other factors may affect student performance in the class.

Research Question 4

What perceptions are held by campus administrators, general education teachers, and a district special education specialist of the criteria for successful general education activities prior to a referral to special education? The presumptions and influences on the criteria of successful prereferral programs have developed from the campus administrators' involvement, knowledge and skills, decision-making responsibility, and accountability in assessment in the prereferral process to assure there is not disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education. I wanted to know how these perceived influences and expectations impacted participants' perceptions of the criteria of successful prereferral programs. I asked the participants a series of questions, which allowed themes to emerge. Those themes are (a) identification of "student needs" to improve student performance and (b) utilization of school staff expertise.

The 7 participants shared why it is important to identify the student needs, but realized that other factors may be beyond their control or knowledge. They spoke about how it is important to utilize school staff who have expertise, such as the counselor, diagnostician, teacher, special education teachers, and instructional specialists. They discussed that these intervention strategies and resources should be utilized prior to referring a student to special education. Additionally, if the student's needs are identified, then the school staff can more readily and more successfully address the problem. Finally, they spoke passionately about how the school staff must collaborate and work together for all students to be successful by exhausting all

interventions collaboratively (requiring dedication of the school staff). When I asked the participants to clarify what they meant by “identify the student’s needs,” they congruently described it as important for the campus administrator to discover what resources or personnel such as the counselor, diagnostician, and/or behavior specialists are available to assist the teacher to improve student performance. Hence, one criterion of successful prereferral intervention programs is the campus administrator’s taking an active role in facilitating the utilization of school staff expertise as a resource to identify the needs of students to improve student performance.

Identify the “student needs” to improve student performance. The participants were fervent about the importance of student’s needs being met in the prereferral process prior to a student’s being referred for special education. However, they realized that the teachers could not do this alone. Thus, my first question was about the campus administrators’ involvement in the prereferral process. I wanted to know the perceptions of the campus administrators’ involvement in the prereferral process in relation to meeting student needs prior to referral for special education. The participants were passionate about how the campus administrators should identify the students’ needs and employ various different resources and interventions to collaborate with school staff experts, which are the criteria of successful prereferral programs. Ms. Carter stated,

We in education need to be aware of the students’ needs and also the parents’ needs in helping their child to improve their student performance. I think as principal I need to lead in the role of making sure students’ needs are being

met prior to them being referred to special education. I believe that I need to be involved in this prereferral process, but if I'm not available for some reason, then I need to specify the individual that is capable of providing for the needs of the students. This is the criteria for successful prereferral programs. For this reason we need to work together toward the same common goal, which is to identify the factors that contribute to the academic problems so that we can meet the students' needs. Also, this will better enable and equip teachers to work with those students. And, as an administrator we must make programs available for our students to assist in meeting their needs.

Interestingly, Ms. Carter shared that at times the needs of a student are “apparent and can be clearly identified,” and in other instances are difficult to decipher. Ms. Carter spoke intently throughout the interviews about how the campus administrator must be responsible for helping the teachers identify the student's needs, because of possible outside factors that the teachers may not have the knowledge to address. “I think it is a process that needs to be worked based upon the students' needs,” Ms. Carter emphasized. Campus administrators must provide teachers with staff development on how to identify the needs of students, such as some of the signs, cues, and symptoms, Mr. Carter asserted. For example, she shared that the campus administrator must make the teachers aware of possible circumstances or problems that may affect the students' academic performance, such as drugs, a difficult home life, and emotional issues. Additionally, she said, “We must do what we can do by providing resources for our students and always try to do what we can to address the needs of the individual child.” Further, she discussed how the campus administrator must make available different resources on the campus in addressing these issues prior to referring a student to special education. She saw how

one criterion of a successful prereferral program must be for the campus administrator to acknowledge and make the school staff consciously aware of these needs.

Similarly, Ms. Cox identified a criterion of successful prereferral programs as identifying the students' needs. She felt that the campus administrator must help the teacher determine the needs of the student and what interventions strategies should be implemented, while working with the teacher to address the students' academic problems. Ms. Cox eagerly declared that academic problems may be due to "behavior or other factors" that affect the student's ability to learn the content. She spoke about how many students often are referred quickly for special education without identifying the student's needs or trying interventions (other possibilities) needed in the prereferral process. Ms. Cox demonstrated a genuine belief that determining the students' needs is imperative to operating successful prereferral programs. She illustrated this by saying,

I believe that it's important to determine when a student has significant needs and what could best meet that student's needs. For instance, if a teacher is having difficulty with a student because the student is performing poorly in their class, or because of behavior or any concern the teacher might have, then they must get together with the principal and other staff members to determine how that student can be assisted in improving their performance before being referred for special education services. My belief is that once it is determined how the student can be helped, the campus administrator must make sure the intervention strategies are utilized. And if they do not work, continue to problem solve until an effective intervention strategy can be used to address the student's needs. I believe the prereferral process is an ongoing process.

Ms. Cox declared that another criterion of successful prereferral programs should be for the campus administrator to lead in "identifying someone with some knowledge of possible interventions for the students, so that the student doesn't feel

helpless when they aren't being successful in their class." Ms. Cox explicitly noted that someone should be in place in the prereferral program who can assist in determining appropriate interventions based on the student's identified needs.

Mr. Garcia also spoke about the importance of identifying the students' needs to improve student performance as a criterion for successful prereferral programs. He discussed how the prereferral processes should look specifically at the "individual kid." Emphatically, he explained that the teacher must look at the individual student when discerning each student's needs as well as look for possible reasons why the student may not be performing well. Mr. Garcia felt that the criteria of a successful prereferral program include the campus administrator's providing the teachers with information so that they can implement the proper intervention plan to address each student individually before referring that student to special education. He shared,

As an administrator we must emphasize to the teachers the importance of looking at the relationship they have with the student when trying to identify the student's needs. I believe if the teachers have a relationship with the student, then it may be easier for them to identify the student's needs before the student gets far behind and the poor performance increases. Further, teachers on their own can modify for kids if they feel in their heart it will help the kid. Also, in order to have a successful prereferral process, we have to be able to give the teachers those tidbits of information that will equip them to make better decisions about how to help kids achieve. As a campus administrator we have a responsibility to provide a successful prereferral program, and a way for this to occur is to provide the teachers with the proper tools to identify their student's particular needs.

Furthermore, Mr. Garcia explained how during the prereferral process, the campus administrator needs to emphasize to teachers the need to make sure student's needs are identified to improve performance before any type of referral to special

education takes place. He also said that in successful prereferral programs the campus administrator must indicate to the teacher “that it’s their responsibility to make sure they modify for the students when it is revealed that a student has a need that persists in order to improve their performance.” In administering a successful prereferral program, determining each student’s individual needs is “number one,” Mr. Garcia passionately declared. Hence, the campus administrator takes a lead role in providing the teachers with the necessary tools needed to identify the student’s needs while developing a relationship with the individual student to improve student performance prior to the student’s referral to special education.

Similarly, Mr. Thomas noted that the criteria of a successful prereferral program include identifying the student’s needs prior to being referred to special education. He specifically described the importance of the teacher–student relationship in order to ascertain the student’s needs. Due to this relationship, the student will be more likely to ask questions and open up to the teacher. Mr. Thomas said, “I think you would have to look at the individual child on an individual basis to identify the needs of that student.” He explained,

What better way to identify the needs of a child than to have a good relationship with them? We as teachers have to develop a relationship with every student, and if you do this it’s going to be much easier to identify the student’s academic needs, because they may be more comfortable sharing personally with the teacher when they are having a problem or an academic need. Additionally, we will be able to see the student’s weaknesses. It is the principal’s responsibility to provide the teachers with a hands-on approach to strategies including everyone who will address the academic needs of the students. The campus administrator should determine in a hands-on fashion exactly what we need to do to identify the needs of students. We are the ones

on the front lines. I believe this has to be a part of the criteria of a successful prereferral program.

Further, Mr. Thomas discussed that another component in the criteria of successful prereferral programs is providing the teachers with readily available strategies to help recognize the needs and thus improve student performance. If the campus administrator provides strategies that will get teachers involved with the students, like walking around and checking for understanding, “then you are more apt to catch a child that may have the potential to slip through the cracks or is just on the cusp of being referred to special education.” Mr. Thomas noted that a lack of communication and the lack of a relationship or rapport with students have hindered the prereferral process because student’s needs are either not being met or remain unknown until it is too late; the student is far behind and continues to performing poorly in class.

Through prolonged engagement and persistent observation during staff development and district meetings, I saw the district as what Mr. Thomas described as “the relationship model.” I shared in my reflexive journal how the participants discussed that one criterion for successful prereferral programs must be to determine the student’s needs prior to referring the student to special education. Additionally, through persistent observation I saw how the campus administrators utilized counselors, teachers, diagnosticians, and behavior specialists in staff development as a component in providing interventions and strategies through their expertise and information concerning student’s needs. Further, through prolonged engagement I

observed teachers who were previously trained in dealing with students of poverty and working with minority students modeling techniques deemed appropriate to assist the teachers in discerning the needs of students while helping them build a relationship by getting to know the students. I reflected on perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process, where a component of getting to know the students helps better serve the students before they are referred to special education. I described in my reflexive journal how the participants determined that the way to foster this relationship between student and teacher is to provide staff development in the area of cultural diversity, including improving communication between different ethnic groups in the prereferral process. I noted in my reflexive journal that teachers have to buy into this kind of staff development and implement the strategies presented as well as use the intervention strategies shared by the different stakeholders within the district to help identify the student's needs and ultimately improve student performance. Providing the teachers with strategies to identify student's needs, such as checking for understanding and other communication strategies, helps alleviate communicative problems that may affect the student's learning and performance, Mr. Thomas claimed.

In concurrence with Mr. Thomas, Mr. Davis spoke about how "finding out about the individual" in identifying the needs of the student is a criterion for successful prereferral programs. He reiterated the importance of not allowing students to "slip through the cracks." Mr. Davis reported that many times a student performs poorly in class because the needs are not identified soon enough. For this reason, Mr.

Davis maintained that it is important for the campus administrator to provide the teachers with resources such as teaching strategies that address identifying the needs of students. Mr. Davis clarified,

My perception of the criteria of successful prereferral programs is to encourage teachers to identify the students' individual needs by helping them to understand where the students come from. I feel it is important for the campus administrator to support us by providing teaching strategies and resources that will help us identify the needs of students. The prereferral program must have a component that allows for teachers to be assisted when identifying the problem and need of the student and to address those needs. It's very clear that the principal must support the teachers who decide what's best for the children when identifying their academic needs and getting a handle on it. This will help us a great deal in this area.

Additionally, Mr. Davis stated differently how a criterion of successful prereferral programs is to identify the student's problem. He explained that if the teacher, campus administrator, or school staff cannot identify the problem, then it is difficult to determine the student's needs. He asked, "What is causing the poor performance? Is it the teaching style? Is it a behavior problem? Or is it external factors such as family life affecting their learning?" Mr. Davis said these questions will help teachers determine what problems need to be addressed, especially when trying to determine the child's specific need. He further explained,

When talking about criteria of a successful prereferral program, we have to make sure the problem matches the need in order to fulfill the actual needs of the student in the prereferral program so that we will not spinning our wheels. I guess the biggest part of the prereferral program is to make sure we're not wasting time and there are so many things that we need to do that actually fit what the student needs. By identifying the problem we will help to identify and address the needs of the student in the prereferral program to improve student performance before the student is referred to special education. For example, the campus administrator should provide teaching strategies for teachers so they know how to instruct in a fashion that matches the learning

style of the student in the prereferral process. The administrator also needs to check and see that those strategies are being implemented.

Mr. Davis shared that the campus administrator must support teachers in identifying students' individual needs by providing teaching strategies and resources to address the needs of the students. In addition, he felt that a strong component of the criteria of a successful prereferral program is to identify the student's problem.

On the other hand, Mr. Jones described how the criteria of successful prereferral programs include making sure the student is being successful. I observed Mr. Jones emphasize the need for the student to be successful in the classroom. The campus administrator could ensure this success by equipping teachers with strategies and activities that detect student's needs, he truly believed. He shared how he felt that general education teachers must "open up" to the instructional specialist or to special education teacher's skills so they can best work with students. If a student is being successful, then their academic needs are being met. Mr. Jones said,

You know again, it's all about student success. It's about making sure that every child is going to be successful. Also, I think the criteria of successful prereferral programs is to come up with strategies and activities that can be used by the teacher to meet the needs of the student in order for them to be successful prior to being referred for special education. For example, talking to the curriculum specialist or behavioral specialist will help, because they can share their experience from previous situations that will help the teacher recognize the need and know what to do for that student in that class. In my opinion, the main purpose of the prereferral program is to make sure that teachers are successful at identifying academic needs of the students before referring them to special education, which should be the last resort. Also, it's to make sure that we are using strategies that are going to make children successful. The prereferral program is basically a problem-solving program that aims to meet the student's needs before we put a special education label on a child.

Agreeably, Mr. Jones reiterated that one criterion of a successful prereferral program is to ensure that the teacher has tried everything before a student is referred to special education. He shared how the campus administrator must meet with the teacher to plan to utilize strategies and have several options in place to ensure the student will be as successful as possible. He noted that this is not an easy task. Also, he felt that problem solving should be a major component of the prereferral program. Further, Mr. Jones explained that there has to be a relationship between identifying the problem or the student's academic need and choosing strategies to meet those needs for a successful prereferral program. He shared that the criteria of a successful prereferral program include the campus administrator's focus on knowing the problem as well as having strategies readily available to identify the student's needs for the student to be successful.

Comparably, Ms. Allen indicated that a criterion for successful prereferral programs is identifying the student's academic problem. She was adamant that the campus administrator must have in place intervention strategies for teachers in the prereferral process to identify the academic problem for why the student may be struggling in class. Further, she spoke about how the intervention strategies must address the student's needs to improve the student's performance. At times, teachers or administrators know the problem; however, they do not have anything in place to ascertain the needs of the student in the prereferral program. This in turn leads to an inappropriate referral to special education, Ms. Allen declared. She explained,

I feel that teachers have to feel real comfortable with the campus administrator to be able to go to them to share their problems, and the campus administrator must be aware of how to distinguish the student's need from what the teacher reports. The criteria of successful prereferral programs must have a component that makes sure particular interventions are in place such as providing the teachers with strategies not only to identify but address the academic needs to improve the student's performance in class to be successful before they are referred to special education. I believe if the campus administrator has in place an effective prereferral program on their campus for not only the students but the teachers, then many techniques to recognize the student's needs may occur more frequently before a teacher does a referral for special education.

Ms. Allen shared how the campus administrator must teach teachers to use strategies that aid in recognizing the student's academic problem in order to identify the student's needs. Ms. Allen firmly insisted that the teacher and administrator must collaborate in the prereferral process to make sure that strategies are being used to help ensure student success. She shared that as it pertains to the prereferral program, if the child is having an academic problem with learning the content or being successful, teachers and administrators must try different strategies with the student, even if they feel uncomfortable using a particular strategy "to best distinguish the needs that the student may have." Ms. Allen expounded,

As a teacher I think it's really good, because you're not just skipping around and saying, "Okay, this child is having a problem, and we're just going to automatically refer them to special education." The principal must know that for a prereferral program to be successful there must be some teaching strategies for the teacher to try with that student to make sure that they understand and feel more comfortable with the student. Also, strategies that may determine the student's needs, such as a particular reading strategy that may help them to better comprehend reading before having to be referred to special education because of low performance in reading, would be necessary. The campus administrator has to make sure that teachers try different strategies, because if I don't try different strategies, then the chances of the student being referred to special education increases. Further, I would feel

very uncomfortable because I didn't exhaust all intervention strategies for the student to be successful. I feel that I wouldn't have given them the benefit of the doubt of trying everything I could before I had them tested for special education.

Ms. Allen shared that a criterion of successful prereferral programs is that the campus administrator must spearhead the use of certain teaching strategies that help distinguish the academic problems in correlation to the student's needs to improve student performance. This can prevent inappropriate referrals to special education or predetermined referrals to special education.

Generally, the criteria of successful prereferral programs include identifying the student's needs to improve student performance prior to a student being referred to special education. Also, several of the participants identified determining the student's academic problem in correlation to identifying the student's needs as a component of the criteria of a successful prereferral program. However, it was noted that the campus administrator should help teachers utilize different teaching strategies to identify the individual needs of the students. Additionally, another criterion of a successful prereferral program is for the campus administrators to support teachers' getting to know the student to ascertain the student's needs more effectively in the prereferral process so that the teacher may be able to distinguish the needs of the students sooner. This relationship building allows teachers to develop a better understanding of the student. In all, the participants believed that the criteria of successful prereferral programs relate to identifying the student's needs to improve student performance prior to referring them to special education.

Utilization of school staff expertise. The 7 participants were adamant that another criterion of a successful prereferral program is for the campus administrator to utilize school staff expertise as a resource to identify the needs that may affect the student's performance academically. For instance, they shared how the utilization of school staff assists in identifying needs that may be due to external factors that affect the academic performance of the student. The participants indicated that the campus administrator should be focused and make a conscious effort to utilize school staff expertise as a component of the prereferral process. Ms. Cox stated,

I think that the principal should head this up in providing the proper staff members to use their experience and knowledge to help identify the student's academic needs in the prereferral process. I would say specifically the counselor and of course the administrator and the teachers who are involved are key stakeholders in that child's life. I think in the prereferral program the campus administrator should use whoever has the best knowledge of that particular student, because they may be able to provide the best choice of interventions that would be appropriate before referring the student for special education. Also, their specialized knowledge and training in a particular area may help to identify the need the student may have, which may be affecting their performance academically. For example, the counselor may be counseling the student, and there may be an emotional problem because of a change in the student's life, which may affect their academic performance.

Further, Ms. Cox shared the counselor can be utilized in the prereferral program by providing information to the teacher regarding factors that may be affecting the student's school performance. The (nonconfidential) information provided to the teacher helps in the prereferral program to identify the needs of the student that will help determine the student's academic needs, Ms. Cox firmly believed. Ms. Cox said that utilizing school staff expertise aids in helping the individual child. She spoke about the importance of teachers' seeking as much

information as possible when attempting to make appropriate decisions to address the students' needs. For example, the diagnostician may be able to provide teachers with appropriate resources and strategies. If the teacher fails to share concerns or ask the diagnostician questions, the opportunity to use a certain strategy that just may do the trick may be overlooked, Ms. Cox described. That dialogue is necessary to share information. She also stated that the utilization of school staff expertise may help identify the student's needs much more quickly, simply because an outsider may be able to listen and pinpoint the problem through a different perspective. This may reduce premature referrals to special education. In the prereferral program, the utilization of school staff expertise covers the different components of the student's education that need to be addressed, such as academic needs, social needs, emotional needs, and others that may have a direct negative affect on the student's school performance, Ms. Cox declared. She explained, "These are other ways to help students besides just sticking them in special education. I certainly want every child that needs whatever kind of intervention to be used to address their needs to get it." The campus administrator must go to any lengths to help their teachers find appropriate interventions to meet the needs of every student, "not just put them in a box," but actually discuss and break down the student's needs, Ms. Cox expressed. She elaborated,

I think it is important to note that special education may not be an option for the student, but the campus administrator must lead the prereferral program by providing options to address the student's needs. I think two or three heads are better than one in determining what can be help for a student, so using different school staff could help in brainstorming, identifying, and addressing

the needs of the student before referring them to special education to improve student performance.

Ms. Cox shared that her recipe of a successful prereferral program includes the criterion where the campus administrator takes the role of overseeing the prereferral program and utilizes various school staff expertise to address the needs of the students by providing positive interventions to improve students' school performance prior to referring them to special education. Additionally, there has to be a well-structured process that everyone knows and "buys into." Resource people and strategies must be available to help the students. In my reflexive journal, I shared that in the prereferral program there is not enough utilization of school staff, because the campus administrators are not aware of the different school staff members who may be able to identify the student's needs. For example, the use of a parent training specialist to help with a student and parent with problems at home that may be affecting the performance of the student may be missed entirely. Also, the campus administrator or teacher may not utilize a particular school staff member's expertise because they may simply be unaware of that individual's expertise in the area needed. Further, it is important for teachers to know that resources are readily available to them as a part of the prereferral program to make sure they can help the student become successful and improve student performance prior to being referred to special education.

Ms. Carter continued that she believes the principal would be a good resource but should know and use a variety of options for the students, such as the counselor.

She said that all school staff should be involved in the prereferral program and be well informed to be able to provide interventions that could be put in place for the student prior to being referred to special education. “I have to rely heavily on my school staff expertise in the prereferral program,” Ms. Carter said. She also indicated that a particular school staff member’s expertise should only be used when it is appropriate in addressing a student’s needs. For instance, Ms. Carter discussed how the counselor can counsel the student on a problem in an area that is hindering the student from performing academically. Therefore, the teacher may check with the counselor to see if that counselor has resources or is able to discuss with the teachers some of the things they may be observing that may be affecting the student’s academic performance. Further, she described a criterion of a successful prereferral program as the campus administrator’s making certain that services are provided to assist the students in the prereferral program. Ms. Carter said, “I think as a principal I need to designate an individual in a specialized field that is capable of identifying and providing for the needs of the student.” She expressed her concern that students may be referred to special education inappropriately when the student’s performance may be affected because of a medical condition that the teacher was unable to diagnose. For this reason, Ms. Carter felt that the campus administrator must make the utilization of school staff expertise readily available and a part of the prereferral process. She continued,

I think the campus administrator is the instructional leader and should utilize a variety of school staff expertise as a way besides referring a student to special education and to concentrate on the student’s needs, because special education

should be the last option. I think it is not used as a last option because of our desire to help the students. The campus administrator has to always be looking for better and more innovative ways to assist our students. We have to provide the opportunity for the student to visit a psychologist if one is needed, because it is a need that the student may have. But if there is not one available on the campus, then we have to utilize the district resources to make it available for the student if they need it in the prereferral program to address their needs. However, the student may come from a difficult home life in which their basic needs are not being met, which may result in poor performance in the class. Also, the school staff in the prereferral program should complement one another in the process. For example, if one had an expertise in the area of curriculum, they could be chosen for a particular student who has a need in that area. Or if there is one who has an expertise in the area of behavior, that person may assist the teacher in behavior modifications that may be affecting the student's performance academically; that person could be used for a student who is struggling with those issues or behaviors. Further, the nurse may need to be utilized, because the student may have a medical condition that may be affecting academic performance that may need to be identified prior to a student being referred for special education.

Intriguingly, Ms. Cox spoke about how teachers struggle with what to do for those students who are performing poorly in the classroom. She felt that the teachers do not know what it may take and what resources are available to them to meet the students' needs. The lack of a variety of strategies and resources may be the cause of the lack of student success, such as educational opportunity or emotional support at home that the teachers cannot address. However, the campus administrator must try to find something that will work for the child and go to any extent to support the teacher in the prereferral program to meet the student's needs. Ms. Carter said her perception of the criteria of a successful prereferral program included looking out for the needs of all the students, and if the teacher identifies any student struggling, help them by using school staff when necessary to help address students' needs prior to being referred to special education to improve student performance. Additionally, she felt

that the criteria of a successful prereferral program include the campus administrator's understanding the needs of the student and providing various interventions as a "secure net" to work to help the students to develop their academic skills, especially for those students that do not qualify for special education but may need intervention support. Moreover, according to Ms. Carter, the recipe of a successful prereferral program requires the criterion of every stakeholder working together—whether it is the counselor, teacher, psychologist, behavior specialist, reading specialist, diagnostician, or the cafeteria person—and taking ownership to intervene in the process to make sure that the needs of the student are being met. Also, a criterion of a successful prereferral program is for the campus administrator to have the resources needed for every child, which includes school staff expertise; the teachers need to know that special education is not the only option when a student has an academic need, Ms. Carter declared.

Mr. Garcia also indicated that the criteria of successful prereferral programs include the campus administrator's making sure that the counselor, diagnosticians, and other appropriate school personnel are accessible in the prereferral program to help meet the needs of the students. Mr. Garcia spoke about how the campus administrator sometimes must approach identifying the academic needs of students in a different manner by informing the teachers of the different tools available to identify the academic needs of the student before referring them to special education. Further, he shared how the school staff can provide teachers with information and show them how to get access to that information to help the individual student. He

was very adamant about the use of school personnel when appropriate to address the needs that are causing the student to perform unsuccessfully in class. Mr. Garcia explained,

I think what needs to be done in order for a prereferral program to be successful is we have to inform teachers and provide them with additional tools to identify the needs of students. For example, we must involve the counselor and diagnostician who can pinpoint exactly why a student isn't, say, turning in their homework assignments.

Mr. Garcia acknowledged that the campus administrator in the prereferral program must utilize the expertise of the school staff earlier in the process by identifying the needs before the educational need becomes alarmingly difficult to address. He explained,

I think a campus administrator definitely needs to make sure that the teacher, counselors, diagnosticians, and other school experts are available to provide services for the student in the prereferral program to help make decisions and meet the needs of the students before they are referred for special education services. The criteria of a successful prereferral program is one that utilizes these individuals to meet the needs of the students when they are failing a class. The teacher must identify the need as early on as possible so that as the campus administrator I can assist the teacher in identifying which school personnel may be needed to assist the teacher in meeting the student's needs before it gets out of hand. I think we have to allocate school staff to use their expertise before a child begins to fail, or before the problem gets out of control and affects their performance in other classes or their behavior begins to decline, because I believe our counselors and diagnosticians are good at what they do in assisting students and meeting their needs.

Additionally, Mr. Garcia discussed how it is his responsibility as a campus administrator—as part of the criteria of a successful prereferral program—to make sure that the steps and the interventions are followed through with, when the expertise of school staff is utilized to identify the needs of the student to improve student

performance. Further, Mr. Garcia spoke about how important it was for the campus administrator to make sure that the appropriate school staff are present and informed before seeking their expertise in the prereferral program. The expertise of school staff needs to be used more than in the past when it comes to aiding students in the prereferral program, because they have a

running knowledge in areas that may be going on that they have previous experience in that they have seen before and they may be able to identify the need, and provide the teacher with information or resources to address the student's needs that may be affecting their academic performance.

Importantly, Mr. Garcia specifically expressed how staff needs to be utilized at the earliest stage possible in the prereferral process before other problems and factors occur that will cause the student to continue to decline in academic school performance. In addition, he expressed that the key to a successful prereferral program is providing the teachers with the necessary resources such as school personnel when appropriate, such as the counselor and/or diagnosticians, to help make good decisions to identify the student's academic needs to improve behavior prior to a student's being referred to special education.

Mr. Jones concurred with his perception that the criteria of a successful prereferral program "should involve the counselor, diagnostician, teacher, and instructional specialist." The campus administrator must rely heavily on the specialists' expertise on his campus. With so many resources available, and teachers may feel like they have exhausted all resources. He noted,

I rely heavily on my assistant principals, teachers, counselors, diagnosticians, and behavioral and instructional specialists in the prereferral program. Also, I

think a successful prereferral program needs these people to help the teachers identify needs that are affecting a student's academic performance before they are referred to special education, because, as I said earlier, special education is the last resort. We must utilize the resources available and necessary to ensure the success of all students before they are referred to special education. Further, I think as a principal, when I think of a successful prereferral process, basically I look at the different strategies, techniques, and resources our different school specialists could supply in meeting the needs of our students, because we'll do all we can to make sure that this student is going to be successful at our school.

Additionally, Mr. Jones shared, "It's all about the success of the students."

Administrators and teachers have to remember that each student is an individual with different needs, issues, concerns, and problems that affect their performance academically; thus, a successful prereferral program must involve all of the different resource people on a school campus to ensure success for each student individually, Mr. Jones declared. Further,

We only fail our students when we don't support our teachers by utilizing our school specialists effectively by providing and working in a collaborative effort with teachers on different options they have when deciding how to address the needs of the students in the prereferral program.

Mr. Jones indicated another factor needing consideration when utilizing school staff expertise in the prereferral program: Teachers are prone to getting frustrated with a situation because they may not know how to work with the student; thus, it may seem easier for the teacher to refer the student to special education without using the expertise of school staff in the prereferral program. In Mr. Jones' opinion, another criterion is that campus administrators and teachers must be challenged to get everyone involved in the prereferral program. That means everyone

has to be on the “same page” in this process so collectively the best educational decisions can be made for all students.

Similarly, Mr. Thomas was adamant that the criteria of successful prereferral programs include having knowledgeable people at every level from the “classroom teacher up to the campus administrator” readily available in the prereferral program. He reported that the campus administrator must make the most of the different people in the educational system of the student to provide input that will aid in identifying the needs of a student in the prereferral program in order to ultimately improve student performance. Moreover, Mr. Thomas noted that the campus administrator must guide the program and give the teachers the tools they need “to make it happen.” This includes making the necessary people available to identify the student’s needs for a successful prereferral program. According to Mr. Thomas, another criterion for a successful prereferral program is for the parents to become involved by communicating with them to get their input in identifying their child’s needs. In addition, he said that utilizing the diverse members of the educational community on campus in the prereferral program will abet in making good decisions for the student. Mr. Thomas continued,

It’s not only about the mechanics of a program, but the philosophy of the program. This is why we’re doing this. In other words, I think you have to have well-informed people on the campus who need to be in every step of the process for the students. In the program we want everybody on the same page as to why we’re doing the interventions to meet the needs of the students, for example, the principal, diagnostician, counselor, assistant principal, and special education teacher. I think if the special education teacher is actively involved with helping the regular education teacher with a particular student in the classroom, teachers will learn and become comfortable using

modifications and strategies the special education teacher is trained to utilize. Also, in this situation as a teacher we are given tools to identify and address the student's needs so the student will not be referred to special education early. There has to be communication with the parent and other people in the prereferral program for everyone to work jointly together to meet the student's needs. The parent knows the student better than anyone in the prereferral program. What it boils down to is in this program we will do what is best for the child, and in the process the philosophy should be do whatever it takes, regardless of cost. As long as the criteria of the program is that we focus on the needs of the students, then we will make the correct decisions.

Mr. Thomas insisted that if everyone involved in the prereferral program focuses on "the same agenda" of making decisions in the best interest of the student, regardless of cost, then the student has the opportunity to be successful before a referral for special education is needed. Additionally, Mr. Thomas noted that the campus administrator should be responsible for making sure the necessary educational staff members are a part of the program and the interventions are carried out to identify the needs of the student. He reiterated that this should be a criterion of a successful prereferral program: utilizing everyone in the educational system, including the parents or guardians, who impacts the student's life when working to make the best decisions for the student, regardless of the cost, before choosing to refer a student to special education.

Similarly, Ms. Allen asserted that a criterion of a successful prereferral program is the campus administrator's facilitating the use of various school faculty and staff when needed in the prereferral program. The campus administrator must emphasize, "as our administrator does," the need to make available school staff with special skills and knowledge that will help identify the needs of the student to

improve student performance prior to being referred to special education. Ms. Allen shared that this also should include the parent or guardian of the student. For example, Ms. Allen spoke about the STAR committee, which is set up to solicit ideas from school faculty and staff as well as parents.

She noted that another component of a successful prereferral program is using this committee meeting for various school staff to review previous interventions that were successful or unsuccessful and to strategize on which interventions could be used to meet the student's needs before a referral to special education. The members of the STAR committee assist in gathering and providing information to identify the needs of the student prior to being referred to special education, and this should be the last step before a referral to special education takes place, according to Ms. Allen. For example, she described how the campus administrator on her campus utilizes teachers in a specialized area of instruction such as math to provide tutoring for a student having difficulty with a particular math concept. She explained,

Led by the campus administrator, we have to do the interventions by getting with the STAR committee, which is made up of the campus administrator, counselor, general education teacher, special education teacher, diagnostician, behavior specialist when appropriate, and other staff members when needed. The parent will be involved because we need to discuss the problems we are having with the student to identify the needs. We hit the campus administrator, we hit the special education teacher, we hit the parents, and hit other teachers that may be able to assist the student. The campus administrator may use the expertise of our teachers in a subject area to target the skills and reinforce the skills the student may be having difficulty with. Also, the campus administrator implements a program that takes students that are having problems and pairs them with students who are strong in those targeted areas. The criteria of a successful prereferral program is that we have to do everything we can before we put the student in special education, which, yes, includes using the expertise of school staff to identify the needs of the student.

Ms. Allen identified this committee approach as a criterion of a successful prereferral process; however, she shared that it is very time consuming and difficult to get all the school staff needed together for their input and interventions. Nonetheless, Ms. Allen said, “If the student is having problems, then we’re going to help them with their problems.” She explained,

The campus administrator has to really make sure that the expertise shared by school staff is appropriate and useful for to improving the poor performance of a student before being referred to special education. This also includes things that are outside of school that may be causing a problem with their success in school. For example, if the student is having a physical problem and the physical problem affects the student having trouble disseminating materials, then in the prereferral program the campus administrator has to just get the extra help for the student.

Ms. Allen spoke about the importance of the counselor in the success of a prereferral program. Counselors can gather information about the student and can use their expertise in identifying the needs of the student that may be difficult to detect by the teacher. The counselor is able to identify why a student is having behavior problems and can provide additional information about the family situation of the student that may factor in the poor performance of the student, Ms. Allen noted. In addition, she shared how her campus counselor usually works closely with the campus administrator, collaborating with different school staff in the prereferral program to meet the needs of the student by “knowing the student and finding some program or intervention that is needed for the student to be successful, which may involve the entire family.” She emphasized that when the student has a problem, the prereferral program led by the campus administrator must help with the problem by

utilizing school staff expertise and interventions to improve student performance before referral to special education.

Mr. Davis, on the other hand, shared a somewhat different perception of the criteria of a successful prereferral program. He emphasized the importance of using different school staff expertise such as the campus administrator, counselor, diagnostician, and parents in appropriately scheduling students according to their learning style in relation to the teaching style of the teacher. The diagnostician and counselor can provide their knowledge about how to work, interact, or reach a particular student to effectively teach that student, Mr. Davis declared. For example, he shared how these individuals can give particular interventions and strategies to address factors that affect student performance, such as raising the student's self-esteem, positive reinforcement strategies, and "getting a higher level of understanding of the student's background." Additionally, Mr. Davis shared that a criterion of a successful prereferral program is to utilize the school staff in the appropriate class size in identifying the needs of the student prior to being referred to special education. Mr. Davis also noted that the counselor could help schedule the student appropriately; the counselor may have information to share with the campus administrator when planning the best schedule possible for the success of the student. He felt this was an early intervention strategy that would address the academic needs of the student before they have to be referred for special education services. Input of school staff to help better schedule students should be a criterion of a successful prereferral program, Mr. Davis believes. He explained,

Class size is one of the biggest criteria that would help the whole process. I would like to have enough time to meet those kids where they are, that would be utopia. If the students can't get the help they need or their questions answered, how can we identify their needs to help them before they are performing poorly in class, which then results to being referred to special education, because I can't give them what they need to be successful. Also, if the students are not getting the help they need, they don't feel as though they fit into the whole group. The student becomes frustrated and begins to act out because of frustration, and behavior problems occur. As a teacher, I lose the things I'm suppose to do to meet their needs, and I switch and go into survival mode trying to keep them in their seats and keep them quiet. I forget about classroom management issues, teaching, and using all my educational training that I have, and my song and dance changes from meeting their needs to just surviving.

I think you have to identify the needs of the students as soon as possible. I believe it is the responsibility of the campus administrator, assistant principal, counselor, and diagnostician to identify the appropriate regular education placement of the student. The students have to be put in places where they can succeed before a referral to special education is necessary. If this is lacking, then they have to go to the counseling office and say, "Let's take a look at the placement. Are they in the right class that will suit their learning style?" We have to keep the parent involved in this because they have information they can provide us that will help in scheduling the student correctly. Or if the student is not successful, is it a learning problem, teaching strategy? And I can go back to the counselor or diagnostician to review information they may have on the student.

Mr. Davis explained that the campus administrator must have an understanding of the teachers' teaching style as a criterion of the prereferral process and must utilize their expertise in the scheduling and planning of the schedule of each student to identify their needs prior to being referred to special education. "If a teacher teaches in that category, then let's move the student into that class," Mr. Davis described. Moreover, he determined that the campus administrator must have an idea of what is going on in the classroom to help identify the student's learning style.

Mr. Davis identified another criterion of a successful prereferral program: Utilize teacher input in identifying the student's needs in matching the student's learning style with the teacher's teaching style. For example, he said, "If we are identifying the student's needs, we need to identify students that are audio learners or students that were visual learners, and put them in the class with more visual teachers or audio teachers beforehand." He felt that the teachers know the students well by previously teaching a sibling, working with a student, or some history of working with the family; thus, teachers know the family background of the student. Mr. Davis' perception of the criteria of a successful prereferral program is somewhat different; he said school staff expertise should be utilized at an early stage through scheduling prior to the student's beginning the class. In addition, he looked at utilizing previous data and the expertise of the counselor, diagnostician, and the teachers' input regarding the student's progress and learning style in relation to their teaching style. According to Mr. Davis, a criterion for prereferral success, increasing student success, and decreasing premature referrals to special education, is utilizing the expertise of the teachers and other school staff in scheduling students by "matching our students' learning styles to the teaching styles."

The 7 participants identified their perceptions of the criteria of a successful prereferral program, which in general were to identify the academic needs of the student and to use school staff expertise to improve student performance. All recognized the need for input and information from the various different school staff to address factors that affect the academic needs of the student. Ms. Allen noted that

the utilization of the school staff expertise on a committee such as the STAR committee should be led by the campus administrator to help with the problem by providing information and interventions and by reviewing the status of those students receiving these interventions to improve student performance before a student is referred for special education. With a different twist, Mr. Davis stated that a criterion of a successful prereferral program is using the expertise of the counselor, diagnostician, and the teacher in the scheduling process. In addition, he believed that utilizing previous information regarding the student and family background helps to identify the student's needs early in the process; this information and interventions used can match students' schedules properly by connecting the students' learning styles with teachers' teaching styles. Regardless, the 7 participants perceived that (a) identifying the academic needs of the student to improve student performance and (b) utilizing school staff expertise are the criteria for a successful prereferral program.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the data gathered to answer the four research questions. I also presented the themes that emerged and that I used to answer the four questions. I accumulated the responses and used the themes that emerged from two individual interviews with the 7 participants in the study. I have also included passages from my journal to complement data gathered from the interviews, through persistent observation, and through prolonged engagement of staff development and

administrative meetings to help answer the questions. Chapter 5 presents implications of this study's findings as well as recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, INTERPRETATION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provides the summary of the research, an interpretation of the results, the implications of the results, a review of the strengths and limitations of this research, and the conclusion. The summary is a concise overview of the first four chapters, featuring the research design and the reason for this dissertation. The second section contains the meaning and my interpretation of the results of the research. The third section includes implications of the findings with specific regard to the potential application of the results (a) for practical educators and administrators; (b) for policy at the national, state, and district levels; and (c) for further research. The fourth section is a review of the strengths and limitations of this study, with the conclusion as the final section of this chapter.

Summary of the Research

The subject of this dissertation was the perceptions of the campus administrators' role in general education activities prior to referral to special education and related to the placement of African American students in special education. This topic is of interest to me because I am a campus administrator and a former special education teacher with ambitions of succeeding in public school

leadership by addressing ways for all students to be successful in education and by reducing the inappropriate referrals of African American students for special education. I have been both concerned and disappointed with the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education as well as with the long-term effects this inappropriate placement has on the future of African American students. Also, I have been disappointed with the often diminished role of the campus administrator in the prereferral process. Further, I am interested in the criteria of successful prereferral programs in school.

This research started with an extensive historical review of special education law. For over 20 years African American students have been represented disproportionately in special education programs for students with learning disabilities and severe emotional or behavioral disabilities. This issue was first raised by civil rights advocates, educators, administrators, and policymakers who identified that children of ethnic minority backgrounds were overrepresented in classes for the mentally retarded. Specifically, Dunn and Deno were pioneers in addressing the disproportionate placement of children of color in special education classes; they focused on procedures used for diagnosis and placement into special education programs to seek possible solutions to the problems (Deno, 1994; Dunn, 1968; Harry, 1994; J. Patton, 1998). The Civil Rights Act was the first piece of federal legislation that required school districts receiving federal financial assistance to ensure nondiscrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin (Artiles, 1998). For instance, in 1975 the EAHC guaranteed the right of every student with a disability to

a free, appropriate public education (S. Walsh & McKenna, 1990; Yell, 1998). Further, in *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979), the court ruled that standardized IQ tests were culturally biased because they did not account for the cultural background and experiences of African American children; therefore, the California State Department of Education had discriminated intentionally against African American students (Reschly, 1988a, 1988b). Additionally, IDEA is a law requiring states to present a plan containing procedures for assuring that disabled children and their parents are guaranteed procedural safeguards in decisions regarding identification, evaluation, and educational placement to meet the distinctive needs of all students in the least restrictive environment in the educational setting (U.S. Department of Education, 1997; S. Walsh & McKenna, 1990). The language of IDEA can assist campus administrators in becoming more familiar with policy and appropriate procedures and in shaping school-based policy and procedures. Further, it helps to evaluate the way in which special education programs are implemented. Finally, it assists campus administrators in assuming more responsibility in making informed decisions about assessment, placement, and service delivery not only in special education, but also during the general education prereferral process; thus, special education will be more consistent (Anderson & Decker 1993; Kluth et al., 2002; Van Horn, 1989).

In addition, I looked at the campus administrators' role and their increased responsibility in special education as well as their lack of training and knowledge in the area of special education. Historically, district office administrators have managed special education programming, training, staffing, testing, and facilities; however, the

responsibility of the supervision of special education policies and practices is increasingly placed on school administrators (Patterson et al., 2000). The success of the special education programs and general education prereferral processes is dependent on the campus administrators' role and responsibility of these programs (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Lumsden, 1992; Patterson et al., 2000). However, findings of this study support the literature in that the administrators delegated to those with expertise because of their own reported lack of knowledge in the area of special education.

Further, this study indicates how the lack of participation in special education by the campus administrator threatens the success of the prereferral process. Prereferral intervention is an educational intervention that is necessary to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education and to reduce inaccurate identification of students referred for special education services (Overton, 1992). This intervention consists of alternative methods and strategies the regular education teachers can use to identify areas of difficulty and make adjustments so that students can achieve academically prior to making a formal referral for special education. Additionally, this study emphasizes the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process relative to the disproportionate representation of African American students for special education due to inappropriate referrals. This problem is compounded by the fact that little research has been conducted on the role of the campus administrator in the prereferral process in general. Prior research has emphasized school and student characteristics that may influence the referral process (Meijer & Foster, 1988).

A number of issues contribute to the problem of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education and the need for the campus administrator to have a role in the prereferral process. Cultural differences may lead to biased diagnoses and additional causes of the pattern of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education (Osher & Hanley, 1995; Serwatka et al., 1995). For instance, the failure by the school or school district such as misinformed decisions by teachers and various educators contribute to the problem of disproportionate representation of African American students (Nettles et al., 2000). Researchers studying disproportionate representation have identified affects of inappropriate placement of students in special education. These children are deprived of the opportunity to develop intellectual, social, emotional, and vocational skills that will help them succeed upon completing their education (Starratt, 1991). Moreover, the long-term effects of inappropriate placement of students in special education include lack of interest in school, low self-esteem, poor educational outcomes, negative impact on future employment, and even incarceration (Rutherford et al., 2000; Wehmeyer & Shalock, 2001). Effective leadership is needed at all levels to ensure that there is no disproportionate representation of African American students in special education and that all students are classified and placed accurately in the appropriate educational setting. The campus administrator's responsibility is to spearhead the campus prereferral process for all students to be successful academically.

To investigate the campus administrator's role, I used a qualitative and descriptive case study research method with naturalistic and narrative inquiry, observing the settings and the people within those settings. Case study research focuses on "discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives being studied" (Merriam, 1988, p. 3). I designed this qualitative, multisite study to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the general education prereferral process as it relates to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The descriptive method is informative for investigating an assortment of educational problems (Gay, 1992). I used this approach to identify perceptions held by the 7 participants selected through purposeful sampling. The 7 participants interviewed for the study were one campus administrator and regular education teacher from each level of school (elementary, middle, and high school) and one special education specialist from the district. The elementary and high school campus administrators and regular education teachers in the study were identified based on data I received from the district regarding schools with the highest disproportionate representation of African American students.

I used a combination of different types of interviews: informal, conversational, and semistructured interviews. The flexibility allowed themes to emerge from the descriptive data of each of the interviews. Furthermore, the semistructured interview method allowed for systemic comprehensive coverage of the inquiry area, while permitting flexibility to modify the focus or exclude questions I

found to be unproductive for the goals of the research (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

This method encouraged spontaneous questions and responses from the participants during the interviews. Moreover, it helped me with my journal writing and with becoming reflexive in writing the results.

As I completed the analysis and interpretation of the data, I utilized member checking to rephrase, edit, and clarify interview statements and perceptions in a fashion that allowed the participants to correct inaccurate information. In addition, I allowed the participants to review the transcriptions to member check for clarification of data shared during the interviews.

Through this process of data collection, the 7 participants shared their perceptions regarding the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process related to the placement of African American students in special education. The findings of this research fill a void in the existing educational literature by accumulating the perceptions of the campus administrators, regular education teachers, and district special education specialists of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process related to the placement of African American students in special education. This study demonstrates that campus administrators in general have a role in the prereferral processes, specifically in providing resources for teachers and utilizing resources in the prereferral process. Further, this study illustrates the campus administrators' responsibility in the prereferral processes. This study also strengthens the literature noting campus administrators' lack of training in the area of special education and the importance of the campus administrator having

the knowledge and skills in the area of special education to administer an effective prereferral process. Lastly, this study contributes to the field of education the significance of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process: It is essential and must be recognized as one of the criteria of successful prereferral programs to ensure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students identified for special education.

Interpretation of Results

Some results of this study align closely to findings in the literature; however, the participants' narratives reveal some differences. The findings according to the participants and participant groups are illustrated in Tables 1–4 and are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Involvement. The participants in the study perceived the campus administrator's role of involvement in the activities prior to a referral to special education to be threefold: (a) resources, (b) staff development, and (c) decision making (see Table 1). All of the participants perceived the campus administrator's role of involvement in the prereferral process to include providing teachers with resources. Those resources were a combination of teaching strategies and instructional materials as well as relevant funds. More specifically, the campus administrators, with the exception of one, included in their perception the need to give teachers ways to address the student's different learning styles. The campus administrators believed they should be resource people who provide teachers with

information especially and mostly when teachers ask for help, and expressed a desire not to be the person totally responsible for the program because of their many overwhelming other responsibilities. Administrators want to facilitate resources by providing input, receiving feedback, and basically allowing teachers to oversee the program. However, many teachers do not ask for help and therefore may not receive needed resources.

Table 1

Involvement

Research Question 1: Perceptions of campus administrators' involvement in activities prior to a referral to special education			
Campus administrators	<i>Involvement</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing resources - teaching strategies and instructional materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing resources – teaching strategies and instructional materials • Address student's different learning styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing resources – teaching strategies and instructional materials • Address student's different learning styles
	<i>Role in staff development</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs assessment of staff • Prioritize needs • Plan yet utilize specialists to present, evaluate effectiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs assessment of staff • Plan yet utilize specialists to present • Yearly diversity training – cultural differences and low socioeconomic status • Evaluate effectiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan yet utilize Specialists to present, evaluate effectiveness
	<i>Role in decision making</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input from all stake holders • Team effort – rely heavily on teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input from all stake holders • Team effort – rely heavily on teachers • Yet final responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input from all stakeholders • Admin. ensures all options are explored and makes final decision

Teachers	<i>Involvement</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources – teaching strategies and instructional materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources – teaching strategies and instructional materials • Address student’s different learning styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources – teaching strategies and instructional materials • Address student’s different learning styles
	<hr/>		
Special education specialist	<i>Role in staff development</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yearly train on referral system • Plan yet utilize specialists to present, evaluate effectiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan yet utilize specialists to present, evaluate effectiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan yet utilize specialists to present, evaluate effectiveness
	<hr/>		
Special education specialist	<i>Role in decision making</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team effort – rely heavily on teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team effort – overseen by administrator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team effort – rely heavily on teachers
	<hr/>		
Special education specialist	<i>Involvement</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources – teaching strategies and instructional materials (including financial) 		
	<hr/>		
Special education specialist	<i>Role in staff development</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs assessment of staff • Plan yet utilize specialists to present, evaluate effectiveness 		
	<hr/>		
Special education specialist	<i>Role in decision making</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input from all stakeholders • Admin. ensures all options are explored, guides all stakeholders, and makes final decision 		
	<hr/>		

The teachers noted the need to address students’ different learning styles through scheduling by matching students’ learning styles with the different teachers’ teaching styles. The teachers wanted the students to adjust to them rather than adjusting to the students. However, this type of scheduling would add a logistical nightmare to the already involved scheduling process. Student learning styles would have to be available during scheduling; the classes would be changing constantly and therefore students as well as teachers would lack stability. It is unlikely that principals would agree to add this type of scheduling to their role. The teachers’ job is to

instruct students in a variety of ways to ensure that every student in their class has the opportunity to be successful. In addition, the teachers felt that they already try many strategies before referring students to special education; however, if this were so, there would not be so many students being referred to special education, which is steadily increasing (Peterz, 1999).

The campus administrators believed that their role in staff development as it pertains to involvement in the activities prior to a referral to special education included providing staff development, again, acting as a provider of resources. This role includes determining a needs assessment, prioritizing those needs, planning the staff development, utilizing specialists to present the staff development, and then evaluating the effectiveness of the information presented to the staff. One vital aspect of this professional development is related to cultural diversity. Staff development on diversity training that includes cultural differences and working with low socioeconomic status students is pertinent. These findings support research that has found that the administrator can assist teachers by supporting them and providing ongoing training that increases teachers' ability to work with a diverse group of students in the classroom (Crocket, 2002). Also, Gilbert and Gay (1985) suggested that African American students often have difficulty in the classroom because the environment is not conducive to the needs of culturally diverse students.

Professionally, the students see one ethnicity teaching the class, and that person is of the dominant culture; therefore, the district needs more African American teachers to address and help other teachers address the needs of African American students. The

teachers hired should reflect the demographics of the school proportionately. Irvine and York (1993) analyzed a large urban school district and found that as the proportion of African American teachers in the school district increased, the proportion of African American students assigned to special education classes suspended or decreased.

School staff also need training on the prereferral and referral systems on campus so they are well informed. According to research, the general education prereferral process is an early intervention that provides an opportunity to explore student strengths and abilities and to investigate alternatives to placement that mitigate problems. This is when information is obtained to help determine if a referral to special education is warranted (Serwatka et al., 1995).

This staff development is vital because campus administrators depend upon teachers to help in the prereferral decision-making process. The campus administrators in this study perceived their decision-making role as from a team position, where they get input from all stakeholders but have the final responsibility. Administrators perceived they should rely heavily on teachers because the teachers know the students; the teachers perceived that it is the campus administrator's job to gather their input and then make decisions as a team. This finding supports Van Horn's (1989) concept that the campus administrator's ability to lead guides the direction of the campus and the attitude of staff members in the area of effective decision making in special education.

Knowledge and skills needed. Campus administrators discussed the knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to referral to special education on three levels: (a) their current training in special education, (b) their lack of knowledge and skills in special education, and (c) the knowledge and skills needed to administer an effective prereferral process (see Table 2). Overall, the campus administrators did not seem confident in their special education training, which they believed to be minimal. Even the administrator who had a background in special education had limited training in the law. Moreover, the campus administrators all perceived that they lacked knowledge and skills in teaching strategies and instructional issues such as resources, modifications, working with diverse learners, and addressing students' different learning styles. These are the same campus administrators who said they believed their role in involvement in the general education prereferral process to be that of providing resources such as teaching strategies and instructional materials. Clearly, there is a disconnect between administrators' perception of their role and their perception of their own knowledge and skills. Similarly, Hines (2001) found that although administrators in Mississippi perceived their level of knowledge in special education to be sufficient, data revealed that their actual knowledge in special education was quite the contrary.

Table 2

Knowledge and Skills

Research Question 2	
Perceptions by campus administrators relative to knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to referral to special education	
<i>Campus Administrators</i>	
Current training in special education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal – 2 courses in special education law, on-the-job training, and workshops and conferences in special education law and the ARD process • Minimal – 2 courses in special education law, on-the-job training, and workshops and conferences in special education law and the ARD process • Prior to administration – Major in special education, a special education teacher • As an administrator – minimal – 1 course in special education law, on-the-job training, and workshops and conferences in special education law and the ARD process
Lack of knowledge and skills in special education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In teaching strategies and instructional issues such as resources, modifications, working with diverse learners, and addressing students’ different learning styles • In teaching strategies and instructional issues such as resources, modifications, working with diverse learners, and addressing students’ different learning styles • In teaching strategies and instructional issues such as resources, modifications, working with diverse learners, and addressing students’ different learning styles
Knowledge and skills needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource person – intervention strategies, management strategies, and utilize other specialists • Resource person – intervention strategies, management strategies, and utilize other specialists • Administrator must have wide knowledge base in special education to be effective • Resource person – intervention strategies, management strategies, and utilize other specialists • Problem solver

This finding led to questioning the campus administrators about their perceptions of what knowledge and skills are needed to administer effectively general education activities prior to referral to special education. They all reported that these knowledge and skills include being a resource person by providing intervention strategies, management strategies, and utilizing other specialists. They basically

determined that being able to provide these resources was a criterion of a successful prereferral program. As a result, they are not being successful in meeting the needs of students in the prereferral process, the majority of which are minorities, which accounts for the disproportionate representation of students identified for special education.

Responsibility. The participants perceived that the campus administrators' responsibility to assure that there is no disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education means being accountable in assessment of the prereferral process (see Table 3). Five of the 7 participants perceived that this responsibility meant eliminating cultural and ethnical bias in some way among teachers. However, can bias really be eliminated? According to research, educators and service providers must be aware of the cultural influences on behavior and may need training to develop their knowledge of cultural beliefs, values, behaviors, and expectations. Such training can develop educators' understanding of their own attitudes, values, and perspectives toward diversity and the way their biases and backgrounds impact their decision making, instruction, and behavior (Quinn & Jacob, 1999). Awareness is the first step because cultural ignorance, especially regarding the varied contexts in which children of color must function, within the learning environment has been identified as a significant contributing factor in the identification of children of color as disabled (Ogbu, 1994). Participants in this study, with one exception, seemed to prefer to be "color blind." One completely rejected the idea that cultural differences affected special education placement. This finding

relates to the findings of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University that racial minorities make up a disproportionate number of the students involved in special education due to intentional as well as unintentional racial bias (Coeyman, 2001). The participants recommended training in cultural diversity yet not hiring more African American teachers or teachers proportionate to the school's demographics. However, Serwatka et al. (1995) maintained that cultural differences may lead to biased diagnoses and thus add to the pattern of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

Table 3

Responsibility

Research Question 3			
Perceptions of campus administrator's responsibility to assure there is not disproportionate identification of African American students identified for special education			
Campus administrators	<i>Administrators' responsibility to ensure no disproportionality of African American students in special education</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dispel ethnic and cultural bias – increase teachers' knowledge and skills to work with children of different ethnicities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dispel ethnic and cultural bias – make teachers more knowledgeable about different cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with different teaching strategies
	<i>Administrators' accountability in assessment of prereferral process</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable as part of the process • Collect data on teachers by classroom each grading period (ongoing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable as part of process • Instructional leader who oversees process • Ensure teachers monitor failure rate of students • Monitor failure rate of teachers by ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable to assist teachers with strategies and assessment practices, • Adapt assessment practices from special education classes and use in regular education classes

Teachers	<i>Administrators' responsibility to ensure no disproportionality of African American students in special education</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate cultural and ethnic bias – Provide teachers with resources for all children including culturally different children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify student strengths and make the best decisions for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate cultural and ethnic bias
Special education specialist	<i>Administrators' accountability in assessment of prereferral process</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable as part of the process • Make teachers aware of data results and how to use them to make decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at collected data, interpret data, and make appropriate decisions • Check to see that teachers are addressing students needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable as part of the process • Provide teachers with tools they need • Instructional leader who evaluates, assesses, and disaggregates data by subgroups
Special education specialist	<i>Administrators' responsibility to ensure no disproportionality of African American students in special education</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate teachers concerning working with diverse students • Provide resources and teaching strategies to utilize when addressing needs of culturally diverse students 		
Special education specialist	<i>Administrators' accountability in assessment of prereferral process</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No direct accountability • Instructional leader who delegates to school staff, oversees and is available by request • Provide benchmark results to be used instructionally to determine learning difficulties • Collaborate with teachers in assessing failure rates 		

Most of the participants perceived that the campus administrator has accountability as part of the process in assessment related to the prereferral process, including the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education; however, findings reveal no consensus regarding the campus administrator's specific role in the assessment process. Accountability in assessment thus seems to be an ill-defined area on campuses. Assessment should be comprehensive and should include the student's varied developmental areas as evidenced in classroom observations, school reports, previous school experiences,

teacher–parent meetings, and specified testing instruments (Board of Education of the City of New York, 1994; Collier, 1988; Ortiz, 1992; Ysseldyke et al., 1992). Initially in the general education prereferral process, teachers should collect any data available on the student, interpret those data with the campus administrator’s help if needed, and allow those data to drive instruction or decisions about the course of action. The campus administrator should check to see that this has occurred initially as well as appoint someone to follow up on the student in a specified amount of time. If the student has not shown progress, another course of action should be declared at that time. The campus administrator should oversee this process to ensure students are not allowed to fall through the cracks. On a grand scale, the campus administrator should be accountable in assessment in making sure staff members are kept aware of scores and failure rates broken down by teacher and by ethnic groups. This should take place on an ongoing basis to ensure appropriate instructional strategies are being practiced so that all students have the opportunity to be successful in their school performance.

Criteria for successful general education activities prior to referral to special education. This study revealed two criteria for successful general education activities prior to referral to special education: (a) to identify the student’s needs to improve student performance and (b) to utilize school staff expertise (see Table 4). Many of the participants believed that to identify students’ needs to improve student performance means that campus administrators must provide teachers with interventions and strategies that help them identify factors that contribute to student’s academic problems. Several of the participants went on to say that in order to identify

a student's needs they must consider the individual student and the reason that student is not performing well by emphasizing the need to build relationships with students. Building a relationship and showing the students that they are cared for fosters the retrieval of personal information from the student. In other words, it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure success for all students in their classroom by modifying instruction for any student who is not performing well academically. This belief is supported by research conclusions that before referring a student to special education, teachers must identify the problem that is hindering the student's academic performance and employ alternative methods of instruction drawing from other available resources to help that student overcome and achieve academically (Overton, 1992). These findings also support Gottlieb et al.'s (1994) contention that administrators and teachers must know how their students are doing before they can design appropriate programs for them. Some of the participants, both administrators and teachers, advocated that the campus administrator needs to provide teachers with strategies and activities to ensure such student success in the classroom. According to Heller et al. (1982), regular education teachers are responsible for engaging in multiple educational interventions and for noting the effects of such interventions on a student experiencing academic failure before referring the student for special education assessment. Subsequently, administrators, district leaders, and school boards are responsible for ensuring that alternative instructional resources are available. All too often though, students' needs go unmet or remain unknown. Many teachers are overwhelmed and go into survival or management mode and dismiss the

needs of individual students, especially if the teacher sees that student as a behavior problem. These students, who tend to be minority students, fall through the cracks, which is evidenced by the large number of minority students being referred for special education and the disproportionate representation of African American students identified for special education.

Table 4

Criteria for Successful General Education Activities Prior to a Referral to Special Education

Research Question 4			
Perceptions of criteria for successful general education activities prior to a referral to special education			
Campus administrators	<i>Identify student needs to improve student performance</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with interventions • Identify factors that contribute to students academic problems • Identify parent as well as student needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with interventions and tools for identifying student needs • Look at individual student and reasons not performing well • Emphasize building a relationship with students • Teachers responsible to modify 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with strategies and activities to ensure student success • Ensure student success in the classroom • Problem solve
	<i>Utilize school staff expertise</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize certain school staff when needed, Provide resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and have appropriate school staff present and informed when seeking their expertise • Ensure school staff are accessible as early on as possible • Ensure prereferral steps are followed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with teachers and other school staff

Teachers	<i>Identify student needs to improve student performance</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with intervention strategies that identify and address academic need • Identify student's academic problem, • Admin. ensure teachers try different strategies before referring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with readily available strategies and hands-on approach to identifying student needs • Look at individual student • Emphasize building a relationship with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with intervention strategies • Look at individual student • Must identify the problem before determining the needs, • Match teaching style with student learning style
	<i>Utilize school staff expertise</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve parents • Use committee meeting to strategize after reviewing info, • Ensure staff expertise suggested is appropriate and useful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve parents • Ensure school staff are well-informed about process • Have special ed staff train regular ed staff in modifications • Ensure interventions are carried out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve parents and school staff to get early input for scheduling that matches teaching styles with students learning styles
Special education specialist	<i>Identify students' needs to improve student performance</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure intervention strategies are utilized and problem solve if they do not work • Identify possible interventions for students based on their needs • Collaborate with and help teachers identify student needs 		
	<i>Utilize school staff expertise</i>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quickly address the problem by seeking as much info from school staff as possible • Cover different components of student education (social, academic, emotional) • Help teachers find appropriate interventions • Ensure a well-structured process everyone knows and buys into 		

The participants also perceived that the criteria for successful general education activities prior to referral to special education included utilizing school staff expertise including regular education and special education teachers; diagnosticians; behavior, reading, curriculum, and instructional specialists; parent training specialists; counselors; the school nurse; and according to the teachers, the student's parent or guardian as well. The general education prereferral process must be well structured, and all staff must be well informed about and buy into that

process. According to ILIAD Project (2002) prereferral intervention processes show promise for preventing the disproportionate representation of African American students referred for special education. They have the potential to identify and address systemic problems such as inadequate instruction, irrelevant curriculum, and lack of resources to avoid inappropriate referrals and placement in special education. Many teachers are unaware of certain school staff and the nature of their expertise; therefore, campus administrators must ensure that the prereferral process includes convening school staff to brainstorm, share information, identify the problem, and determine a course of action. This can be done through weekly or biweekly committee meetings, as one participant advocated.

The 7 participants in the study shared their perceptions of the campus administrator's role of involvement, knowledge and skills, responsibility to ensure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students identified for special education, and the criteria for successful general education activities prior to referral to special education. The findings according to the three participant groupings are, for the most part, parallel to findings in the review of related literature in several of the themes that emerged. These findings have certain implications that are discussed next.

Implications of the Findings

This research was intended to contribute to the national, state, district, and schoolwide knowledge of how general education activities prior to special education

referral contribute to inappropriate special education referrals and in turn the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Specifically, the role of campus administrators in general education activities prior to referral to special education was investigated. However, campus administrators and teachers and other stakeholders differ in their own views of the administrator's role in the prereferral process. Information from this study develops possible reasons why African American students are represented disproportionately in special education and whether the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process is related to this problem. Therefore, there are implications for practice, policy, and further research concerning the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process and its effect on the placement of African American students in special education.

Implications for practice of educators and administrators. The National Academy of Science study by Heller et al. in 1982 was done at the request of Congress to address the disproportionate representation of minority students and male students in special education. Twenty years later, disproportion in special education persists. In the district where the current research was performed and in similar districts, there has been little to no progress in addressing disproportionality since the study in 1982. Therefore, the recommendations from that national study are still relevant and apply to the issues found in this study:

1. Teachers should demonstrate that an individual child needs special education by being accountable not just for utilizing multiple educational interventions, but also for taking note of the effects of such interventions on a child

experiencing academic collapse before referring that child for special education assessment.

2. The school board and campus administrators should make certain that these necessary alternative instructional resources are available.

3. Administrators at the district, state, and national levels are responsible for regularly monitoring the pattern of special education placements along with the rates for particular groups of children or particular schools and districts. Administrators also must monitor the types of instructional services existing to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed and that inequities found in the system are reduced.

There is evidence that the school district in this study operates as an “old-model” district, a dual education system where regular education and special education exists within the district as separate entities. Special education is separate, and identified special education students are “pulled out” of the regular classroom and isolated to receive individualized instruction (in resource or content-mastery settings) from special education teachers. Thus, these students miss regular education instruction and develop a gap in knowledge with serious personal consequences. The participants overall embraced their antiquated ideals and preferred their parallel structures rather than more current values and federal and state law and policy emphasizing inclusion, collaboration, and collective efforts. Schools in this district and similar old-model districts should ensure as early as possible that students who are not succeeding academically receive high-quality regular education services that

include proper assessment, diagnosis, interventions, and evaluative measures before those students are referred for special education assessment (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

This research increases the understanding of the leadership role and responsibilities the campus administrator must assume in the prereferral process on their campus. Clearly, administrator and teacher preparation programs must provide theoretical as well as practical knowledge, either through simulated programs or hands-on projects at schools that include managing special education programs as well as facilitating the prereferral intervention process, which is mainly a general education issue. Higher education institutions should require more classes in special education and training in implementing and facilitating a prereferral process on campus; general education curricula may lack such training, although prereferral intervention is a general education, rather than a special education, process. The campus administrator is responsible for the academic success of all students on campus and needs to be equipped to handle this task. Aspiring administrators need to develop and maintain knowledge, skills, practical experience, and personal abilities conducive to effectively identifying students' needs and to implementing a process that will provide interventions for struggling students prior to being referred to special education. If campus administrators are properly prepared and fully understand the programmatic elements of special education, they may assist their school district in (a) reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education and (b) reducing costly inappropriate referrals for special education.

Furthermore, the campus administrator's enhanced knowledge will help teachers utilize interventions and resources. This in turn will help provide a link between the special education and regular education programs that will facilitate collaboration, helping to identify the needs of all students and to meet those needs prior to making a special education referral. Possessing a more thorough knowledge base would provide for more effective decision making on the part of administrators, which should help them lead successful programs and therefore benefit all students. The properly trained campus administrator who understands the true nature of prereferral processes can identify the student's individual needs by effectively utilizing school resource interventions and school specialists and by providing teachers with instructional materials and teaching strategies that will ensure adequate educational experiences for all students.

The participants of this study acknowledged that the campus administrator should be involved in the prereferral process on their campus, whether it is through providing resources, staff development, or instruction to make sure the students are in the appropriate educational placement. This parallels the research findings of the NABSE and ILIAD Project (2002a, 2002b) that the administrator has the responsibility to monitor the effectiveness of the prereferral intervention process to ensure that students are appropriately supported and challenged in general education. Administrators should implement a process for review of interventions and their implementation; they can choose from numerous established prereferral process models.

Further, educators and school boards must ensure that disproportionate representation of any minority, culture, or socioeconomic group does not occur and that academic success of all students is prevalent. In order to meet the needs of minority students, educators need to hire administrators and teachers who represent the demographics of their school district and/or school proportionately as well as include diversity training in their yearly staff development. Furthermore, hiring teachers and administrators who represent the demographics of the school district and/or school may enhance prereferral processes in identifying and addressing the student's needs due to congruent real-life experiences and similar cultural background. In addition, school boards and campus administrators must implement policy and procedures to make sure that prereferral processes are effective in identifying the needs of students prior to being referred to special education. To provide this type of assessment, campus administrators must understand modifications and intervention strategies for special education students. Based on the research, campus administrators and educators need more training in the area of assessment and of effectively utilizing data to provide interventions ultimately to reduce the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Assessment should be utilized diagnostically to drive instruction in the classroom. In addition, there should be a link between the special education and regular education programs within a district and on campuses so teachers can work together in identifying student and teacher needs (Ford, 2001; Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Overton, 1992).

Implications for policy at the state and district levels. As a mandate of IDEA, school districts are responsible for the instructional placement of students in the least restrictive environment. District and state leaders must recognize and acknowledge the need for campus administrators to take an active role in reducing the disproportionate representation of African American and minority students in special education. The participants in this study spoke about the prereferral process simply as interventions and did not have a formal prereferral model in place. Therefore, this district and similar districts should investigate formal prereferral process models and adapt or adopt one that best meets the needs of the district. District policy also should mandate that all personnel within the district be trained and expected to adhere to the chosen model. Further, policy should ensure that each state and district has formal prereferral processes spearheaded by an accountable campus administrator to reduce inappropriate and disproportionate representation of minority students in special education within the state or district. Ford (2001) shared that accountability is a requirement of leadership, and effective leadership is needed at all levels—in the classroom, schoolwide, districtwide, and within the entire community—to ensure that all students receive an appropriate education. State- or district-mandated formal prereferral processes would ensure accountability by the individual campuses to the district, by the district to the state, and by the state to the federal government. State and district policy should require each district to have a prereferral process in place so that when students transfer to another school district or to another school within the same district, that school will receive the student's intervention information in a

timely manner. This way, time will not be wasted in first identifying the problem, then trying different intervention strategies that prove unsuccessful in helping the student.

In addition, the allocation of resources should be written into policy to be utilized better at the state and district levels. Intervention strategies are needed to identify the students' needs prior to being referred to special education. Further, the implementation of prereferral processes within the state and district levels would help to improve student achievement in general and improve the way to monitor and reduce the inappropriate referral rate of students referred for special education.

The participants held perceptions that the campus administrator had a responsibility to assure there is not disproportionate identification of African American students. To address this perception, campus administrators must utilize staff development to dispel ethnic and cultural biases and lack of special education knowledge among teachers. Diversity training in this district focused on facts and characteristics of culturally diverse and linguistically different groups. Unfortunately, this training did not include ways to alter instructional practices to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. The district had no form of assessment to verify whether staff training was successful in reducing the disproportionate identification of African Americans referred to or placed in special education. This district and similar districts should change instructional practices to address issues of culture and language. Teachers should be called upon to demonstrate they are utilizing these practices to meet the needs of diverse learners. The training on multicultural issues must consist

of not only information about culturally and linguistically diverse groups, but also how to use that information and materials to reform instructional practices in the classroom. For example, the campus administrators and teachers must be knowledgeable about the cultural influences on assessment and the problems connected with cultural insensitivity of assessment methods. A definite distinction must be made between differences and disabilities of students. According to Valles (1998), the failure of general education to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students may be due to schools' limited application of the emerging knowledge base on effective practices for culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Hence, as the district continues to change demographically with the increase in African American students, campus administrators and teachers must be better prepared to serve this diverse population in general education prior to referral to special education.

The state and district should consider implementing certain criteria as a component of the prereferral process. These criteria should include school specialists and stakeholders who must be a part of the prereferral process and the particular problems that must be assessed to identify struggling student's needs and to improve student performance prior to referring them to special education. The prereferral process may be one of the most inconsistently employed processes in education. For instance, technical aspects of the prereferral process are inconsistent in areas such as the type of problem, size, and level of involvement of team members including the administrator in implementing prereferral strategies (Buck et al., 2003). Additionally,

implementation of prereferral processes will help to alleviate excessive costs such as inappropriate referrals and costly testing. As Ortiz (1992) indicated, researchers believe that preintervention is profitable for students and therefore for school districts as well. Noteworthy, the referral process can be extremely costly to school districts and damaging to students if not approached with care (Dillon, 1994). The superintendent of the school district should facilitate collaboration with campus administrators within the district to provide a framework for a districtwide prereferral process; however, the framework on each campus should be set up according to the needs of the individual campus. The purpose of the prereferral process in the school district is to help alleviate the possibility of students slipping through the cracks, particularly students who move.

Implications of the findings for future research. The findings from this study suggest possible recommendations for future research. First, additional study should investigate this area of leadership effects on special education referrals. The disproportionate representation of African American students in special education should be addressed on a systemic level including examining inadequate instruction and lack of resources (Ford, 2001; NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002a, 2002b).

Additionally, this study serves as a pathway for future studies aimed at increasing the knowledge and skills of the campus administrator relating to utilizing prereferral processes in the appropriate placement of African American students prior to being referred to special education. There is no question that more literature and research is needed on the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process to

prevent inappropriate referral of minority students for special education (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988; Heller et al., 1982; Markowitz, 1997). Campus administrators are the instructional leaders on a campus and are responsible for having the knowledge and skills needed to utilize school specialists when making decisions for all students on their campus. Additionally, campus administrators must have a better understanding to utilize the available resources to identify the needs of the students prior to being referred for special education. For this reason, further research is needed in the area of the campus administrator's ability to use resources in the prereferral process to identify and address student problems that hinder their academic performance in school.

Another concern in the field of education is an emphasis by the federal government on school districts and campuses being held accountable for student achievement or the lack thereof. Currently a part of the state accountability rating for schools and campuses in Texas is Average Yearly Progress (AYP), which means the federal government expects all students—regular and special education—to gain at least a year of progress in their educational performance. For this reason, additional studies evaluating prereferral processes within a school district or campus and their effectiveness in improving student performance and reducing the student achievement gap among ethnicities is needed to determine their effect on AYP.

These studies could become a teaching component used in educational administrator preparatory programs. Moreover, qualitative studies could provide more detailed models for how campus administrators address their leadership

responsibilities in the prereferral process in relation to identifying and meeting the needs of all students prior to students being referred to special education.

Additionally, further studies that address educational preparatory programs could focus on the knowledge and experiences needed for effective leadership within prereferral processes and special education. Real-life application stories from campus administrators with successful and effective prereferral processes could be shared in these graduate education administration preparatory classes. These stories must be shared so others can learn about the firsthand responsibility of campus administrators in an effective prereferral process. As Sage (1969) indicated, role playing in simulated environments and situations of the school setting to educate administrators is effective in increasing the campus administrators' knowledge, skills, and leadership abilities.

Future research could examine how the campus administrator links regular education and special education, where the prereferral process bridges the gap. This link between regular and special education on a campus allows the campus administrator to better identify the needs of the students and recognize that intervention strategies that are normally used in the special education can be implemented in the prereferral program. Educational administration preparatory programs must require more than the minimum of one or two special education classes to equip campus administrators with a wider special education knowledge base that enables them to serve all students. Often campus administrators do not participate in the special education program on campus because of a lack of

knowledge regarding special education policy, rules, and regulation (Pellicer & Anderson, 1993). In other words, the campus administrator must bring a sense of the special education concept to the regular education program. This consists of utilizing the special education modifications and teaching concepts in a regular education program instead of changing the student's placement from the least restrictive environment to a more restrictive environment. Special education teaching strategies can work in a regular education program as long as the correct intervention strategies are utilized by individuals in the prereferral process. Research regarding this link could contribute to changing curricula in educational administrator preparatory programs.

Finally, student achievement data could be collected and analyzed to determine if there is a relationship of improved student achievement and the campus administrators' leadership in the prereferral process. Utilizing prereferral processes effectively will help more students improve and become more successful while reducing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to a small number of participants: 7, of whom 3 were administrators. Additionally, this study was a single case study and thus may not be applied or compared to other studies, because the same participants, setting, and environment cannot be replicated or generalized to other school districts. In addition,

it cannot be assumed that different participants' experiences would be the same when accessing their perceptions of the campus administrators' role in the prereferral process relative to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. Moreover, the general education teachers have never been campus administrators, so they may not have a good idea of what the role of the campus administrator should be in the prereferral process.

The final limitation is researcher bias. The researcher served as the prominent research instrument and accumulated all the data. For instance, the natural setting of the research was a familiar setting—the district in which I am an administrator. Further, my educational background and experience in special education may have provided bias. Also, the narratives were gathered in a natural setting and are only appropriate for this study. The participants answered the questions according to their own experiences and perceptions.

Conclusion

This research was conducted because there is without a doubt a disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The adverse effect of this inappropriate referral on these students' future is horrible and unnecessary. Once students are referred to special education, it is highly likely that they will qualify and indeed be placed in the special education program (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Once placed in special education, it is just as likely that those students will remain in special education—very few are exited from the program

(Bahr et al., 1991). These students then miss out on the regular curriculum; in fact, their teachers often concentrate on social and behavioral issues. It is increasingly becoming the responsibility of campus administrators to oversee and facilitate special education as well as regular education programs on their campus. They are in the leadership position and can effect change on the campus. These leaders need a wide knowledge base concerning special education to run a successful program. Lack of knowledge on the part of the administrator can create excessive costs for the district due to lawsuits that could be avoided if campus administrators had the knowledge and skills effectively to oversee the special education program (Anderson & Decker, 1993). Further, America's schools are changing demographically, and it is time all educators were more equipped to work with culturally diverse students. African American students in particular often have difficulty in their classrooms with teachers and other students because the environment is not conducive to the needs of culturally diverse students (Gilbert & Gay, 1985).

In addition to this increased knowledge base, administrators must implement a well-known, established, and adhered-to prereferral process on each campus that effectively identifies the needs of students who are not performing well academically and that proficiently addresses these needs to improve student academic achievement in schools before referring students to special education. This type of intervention process addressed systemically can help reduce the high number of inappropriate referrals to special education and thus reduce the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education (Overton, 1992). After successful

prereferral intervention, some students may not warrant a referral for special education, which can save the district unnecessary costs. Students should be formally referred to special education only if they show no improvement or progress after intervention strategies have been employed.

The participants in this study gave their perceptions concerning the campus administrators' involvement in the general education activities prior to referral to special education, knowledge and skills needed to administer effectively such general education activities prior to special education referral, their responsibility to assure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students identified for special education, and their criteria of successful general education activities prior to special education referral. The study obtained perceptions of 3 campus administrators, 3 teachers, and a district special education specialist. Common themes emerged and aligned in some instances to the literature review. The participants had some concerns that need to be taken into consideration: (a) the fast-changing demographics of students moving into the school district; (b) teachers' lacking skills needed to work effectively with African American and other minority students; (c) students moving into the district already in special education; (d) the district's inability to deal effectively with the high mobility rate of students, mostly at schools comprised of low socioeconomic status students; (e) the need for intervention teams to address the issues of students before referring them to special education; and (f) a discrepancy in the number of African American students actually being served in special education versus the number reported as receiving special education services at that school, due

to the high mobility of students and problems with student records. These concerns are legitimate yet do not change the nationwide issue of the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

This study demonstrates that, according to stakeholders' perceptions, campus administrators need to provide teachers with resources including teaching strategies and instructional materials for use with students who are having problems before referring them to special education. Also, campus administrators need to plan staff development yet utilize school staff expertise to present and evaluate this staff development. Additionally, the campus administrator should make decisions regarding students in the prereferral process as a team, relying heavily on teacher input. However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the campus administrator. In the area of knowledge and skills, campus administrators lack knowledge and skills in the areas that they need to administer the prereferral process, such as special education law and the ARD process as well as providing intervention strategies, management strategies, and modifications. Moreover, campus administrators have the responsibility to ensure there is no disproportionate representation of African American students in special education by reducing and eliminating cultural and ethnic bias. Further, administrators need to be accountable in assessment of the prereferral process. Lastly, in order to have successful general education intervention activities prior to referral to special education, campus administrators need to provide teachers with intervention strategies that aid in identifying student needs to improve student performance and utilize school staff expertise in the prereferral process. All of

the participants in the study expressed their willingness to do whatever they could to make sure all of their students are successful in school. Overall, the participants did not in any way deny the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, and they expressed hope that the general education prereferral intervention process was the way to reduce this disproportionate representation.

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VITA

John Wesley Hamlett, III, the son of John Hamlett, Jr., and Shirley Hamlett, was born in Fort Worth, Texas, January 2, 1967. He graduated from Everman High School, Everman, Texas, in 1985, and from Tarrant County Junior College in 1987, where he earned an Associate in Arts Degree. He then entered Texas Christian University as a junior and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Speech Communication in December 1991. Upon receiving his Bachelor of Science degree, he was employed as an auto insurance claim representative in Irving, Texas. In the summer of 1993, he entered the Alternative Certification Program at the Educational Service Center–Region 11 in Fort Worth, Texas, where he earned a teaching certification in Special Education. The first year John was employed by the Fort Worth Independent School District as a middle school special education teacher and soccer coach. For the next 4 years John was employed in Austin Independent School District as a special education teacher and basketball coach. During 1998–2000 he was employed by the Round Rock Independent School District as a Resource teacher. At this point, he began his master's at Prairie View A&M University. There he earned his Master of Arts degree in Educational Administration in May 2000. During 2000–2003, he was employed as a middle school and high school administrator with the Austin Independent School District. In June 2001 he entered the Cooperative Superintendency Program with the XIV Fellow Cohort in the department of Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, the

summer of 2003, he returned to his hometown of Fort Worth to launch a ministry as Pastor and founder of New Covenant Christian Fellowship of Tarrant County, along with his wife Vanessa as the President and Licensed Professional Counselor of Personal Care Christian Counseling to impact the community. Currently, he is also a campus administrator with a North Texas suburban school district.

Permanent Address: 8217 Cedarcrest Lane, Fort Worth, Texas 76123

This dissertation was typed by the author.