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Perceptions of special educators on disproportionate representation

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS ON
DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION

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

Troy Daniel Gonzales

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
School of Special Education

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This Dissertation by: Troy Daniel Gonzales

Entitled: *Perceptions of Special Educators on Disproportionate Representation*

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

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ABSTRACT

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Disproportionate representation is an ongoing concern in the field of special education, specifically for learners of historically underserved populations. In this study, the perceptions special educators had of disproportionate representation were examined. Four elementary special educators from a Midwestern school district were interviewed three separate times. Results of the study showed that special educators externalized inadequacies to other staff members, the district, families and learners of historically underserved populations, and cultural differences. The implications of the study indicated that special educators must recognize their role in the special education process in order to diminish disproportionate representation of historically underserved learners in special education.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Disproportionate representation is an ongoing concern in the field of special education (Dunn, 1968; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Special education is a major component of the educational system with nearly seven million learners served under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2006), approximately 13% of all learners ages 3-21 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The 28th Annual Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) on the Implementation of IDEA estimates that 38% of the total special education population receives special education and related services for specific learning disabilities (SLD). Of the total special education population, 6% receive special education and related services for emotional disturbance (ED). Of the 13% of learners in special education, 52% are learners who are from historically underserved groups. However, according to *The Condition of Education 2010* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), learners who are from historically underserved groups comprise 44% of the total school-aged population (see Table 1). The difference in percentage represents the longstanding disproportionate representation of learners receiving special education and related services.

Table 1

National Percentage of Learners by Race

Total General Education Population		Total Special Education Population	
White	Historically Underserved Groups	White	Historically Underserved Groups
56%	44%	48%	52%

Disproportionate representation seems incongruous given the amount of attention dedicated to the problem (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Beratan, 2008; Dunn, 1968; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent & Artiles, 2007). The concern is so widespread that current legislation calls for public and parental reporting of disproportionality (IDEA, 2006). The long-standing problem of disproportionate representation is a complex phenomenon and is influenced by a number of factors. Skiba et al. (2008) conclude that disproportionate representation is “a symptom of a broader disconnect between mainstream educational culture and the cultural orientation of communities of color” (p. 227). Specifically, disproportionate representation is a concern in high-incidence disability categories (e.g., learning disabilities, emotional disturbance; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002).

According to the 28th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), the largest percentage of learners in the United States receiving special education and related services by race/ethnicity are American Indian (13.7%) and African American (12.4%). These races are 1.5 times more likely to be served under Part B of IDEA than all other racial groups combined. From the national data (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), American Indian learners are 1.79 times

more likely to receive special education and related services for a SLD and 1.55 times more likely to receive special education and related services for an ED than all other racial groups combined. African American learners are 1.42 times more likely to receive special education and related services for a SLD and 2.24 times more likely to receive special education and related services for ED than all other racial groups combined. Statistically, learners who are American Indian and African American are overrepresented in special education, specifically within the categories of SLD and ED.

With the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), states have options for identifying learners with SLD. The IQ-achievement discrepancy model, which has historically been the primary means of identification, is no longer required. Some states have gone to the extent of prohibiting the IQ-discrepancy model (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). States must permit a response to the intervention (RTI) model or “may permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures” (IDEA, 2006, U.S.C. § 300.307[a]). The RTI model has dramatic implications for learners in historically underserved groups (Artiles et al., 2004), it seeks to provide quality instruction that meets the needs of all learners and thus decreases the number of inappropriate referrals to special education (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Currently, all 50 states allow for the use of RTI as a method for identifying a learner with SLD (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2011).

A model utilized for learners receiving special education and related services for ED is the school-wide positive behavior intervention support (SWPBS) model. Approximately 31 states have teams at the state level to assist with the implementation of SWPBS (Spaulding, Horner, May, & Vincent, 2008). SWPBS places culture and the way culture influences behavior at the forefront of intervention design, thus reducing the

number of inappropriate referrals to special education (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

Factors contributing to disproportionate representation in special education are complex. For the last 50 years, the main focus of disproportionate representation has been on race (Dunn, 1968; Losen & Welner, 2001; Mercer, 1973). Although race is identified as a significant factor contributing to disproportionate representation, issues relating to poverty (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, R., & Chung, 2005), insufficient language instruction (Watson, Van Etten, Gonzales, & Ortiz, 1977), a lack of sensitivity to culture and language (Hilliard, 1980), and the use of a wait-to-fail identification model are additional factors contributing to disproportionate representation. The wait-to-fail model is an ineffective model for learners who are historically underserved because this model does not take into consideration the impact language development and acculturation have on learning (Fletcher & Navarette, 2003). Recent literature considers the fact that cultural differences contribute to disproportionate representation (Sheets, 2005; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008). Education systems, particularly special education, are based on values and knowledge of White middle-class individuals. Without acknowledging the multiple factors that contribute to culture, disproportionate representation and inadequate educational outcomes for learners who are in historically underserved groups will persist.

One theoretical perspective that holds promise for providing a foundation to understand cultural difference is the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS; Bennett, 1998). The DMIS provides a developmental model to recognize how individuals understand and act across different cultural settings. The model “assumes a

social construction of identity in which individuals not only negotiate and interpret their identity in relation to others, but also learn through interaction and negotiation with others that culture difference is not a static concept” (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004, p. 314). To that end, Hammer (2009) created the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI) to measure intercultural competence. The inventory places individuals along a continuum from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural mindset. There are five stages along the continuum (see Figure 1.)

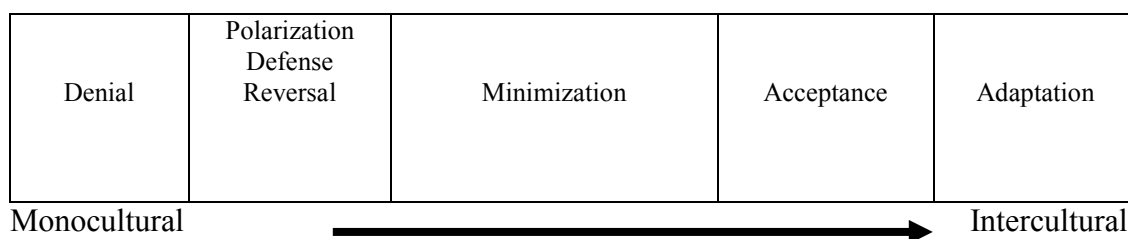


Figure 1. Five stages along IDI continuum to measure intercultural competence.

Generally speaking, within the monocultural mindset, individuals are likely to avoid cultural difference; whereas in the intercultural mindset, individuals are likely to seek understanding of cultural differences. The IDI (Hammer, 2009) relates directly to the ongoing problem of disproportionate representation as it becomes necessary to examine the perceptions special educators have on disproportionate representation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation. The intent of this research was to “uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these

understandings against the backdrop of the people's overall worldview or culture”
(Crotty, 1998, p. 7).

Research Question

Q1 What perceptions do special educators have of disproportionate representation in special education?

Definition of Terms

Composition index. “The extent to which a group is over- or underrepresented in a category compared to its proportion in the broader population” (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 266).

Culture. “The learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people” (Bennett, 1998, p. 3).

Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. A model created by Milton Bennett (1993) to describe the increasingly more complex cognitive structures used to view the diverse world.

Disproportionate representation. “The extent to which membership of a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education disability category” (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999, p. 198).

Emotional disturbance. “A condition exhibit[ed]...over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance” (IDEA, 2006, 34, U.S.C. §300.8 (c)(4)(ii)).

Historically underserved groups. “Students from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds” (Trent, 2010, p. 1).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004).

“Operates as the federal grant program to state educational agencies (SEA), and through the SEA to local educational agencies (LEA), providing funds for free appropriate public education (FAPE) for eligible children with disabilities” (Latham, Latham, & Mandlawitz, 2008, p. 23). Part A includes general provisions of IDEA and definitions. Part B provides assistance for education of all learners with disabilities ages 3-21. Part C provides assistance for infants and toddlers with disabilities. Part D provides national assistance to improve education for learners with disabilities.

Intercultural. A mindset in which “one’s own beliefs and behaviors are just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62).

Intercultural competence. “The capability of shifting cultural perspectives and adapting behavior to cultural context” (Hammer, 2009, p. 205).

Least restrictive environment.

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities . . . are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 2006, § 612 (a)(5)(A))

Monocultural. A mindset in which one views his/her own culture as “central to reality...the beliefs and behaviors that people receive in their primary socialization are unquestioned; they are experienced as ‘just the way things are’” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62).

Response to intervention (RTI). The “practice of providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying student response data to important educational decisions” (Elliot & Morrison, 2008, p. 1).

Risk index. “The proportion of a given group served in a given category and represents the best estimate of a risk for that outcome for that group” (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 267).

Risk ratio. “Compares the rate at which different groups are served in special education to generate a ratio describing the extent of disparity” (Skiba et al., 2005, p. 133).

School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS). “A framework or approach comprised of intervention practices and organizational systems for establishing the social culture, learning and teaching environment, and individual behavior supports needed to achieve academic and social success for all students” (Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, OSEP, 2010, p. 12).

Specific learning disability (SLD). “A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (IDEA, 2006, 20 U.S.C. §1401 (30)). The definition of SLD for the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Administrative Rule 5325.1341 Specific Learning Disability, 2010) is similar to the federal definition mentioned above. However, the state of Minnesota has a separate category for traumatic brain injury, rather than incorporating it into a condition contributing to SLD.

Summary

In conclusion, disproportionate representation is a longstanding problem in the field of special education, specifically with American Indian and African American learners who receive special education and related services for SLD and ED. For the past

50 years, the major focus of disproportionate representation has targeted race. A limited number of studies have focused on the multifaceted aspect of culture. It is hoped that with the implementation of the RTI model, which includes provisions for high quality instruction to meet the needs of all learners, disproportionate representation will decrease. The SWPBS model places culture, and the way culture influences behavior, at the forefront of intervention design. With culture at the forefront of behavioral differences, this model has possible implications in reducing the number of inappropriate referrals to special education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Disproportionate representation in the field of special education is an ongoing concern, specifically in the category of specific learning disability (SLD) and emotional disturbance (ED) for American Indian and African American learners (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004). The ongoing problem of disproportionate representation is complex and influenced by a number of factors (Artiles, 2003; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent & Artiles, 2007). The following review highlights a synopsis of disabilities, an historical overview of SLD and ED, and the identification process for each. Statistical data are presented with regard to the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American learners who receive special education and related services in the categories of SLD and ED. A review of response to intervention (RTI) and school wide positive behavior intervention support (SWPBS) is included to emphasize the importance of these models in current legislation and the impact of each model on the identification process. The theoretical construct of intercultural competence is reviewed to establish a foundation from which to understand cultural differences. The challenges and the impact of language and culture on the learning environment are also reviewed.

Disabilities

Two perspectives of disabilities identified in the literature include the mechanistic paradigm (Johnson, Humphrey, Mellard, Woods, & Swanson, 2010; Swanson, 2009) and the holistic paradigm (Heshusius, 1982; Iano, 1986). Each paradigm differs in its definition and identification of disabilities. The mechanistic paradigm defines and identifies disabilities through “scientific refinement” (Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004, p. 4), i.e., disabilities are typically viewed as something that a learner *has* and the disability resides within the learner (Gallagher et al., 2004). On the other hand, the holistic paradigm focuses on the person—a shift from the “machine to the human being” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 61) and from the natural science model to the human science model. The holistic paradigm holds that human beings are active and reflexive. Rather than being a passive participant in the educational process, the learner is actively constructing and transforming reality. Lave (1990) offers support for the holistic paradigm by stating that “the encompassing, synthesizing intentions reflected in a theory of understanding-in-practice make it difficult to argue for the separation of cognition and the social world, the form and content of learning, or learning and its 'applications” (p. 323).

The mechanistic paradigm is grounded in the deficit model or a wait-to-fail model (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Urban, 2009). Theoretical perspectives that support the deficit model include the genetic pathology theory (McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Neal; 2003), the cultural disadvantage theory (Foley, 1997), and the cultural and accumulated environmental deficits theory (Span, 2003). These theories contribute to the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation in the field of LD and ED by continuing to

blame parents and communities for sustained failure (Trent, 2010). The genetic pathology theory was embraced in the 1960s and subscribed to the thought that genetic make-up played a role in determining cognitive ability (McCray et al., 2003). The cultural disadvantage theory subscribed to similar thoughts as the genetic pathology theory but differed in that it placed focus on the family unit (Pearl, 1997). Cultural and accumulated environmental deficits theory is similar to the previous two theories, e.g., the "problem" lies within the individual; however, this theory takes it a step further by indicating that the family unit and genetics lead to irreversible cognitive deficits (Foley, 1997). In summary, these three theories focus on the deficit model and ascertain that the problem lies within the individual.

Alternative theories include the cultural incongruity theory (Ladson-Billings, 1994), the oppositional cultural framework theory (Ogbu, 2003), and the stereotype threat theory (Mickelson, 2003). The cultural incongruity theory indicates that the problem is not within the learner, but the cultures of historically underserved learners do not align with the school culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The oppositional cultural theory suggests learners take on oppositional behaviors with regard to school success, i.e., learners from historically underserved populations are perceived as disrespectful, unprepared, and arrogant (Ogbu, 2003). The stereotype threat theory argues that stereotypes portrayed in the media have adverse academic effects on learners from historically underserved populations (Mickelson, 2003). These theories allow educators the opportunity to look beyond group deficits to other factors that may contribute to failure: "the role of history in shaping beliefs about people and their children and how

these beliefs influence the identity, development and performance of these children (Trent, 2010, p. 777).

Currently, the mechanistic paradigm is infused in the field of special education (Spencer, 2008). However, practitioners and educators differ in their opinions of theory and practice within the field of special education (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2005). To allow knowledge to determine practice, educators must give rise to a corpus of information (Foucault, 1965, 1973, 1980), allowing the creation of new knowledge in the field of specific learning disabilities and emotional disturbance rather than solely relying on the mechanistic paradigm and scientific refinement.

One example of how the mechanistic paradigm permeates the field of special education is through the process of how a learner *becomes* disabled (Linton, 1998). In schools, when a learner is developing “differently” than his peers, s/he is usually referred to a team. At this point, the learner becomes the object of observation, evaluation, and documentation (Heshusius, 2002). Shortly after the observation and evaluation, the special education team meets and discusses the individual’s differences based on previously documented results. If the learner is eligible for services, s/he receives an Individual Education Program (IEP). The process of labeling and categorizing a learner as disabled follows the scientific model (making the human into several different parts). The identification process generally looks at biological factors to determine a disability rather than taking into consideration other factors: the role of history, identity, development, and performance (Trent, 2010).

Within the mechanistic paradigm, facts are separated from value, observers are separated from the observed, and the knower is separated from the known (Heshusius,

1989). All things are measured and quantified, thus making measure and quantification actual knowledge. Another example of how the mechanistic paradigm persists in the field of education is through the goals and objectives that each learner with an IEP must have documented. Researchers (Heshusius, 1982; Iano, 1986; Poplin, 1985) discuss the mechanistic paradigm in special education as the never-ending search for causes, diagnoses, and categorizations of exceptionalities. Yet others (Heshusius, 1982; Mitchell, 1980; Poplin, 1985; Smith, 1986) discuss how the special education model guarantees the mechanistic conception of disabilities in education by separating facts from value, observers from the observe, and the knower from the known—creating knowledge through measure and quantification.

A third example of how the mechanistic paradigm pervades the field of special education is through mandates of laws such as IDEA. The current law (IDEA) of special education represents a time in history when beliefs were focused on disabilities in a certain context (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Even the recent mandate of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) discusses appropriate instruction based on scientific research.

Confusion surrounds the alternative paradigms presented within the field of special education. Heshusius (1989) affords two conceptual misunderstandings about theoretical and paradigmatic changes presented in the field of special education: (a) renaming theories as paradigms and (b) the accusation of “fuzziness” associated with those who stray from the current mechanistic paradigm. Masterman (1970) purports that a paradigm exists when there may not be a theory. For instance, individuals operate in a paradigm and then a mechanistic theory is dropped into the already existing paradigm. So within the paradigm, individuals can change a part of the theory without ever

changing the paradigm. Thus, several authors show confusion in different discussions of a paradigm versus a theory (Kavale & Forness, 1985; Kuhn, 1962, 1970; Radencich, 1984; Torgesen, 1986). Finally, Heshusius states that the field of special education does not contain a paradigm within itself; rather, it is a part of the paradigm that has dominated the social sciences for years.

Ulman and Rosenberg (1986) believe the field of special education will collapse into chaos or into nothingness if a non-mechanistic/holistic paradigm is adopted. Lloyd (1987) believes an alternative method will constitute an art rather than the typical measure and ranking science. The mechanistic paradigm drives and permeates the field of special education. Ultimately, disability services are constructed according to an individual vision and system of values (Barton & Armstrong, 2001). Alternatives are looked at as being “fuzzy” and are often misunderstood due to the confusion over theories and paradigm-as-metaphor. In summary, the mechanistic and holistic perspectives within the field of special education, particularly relating to specific learning disabilities and emotional disturbance, have significant impact on the construction of disabilities--both in the identification process and the definition.

In summary, special education operates within the mechanistic paradigm. Several authors (Kavale & Forness, 1985; Kuhn, 1962, 1970; Radencich, 1984; Torgesen, 1986) have tried to place alternative theories within the mechanistic paradigm, only to create confusion. When confusion between paradigms and theories are introduced into the field of special education, further confusion is created, leading to further controversy.

Specific Learning Disabilities

Specific learning disabilities (SLD) is a controversial concept and has been since its introduction in the 1960s (Kirk & Bateman, 1962). Researchers have written hundreds of articles about SLD from the time of its acceptance into public law (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, EHCA, PL 94-142, 1975) in the 1970s. Given the varied perspective reflected in the research and the level of interest, the category of SLD has inspired controversy (Hallahan, Lloyd, Kauffman, Weiss, & Martinez, 2005; Mercer & Hallahan, 2002). Two main controversies exist: the definition of SLD and the construct of the disability itself.

The first controversy concerns the definition of a learning disability. Two committees were established in the 1960s (Task Force I--Clements, 1966; Task Force II--U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1969) to report on learning disabilities. Task Force I provided a specific definition for children with a learning disability. The criteria included the definition that the child had average or above average intelligence and the disability was due to central nervous system dysfunctions. However, Task Force II rejected that definition and concluded that no single definition was acceptable.

Today, the term used in federal regulation (IDEA, 2004) is specific learning disability (SLD). The most widely used definition is found in Public Law 94-142—the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), currently referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004):

The term 'specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a

learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (20 U.S.C. §1401 [30])

This definition is similar to one prior to the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. Of importance, SLDs are not the result of other disabilities, including ED, or the result of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage. Although the definition itself did not change, significant changes were made to the process of identification (for more information on identification, see Identification of SLD).

The National Joint Council on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 2001) offers an alternative definition than the IDEA. The NJCLD definition includes five constructs. One construct is that an individual with a specific learning disability displays different behaviors and characteristics from the general education population. Another is that an individual with a specific learning disability may struggle in gaining the use of listening, speaking, writing, reasoning, and/or math skills. Furthermore, specific learning disabilities are not contributive factors in the environment but rather are intrinsic. Another construct offered by the NJCLD is that specific learning disabilities are related to the central nervous system. A fifth construct is that an individual with a learning disability may have other disabilities or conditions (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2001).

The Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD) offers the following definition:

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment,

mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), with socioenvironmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987, p. 222)

The definition offered by ICLD is unique--it draws attention to instruction (input); whereas the other two definitions speak only to the ability of the learner. In addition, this definition specifically mentions attention deficit disorder (ADD).

Several common themes emerge from the definitions. The first theme is that there must be exclusion of other causes, i.e., a specific learning disability is not primarily the result of other disabilities. For example, a specific learning disability cannot be automatically attributed to an individual who may have an emotional disturbance or visual or hearing impairment and a specific learning disability may not be attributed to the cultural, social, or economic environment. Another theme that emerges is that a specific learning disability is attributed to a dysfunction of the central nervous system. Therefore, the disability is intrinsic and not attributable to external factors. This assumption can be made on the grounds that learning occurs within the brain and is therefore related to the central nervous system. The third theme is the commonality among academic learning difficulties mentioned in each definition. The difficulty may be exhibited in any of the academic areas and/or in handwriting, motor skills, thinking, or nonverbal learning. The final theme across definitions is abnormal development of intellect. An individual with a specific learning disability may mature normally in some components of development but may have uneven development in other components.

Due to the variety of definitions for SLD offered by different institutions, Kavale, Holdnack, and Mostert (2005) state, "The most fundamental problem facing SLD

remains definition, not identification” (p. 3). Keogh (2005) posits that although there have been numerous studies on SLD, the field continues to struggle with inconsistencies on the definition and identification process. The confusion within the field of SLD leads to the second controversy—the actual construct or existence of the disability itself. The different opinions on the topic create an unrecognizable disability (Kavale & Forness, 2003). The category of SLD has been referred to as an imaginary disease (Finlan, 1993), a myth (McKnight, 1982), and a questionable construct (Klatt, 1991). Currently, the debate is centered on the identification of SLD (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009). The discrepancy model has been the only process for identification of SLD for the past 40 years but is no longer an essential component. The controversy of the existence of the construct of SLD is addressed in the next section-- Identification of Specific Learning Disability.

Prior to the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the discrepancy model was used for identification of a specific learning disability. More specifically, the law (IDEA, 1997) called for an identification of a gap between what the learner was capable of learning and what the learner had actually learned or achieved (a discrepancy). This model consisted of a formula in which states established a definition of a *severe* discrepancy. Kavale (2002) identified at least four approaches to determining a discrepancy: grade level difference, expectancy formula, standard-score difference, and regression formula. Although each formula Kavale identified determined a type of a “discrepancy,” the different procedures presented controversy in the field. Today, the discrepancy approach is questioned, not only because different methods are used but because large-scale studies indicate that up to 50% of learners receiving special

education and related services for SLD do not meet the discrepancy criterion (Kavale & Reese, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1983). The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA removed the requirement of a *severe* discrepancy. The removal of a severe discrepancy is significant, considering it has been part of the law since 1977. With the removal of such a requirement, Congress added the possibility for school districts to implement a process to determine if learners respond to scientifically-based interventions. Although IDEA (2004) presents alternative methods to identification of SLD, proponents of the discrepancy model maintain that the quantitative nature of the discrepancy model should remain intact.

The controversy concerning the identification of SLD led to the 2002 Learning Disabilities Roundtable which presented consensus statements on the following topics: the nature of SLD, identification of SLD, eligibility of SLD, and interventions for SLD (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallihan, 2002). The more current Learning Disabilities Roundtable (2005) presented consensus statements on the same topics, although additional information was presented. More specifically, with regard to the identification process, the 2005 Learning Disabilities Roundtable added the response to the scientific, research-based intervention process: cultural factors (as its own entity), limited English proficiency, and economic disadvantage. Although consensus was reached on these topics, the identification process remains a concern (Fuchs et al., 2010; Kavale et al., 2009). Stuebing et al. (2002) purport that the academic performance of learners who demonstrate a discrepancy does not differ significantly from learners who do not demonstrate a discrepancy. Kavale (2005) indicates arguments against the discrepancy model appear uncorroborated and speculative, thus advocating for the retention of the

original discrepancy model for SLD identification. Some researchers (Bradley et al., 2002; Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004; Gresham et al., 2005) support prohibiting the use of the discrepancy model completely and replacing it with the RTI model. Others (Kavale, 2005; Kavale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Hale, 2005; Schrank et al., 2005) advocate for a continued use of the discrepancy model. Still others support a combination of the two models (Flanagan, Ortiz, Alfonso, & Dynda, 2006). Currently, 12 states have adopted RTI as the sole identification process for SLD (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Of the 12 states that have adopted RTI, five do not allow the use of the discrepancy model, four have completely adopted RTI with the possibility of using a combination of approaches, and three have only partially adopted RTI as the identification process (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). In Minnesota, the state in which this study will be conducted, law permits both RTI and the discrepancy model with the exception that each form of identification requires a pre-referral process (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Within the definition of SLD, an exclusionary clause exists. Learners who have a learning problem due to environmental factors (i.e., poverty) should be excluded from being identified as SLD. The exclusionary cause is included in the definition to ensure that learners who have difficulties progressing academically are not struggling due to other types of disabilities or environmental conditions (e.g., poor teaching; IDEA, 2004). In addition, with the passage of IDEA (2004), limited English proficiency was added to the exclusionary clause, i.e., limited English proficiency must be eliminated as a possible cause of a SLD.

Swanson (2009) indicates the RTI model could be problematic for learners because it may not address individual needs. Several researchers have concluded that the

RTI model has not been advantageous in the identification of SLD (Gerber, 2005; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; MacMillan & Siperstein, 2002). Some indicate that the RTI model may be ineffective due to a misunderstanding of environmental information about the learner and a lack of scientifically-based research interventions (Wittelman, Harries, Bekker and Van Aarle, 2007). Regardless of cited concerns, 86% of states use some form of RTI implementation (Hoover, Baca, Wexler-Love, & Saenz, 2008).

The identification process of SLD is controversial in that the original discrepancy model is no longer the sole required approach. Other methods have been introduced as possible alternatives, which are continuing to blur the field of SLD. The strength of the discrepancy model is in its quantitative form, whereas the strength of the RTI model is in its accountability for all learners including those who are historically underserved.

Emotional Disturbance

The term emotional disturbance (ED) has a relatively brief history in the field of special education (Gable & Bullock, 2004). Reports on how to work with learners with emotional disabilities began to surface as early as the 1960s (Berkowitz & Rothman, 1960; Bower, 1960; Morse, Cutler, & Fink, 1964). However, it was not until the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHCA, 1975) that children with ED received a free, appropriate public education. One of the most significant challenges for the field of ED is appropriate identification to avoid the current concern of disproportionate representation (Fox & Gable, 2004; Mattison, 2004; Shriner & Wehby, 2004). Two other concerns within the field include (a) appropriate disciplinary procedures to meet individual needs of learners who receive special education and related services for ED (Obiakor et al., 2002) and (b) identification of appropriate strategies to

create positive behavioral interventions and supports to build on individual strengths (Lewis, 2004).

Research in the field of ED has a long history. Even before the passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), programs for learners receiving special education and related services for ED were being evaluated (Morse et al., 1964). Although several reviews of ED programs have been conducted since 1964 (Adamson, 1968; Knoblock & Johnson, 1967; Schultz, Hirshoren, Manton, & Henderson, 1971), the most current, in-depth analysis of programs for learners with ED was conducted by Grosenick, George, and George (1987). Grosenick et al. identified considerable changes within the field of ED after the implementation of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). The identifiable changes included (a) increased volume of programs serving learners who receive special education and related services for ED, (b) greater diversity within delivery systems, and (c) a majority of programs based on behavioral learning theory. The studies mentioned above have two common themes—a lack of exit criteria for learners receiving special education and related services for ED and the role of the educator who serves the learners.

More than half of all learners who receive special education and related services for ED drop out of school (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bortolotta, 2008). This statistic has significant implications for learners, especially those from historically underserved groups who receive special education and related services for ED. Research indicates that learners who receive special education and related services for ED generally receive services in more restricted environments, have a higher rate of suspension and expulsion than their non-disabled counterparts, and have less access to highly qualified educators

(Bradley et al., 2008; Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, & Bradley, 2005; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005). This information has created controversy within the field of ED, particularly regarding evidence-based practice (Walker, 2004). Due to the controversy surrounding evidence-based practice, the Peacock Hill Working Group Revisited (Gage et al., 2010) provides seven features in determining appropriate evidence-based practices: (a) systematic, data-based interventions; (b) continuous assessment and monitoring of progress; (c) provisions for practice of new skills; (d) treatment matched to problem; (e) multicomponent treatment; (f) programming for transfer and maintenance; and (g) commitment to sustained intervention. These features have led the field to adopt interventions such as School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention Support (SWPBS), which meets the seven features provided by the Peacock Hill Working Group and the scientifically supported practices outlined by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC; 2008).

A major concern within the field of ED is found within the definition. Bower (1960) introduced the term emotionally handicapped, which was adopted with the initial legislation of PL 94-142--Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975). His original definition included five characteristics that had to be present over an extended period of time:

- 1) An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors, 2) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, 3) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions, 4) A general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, and 5) A tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or fears, associated with personal or school problems. (Bower, 1981, pp. 115–116)

The term emotional disturbance is new with the passage of IDEA (2004) and is found in section 300.7(c). Previously, the disability was referred to as “serious emotional

disturbance.” Emotional disturbance, according to IDEA, is similar to the definition proposed by Bower (1981). However, IDEA adds additional wording to the definition and a clause that indicates the five characteristics can only be a consideration for the identification of an emotional disturbance if it is affecting the learners’ educational outcome. A significant change added to the federal definition is a clause that eliminates learners who are socially maladjusted. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance (IDEA, 2004).

Rather than emotional disturbance, The National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition (Forness & Knitzer, 1992) proposed the use of the term emotional or behavior disorder. The term emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) accounts for two types of responses that vary in extremity from the norm and therefore adversely affect educational performance (Forness & Knitzer, 1992). EBD is characterized by its longevity, its presence in more than one setting, and the students’ unresponsiveness to general interventions. Additionally, EBD can be diagnosed concurrently with other disabilities. This proposed definition includes such disorders as schizophrenia, anxiety, and other affective disorders. The significance of this definition is in the terminology used—emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) rather than emotional disturbance. This definition is more descriptive and less stigmatizing than the current terminology. This definition differs from the federal definition--it explicitly identifies that EBD can exist with other disabling conditions and that the conditions must be exhibited in at least one other environment than the school setting.

A dimensional approach to classification uses empirically supported evidence based on the externalizing and internalizing bipolar classification (Cicchetti & Toth, 1991; Merrell, 2003). Examples of externalizing behavior include “antisocial and aggressive behavior, conduct problems and delinquency, destructive and harmful behavior, and the hyperactive-impulsive manifestations of ADHD” (Merrell & Walker, 2004, p. 907). Internalizing behaviors include “depression, anxiety, social withdrawal and somatic problems” (Merrell & Walker, 2004, p. 907). One advantage to this definition is that it allows learners to be classified according to external, internal, or a combination of behaviors, allowing for classification for learners who have internal problems, an issue that is sometimes overlooked in the current definition. In summary, the original term of emotionally handicapped has been amended in current legislation to account for the requirement of impairment to education outcomes. The current term--emotionally disturbed--has negative connotations, creating controversy and proposal of alternative terminology.

Identification of an emotional disturbance is difficult due to the vagueness of the definition (Gresham, 2005; Reddy & Richardson, 2006). The federal definition also serves as the identification process in that a learner can be identified as ED simply by meeting one of the criteria outlined. Beyond that, no formal procedure has been documented for formal classification. Thus, a variety of possible approaches for the identification of ED exists. One suggestion for identification of an ED is posited by Forness and Knitzer (1992) who indicate a learner must meet one of the five criteria outlined in the Federal definition (see above). Additionally, learners must meet three

limiting criteria of severity, duration, and impact on educational outcomes to be identified as emotionally disturbed.

Since the passage of IDEA, another suggestion for the identification of ED is the response to intervention (RTI) model (Gresham, 2005; Kavale, Holdnack, et al., 2005). Harris-Murri et al. (2006) state, “The response to intervention may be considered one of the most promising preventative approaches for reducing minority representation in ED” (p. 783). Research (Walker, Ramsay, & Gresham, 2004) suggests the importance of learner response to intervention when using the classification of ED, i.e., a part of identification for ED should include how learners respond to academic and behavioral interventions. When using the RTI model for identification of ED, the first tier--universal instruction based on evidence-based practice--should include culturally responsive educational pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2004). Harris-Murri et al. suggest that the identification process should not assume the problem lies within the child. Rather, it should focus on the behavior of others in the environment when pursuing an ED classification. The RTI approach to identification of ED is important to note because early intervention for learners who experience emotional and behavior problems is more effective than a wait-to-fail model (Lane, Gresham, & O’Shaughnessy, 2002). In summary, the identification of ED is problematic due to the double use of the definition as a process for identification.

Disproportionate Representation

Disproportionate representation is longstanding within the field of special education (Artiles, 2003; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent & Artiles, 2007). The determination of disproportionate representation or the under- or over-identification of learners in a

specific disability category appears to be a simple concept. However, the determination of such is difficult to understand. There are many ways to determine disproportionate representation. The most common methods found in the literature include the composition index, the risk index, and the relative risk ratio.

The composition index answers the question, “What percentage of learners receiving special education and related services either for a particular disability or in a particular educational environment are from a specific racial group?” The formula for determining the composition index is relatively simple: divide the number of learners from a racial group in a disability or educational environment category by the number of learners in a disability or educational environment category and multiply by 100. For example, there are 450 learners in the SLD category and 85 of them are African American— $85/450 \times 100 = 18.9\%$. Therefore, 18.9% of the learners receiving special education and related services for SLD are African American. The composition index has been identified as the “most intuitive method of measurement of disproportionality” (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 266) because the formula allows a simple comparison of percentages. The comparison is between the percentage of African American learners in the district and the percentage of African American learners receiving special education and related services in a particular category. Although the composition index is easily determined, there are two significant problems with using this formula. The first concern is that a *significant discrepancy* has not been identified (Coutinho & Oswald, 2004). For example, if the total district population of African American learners is 15% and the percentage receiving special education and related services for SLD is 18.9%, is 3.9% a significant discrepancy? Another concern with the composition index is that the

discrepancy becomes less useful as the racial demographics of the district change (Westat, 2005). For example, if the African American population is over 85%, finding a discrepancy becomes impossible. A few studies that have used the composition index to determine disproportionate representation include Chinn and Hughes (1987) and Mercer (1973).

The risk index answers the question, “What percentage of learners from a specific racial group receive special education and related services for a particular disability?”

The formula to determine risk ratio is to divide the number of learners from a racial group in a disability category by the number of enrolled learners from the racial group and multiply by 100. For example, there are 1302 learners who are African American and 85 receive special education and related services for SLD— $85/1302 \times 100 = 6.5\%$. Therefore, 6.5% of African American learners receive special education and related services for SLD. This percentage is meaningful only when compared to the risk for a comparison group--thus the risk ratio.

The risk ratio answers the question, “What is a specific racial group’s risk of receiving special education and related services for a particular disability as compared to the risk of all other learners?” The procedure to find the risk ratio involves multiple steps. Once the risk has been calculated (as outlined above), that number becomes the numerator. The next step is to find the denominator for the risk ratio--the denominator is the SLD risk for all other learners:

1. Calculate the number of all other learners in the SLD category who are not African American (365)

2. Calculate the number of all learners enrolled in the district who are not African American (9438)
3. Calculate the risk by dividing the numbers ($365/9438 \times 100 = 3.7\%$)

The final step is to calculate the risk ratio by dividing the SLD risk for African American learners by the risk for all other learners ($6.5/3.7 = 1.8$). Therefore, learners who are African American are 1.8 times more likely than all other learners to receive special education and related services for SLD. Studies that have used the comparison group include Finn (1982) and MacMillan and Reschly (1998). For the purposes of this paper, the risk index and relative risk ratio are used because the confidence level for the composite index has not been determined (Skiba et al., 2008; U. S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Overwhelmingly, learners who are Native American and who are African American are disproportionately represented in special education (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2008). Compared to the national statistics, in the state of Minnesota, learners who are American Indian are 1.75 times more likely to receive special education and related services for a SLD and 1.59 times more likely to receive special education and related services for ED than all other racial groups combined. Learners who are African American are 1.59 times more likely to receive special education and related services for a SLD and 1.69 times more likely to receive special education and related services for ED than all other racial groups combined.

The national statistics and the state statistics closely align with data from the participating district. The data from the district indicate learners who are American Indian are 1.67 times more likely to receive special education and related services for

SLD and 2.95 times more likely to receive special education and related services for ED. Learners who are African American are 1.68 times more likely to receive special education and related services for SLD and 2.43 times more likely to receive special education and related services for ED. For learners who are American Indian, both in the national and state data, the risk ratios fall within .04% in SLD and ED. However, the participating district reflects a risk ratio slightly lower for SLD learners who are American Indian. The risk ratio for American Indian learners who are ED is almost 1.5 times higher than national and state statistics. Similarly, in both SLD and ED, learners who are African American are .82 and .75 times more likely, respectively, to receive special education and related services in the participating district when compared to national or state data (see Table 2; Minnesota Department of Education, 2010).

Table 2

National State and District Risk Ratio for American Indians and African Americans in SLD and ED

	SLD			ED		
	U.S.	State	District	U.S.	State	District
American Indian	1.79	1.75	1.67	1.55	1.59	2.95
African American	1.42	1.59	1.68	2.24	1.69	2.43

The literature review focuses on the specific learning disability (SLD) and the emotional disturbance (ED) categories for the race/ethnic groups of American Indian and African American. The categories of SLD and ED are classified as high-incidence. Learners who are American Indian and learners who are African American are most

likely to be disproportionately represented in each category. There is confusion in the literature in the field of special education among the different methods of determining disproportionate representation (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The different methods only provide similar information under certain conditions.

Disproportionate Representation in SLD

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics (2009) reports that individuals identified with SLD are identified at a higher proportion than any other classification under IDEA (2006). There has been a 200% increase in SLD identification since the implementation of formal identification procedures (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008). Today, this represents over “50 percent of the special education population and over 5 percent of all students in school” (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008, p. 169). This growth creates a concern of disproportionate representation. According to the risk ratio for the suburban district participating in the study, American Indian learners are 1.67 times more likely than all other learners to receive special education and related services for SLD and African American learners are 1.68 times more likely than all other learners to receive special education and related service for SLD.

American Indian/Alaskan Natives are overrepresented in specific learning disabilities (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002) and learners who are African American are overrepresented in the mental retardation (MR), SLD, and EBD populations (Jordan, 2005). This information aligns with data presented in the Twenty-eighth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U. S. Department of Education, 2006). Losen and Orfield (2002) found that learners who

are Black are approximately 1.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with a SLD compared to their White peers.

Disproportionate Representation in ED

Learners identified as ED comprise about 8% of all individuals with disabilities. However, the number is on the rise (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). According to the risk ratio for the suburban district participating in the study, American Indian learners are three times more likely than all other learners to receive special education and related services for ED and Black learners are 2.4 times more likely than all other learners to receive special education and related services for ED.

Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) state that American Indian/Alaskan Natives are overrepresented in emotional disturbance. The 28th Annual Report to Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) shows that learners who are Black are disproportionately represented in the emotional disturbance disability category. This finding aligns with the work of Dunn (1968) who determined the disproportionate representation of learners are African American.

Response to Intervention

Response to intervention (RTI) is a controversial topic in the field of special education. The central controversy has given rise to differing points of view. The first perspective (Batsche et al., 2005; National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2006; Reschly, 2005) is grounded in a standards-driven context and suggests that appropriate general education practices will lead to high incidence disabilities disappearing (Fuchs et al., 2010). The models proposed within this perspective rely

heavily on skill building rather than cognitive processing. The second perspective (Bradley et al., 2002; Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006; Grigorenko, 2009; Hale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Kavale, 2006; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005) is grounded in an early intervention context and suggests that early intervention will speed up the progress of learners who may be identified, thus lessening the amount of learners being referred for special education and related service (Fuchs et al., 2010). The models proposed within this point of view rely heavily on cognitive processing rather than skill building.

The term “RTI was propagated to address the disproportionate number of ethnic minority students identified for special education” (Grigorenko, 2009, p. 114). To that end, the National Research Council used RTI in 1982 (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982) for identification of SLD. The National Research Council study proposed the classification of a learning disability based on three criteria. The next step was to incorporate the term RTI and the model of RTI into federal law. The concept of RTI was introduced in IDEA in 2004.

Serna, Forness, and Nielsen (1998) indicate that an intervention model, where universal supports are available to all learners, is a promising model for addressing disproportionate representation. The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010) defines RTI as a

response to intervention [that] integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems. With RTI, schools use data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities. (p. 2)

The RTI concept developed out of a concern of disproportionate representation of historically underserved groups of learners, specifically in SLD (Grigorenko, 2009; Learning Disabilities Roundtable, 2005).

The main foci of RTI are threefold: (a) the systematic application of high quality scientific, research-based interventions; (b) measurement of students' response in terms of level of performance and learning rate, and (c) the use of data to inform instructional decisions (Mellard, 2004). The National Research Center of Learning Disabilities (Fuchs, Deschler, & Reschley, 2004) was established to create a concrete understanding of how RTI and SLD coexist to create appropriate identification for SLD. It is important to note that RTI remains experimental. More research is necessary to deem the process appropriate for use as a means of identification (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008). Kavale et al. (2008) posit that RTI is "best viewed as an instructional model, not an identification model" (p. 142).

Generally, RTI is presented in a three-tier model (see Figure 2). The three tiers of RTI are referred to as Primary Prevention, Secondary Prevention, and Tertiary Intervention (Bradshaw, Reinke, Brown, Bevans, & Leaf, 2008; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs 2008; Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2009). Tier 1--primary prevention--should include culturally responsive instruction with ongoing progress monitoring in the general classroom (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). This tier includes all learners and adults in the school. The supports offered in this tier are applicable across all school settings, i.e., the general educator implements the first tier of RTI to meet the needs of all learners including learners from historically underserved groups. The first tier encompasses the following: (a) research-based interventions and (b)

educators whose pedagogy reflects the characteristics of culturally responsive instruction. Stecker et al. (2008) state that tier 1 of RTI is to “prevent (a) inadequate instruction from being implemented over sustained periods of time and (b) disabilities from developing or becoming more severe” (p. 10). Within this tier, data collection and progress monitoring are essential and must be maintained accurately by the general educator.

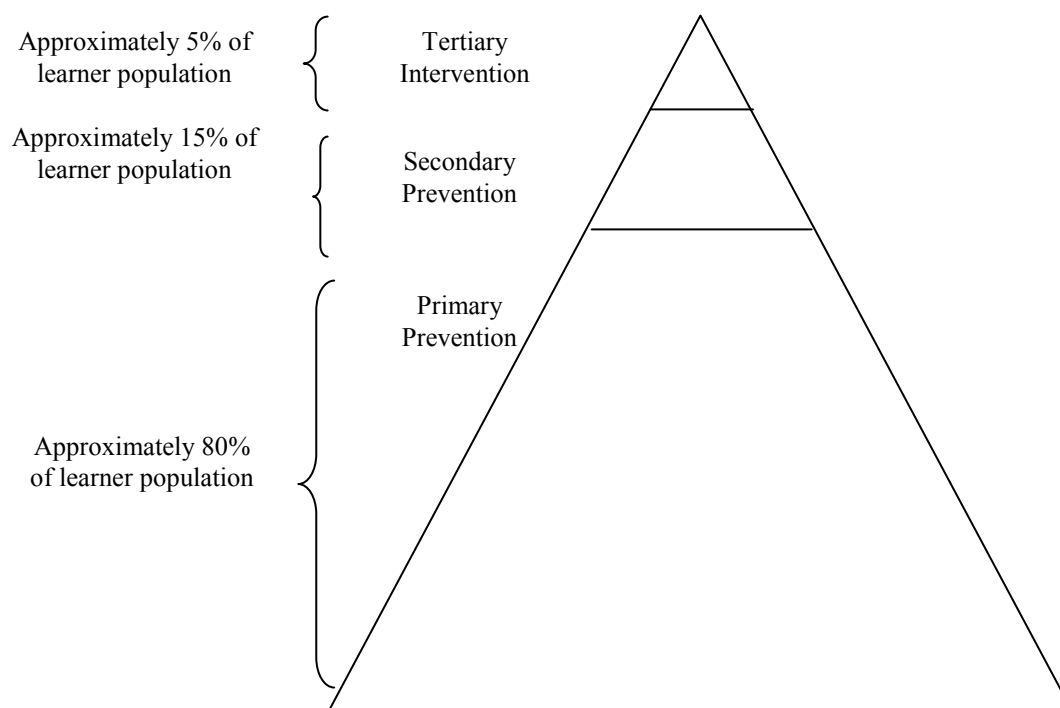


Figure 2. Model of response to intervention.

The second tier of RTI--secondary prevention--is the systematic application of high quality, scientific, research-based intervention. Within this tier, interventions are targeted for learners who exhibit learning or behavior concerns (Freeman et al., 2006). This tier has created a sense of uneasiness in the field of SLD. As Kavale, Holdnack, et al. (2005) suggest, "Scientific research-based interventions translate into try something, anything, try to measure it well, make sure the teacher does what might or might not help, and if the child doesn't get better, than he's SLD" (p. 21). This tier includes small group or individual instruction on a frequent basis with the continuation of data collection and progress monitoring. The foundation for scientifically based interventions for implementation is continuing to develop. However, several examples of scientifically based interventions have been described in the literature (Kamps & Greenwood, 2005; O'Connor, Harty, & Fulmer, 2005; Vaughn & Roberts, 2007). Although scientific-based interventions are acceptable, further research on interventions for learners who are in historically underserved groups is needed (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, and Leos, 2005). Tier 2 serves as a monitor for a possible referral to special education. It is important to note that the same progress monitoring tools used in tier 1 may be used in tier 2. The data collection procedure must be held to a high level of accuracy throughout the RTI process (McCardle et al., 2005).

The third tier of RTI--tertiary intervention--is intended to "focus on a smaller number of students whose needs are more individualized than is included in the primary and secondary prevention practices" (Freeman et al., 2006, p. 6). This tier may begin with a referral to the Student Assistance Team (SAT). The team that receives the referral must be diverse and should include a bilingual or ESL specialist. Viable information that

should be considered when referring learners for special education and related services includes the data collected from tier 1 and 2. Along with previously collected data, other assessments may be conducted at this time to determine if a disability exists (Division for Learning Disabilities, 2007; Fletcher, 2006).

Although not commonly recognized, a fourth tier may exist that includes the support of special education services (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). The recommendation for this tier would differ from the previous tiers since no time limit is set for the RTI.

Currently, no model has been universally accepted for RTI (Kavale & Spaulding, 2008). The majority of the models include three tiers. RTI for learners in historically underserved groups needs to be designed with their specific cultural needs in mind (Harris-Murri et al., 2006).

Multiple perspectives exist regarding the implementation of RTI. First, Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) discuss the positive aspects of using the RTI model as a means for identifying SLD. The benefits include “(1) identification of students using risk rather than deficit model, (2) early identification and instruction of students with LD, (3) reduction of identification bias, and (4) a strong focus on student outcomes” (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003, p. 140). Mather and Gregg (2006) conversely argue that RTI cannot be used for identification of SLD; they posit that SLD identification requires a processing disorder and RTI does not include procedures to “identify the specific cognitive and/or linguistic correlates that appear to be related to the identified area of underachievement or relative difficulty” (p. 17). Finally, Wodrich, Spencer, and Daley (2006) suggest the use of RTI combined with psychoeducational assessments to ensure the most effective identification procedure. RTI, although in its experimental stages, offers a range of

supports that accounts for all learners including those in historically underserved groups. One of the positive aspects of RTI is its capability to address the cultural differences among all learners. When considering culture as a possible factor in disproportionate representation, RTI offers the flexibility to consider cultural differences in the learning environment.

Long-term outcomes for elementary learners who received intervention services in tier 2 of an RTI model show that approximately 30% of learners referred for secondary intervention functioned independently after four years and 19% of the learners who received secondary interventions were actually referred for special education and related services (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). A two-year longitudinal study on the implementation of RTI indicates that with a combination of interventions, along with systematic progress monitoring, learners made sufficient enough gains to recommend the use of RTI (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).

School-Wide Positive Behavior Support

School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) is “a framework or approach comprised of intervention practices and organizational systems for establishing the social culture, learning and teaching environment, and individual behavior supports needed to achieve academic and social success for all students” (Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2010, p. 12). The implementation of a SWPBS framework is important because the school climate affects academic performance and school attendance (Bandypadhyay, Cornell, & Konold, 2009; Stewart, 2008). SWPBS received much attention, so much so that it has been awarded federal funding and been written into federal legislation. IDEA (2004) states children with

disabilities may be provided positive behavioral interventions and supports. Over 5,000 schools use some type of positive behavior support (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Sugai & Horner, 2006; U. S. Department of Education, OSEP, 2005). Research indicates that implementation of positive behavior intervention support (PBIS) decreases suspensions (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005) and improves academic performance (Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002) through the use of reinforcement, direct instruction, clear and specific requests, modification of antecedents and consequences, self-monitoring, and teaching and practicing social skills in the classroom (Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008). In the end, SWPBS is a proactive, preventative approach to addressing behavior concerns and results in better outcomes for learners. The PBIS approach is different from addressing behavior concerns after they happen—a reactive approach.

SWPBS may be implemented at all three tiers of the RTI continuum (Bohanon, Flannery, Malloy, & Fenning, 2009; Cheney et al., 2010). For example, tier 1--implementation or primary interventions--consists of defining behavioral expectation, directly instructing learners on behavioral expectations across settings, and development and implementation of a continuum for behavior issues (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Bohanon et al. (2009) add to the criteria of Bradshaw et al. (2008) by suggesting tier 1 implementation should include recognition of positive behaviors and the use of data for decision-making. Approximately 80% of learners respond to tier 1 interventions (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Merrell & Walker, 2004; Taylor-Green et al., 1997).

In tier 2, implementation of secondary interventions would consist of universal screening, data collection for learners who are at risk, and the use of data to make

decisions (Cheney, Flower, & Templeton, 2008; McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Dickey, 2009). Examples of interventions at this level include social skills development, conflict resolution skills, and/or environmental changes in the classroom (Fairbanks, Simonsen, & Sugai, 2008; Hawken & Horner, 2002; Todd, Campbell, Meyer, & Horner, 2008). Use of data from tier 1 would identify the learners who are not responding to tier 1, thereby allowing a team to develop functional-based assessments with appropriate staff. Efficient interventions and responses will be developed at this level when the team is knowledgeable in assessment and intervention. When SWPBS is fully implemented with high fidelity at the primary and secondary levels, there is generally a decrease in the number of inappropriate behaviors (Illinois PBIS Network, 2009). Movement from the first tier to the second tier increases frequency and intensity of interventions (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008). Approximately 15% of learners will need tier 2 interventions and support (Bohanon et al., 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2008; Merrell & Walker, 2004).

In the third tier--tertiary interventions, SWPBS consists of a functional behavioral assessment (FBA), an individual comprehensive assessment, and/or data collection for individualized decision-making (Preciado, Horner, & Baker, 2009). In this tier, teams exert a high amount of time and energy and the interventions are individualized (Fairbanks et al., 2008; Frey et al., 2008). This level of intervention is for learners who have not responded to the previous two levels and includes 1-5% of learners (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Merrell & Walker, 2004; Walker et al., 1996).

The Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2010) suggests that one of the central elements of PBIS is directly related to system change. Freeman et al. (2006) posit five key themes within SWPBS to support system change:

(a) an investment in the social culture of the whole school as a foundation for both social and academic success, (b) emphasis on prevention of problem behavior, (c) reliance on directly teaching appropriate skills to all students, as well as rearrangement of both antecedents and consequences when necessary, (d) use of a three-tiered continuum of behavior support practices to facilitate prevention of problem behavior, and (e) active collection and use of data for decision making. (p. 6)

With high fidelity implementation of each of the five key themes, schools experience an increase in positive behavior and an improvement in the school climate, which increases learner engagement (Bohanon et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Bohanon et al. (2009) go as far as to suggest, “By embedding preventative strategies within the high school setting, educators can bridge the gap between risk factors and improved school completion rates” (p. 42).

There are two possibilities for implementing PBIS—the district level (George & Kincaid, 2005) and the school level (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Freeman et al., 2006; Simonsen et al., 2008). George and Kincaid (2005) indicate nine steps in district level implementation: (a) establishing a leadership team, (b) determine a district level coordinator, (c) secure funding for sustainability and expansion, (d) create visibility to increase awareness of implementation, (e) written and verbal communication of PBS implementation, (f) develop internal training programs, (g) coaching, (h) demonstration of PBS, and (i) evaluation to determine PBS effectiveness.

Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Meyers, and Sugai (2008) posit four steps for successful implementation at the school-level: “(a) identify meaningful outcomes; (b) establish and invest in schoolwide (sic) systems; (c) select and implement contextually appropriate evidence-based practices; and (d) collect and use data to make decisions” (p. 34). Along with the steps suggested by Simonsen, Fairbanks, et al., Bradshaw et al. (2008) indicate principals must be devoted to implementation of SWPBS, the faculty and staff must buy into the model, sufficient time needs to be devoted to the model, and there needs to be an effective model for data collection. A system should be in place to guide teams in problem solving and data based decisions. A measurement tool, the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET) created by Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, and Horner (2001) and recently updated by Horner et al. (2004), allows schools to determine if SWPBS is being implemented with high fidelity. However, reliability and validity of such tools may not be accurate for all schools, depending on their implementation of SWPBS (George & Kincaid, 2005).

Cultural Competence

Due to the increasing number of learners in historically underserved groups (Smith, 2003; U. S. Department of Commerce, 2000) within the educational system and the proportionate lack of diversity amongst educators (Children’s Defense Fund, 2004; Snyder, 2002; Trent & Artiles, 2007), there is an increasing demand for educators to be interculturally competent and for educational opportunities and outcomes to be equitable for all learners. Hammer (2009) defines intercultural competence as the capability to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior to cultural commonality and differences in

order to successfully accomplish cross-cultural goals. Educational equity refers to equal outcomes and equal opportunity for all learners (Nieto, 1996).

Two examples of legislation focusing on ways to improve the academic and social outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse learners from economically and disadvantaged backgrounds are the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (2002) and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. A key element of NCLB is to close racial gaps in school performance. NCLB requires schools and districts to focus their attention on the academic achievement of underrepresented groups of children including racial and ethnic subgroups. IDEA also has policies and procedures designed to prevent the inappropriate over-identification or disproportionate representation of learners with disabilities in historically underserved groups. States that receive monies from the federal government must provide, collect, and examine data to determine if significant disproportionality based on race and ethnicity is occurring in the state. In addition, policies and procedures are in place for collecting and examining data related to disproportionate representation, to disaggregate data on suspension and expulsion rates by race and ethnicity, and to monitor data specifically related to disproportionate representation.

There are three main reasons the disproportionate representation of learners in historically underserved groups in special education is a matter of concern: the negative effects of labels, restricted access to general education settings, and the lack of evidence that special education programs are successful (Hosp & Reschly, 2003). In addition to the previously mentioned concerns, other variables within and among learners in special education programs that may further impact disproportionate representation include

language proficiency, grade level, disability category, and socioeconomic status.

Notwithstanding other factors, these variables contribute to the concern of disproportionate representation of learners who are in historically underserved groups in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2010). Learners who are culturally and linguistically diverse have a higher referral rate, which in turn contributes to the disproportionate representation in special education (Hosp & Reschly, 2003).

The theoretical foundation of intercultural competence derives from the work of Bronfenbrenner, Harding, and Gallwey's (1958) study of sensitivity. Bronfenbrenner et al. specifically discuss interpersonal sensitivity—the idea of distinguishing different ways in which people behave. The concept of interpersonal sensitivity is similar to intercultural sensitivity. Interpersonal sensitivity deals with interactions on a personal level and intercultural sensitivity deals with interactions between cultural groups. Hart and Burks (1972) further developed a definition of sensitivity by indicating sensitivity is a mind-set, which accounts for the ability to interact with differences between individuals and cultures. Bennett (1993) constructed the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) in which individuals transform themselves affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally from ethnocentric stages to intercultural stages, i.e., an individual is able to move along a continuum from an inability to decipher cultural differences to a competence of understanding and being understood across cultures. Cultural sensitivity mainly accounts for affective faculties. To be culturally sensitive is to have positive emotions toward the difference of other cultural interactive frameworks. For example, one is able to identify cultural differences (cognitive), followed by an emotional response to the cultural differences (affective), and culminating in an appropriate interactive

response (behavioral). From this, the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003) measures intercultural sensitivity that is synonymous with intercultural competence. Intercultural competence accounts for the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of “operating effectively in a global environment while being respectful of cultural diversity” (Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004, p. 25).

Language and Culture

Artiles et al. (2010) challenge three traditional ways in which culture and learning have been linked in research. Processes of socialization or deprivation are

interrelated aspects of a deficit-based paradigm. Children either learn skills and dispositions that are not useful for school learning as they are socialized in their cultural communities or the children’s culture prevents them from learning skills, habits, or values that prepare them for success in school (deprivation). (p. 291)

Learners from other cultures may grow up in environments that do not directly teach skills necessary for success in the school environment or they grow up in an environment that prevents them from learning the skills necessary for success in school. The third way in which culture and learning have been presented in the research is through an “equal treatment” approach (Artiles et al., 2010, p. 291). An equal treatment approach suggests that achievement can only be measured against and between like races, i.e., learners of any minority group should only be measured against other learners in the same minority group.

Ferretti and Eisenman (2010) further the conversation by offering “what happens in the school and classroom is most often mediated by teachers’ practices, how teachers interact with colleagues and families, and how these relationships are embedded in the larger community” (p. 380). However, if an educator does not have the knowledge,

skills, and abilities to interact across cultures, his/her perspective may hinder the interaction with families from other cultures.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE; 2008) defines diversity as “differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area” (p. 86). It is with this definition that NCATE establishes diversity standards and culturally relevant curriculum to prepare pre-service educators. NCATE states that educators need to “learn about exceptionalities and inclusion, English language learners and language acquisition, ethnic/racial cultural and linguistic differences, gender differences, and the impact of these factors on learning” (p. 37). While the definition encompasses nine sources of diversity, unfortunately, the definition and standard do not give weight to the amount of knowledge necessary for an educator to be considered culturally competent.

Several studies conclude that success for learners in historically underserved groups may improve if educators are knowledgeable and accepting of the culture of the learners (Gay, 2000; Grant, Elsbree, & Fondrie, 2004; Irvine, 2003). Gay (2005) indicates that educators must be aware of their own culture and values before they will be able to have an awareness of the values of other cultures.

The importance of the interrelatedness of culture, language, and learning is vital; each affects the other and is in turn affected by the other. If these factors are considered in separation, it is more likely that disproportionate representation will continue to occur for learners in historically underserved groups due to the fact that each of these arenas

contains rich, pertinent, and relevant information about cultural background and language acquisition.

Summary

The literature review discussed a synopsis of disabilities in general and highlighted an historical overview of SLD and ED and the identification process for each. Statistical data presented represented the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American learners who receive special education and related services in the categories of SLD and ED. A review of response to intervention (RTI) and school wide positive behavior intervention support (SWPBS) indicated importance of these models in current legislation and the impact of each model on the identification process. The theoretical construct of intercultural competence established a foundation from which to understand cultural differences. The challenges and the impact of language and culture on the learning environment articulated how current literature is focusing on cultural factors, rather than race only, in determining disproportionate representation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation. The intent of this research was to “uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people’s overall worldview or culture” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). This chapter provides a description of qualitative case study research, selection of participants, data collection, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

The Research Question

Researchers have explored disproportionate representation through the lenses of race, poverty, language instruction, and/or the identification process of specific learning disability and emotional disturbance. This study examined the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation as an additional lens through which to examine disproportionate representation. The research question for this study was:

- Q1 What perceptions do special educators have of disproportionate representation in special education?

The Qualitative Approach

The nature of the research, the review of the literature, and the question I sought to answer determined the methodology. Qualitative research was selected for this study

because this methodology “relies primarily on human perception and understanding” (Stake, 2010, p. 11). Qualitative research allowed me to explore the multiple dimensions of the issues faced by special educators in the placement of learners from traditionally underrepresented groups who receive special education services. Qualitative and quantitative methods of study have been used to research disproportionate representation. However, few studies have focused specifically on the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation.

Creswell (2007) states, “Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (p. 73). In addition, Yin (2003) provides three situations in which case studies are appropriate. First, the study needs to define the specific type of research question that will be asked: what, why, and how questions are best answered by case studies. The research question for this study focused on what perceptions special educators possessed of disproportionate representation. Second, the research needs to determine the amount of control over the behaviors, with the least amount of control being most appropriate. This study did not require control of behaviors. The last consideration is the degree to which the issue is contemporary versus historical. Contemporary issues lend themselves to case study design. Disproportionate representation is a contemporary issue (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Beratan, 2008; Dunn, 1968; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent & Artiles, 2007).

Using a case study is one method of gaining in-depth understandings of contemporary issues. Stake (1995) identifies three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. The intrinsic case study is used to describe one specific case

and everything there is to know about that one particular case. The instrumental case study is similar to the intrinsic case study except the case is not selected ahead of time. The case for an instrumental case study is determined based on the research question, hoping that the specific case will provide insight into the question. The collective case study is one in which I can utilize more than one case to assist in understanding and gathering information about the research question. To fully understand the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation, this study implemented a collective case study.

Setting of the Study

This study occurred in a suburban district in Minnesota. The district serves approximately 10,672 learners. The district population is 61% White, 2% Native American, 14% Pacific Islander, 15% African American, and 7% Hispanic/Latino. In the school district, 16% qualify for special education services and 41% receive free and reduced lunch. The elementary population is 56% White, 2% Native American, 18% Pacific Islander, 16% African American, and 8% Hispanic/Latino. In the elementary school population, 14% qualify for special education services and 47% receive free and reduced lunch.

In the participating district at the elementary school level, 99% of the educators are Caucasian and 1% are educators of color; 91% are female and 9% are male. Every attempt was made to select participants who reflected these demographics. Due to the fact that 99% of the educators were Caucasian and 91% were female, the selected participants proportionally represented the educator population in the participating district.

Participant Selection

For this study, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used. Purposeful sampling allows the selection of individuals who can provide a great deal of information about the issue of central importance. Information-rich participants contribute to understanding the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation (Patton, 2002). One participant was used in a pilot study and four other participants were used in the actual study. Information from the pilot study was not included in the findings since the purpose of the pilot study was to refine the interviewing process. The following selection criteria were used to identify potential participants:

1. Individuals who trend toward the monocultural end of the continuum and/or individuals who trend toward the intercultural end of the continuum according to the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI; Hammer et al., 2003). The IDI is a district-administered inventory. The purpose of selecting individuals from each end of the continuum was an attempt to provide distinctive perceptions. The participating district provided the results of the IDI. Currently, all educators in elementary schools in the district had completed the IDI.
2. Elementary special educators. The purpose of selecting elementary special educators was because elementary school (specifically grades 3-5) is typically when most learners are identified to receive special education and related services. For the purpose of this research, the participating district provided a list of elementary special educators.

3. Elementary educators who hold a full-time license in SLD and/or EBD.
Educators holding full-time license in SLD and/or EBD were identified because they serve learners who receive special education and related services. I searched the Minnesota Department of Education website section called “View an Individual Educator’s License.” I entered the names provided by the district to see if their licenses were current.
4. Elementary special educators who provide services within settings 1 and 2.
 - a. Setting 1: the student is served in general education classes at least 80% of the day
 - b. Setting 2: the student is served in general education at least 40-79% of the day.
5. Educators who had served with the participating district for a minimum of three years. The purpose of selecting educators who had served in the participating district for a minimum of three years was to ensure they had an understanding of the district culture. Another purpose of selecting individuals who had served in the district for a minimum of three years was to ensure they had “identified” learners. The participating district provided a list of elementary special educators who had served in the district for three or more years.
6. Educators who self-identified as Caucasian. The purpose of selecting individuals who self-identified as Caucasian was because the majority of educators are Caucasian. It was important to understand their perception of the research problem.

Of the 12 educators who met the above criteria, five were randomly selected. As the anticipated number of educators who met the criteria was low, names of those in each category were selected at random through a manual randomization process.

Data Collection

Various forms of data collection were used for this case study including interviews, my journal reflections, analysis of artifacts, and field notes. Interviews were semi-structured to utilize a structured agenda but allowed flexibility for follow-up questions. My journal reflections were ongoing throughout the study. Artifacts were collected throughout the study and field notes were used in the data analysis.

Interviews

Interviews are the most useful method for gathering information about the perceptions of special educators regarding disproportionate representation. The specific qualitative method used for this study was semi-structured interview questions. It was important to prepare initial questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their answers as necessary. Three 45-minute interviews were scheduled with each participant. Questions were finalized before the interview was conducted (see Appendix A). I recorded participants' interviews using an audio digital recorder. Recordings were transcribed verbatim to facilitate the coding process.

Participants were individually interviewed three times. A different set of questions was asked each time (see Appendix A). After each interview, the digital recording was transcribed and the transcription was sent to the participant for member check prior to the next interview.

Journal Reflections

I wrote a journal reflection following each interview and included information on the setting, the participant, social interactions, and other factors that might influence the data analysis. I used the written journal to record patterns and themes in the data and additional questions to pursue during other interviews. Reflection was ongoing, as necessary, as part of the process of data collection.

Analyze Artifacts

Participants were asked to provide artifacts and other documents for review and analysis to create meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These artifacts included case lists and race of each learner on the case list, initial IEP meetings conducted, the identifying disability of each learner on the case list, and specific results of the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI; Hammer et al., 2003). The IDI was previously given to all participants by the participating district. These artifacts enabled me to triangulate the information gained from the interviews and reflections. Use of the IDI allowed a “different kind of depth [that] comes from recognizing the multiple realities people have experienced” (Stake, 2010, p. 70). The artifacts served as a source to further the discovery of meaning, understanding, and insights about special educators’ perspectives of disproportionate representation.

Field Notes

Detailed and concrete field notes are important to qualitative research (Patton, 1990). Field notes provide a written record of the analysis of the artifacts. I wrote field notes during the interview process and while analyzing artifacts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the pilot study and was ongoing throughout the research study. The purpose of the pilot study was to ensure that the questions are meaningful. Data collected from the pilot study were not included in the data analysis. Before the pilot study occurred, I created a folder on the computer entitled “data collection.” This folder was password protected for security purposes. Journal reflections were kept in this folder. Within this folder, each participant was assigned a folder with his/her name on it. Within each named folder, additional folders were labeled according to the interview number (e.g., 1, 2, 3) and one folder named artifacts. After each interview, the digital recording was placed into the appropriate folder. After transcription of the digital recording, the transcription was also placed in the corresponding folder. After the artifacts were analyzed and field notes were taken, the artifact was scanned and saved in the artifacts folder for further review. Hard copies of artifacts were locked in my office desk drawer.

Digitally recorded interviews were transcribed within two days of each interview. This immediate transcription served a twofold purpose. First, it allowed me to listen to the interviews through the digital recorder while reading the text to ensure accuracy. Second, it allowed for immediate member check, thereby allowing me to address emerging findings and to immediately revisit the data with participants as necessary.

After the digitally recorded interviews were transcribed, I began to organize and code the data using computer-based software (HyperRESEARCH). With the use of the computer-based software, I was able to organize and identify units of meaning in order to shape the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the data analysis, free nodes (units)

and tree nodes (categories) began to emerge. I used multiple transcripts, reviewed and recorded data, searched for patterns in coding, and created nodes to organize, report, and represent the data. The free nodes showed emerging categories and subcategories. I met with an external-auditor throughout all stages of data analysis.

Coding

Coding was a two-step process that included unitizing data and creating emerging categories. Coding was organized according to free, tree, and case nodes. Free nodes are ideas that stand-alone. Tree nodes were used to index categories and subcategories that emerged from the free nodes. Case nodes were used to store material on individual participants. This differentiation of nodes allowed me to refer to material from each case throughout the coding process.

Unitizing data. Unitizing the data was a process in which I disaggregated the data into the smallest pieces of comprehensible information. These small pieces of information were referred to as free nodes (units). The free nodes could not be disaggregated too much—each free node must be understandable to an outside reader within the broad context of the research topic. Disaggregating the data into free nodes began after the first interview and was ongoing throughout the data collection process. An external-auditor evaluated the free nodes to ensure that the free node was meaningful enough to stand alone.

Emerging categories. Free nodes were assigned to tree nodes. During this process, I sorted through each free node and brought free nodes together that had similar content. This process of creating tree nodes followed several steps:

1. The first free node from unitizing represented the first category.
2. The second free node represented the first category if it matched the first free node. If it did not match, a new category was created.
3. This process continued until all free nodes had been assigned to a tree node.
4. At the end of this process, if a tree node contained only one free node, that tree node was removed and placed into a miscellaneous tree node (for later review).
5. Each tree node was reviewed and assigned a propositional statement. This propositional statement determined whether or not the free nodes fit into the tree node. This process created rules for exclusion. This process could lead to addition or deletion of a free node within a tree node.
6. The free nodes were reviewed again to justify inclusion or exclusion from the tree node.
7. Free nodes assigned to the miscellaneous tree node were reviewed to see if there was a relationship among them or if they belonged in another tree node.
8. Collecting and processing stopped with exhaustion of the sources, saturation of the categories, and emergence of regularities.
9. An external-auditor and I reviewed the free nodes and tree nodes to eliminate category overlap, assured that each free node fit in the tree node according the rules of exhaustion, and double checked the miscellaneous free nodes for the possibility of fitting within a category. This process continued until the external-auditor and I reached consensus.

Qualitative research utilizes multiple data sources, participants, and methods to corroborate evidence, substantiate interpretation, and clarify the meaning (Creswell, 1998). Triangulation is a form of differentiation (Flick, 2002) used to “look again and again, several times” (Stake, 2010, p. 123). The validity of this study was strengthened through the triangulation of information from four sources: participant interviews, my journaling, artifacts, and field notes. Participants had an opportunity to examine the transcribed interviews for accuracy (member check). Participants were able to change, clarify, and provide additional information as needed. I compared the interview transcripts from all four participants and their artifacts to corroborate and verify information. An external-auditor who holds a doctorate and is an expert on qualitative data analysis examined the data throughout the process and examined the finished product to determine if the findings, interpretations, and conclusions were consistent with the data. This external auditor has never served as a special educator and was in no way associated with the participating school district; therefore, the external-auditor was able to provide an independent look at the data.

To further establish credibility and trustworthiness, I kept a detailed log of the interviews that were conducted including information about the participants and the specific times and dates of the interviews. The log was used to document and substantiate the commitment of time spent on each interview (audit trail). Since there were 12 digitally recorded interviews with special educators, prolonged field engagement contributed to credibility of the study. I documented the interview results and was able to determine a degree of transferability to the participants’ own realities. Hence, a clear

description of the research procedure and the rationale for coding the study confirmed reliability.

Limitations

Merriam (1998) stated that qualitative research is holistic, multi-dimensional, and ever-changing. To ensure the validity of qualitative research, one must examine the component parts to determine if they reflect the reality of the participants and if the insights and conclusions make sense to the reader, educators, and other researchers. The limitations of this study included transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reason for considering these limitations for this study was due to the nature of qualitative research. Qualitative research is subjective and personalistic; “new questions emerge more frequently than answers” (Stake, 2010, p. 11).

Transferability

Transferability is the extent that findings have significance in a wider context and rests on the degree the findings and implications have in a wider context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of this study was not to generalize findings but to provide a range of information. The degree to which the data could be transferable was not addressed until the data collection process was complete. The investment of time spent learning about the participants, journaling, and analyzing artifacts lent greater credibility to the data.

Credibility

Credibility, the accuracy of the findings, in qualitative research is determined by the integrity and validity of the findings (Patton, 2002). Through interviews, journaling

and analyzing artifacts, I gained an understanding of special educators' perceptions of disproportionate representation. The participants described their experiences in detail and I recorded the interviews and created verbatim transcripts to ensure accuracy of words and meanings. I used member checking--a process whereby participants review statements in the report for accuracy and completeness--to ensure accuracy of the transcripts. Participants had an opportunity to suggest changes or make deletions. During second and third interviews, the participants were able to add additional information to clarify meaning.

My qualifications and experiences increased the credibility of this research. I have a license in SLD and ED, have been in the field of special education for 13 years, and have served as an educational equity specialist for three years. I currently serve as the director for a Master of Arts in Special Education program at a private university in Minnesota.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate that dependability, the degree the results are consistent with the data, takes into account factors of instability and design changes that occur to deepen the understanding of a topic. I adjusted data collection methods with the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B) as necessary to accommodate new findings that emerged. Dependability was monitored throughout the data analysis with the external auditor through face-to-face meetings, electronic mail, and telephone conferences as necessary. The use of different data sources helped eliminate biases that could have resulted from relying on a single data collection method.

Confirmability

It was my responsibility as the researcher to make sure others could confirm the data (Merriam, 1998). I used a literature review and references to validate the accuracy of the findings or to determine how the findings differed. A qualitative researcher conducted an external audit by reviewing the interview transcripts, coding, categories, and resulting theories to ensure accuracy of the findings, results, and recommendations. I enhanced confirmability by proper management of all data collected throughout the process.

Timeline

Participants were identified and the pilot study took place in December 2011. The purpose of the pilot study was to refine the semi-structured interviewing process (data collected were not included in the data analysis). After refinement of the semi-structured interview process, the data collection began. Interviews One and Two took place in January of 2012. Interview 3 took place in February of 2012. Data were transcribed into written text for member check within a two-day window of each interview. Analysis of the data began immediately following each interview and continued through April of 2012. A complete synthesis of the data was available in June of 2012.

Research Sensitivity

Qualitative data collection must employ sensitivity due to contact with human participants (Merriam, 1998). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Northern Colorado received a copy of the consent form to be signed by the participants, an outline of the study, and a list of interview questions (see Appendix B). Each participant was provided full disclosure of the study along with the intent of the data

collection prior to the initial interview. The identity of each participant remained confidential so as not to identify special educators and their schools. Digital audio files, transcripts, and artifacts were stored in a password-protected file on my computer.

Instrumentation

Stake (2010) posits that the qualitative researcher “is a listener, an interviewer, and a finder of the observations others are making” (p. 66). As the qualitative researcher, I served as the instrument for the study. I developed questions to guide the information gathering, keeping in mind that the setting and the participants were dynamic and diverse. To elicit information, I used a semi-structured interview protocol as a guide, allowing flexibility for question modifications or additions when necessary. For qualitative research to be valid, I was required to have experience related to the research focus and be well read, knowledgeable, analytical, reflective, and introspective. As the researcher, I met these criteria, having served as an Equity Specialist and special educator, and through extensive and comprehensive study regarding disproportionate representation.

As the primary researcher, I wanted to understand the meaning individuals had constructed in the placement of learners from traditionally underrepresented groups into special education. Immediate processing of the data allowed me to clarify and summarize meaning as the study evolved. As a qualitative researcher, I wanted to understand the perceptions and experiences of special educators to achieve depth of understanding. The product provided a rich description of the perceptions and experiences of special educators that might influence the placement of learners from traditionally underrepresented groups into special education.

Summary

I used qualitative research methods to examine the perceptions special educators had of disproportionate representation in special education. In-depth interviews, journaling, and analysis of artifacts enabled me to gain a deeper understanding. This chapter discussed the qualitative interviewing research methodology, participant selection, data gathering techniques, and data analysis.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter, the purpose of the study, methods for data collection and analysis, a profile of the district and interviewees, and identified themes are presented. The individual semi-structured interviews provide perspectives of elementary special educators on disproportionate representation in special education. Information from the interviewees emerged into common themes to provide additional information on disproportionate representation.

Purpose of the Study

Disproportionate representation is an ongoing concern in the field of special education (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Beratan, 2008; Dunn, 1968; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent & Artiles, 2007). The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation. The intent of this research was to “uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research by viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people’s overall worldview or culture” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7), i.e., to determine the meanings and perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation with regard to their worldview. The participants’ worldview was reflected in the orientation of the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI).

Data Collection and Analysis

Twelve interviews were conducted with four practicing elementary special educators. Each participant was individually interviewed three times. Participants were selected in collaboration with the participating district, through the process described in Chapter III. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The researcher conducted the interviews in a semi-structured format. A set of questions was used as a guide but additional questions were asked when clarification was needed. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed; the transcription served for purposes of member-check and analysis. I examined transcripts, journal reflections, artifacts, and field notes in open, axial, and selective coding processes to derive the major themes. The next sections provide a profile of the district and schools in which the participants worked.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the school district and the schools.

School District and Schools

Acme School District, in which the study took place, is situated in a suburb of a Midwestern city and is comprised of nine elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, one early childhood learning center, and one alternative learning center. The district serves approximately 10,672 learners. The majority of Acme's learners are Caucasian; the highest percentage of historically underserved learners is African American (15.1%). Approximately half of the learners qualify for free and reduced lunch (see Table 3)

Table 3

District Data

	Acme School District	Acme Elementary Schools
Caucasian	60.9%	56%
African American	15.1%	16%
Asian	14.5%	18%
Hispanic/Latino	7.4%	8%
Native American	2.0%	2%
Free and Reduced Lunch	41.5%	
Learners Receiving Special education and related services	16.1%	

The four elementary schools in which the special educators work include Washington Elementary School (Amanda), Adams Elementary School (Betsy), Jefferson Elementary School (Lindsay), and Madison Elementary (Sarah; see Table 4).

Washington Elementary School is situated in the easternmost part of Acme School District and has the fewest number of historically underserved learners when compared to the other elementary schools in the study. Washington is the smallest of the four schools that participated in the study. The site improvement plan at Washington Elementary School includes goals for math, reading, and science. The goal in each content area is to narrow the widest race-based proficiency gap on the state accountability test by raising the lowest proficiency rate among subgroups of learners from historically underserved populations. For math, the target population is Hispanic/Latino; for reading and science,

the target population is Asian (see Table 4). Out of the four participating schools, Washington Elementary has the fewest learners who are Asian; however, the largest race-based proficiency gap in reading and science is for learners who are Asian.

Table 4

Participating School Data

	Washington	Adams	Jefferson	Madison
Caucasian	68.9%	45.6%	53.7%	60.9%
African American	11.1%	10.4%	14.1%	20.0%
Asian	12.6%	32.7%	18.8%	12.9%
Hispanic	6.6%	10.2%	8.5%	5.5%
American Indian	.9%	1.1%	4.8%	.7%
Free and Reduced Lunch	26.3%	52.4%	53.9%	37.0%
Receiving SPED and Related Services	12.0%	13.6%	13.8%	16.1%
Total Learners	350	471	516	581

*Bold indicates highest percentage/number in category

Adams Elementary School is situated in the western part of the school district. The improvement plan for this school includes goals for math, reading, and science. The goal in each content area is to narrow its widest race-based proficiency gap on the state

accountability test by raising the lowest proficiency rate among sub-groups of learners from historically underserved populations. The lowest sub-group in each content area is African American. Adams has the fewest number of African American learners; however, the largest gap on the state accountability test is between African American and Caucasian learners.

Jefferson Elementary School is situated in the southeastern area of Acme School District. Jefferson Elementary School has the most American Indian learners compared to the other four schools in the study and the highest number of learners receiving special education and related services when compared to the other four elementary schools. The goals for math, reading, and science are similar to the other schools--the focus is on narrowing the widest race-based proficiency gap on the state accountability test by raising the lowest proficiency for the sub-groups of historically underserved populations. For math, the lowest performing group is African American; for reading and science, the lowest performing group is Asian.

Madison Elementary School is the largest of the four schools and has the highest percentage of African American learners when compared to the other four schools. Madison Elementary is located in the eastern part of Acme School District and is the newest elementary school in the district; it opened in 1996. Madison Elementary School is a community school and is housed within the same building as Madison Middle School. The goals for the Madison Elementary School are to narrow the widest race-based proficiency gap on state accountability tests in math, reading, and science by raising the lowest proficiency rate among subgroups of historically underserved learners. The lowest performing subgroup in each area is African American learners.

In conclusion, Acme School District is a diverse school district with a large percentage of African American and American Indian learners. Each school within Acme School district has a site improvement plan that aims to narrow the widest race-based proficiency gap, i.e., narrowing the achievement gap using state accountability test data by raising the lowest proficiency rate among subgroups of historically underserved learners. The next section provides an in-depth profile of each individual participant. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Participants

One participant represented each school (Amanda works at Washington Elementary School, Betsy works at Adams Elementary School, Lindsay works at Jefferson Elementary School, and Sarah works at Madison Elementary School) and the participants represented the demographics of the school district. Each participant completed the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI)--a cross-cultural, generalizable, valid, and reliable assessment of intercultural competency (Hammer, 2009). The IDI is based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS; Bennett, 1998). The DMIS is one theoretical perspective that holds promise for providing a foundation to understanding cultural differences (Bennett, 1998). Intercultural competency relates directly to the ongoing problem of disproportionate representation as it becomes necessary to examine the perceptions special educators have of disproportionate representation (see Chapter V for further discussion of the IDI). There are five states along the continuum of intercultural competence (see Figure 1 in Chapter I). Individual orientations fell along the continuum in a normal bell curve (see Figure 3; Hammer, 2011).

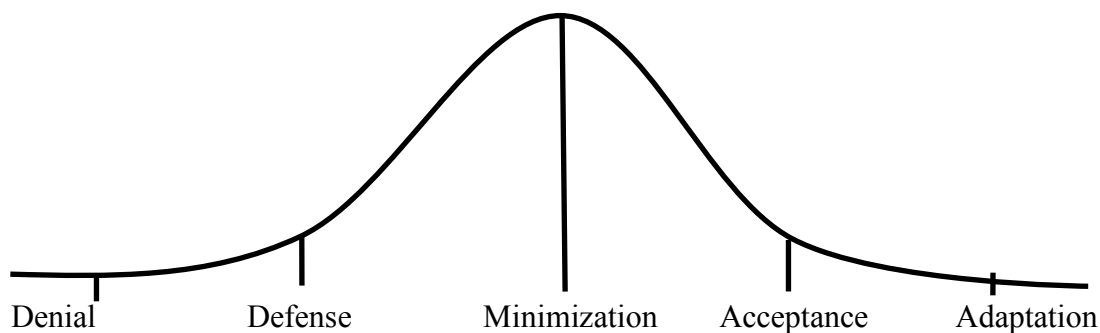


Figure 3. Individual orientations along continuum of intercultural competence.

The depth with which I was able to probe with additional follow up questions with each participant was partially based on his or her worldview. Individuals in Minimization and the Cusp of Acceptance became defensive if probing questions were too personal. One participant was aware of “right answers” or “truth.” When asked questions, she often replied, “Do you want the right answer or the truth?” This statement was representative of her orientation of minimization. As individuals increased in intercultural competence, deeper probing questions were asked without the individual becoming defensive.

Amanda—Washington Elementary School

Amanda is a 49-year-old Caucasian female and grew up in a small city in a Midwestern state. She said, “When we’re calling it a city, it’s more of a town. It just wasn’t very big. But we had our share of differences. But it wasn’t race, it was more religion.” Amanda described the town as “90% white, Irish Catholic...very middle class. In my entire elementary and high school career, I remember seeing two persons of color.”

Amanda began her college experience at a university in a Midwestern state. She did not finish her college experience at this university due to a medical condition.

Amanda finished her degree at a private, all-girls college where her mother was a

professor. Since her mother worked there, tuition was free. Amanda stated that she did “not want to go there...it was all women and it just wasn’t anything I was interested in. But it was a very good college of education and it ended up being a very good thing for me.” When asked about the diversity at this college, Amanda said it was all “women, all White.” Amanda majored in early childhood education and elementary education.

Amanda’s first job was teaching first grade in a rural Midwestern city. She said that in this particular city, “everybody was like what I was used to growing up in”—a majority of the learners were Caucasian. She worked there for two years and then moved to an urban city and took a first grade teaching job at a private Catholic school. She describes it as an “inner-city” school. During her time at this school, she began working on her special education license. She received her Master of Arts in special education at the same college from which she received her undergraduate degree. She said she wanted to become a special educator because “my dad had a brain aneurism. He was 45 years old. He had to relearn everything and had all the special education services you could ever imagine. So, I always wanted to be a teacher so that just kinda put me in the direction of special ed.” Amanda holds teaching licenses in pre-kindergarten, elementary education, learning disabilities, and mild to moderate mentally HDGP (handicapped). Amanda has been at Washington Elementary School for 14 years and in the district for 20 years. Amanda described her school as

“the academy.” We had all White, two-parent families, high socioeconomic status or best test scores. It was fabulous for years and years and years...I mean, we were known as the school that had 100% [attendance of parents] at [parent/teacher] conferences.

Amanda described her principal by saying, “He’s from a different culture, and the parents were thrilled. That was like a really big deal...but it’s not like he goes out of his way to

say, ‘Look, I’m from another culture.’” She said she was surprised that he just “kinda fits in with everyone else. But I think he’s a good role model.”

Amanda’s day “starts with meetings and then teaching. With meetings mixed in...paperwork, observations, putting out crises. More paperwork. More meetings.” She said she had to serve on several school and district level committees; that took a great deal of her time. Amanda indicated, “A lot of it lately has kinda changed where parents are demanding or kids are needing more meetings between IEP meetings because of crises and just lots of different factors.” The crises she described as behavior and emotional crises. “For example, there is a student here who literally pulls his hair out. You know, not [just] one piece of hair.”

When asked about disproportionate representation, Amanda stated that when she thought of that, “I think of MCA tests. Like, ‘Oh boy, Washington Elementary School has a lot of students of color who didn’t pass the MCA tests.’ Disproportionate, you know, that’s what I think of.” When further probed about disproportionate representation specifically regarding special education, she indicated, “That’s my world. And then, I put my blinders on, that’s what I do...But you know, I know like our school, the number of students of color compared to other schools in the district, our numbers are lower.” Amanda seemed to grasp the concept of learners from historically underserved populations scoring low on standardized assessments but she was not clear on how disproportionate representation related to special education.

With regard to intercultural competence, Amanda said it was

having to shift because of...but then again you run into stereotypical, you know, everyone isn’t like that. But in my experience, my limited experience, this is what I have in my head. So this is what I could do to, you know, make this a good experience.

Although there appeared to be uncertainty reflected in Amanda's thought, she identified a need for a shift in order to make the experiences "good" for historically underserved families and learners. Amanda mentioned that she was surprised how high she scored when she took the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI); at various times throughout the interview, she stated that she was "probably the weakest link" of all of the participants.

Amanda stated that her school uses the Woodcock Johnson for determining eligibility for specific learning disabilities (SLD). She mentioned there was a big turnover of psychologists at her school and that had an effect on the team and the identification process. She mentioned that each psychologist brought different experiences and philosophies of "what they test, how they test, when they test, who they test." She believed a team needed to work together for at least two years before they could be a solid team. Having a new psychologist every year made the identification process for SLD difficult. When asked about assessment for EBD, Amanda said they used the "state criteria." She said she relied heavily on their center-based EBD educator for assistance when it came to EBD identification because she was not licensed in that area.

Amanda completed the IDI and is in the stage of Minimization. The worldview of Minimization is described as reflecting a tendency to highlight commonalities across cultures that can mask important cultural difference in values, perceptions and behaviors. Amanda might accurately recognize cultural commonalities and differences but might not fully attend to the differences. Her experiences with other cultures began in her first college experience; Amanda indicated that "the university was my eye opener to that"

when referring to diversity. Another experience she had with diversity was when she worked at the “inner-city” school. She described the faculty as “very diverse. From their race, their gender or sexual orientation...their everything.” While teaching at this school, Amanda became

very good friends with one of [her] colleagues at the school, and she was a Black woman, and as I got to know her, you know, everybody would joke around about me coming from rural [state] but I remember one day saying, “Can I just look at your hands?” I was amazed that her palms were white. I never saw it before and I didn’t know anyone well enough to ask them until then. And I was like 25 years old.

Betsy—Adams Elementary School

Betsy is a 59-year-old Caucasian female and grew up in a Midwestern suburb; she attended elementary, middle, and high school in this suburb. When Betsy attended elementary, middle, and high school, she remembered special education as the “room in the basement where the kids were just sorta kinda shut off from the rest of the kids and you didn’t really see them much because they kinda gave the rest of the kids the creeps.” She attended a major university in a city nearby and received her degree in music education.

Betsy completed her master’s degree in special education and holds teaching licenses in Music, Learning Disabilities, and Emotional Behavioral Disorder. Betsy taught music for several years before going into the private sector by giving private music lessons. When she wanted to return to the field of education, she decided that there was no future in music education because state mandated tests were on the horizon and music programs were getting cut. She decided to return to college to pursue a degree in special education because it was a “field with more demand.” She currently serves as a special

educator in Adams Elementary School and has been in Acme School District and at this school for 10 years. Betsy serves 14 learners who receive special education and related services on her caseload. She works with learners who have SLD, EBD, OHD, and ASD. Betsy said that it is “too bad there’s so many White little old ladies who teach here, cuz we aren’t culturally, you know, as reaching out as much as might be appreciated” by other cultures.

Betsy described her day as “pretty busy.” When probed to explain the busyness, she said, “There is usually a faculty meeting or parent meeting in the morning, then student contact starts and groups run...right through.” Betsy stated that she chose to work with smaller groups so the learners “do a little better.” It was her choice to have smaller groups but then she did not have an actual lunch break. She described the end of her day as “very fast.” She goes to another classroom and helps learners get their backpacks ready, does a math group, and completes bus duty. Generally, Betsy said there was a faculty meeting or meeting with faculty “on the fly” and writing reports after bus duty.

Betsy would say that disproportionate representation is

when students are identified as special education students because someone has mistaken something that is culturally, I guess you would say, normal, and has perceived it in a way that they believe it’s a special education issue; like a behavior issue or a speech or pronunciation issues or a grammar issue, when it is really a linguistic issue from the culture that you’re in.

Throughout the interviews, Betsy seemed to have a firm understanding of disproportionate representation. She often referred to all learners belonging to all educators. She mentioned that they were certainly “not trying to over-identify. We

wouldn't, I wouldn't be saying we're over-identifying, because we wouldn't be identifying them if we thought we were over-identifying."

When asked to define intercultural competence, Betsy indicated that it is "being able to understand enough of a culture to perceive things without a bias from your own cultural perspective." Betsy believed that experiences with different people build intercultural competence because

when you're younger and you come from a certain cultural background, you may have had more recent training than some of the older teachers, but you have less, maybe less life experience. And I think there is a difference being taught cultural competencies and experiencing different people.

When identifying learners for SLD, Betsy indicated that her school used the Woodcock Johnson; when determining services for EBD, she was not aware of an assessment or tool used for identification. She did mention a new computer program that her school was using that tracked behaviors. She does not use the program and did not know the name because only one person could use it.

Betsy completed the IDI and is in the stage called the Cusp of Acceptance. The Cusp of Acceptance is described as reflecting a relatively early orientation that recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference in one's own and other cultures in values, perceptions and behaviors. Betsy discussed how she tended to think of her learners as individuals, although "some of my cultural teaching is like, 'Well, that's not what we want. We want you to consider them by race.'" She continued by indicating "You can't win, you know, but I do tend to think of them [learners] as individuals, and try to not worry about what their individual race is so much."

Lindsay—Jefferson Elementary School

Lindsay is a 52-year-old Caucasian female, grew up in a Midwestern suburb, and indicated that her family had a Black maid. She followed that up by indicating, “Well, I’m old. And, it was very, very White where we were.” When Lindsay was in eighth grade, her father had a job transfer to another, smaller Midwestern suburb. She said that when she moved, she had to get a purse because “everybody in junior high had a purse.” She said that the biggest change she noticed in the new suburb was that everybody knew everybody. She described the move as a “culture-shock.”

Lindsay began her educational career at a small, all women private college; she received a bachelor’s degree in English. A few years after completing her bachelor’s, she decided to return to school to receive her general education teaching license. She completed a degree in elementary education and taught first grade for several years. Lindsay is currently licensed in elementary education and learning disabilities. Lindsay received her LD license from a private school in the Midwestern state in which the study took place.

Lindsay’s first teaching experience was in a fine-arts magnet school. She described the school as “cream of the crop...it was also bilingual, all students were required to take Spanish and [take] strings. A lot of parents worked to get their kids in that school.” She served as the building substitute in this school and ended up taking a third grade position because the third grade educator became ill and had to take a medical leave. She served in this position for 1.5 years and “they had to let the job go to somebody who was bilingual.” At that point, Lindsay took a job at an American Indian magnet school. She worked at this school as a first-grade educator for eight years. She

“absolutely love[d] it, but it was the toughest thing I’ve ever done in my life.” She indicated that it was difficult because of “the population. I cried all the time. Kids’ lives were so bad there. We were 98% free and reduced lunch.” Lindsay indicated, “If I can teach in (city) where I taught, I can teach anywhere.” Lindsay then moved out of state for a year; when she returned, she said, “It was very hard to find a job cuz I’m just another White woman with a general ed license.” She found a job at a charter school that works with learners who receive special education and related services for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The educators at this charter school had to be licensed in general education and special education so she went back to school to get her special education license. Once she completed her special education license, she decided to look for jobs in other districts because “she wasn’t happy” in her current position. Lindsay is currently an itinerant special educator (she works at Washington, Adams, and Jefferson Elementary Schools) in the participating district and has been with the district for five years. Prior to serving as an itinerant special educator, she was a center-based special educator in a functional academic needs (FAN) classroom, which she describes as meeting the needs of “really severely LD kids, or higher functioning DCD (developmentally/cognitively delayed) kids.”

When asked to define disproportionate representation, Lindsay said, “It’s overrepresentation of Black kids in the center-based programs, especially.” She went on to describe an instance when she believed disproportionate representation occurred--a learner of color was inappropriately placed in the center-based program in which she taught. She described the learner as “African American, and um, very boisterous, loud, really cute, big articulation issues, big speech issues. So he was kinda hard to

understand.” The general educator was “having a ton of trouble with him and so an eval was done” and he “became a FAN kid in a center-based classroom.” Lindsay said that at the re-evaluation meeting, “his scores were good enough that he did not need to be center-based.”

Lindsay described intercultural competence as an openness to adjusting to the needs of specific families. When discussing reaching out a lot to some families, Lindsay said “some parents will be more involved in calling or, being in touch, or questioning even, a teacher, and some, because of maybe a language barrier or cultural barrier aren’t going to reach out as much.” She reflected that it was difficult at times to be more outgoing and took more initiative for some families.

In identifying learners for SLD, Lindsay denoted that there was a “form for the general ed teacher to refer someone to special ed.” The form included information on interventions tried in the general education setting, medication, medical needs, and “issues going on at home.” She said the form included MAP scores, state accountability scores, and report card grades. There was not a particular assessment that was used to determine if an individual was eligible for receiving special education and related services for SLD but a process that each school used and “they all tweak it to their own population.” Lindsay said there was a similar process for determining eligibility for learners identified to receive special education and related services for EBD; the general educators “have to go through all those things before they can bring it to the pupil need committee, which is the special education committee.”

Lindsay completed the IDI and is in the stage called the Cusp of Acceptance. The Cusp of Acceptance is described as reflecting a relatively early orientation that

recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference in one's own and other cultures in values, perceptions and behaviors.

Sarah—Madison Elementary School

Sarah is a 31-year-old Caucasian female and grew up in a Midwestern suburb and attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same district. Both of her parents were educators so she decided to go to college to become an educator as well. Sarah double majored in elementary education and special education. She has taught at Madison Elementary her entire career (nine years). After working at Madison Elementary for a few years, Sarah went back to get her license in emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) because she “didn’t have the background to work with EBD students.” While obtaining her license in EBD, Sarah earned her master’s degree in special education and a certificate in autism. Sarah holds a license in elementary education, learning disabilities, and emotional behavioral disorders. Sarah described the staff at Madison Elementary School as “an older staff...and a lot of the times teachers just think they’re doing the right thing. Or they don’t wanna change.” She said she had witnessed other educators dismissing professional development centered on intercultural competence as irrelevant to their students, claiming, “All my kids are the same.”

An example Sarah provided of disproportionate representation was “having students over or underrepresented in special education. So, for example, if you had 20% of your student population as Black, then you should have 20% in special education.” She believed disproportionate representation existed due to “stereotypes that people have.” She shared that educators might have “lowered expectations” and associate race or culture with the need for special education.

Sarah described intercultural competence as “totally understanding culture and why students or parents or whoever we’re working with is acting or thinking a certain way...understanding a culture and verifying that culture and teaching what is acceptable in other cultures.” When asked to describe her thoughts on intercultural competence, Sarah thought it was difficult for people to separate from their own experiences and this might impact their intercultural competence. Sarah indicated that at Madison Elementary School, there was no “buy-in” regarding intercultural competence. She said the school has an intercultural competency goal but she felt like it was a “loose goal...it’s one of those things we put on paper just to put on paper...it’s required by the state, I believe, on our school improvement plan.”

Madison Elementary School followed a process when determining eligibility for learners to receive special education and related services for SLD. Sarah indicated that

we look at all of our data...I guess for LD one thing that’s usually very telling, especially if the student is struggling in reading, is where their math skills are. Or, if they’re read to, can they comprehend? If we’re looking for a true LD...having that average intelligence and the discrepancy.

Sarah did not name one specific tool used for determining eligibility but named a variety of data collection methods for determining SLD. For EBD, Sarah said the “social worker has some sort of computer assessment that looks at social skills and things like that.” She was not aware of the name of the computer assessment but said it served as a screening tool to determine if an individual would qualify to receive special education and related services for EBD.

Sarah completed the IDI and is in the stage of Minimization. Minimization is described as reflecting a tendency to highlight commonalities across cultures that can mask important cultural differences in values, perceptions and behaviors.

In summary, the participants in this study represented the overall teacher population of Acme School District (see Chapter III—Setting of the Study). Of the interviewees, only one began her career in education as a special educator; the other three began as general educators. The majority of each participant's experience in special education occurred in Acme School District; none of them served as a licensed special educator in another school district.

Themes

Disproportionate representation in special education is an ongoing national concern (Artiles & Bal, 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Beratan, 2008; Dunn, 1968; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent & Artiles, 2007). The data (see Table 2 in Chapter II) for Acme School District indicated learners who were American Indian were 1.67 times more likely to receive special education and related services for SLD and 2.95 times more likely to receive special education and related services for EBD. Learners who are African American were 1.68 times more likely to receive special education and related services for SLD and 2.43 times more likely to receive special education and related services for EBD. The main focus of research on disproportionate representation in special education has been on race, poverty, insufficient language instruction, a lack of sensitivity to culture and language, and the use of the wait-to-fail model. In this study, I used interviews of elementary special educators, journal reflections, artifacts, and field notes to establish common themes regarding the perceptions special educators had of disproportionate representation in special education. One of the artifacts collected from the participants was their developmental orientation as indicated by the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI). The IDI is an assessment tool that “measures the level of intercultural

competence/sensitivity across a developmental continuum for individuals...and represents a theoretically grounded measure of this capability toward observing cultural differences and commonalities and modifying behavior to cultural contexts” (Hammer, 2009, p. 12). Intercultural competency related directly to the ongoing problem of disproportionate representation as it became necessary to examine the perceptions special educators had on disproportionate representation. Two participants were in the stage of Minimization and two were in the stage of Cusp of Acceptance. Minimization represents a tendency to highlight commonalities across cultures that can mask important cultural differences in values, perceptions, and behaviors. The Cusp of Acceptance reflects a relatively early orientation that recognizes and appreciates patterns of cultural difference in one’s own and other cultures in values, perceptions, and behaviors. These stages provided further insight into the worldview and frame of reference of the participants and how the participants viewed other cultures. .

Figure 4 represents how the participants in this study perceived disproportionate representation. The “Responsibility of the Special Educator” was removed from the “Perception of Self” because the participants in this study did not appear to accept responsibility for the role they had in diminishing disproportionate representation. The solid line from the “Perception of Self” to “Externalizing Inadequacies” represents the participants’ tendencies to “Externalize Inadequacies.” The three arrows from “Externalizing Inadequacies” represent the themes to which the participants externalized inadequacies. The dotted lines represent how the three themes are interconnected. Free nodes (individual understandable statements) were organized into categories and then searched for related concepts (axial coding) between the categories to find emerging

themes. Emergent themes were Participants' Perception of Others' Responsibilities, System Responses, Responses to Culture, and Perception of Self.

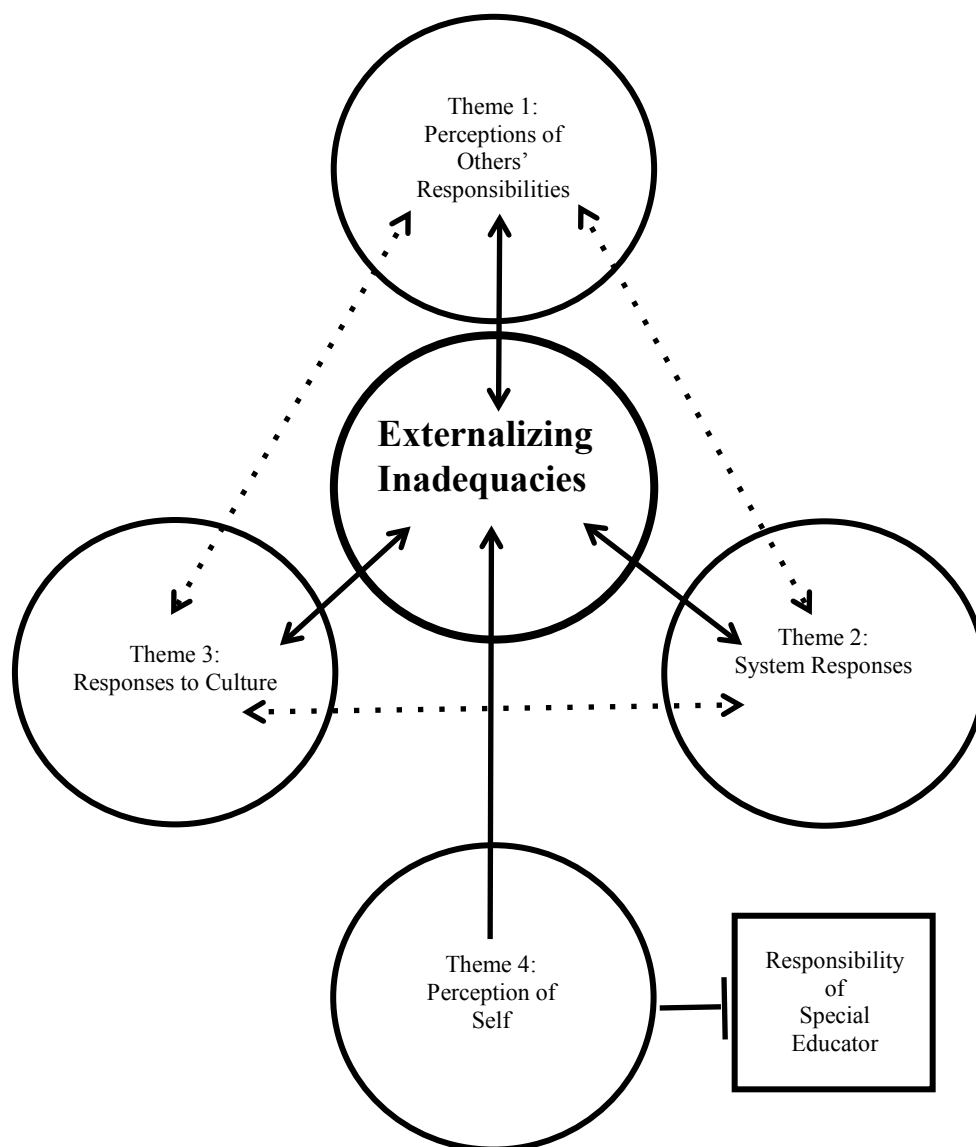


Figure 4. Externalizing inadequacies.

Theme 1: Participants' Perceptions of Others' Responsibilities

Due to the heightened focus on disproportionate representation, school districts have increased the attention on the number of individuals directly or indirectly involved in the special education process. In this study, this became evident in how the participants' responses reflected an awareness of additional measures being taken to decrease disproportionate representation, participation in the special education identification process, and interacting with others in the school community; however, this awareness resulted in a perception that disproportionate representation was the responsibility of others, the special education process was faulty due to a broken system, and the changing demographics of the school district demanded an increased awareness of intercultural competence. Within this theme were two relating categories: staff member and general educators (see Figure 4). The participants' responses evidenced a differentiation between staff members and general educators. Thematically, however, the responses identified the responsibility of both categories. Consistently, the participants mentioned other staff members and general educators as members of the school community who might have an impact on disproportionate representation. However, the special educators did not discuss the impact they themselves had in the special education identification process of historically underserved learners.

Staff members. The participants perceived cultural liaisons, school administrators, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and school secretaries who might have an impact on disproportionate representation. While the participants mentioned how other staff members were responsible for diminishing disproportionate representation, it was noteworthy that they did not take responsibility for their own role

in diminishing disproportionate representation. For example, one participant indicated, “Well, I mean, I know they are trying to prevent disproportionate representation by having cultural liaisons.” This response reflected the perception that it was another’s responsibility to “prevent” disproportionate representation rather than the perception that the special educator himself or herself was also responsible.

Although participants’ responses did not directly identify school administrators as having a role in the special education process, the responses reflected a lack of respect toward the role of the school administrator in special education. The participants described how school administrators “had no clue about special ed” and how the administrator “need[ed] somebody else in [t]here to observe...who know[s] what this is about, cuz I [indicating the school administrator] don’t get it.” This response was evidence of a more general opinion about the knowledge school administrators have of special education. The role of the school administrator was further marginalized when it came to developing positive behavior interventions. One participant mentioned, “Some of our administration doesn’t see that it’s a need.” This illustrated a perception of ineptitude surrounding the need for additional supports and interventions to lessen disproportionate representation. When discussing intercultural competence, the participants identified a perception of school administrators as being “pretty culturally incompetent too.” Thus, participants seemed to have perceptions of school administrators that indicated a need for increased knowledge surrounding special education, response to intervention, positive behavior support, and intercultural competency.

The participants placed the role of identification for EBD on social workers rather than discussing the role they themselves played in the identification process. However, special educators perceived the role of the social worker as an important piece of the identification process. Although the special educators could not specifically identify the tools social workers used, they were aware of a new computer program in use. For example, the “social worker has some sort of computer assessment that looks at social skills and things like that” during the identification process. This understanding of the responsibilities of the social worker, including the use of the computer assessment, appeared to result in a lessening of the special educators’ role in the special education identification process. In essence, the participants’ responses reflected an uninformed knowledge of what the social worker actually did but a perception that the social worker maintained a great deal of responsibility. Paradoxically, one participant stated,

You know, we have a part-time social worker. We’ve had probably, I honestly, about 10 different social workers in the past 12 years...we get all bits and pieces. And we go for days and days and even months at a time without a social worker...our social work has not been good here.

This response, when coupled with the perception of responsibility that the social worker had in the identification process for learners who received special education and related services for EBD, illustrated a frustration for the lack of consistency and importance placed on the role of the social worker.

The participants mentioned psychologists as having a role in the identification process of learners receiving special education and related services for specific learning disabilities (SLD). Rather than describing how the special educators themselves worked with learners and assessed individuals for SLD, the major focus of the responses was on the psychologist and how the psychologist was the *main actor* on the special education

team. For example, “we have a very big turnover of school psychologists” and it takes time to build a team because every psychologist “has different experiences and philosophies of what they test, how they test, when they test, [and] who they test.” Thus, the perception that the identification process truly relied on the school psychologists’ way of doing things; the psychologists’ background, experiences and philosophies; and the inconsistency of having a long-term school psychologist minimized the importance of the special educators’ role in the identification process. By placing the psychologist as the *major player*, the special educators were, in fact, diminishing their own role in identifying the shortcomings of a system that was outside of the special educators’ control. While the school psychologist was perceived as the *major player*, the nurse was poised as the “most valuable [person] at the evaluation meeting” because “they’re [the medical field] saving so many babies that they didn’t used to save.” That is, due to significant advances in the field of medicine, doctors are able to save the lives of many newborns that historically might have not survived due to illness, low birth weight, fetal alcohol syndrome, etc. Therefore the nurse became the most valuable person because s/he could provide the medical history and information that might serve as an indicator for potential special education services. One participant discusses how the most important question for the nurse at an IEP meeting used to be: “When is their birthday?” And now the most important question for the nurse was: “How much did they weigh when they were born?”

Although school secretaries were identified as important staff members in the school community, the responses reflected more of a cultural nuance as opposed to a role in special education. One of the secretaries “will call and hound people until they get

here” for school conferences “...and to be honest, [she] cannot let that go.” Previously, this school had a reputation for having 100% participation of parents at school conferences. Now, however, with the changing demographics of the school population, the secretary was finding it more difficult to encourage families from historically underserved populations to attend. Another secretary “really offended a guy because, um, she said he was Somali, but he wasn’t, he was Ethiopian.” Similar to the perceptions of school administrators, these illustrations reflected the special educators’ perception that school secretaries were responsible for having a heightened awareness of intercultural competence.

In summary, the participants discussed how other staff members played a role in diminishing disproportionate representation, participated in the special education identification process, and interacted with others in the school community. Ultimately, the participants identified the responsibilities of others but did not discuss their own responsibilities for how they might play a role in diminishing disproportionate representation, participate in the special education identification process, and interact with others in the school community. The participants in this study seemed to take a position on the sidelines and externalized inadequacies.

General educators. The participants spoke about the general educators’ educational expectations for learners from historically underserved populations. For example, one participant indicated the “school staff doesn’t understand maybe some of the family values or some of the culture” when it came to homework expectations. The general educators “expect things that aren’t gonna happen unless we do things to change it...so the expectations from home and school don’t match.” This cultural mismatch

might lead general educators to make inappropriate referrals to special education. This was illustrated in the perception that general educators see “nine Black boys in the [EBD] classroom. And so I think [general education] teachers see that and have lowered expectations and think, ‘Well, I have a Black boy in my classroom. Let’s see if he can be EBD and get some extra help’.” The perception of special educators reflected an assumption that general educators would conclude that learners from historically underserved populations “belong” in special education. The special educators *are* a part of the special education referral process; however, what was lacking in their responses was how they could provide interventions to assist learners in being successful in the general classroom.

The general educators “come with their experiences and stereotypes and beliefs and they carry those with them.” This perception might result in “stereotypes that people [general educators] have lowered expectations...I think a lot of it falls into poor pre-referral procedures.” Although the pre-referral process was part of the general and special educators’ responsibility, the participants did not discuss the influence they had in the process. Rather, general educators were perceived as holding stereotypes of learners from historically underserved populations and therefore made misguided referrals. Regardless, none of the special educators mentioned how they themselves came to the table with their experiences and stereotypes and beliefs and carried those with them or the implications these had on disproportionate representation. Ultimately, the responses reflected a perception that disproportionate representation was not the responsibility of the special educators; rather, the onus was placed on the general educators. The special educators assigned responsibility to the general educators for not understanding culture

while failing to take responsibility for their own role in cultural understandings and cultural mismatches.

The participants continued to reiterate the contribution general educators had in disproportionate representation by stating that that general educators “haven’t experienced what a lot of students have, um, poverty, or unemployed parents, or lower socio-economic class, um, it’s hard for a lot of [general education] teachers to relate to that.” One of the participants went so far as to say, “I don’t know if handle is the right word...but they [general educators] don’t know how to handle these kids.” Therefore, since the general educators did not know how to “handle these kids,” the special educators conveyed the responsibility lay with the general educators. When referring to the changing demographics in her school, one participant said that “it’s really hard for some people to be open to having to change their ways and they’re not willing, kinda old horse-new trick kind of idea” when referring to the changing demographics in her school. Another participant stated that she noticed “a lot, I know a lot of um the [general education] teachers were afraid to call parents or contact the parents and I don’t really get what that’s about.” These responses illustrated the special educators’ awareness of an increased need for intercultural competence for general educators. The underlying belief of the participants was that general educators did not know how to work with learners from historically underserved populations and even perceived a sense of fear on the part of the general educators, thus leading to inappropriate special education referrals.

The special educators’ responses did not reflect a perception of their own accountability in the special education process. In fact, their responses lacked an ownership of the stake special educators hold in disproportionate representation. Rather,

the responsibility was placed on the general educators and their lowered expectations, stereotypes of other cultures, and fear of differences.

Theme 2: The System Responses

As perceived by the participants, the implementation of district level mandates, such as RIT and PBIS, was not structured. This lack of structure created a level of frustration. Participants perceived that resources at the school level differed from building to building depending on the population; because of this difference, the participants perceived that some schools were able to offer additional supports. This is represented in Figure 4 with the dotted lines. Further compounding the sense of frustration, the participants felt general and special educators were too busy and not engaged in staff development. Participants perceived staff development focused on working with learners from historically underserved populations as a reflective practice and non-pragmatic concept; however, they suggested it would be easier if the staff development opportunities provided explicit resources on how to work with learners from historically underserved populations. This theme included three categories that developed during open coding: district, resources, and staff development. These categories related to the system of education and the implications of district accountability in disproportionate representation.

District. Due to legal mandates, it was a common practice for districts to implement new programs. With regard to special education, these mandates might include Response to Intervention (RTI) and School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (SWPBS). RTI and SWPBS might serve as important models of implementation when districts are responding to disproportionate representation. The

RTI model is one that was developed out of a concern of disproportionate representation of historically underserved groups of learners (Learning Disabilities Roundtable, 2005). One benefit of RTI is the “reduction of identification bias” (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003, p. 140). Grigorenko (2009) indicated that “RTI was propagated to address the disproportionate number of ethnic minority students identified for special education” (p. 140). SWPBS allows schools to meet the needs of all learners through implementing structures for “establishing the social culture, learning and teaching environment” (Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2010, p. 12) to support the unique characteristics of historically underserved learners.

The participants’ perception of Acme School District’s implementation of programs such as RTI and SWPBS reflected a sense of frustration. For example, when specifically referring to RTI, “One of the frustrating things is that the district, is that they say, ‘Yes, we’re gonna try this. Go!’” The participants indicated frustration with this process, particularly regarding RTI, because “nine elementary [schools], and your middle and high school struggled through the process” of developing an approach. The implication from the participants’ responses was that it was the district’s responsibility to create a streamlined approach for implementation of programs such as RTI and SWPBS. Thus, without having structure provided from the district, the participants perceived a waste of time in developing and creating systems. Other illustrations of this perception included “I think if it [RTI] was a little more laid out there would have been less time wasted,” “it was a big process to muddle through,” and “I think structure would have been more helpful.” In addition to the sense of wasted time, another result from the lack

of district level implementation, was the perception that learners received different services in different buildings.

Due to the perceived inconsistencies from building to building, participants identified a lack of cohesion across the district as well as reflected a sense of imbalance regarding implementation of programs such as RTI and SWPBS. For example, “I don’t think as a district we’ve got from building to building a very cohesive program yet [for RTI]...some buildings do it one way and some another...the only thing like, I just see, every building is so different” when implementing RTI. From the participants’ perspectives, systematic implementation of programs such as RTI and SWPBS should fall on the district’s shoulders “cuz you can’t really have each building develop their own plan.” The district’s responsibility to recruit and retain staff of color seemed to point to an ideology that an increase of staff of color might decrease disproportionate representation. Participants perceived the district had missed opportunities or had allowed its own “way to doing things” to interfere with the hiring of staff of color. For example, “They’ve had plenty of opportunities to hire some staff [of color] like that and they haven’t done it...all the principals, you know...it’s like the old White men’s club here.” Participants externalized inadequacies by identifying perceived district level faults in assisting in implementation of RTI and SWPBS. The participants placed culpability on how the district implemented new programs, such as RTI and SWPBS, and how the poor implementation had implications on disproportionate representation.

Resources. The participants mentioned a difference in funding and resources across the district and the impact this difference had on providing services at each school. The participants indicated that Title I schools had additional funding to provide

intervention services and the subsequent ability for Title schools to use Title staff to work on interventions. Along with perceived inequities in funding, the participants consistently discussed not having enough staff and personnel to implement interventions. For example, “We have less and less personnel able to implement interventions outside the mainstream classroom” and “we don’t have the staff to carry them [interventions] out.” Participants appeared to equate intervention support with decreased disproportionate representation. Participants indicated “everybody has to do it so differently because [of] the resources they have.” Due to the inadequacies of funding at the school level, the participants identified a discrepancy even across grade levels; this was evidenced through the use of resources including time and manpower. For example, “in our building...we don’t have the resources to effectively do it [interventions] at all grade levels.” This reality held true to the perception that increased staff and resources would contribute to the effective decrease of disproportionate representation.

Staff development. District level staff developments in Acme School District were focused on initiatives that aligned with legal mandates; several of the professional development opportunities focused on increasing intercultural competence. The participants’ responses did not focus solely on their views regarding staff development provided by the district regarding intercultural competence; they were forthcoming in discussing comments they heard from other staff members after staff development regarding intercultural competence. For example, “I hear...people...say, ‘Well, I’m not gonna worry about that’ or ‘...I teach all my kids the same.’” The implications of comments such as these might not allow educators to meet the unique characteristics of learners from historically underserved populations. Therefore, special educators seemed

to equate the lack of engagement during staff development regarding intercultural competence with a failure to decrease disproportionate representation. For others, according to the special educators, the staff development was not meaningful to their teaching experience. The special educators' responses did, however, reflect a belief that staff development on intercultural competence might impact classroom practices. The participants perceived that general educators "are a group that don't like staff development though" and "they see trainings as just 'something that we have to do'." Thus, the perceived lack of buy-in was translated as disengagement and an unwillingness to increase intercultural competence. The participants identified time constraints as being an inhibiting factor to engagement in staff development. The participants perceived that general and special educators were busy and had better things to do than attend staff development. For example, "I think those are, a lot of teachers just feel like, 'I could be doing this, I could be doing that'." With regard to the specific content of staff development, special educators mentioned that general educators would like to have particular practices they could implement in their classroom. "In regards to intercultural competence, I've heard, um, teachers come out of cultural trainings saying, 'Just once I wish when we had cultural trainings they'd say, you need to do this'." This perception reflected a desire for more concrete and immediately applicable tools to implement in the classroom when working with historically underserved learners. The paradox of this impression was that although general educators were perceived as being disengaged, there appeared to be a willingness to implement strategies to meet the needs of historically underserved learners if the strategies were presented in a cut-and-dry fashion. Regarding themselves, comments from the participants illustrated a detachment to staff

development on intercultural competence as well. For example, “If you would just let me teach, I’d be fine.” Participants’ responses suggested a general sense of frustration with respect to their time and the nuance that they already knew how to work with learner from historically underserved populations. This perception overshadowed the fact that disproportionate representation was an ongoing concern in the field of special education.

In summary, the special educators pointed to a number of factors at the system level that might have an impact on disproportionate representation. Participants identified a need for cohesive implementation of programming across the district. The implication of the need for equal distribution of resources suggested a perception that some schools were better suited to implement interventions than others. Participants perceived staff development as being ineffective and time consuming. They reported a desire for more usable tools that could be immediately implemented to meet the needs of historically underserved learners. The participants perceived these external factors as contributing to the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation.

Theme 3: Responses to Culture

This theme emerged from two initial categories developed during open coding: home/family and learners. The participants’ responses offered insights into their beliefs about families and learners from historically underserved populations and how these two categories interacted in the school experience. The special educators discussed each category from a deficit perspective and externalized inadequacies of other cultures (see Figure 4), often mentioning needs rather than strengths and unique characteristics of historically underserved learners. The perceptions of the participants reflected a stance that families and learners from historically underserved populations did not fit the school

framework rather than the school shifting to meet the needs of the changing demographics of the school and community population. The implication of these perceptions might contribute to the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation. Although the participants differentiated between families and learners, the overarching theme focused on culture.

Home/family. While discussing home life and families of historically underserved populations, the participants included reflections on family expectations, values, and commitment to the school experience. The participants identified a mismatch between the home life and culture of learners from historically underserved populations and the school culture; the participants assumed how families and learners from historically underserved populations should “fit” in the existing educational system. The participants mentioned how other cultures were different and they questioned who needed to change: the school or the family? For example, “is [this] a cultural thing? Is that something we can work with or is this something we need to change? Or is that something we need to honor?” and “You know...value systems change from, you know, house to house, and family to family.” These perceptions perpetuated the presupposition that families and learners from historically underserved populations were “different” and therefore needed to change to fit within the current system. When mentioning the expectations of the home of historically underserved learners, the participants appeared to diminish the home values and placed significance on the school values. For example, “I just think a lot of it is expectations from home. Like culture.” This perception reflected the essence that there was a “fault” in the home values of historically underserved

populations not matching the school context rather than a possible short coming of the school community in working with learners from historically underserved populations.

Further defining this perception was an identification “that there’s a definite, definite discrepancy with home life” and that “the expectations from school and home don’t match.” Illustrating the mismatch in expectations was the experience that “you have to call five times, and you have to email five times, and send home five meeting notices” even though “we have more phones than ever and yet you can never reach anybody.” This sense of frustration was compounded by a perceived silence from parents of learners from historically underserved populations. Often, participants perceived that parents from historically underserved populations were “not always available [n]or willing to return phone calls” and that “having school as the highest of concerns is maybe not there.” The result of this experience was the perception that the participants themselves had to put more effort into reaching out to families of historically underserved learners. However, this created “more work” for the special educators when working with learners from historically underserved populations.

The participants viewed parents of historically underserved populations from a deficit perspective. The participants discussed how they “don’t have contact with the parents because they don’t even have phones.” Explaining “the importance of the IEP meeting [to the parents] and the follow through, it takes a lot of phone calls.” The participants seemed to believe that parents did not understand the importance of being in contact with them; they seemed to believe that parents from historically underserved populations did not understand the process of special education. Another example of the participants perceiving parents from the deficit perspective was in the underlying

assumption that parents from historically underserved populations did not understand special education. For example,

I had a family...and we were talking about, you know, ADHD and their son, and they could not wrap their head around it. They said, "We took him to the doctor and he's healthy. He's fine." And they still, I mean, they left here and moved on to middle school and they did not understand what we were trying to get at.

While there was an abundance of responses reflecting the perception that the deficiency lay within the expectations and values of the families of historically underserved populations, the dichotomy became evident as participants considered the ways in which they "must" change to reach out to the families of historically underserved populations. The participants expressed that "how you'd deal with those [historically underserved populations] families was very different"; they had to be "open to adjusting expectations or ways of communicating, even to families"; and "having to reach out a lot for certain families and not as much for others." These statements represented the perception that communicating with families of historically underserved populations was "very different" and required "adjusting expectations," not only for the learners in the school but "even to families." The essence was that working with families of historically underserved populations required additional work compared to working with families who fit within the existing school norms. For example, "I think...it's hard, I think there's some discomfort at first at least among some people that they come in and the school seems like a pretty foreign place" and the "parents of various, uh, groups come in, you know, they probably look around and go 'Well, there is nobody here that's like me'."

This illuminated sensitivity to the possible uneasiness families from historically underserved populations might experience in the school setting. The participants described parents from historically underserved populations as individuals who did not

like to be in the school setting; however, the participants did not indicate what changes could be made to make the school setting more comfortable or how to work with families in alternative ways.

The participants mentioned current practices the schools used to reach out to families including family evenings, ice cream socials, carnivals, grandparent's day, performances, world cultural days, and potlucks. The activities were described by the participants as coming "to school wearing your costume," "or they can dance or they, whatever they do," "the kids put on entertainment of their culture or any other culture they choose to." Although these events were explained as a way of reaching out to families from historically underserved populations, the participants perceived the events in terms of entertainment. So rather than meeting the needs of the families, it appeared that the events were held to "entertain." Even though the participants perceived these events as entertainment, they seemed to believe the events created an environment that was friendly and accepting for individuals from historically underserved populations.

However, the participants' illustrations reflected a view of the families who attended these events as difficult to understand. For example, "the teachers [are able] to reach out and find ways to communicate with parents, um, find ways to reach people. It's not always easy to reach people." This was a deficit framework because the participants were consistent in their belief that even though getting parents to school was not working, they were doing something and so the "problem" lay with families of historically underserved populations. The participants continued to emphasize the difficulty of getting families from historically underserved populations in the school setting but they continued to encourage the families to attend school functions. The

participants believed the events demonstrated to the families from historically underserved populations that they were “going those extra steps that it takes to make that obvious that there’s real willingness to be a partner.”

Learner. The conversation of culture was different with respect to learners versus families from historically underserved populations. While the participants’ responses regarding their perceptions of families were centered on cultural values and expectations, the participants’ responses regarding their perceptions of learners from historically underserved populations focused on behavior, academics, and life experiences. Behaviorally, participants provided examples of the difference in ease in working with learners from various cultures. Learners who were Asian and Latino were perceived as easier to work with than learners who were African American. This ease was attributed to styles of interacting. For example,

Well, the Asian kids would be more, this is, so, kinda stereotyping, but, the Asian kids, um, are much more compliant. Um, and would follow directions and listen better. And I think I’ve found that with the Latino kids too. And then the African American kids will be in your face, talking back, um, more non-compliant from the teachers perspective... Some cultures are a little more up front with their opinions...[and] it might be considered argumentative.

These statements provided insight into the disconnection between one’s own cultural norms for interacting and the cultural norms of interacting for learners from historically underserved populations. Specifically, it was the identification of “in your face” and “talking back” as perceived as “non-compliant.” Rather than recognizing this as a difference in styles of interaction, it was perceived as not fitting within the norms of the school culture. Instead, the learners were described as being “very, very difficult.”

From an academic perspective, the participants perceived learners from historically underserved populations as a burden. For example, “Well, you know, I just

seen [sic]an awful lot of students who don't do their homework.” This created a burden for the special educators because of the follow up and re-teaching that might become necessary. Furthermore, language barriers might limit opportunities for success in the school setting. Special educators perceived learners from historically underserved populations as “[not] understand[ing] so many words,” and that “the kids have no vocabulary.” The language deficit was perceived as compounding the academic deficiencies. The participants’ perception of onus on language development created an additional sense of a burden beyond that of behavioral mismatches.

Adding to the complexity of the participants’ perspectives of the behavior and academics of learners from historically underserved populations was a third dimension: life experiences. The participants viewed learners from historically underserved populations as individuals who lived in a “less than” society and brought fewer life experiences to the classroom. The participants described the learners as being “homeless,” “transient,” and “from homes of poverty.” Although the participants did not have access to the free and reduced lunch information, they said, “It’s pretty easy to figure out who’s there.” These assumptions led the special educators to believe that the learners they worked with from historically underserved populations did not have “a lot of the things we talk about in the schools,” i.e., “like canoeing...or a kayak...or a camp-site.” “How many kids have actually been camping in the mountains?” “They haven’t had experiences in those things.” By focusing solely on needs, the participants minimized the strengths and unique characteristics of learners from historically underserved populations. One anecdote clearly elucidated this minimization: in an effort to get to know the learners, they were asked to “draw out your family...Well, everyone’s

an auntie. There's no way you could have that many aunties." The identification of the learner's reality as being impossible counteracted the very purpose of the exercise. Rather than increasing intercultural competence, the special educator rejected the family's values and differences.

In summary, the participants perceived cultural differences, experiences, and values as creating a burden of additional work while maintaining school norms. The participants viewed the learners they worked with as individuals but "treat each student as we do anyone else" and "think that some of the practices we have are good for most kids." These views might add to the burden already perceived by the participants because they were not recognizing the strengths and unique characteristics of historically underserved populations.

Theme 4: Perception of Self

Themes 1-3 elicited a common thread of *externalizing inadequacies* (see Figure 4), i.e., participants identified numerous factors outside of themselves that might contribute to disproportionate representation of historically underserved learners in special education. During open coding, the category of the special educator was not extensive but the implication of the category led to a noteworthy underpinning of the participants' perceptions of possible contributing factors to disproportionate representation. An exploration of the participants' perception of self illuminated an understanding participants had of their seemingly removed role in diminishing disproportionate representation. Most significantly, participants' responses consistently reflected a sense of self-pity and helplessness with an underlying sense of hope. This dichotomy of helplessness and hope led participants to remove their own responsibility

from the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation of historically underserved learner in special education.

Changing demographics of Acme School District might be one factor contributing to the participants' perception of helplessness. When referring to the changing demographics within schools, the participants discussed how they "kinda lament" now because "it seemed like our job was easier" before there were so many learners from different cultures represented in the school community. This perception led to a feeling of inadequacy because the participants did not feel as though they had the tools necessary to work with learners from historically underserved populations. The participants felt as though they had to learn on their own when working with families and learners from historically underserved populations. One participant felt "like I don't have a lot of tools in my toolbox." The participants did not "understand the culture and where they're [the parents] coming from." Furthermore, the participants felt "bad at IEP meetings" when the parents did not understand the special education terms. These sentiments illustrated an overall perception that the participants were struggling to make sense of the increased demands placed on them due to the changing demographics of the school population. The essence of helplessness was reflected in the sentiment that "you [the special educator] can't win!"

On the other hand, the participants expressed hope in identifying the opportunity to get to know their learners better since they worked with smaller groups of learners. For example, "I have the opportunity to work with parents for six years or so," "in special ed, you're forced to build relationships with parents," and "the more time you have in special ed a little bit the more understanding you are of different cultures." The special

educators believed that since they worked in a smaller setting with fewer learners, they tended “to be a bit more understanding.” The participants perceived the smaller environment was dynamic and the experiences they had as special educators were immediately applicable. For example, “what you learn yesterday helps you with what you do today” and “I think it’s our, it’s part of our job to keep learning about our students’ cultures.” These perceptions indicated a sense of hope, albeit on a smaller scale compared to the challenges of other staff members, the system, and the culture.

Summary

As stated previously, the themes emerged from the interviews, research journals reflections, artifacts, and field notes. Three themes related directly to externalizing inadequacies--Perception of Others’ Responsibilities, System Responses, and Responses to Culture; externalizing inadequacies functioned as the core of the themes. As the participants shared their perceptions, they consistently identified factors outside of themselves and factors beyond their control. Thus, the Perception of Self theme was removed from the other themes because the participants did not mention an interdependent relationship with other staff members, the system, and the culture of the home and learners from historically underserved populations. Unknowingly, the participants detached from the Perception of Self because the participants perceived “everybody else” as contributing to the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation of historically underserved learners in special education. The separation became evident as the participants shared their perceptions of disproportionate representation; the participants seemed oblivious to the fact they were delivering a toxic message: *look at how much everybody else is failing “these” kids and there is nothing I*

can do about it. However, the participants were delivering the message with the best of intentions. This dichotomy might be ascribed to the developmental orientations of the participants as indicated by the IDI. The different stages represented by the participants (Minimization and the Cusp of Acceptance) presented a negation of a development of intercultural competence. The participants did not seem aware that they themselves were contributing factors to disproportionate representation; they perceived themselves as powerless.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In Chapter IV, the researcher described the setting, the participants, and the identified themes. This chapter provides a summary, recommendations, discussion, and suggestions for further research.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

- Q1 What perceptions do special educators have of disproportionate representation in special education?

Summary

The clear pattern of responses from the participants during the course of this study revealed that the participants appeared to be externalizing inadequacies of others. In the first theme, participants held cultural liaisons, school administrators, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and even secretaries responsible for the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation in special education and a responsibility for increased intercultural competence. The participants criticized school administrators for not knowing anything about special education and for being culturally incompetent. The high turnover in social workers and school psychologists contributed to inconsistencies in the special education identification process, which might have implications for the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation of historically underserved learners in

special education. Participants elevated the role of the school nurse due to the implications the medical history provided and went so far as to identify a school secretary as being insensitive to the unique characteristics of families and learners from historically underserved populations. The participants held general educators responsible for perpetuating disproportionate representation. The participants' perceptions, when taken as a whole, reflected their belief that general educators lacked empathy for the differences in the home life of historically underserved populations and school values. The participants suggested general educators needed to increase their intercultural competence and went so far as to suggest the lack of empathy was rooted in a *fear* of differences.

While the participants' responses in the first theme readily identified specific others who might have responsibility in diminishing disproportionate representation, the second theme pointed to the system as possibly contributing to the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation in special education. The participants identified shortcomings of the system with regard to the district, resources, and staff development. The participants perceived a lack of structure when it came to implementing new programs such as RTI and SWPBS that aligned with legal mandates. This was evidenced between buildings and in the distribution of funding and staffing. Participants identified the perceived inadequacies of staff development as being a "waste of time" and not offering practical tools and practices.

In the third theme, the participants continued to externalize inadequacies by placing responsibility of understanding cultural differences on the families and learners from historically underserved populations. Participants readily identified a cultural

mismatch between the expectations and values of the school and families and learners from historically underserved populations. The participants discussed families from a deficit perspective, as being “different” with regard to communication, and families of historically underserved populations did not understand the special education process. There was an attempt among the participants to reach out to families from historically underserved populations, although they acknowledged this had not been as effective as hoped. The participants discussed learners from some historically underserved populations as being “difficult to work with” and “non-compliant.” A cultural mismatch was identified in academics as stemming from different values and deficiencies in language and suggested that the lack of experiences due to home life might impact academic achievement. The nuance to the participants’ responses was the expectation that while schools, staff, and educators were responsible for outreach, it was truly the responsibility of the families and learners from historically underserved populations to acclimate to the school culture.

The final theme, while not extensive in raw data, was significant in the opportunity it offered for participants to take ownership of their responsibilities in possibly diminishing disproportionate representation. Participants perceived themselves as being helpless and at the same time faultless. A dichotomy arose from this theme in that although participants felt helpless, they expressed a sense of hope in their ability to form lasting relationship with families and learners from historically underserved populations due to the smaller settings and extended time working with learners. The participants saw these relationships as opportunities to learn more about cultures and

values and how to interact with families and learners from historically underserved populations.

Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for special educators in Acme School District. All of the themes are extremely important to the concern of disproportionate representation in special education. It is important to remember that these recommendations should be taken as a whole and not in isolation. Although presented in a thematic context, all components are necessary for decreasing disproportionate representation due to the interconnectedness of each theme (see Figure 5).

It was implied throughout the study that disproportionate representation was a concern in the larger context of staff members, general educators, the system, the home/family, and the learner; the special educators never placed responsibility on themselves for disproportionate representation. An in-depth understanding of the special educator's role within the context of disproportionate representation must begin with awareness. The acknowledgment of the role special education has in disproportionate representation might not come easily. This appeared to be a widespread misunderstanding and/or paradigm shift that must begin with an awareness of responsibilities and roles. It is clear that these special educators externalized inadequacies. Special educators need to become advocates for overrepresentation of historically underserved learners and accept responsibility for their role as special educators; they must build a level of awareness of their role, the role of others, and the role of the system regarding disproportionate representation.

Special educators can build awareness of disproportionate representation and their role as a special educator through the process the state uses for licensure renewal. One of the state standards is that special educators understand the “role of special education within the structure of a single, evolving and changing education system that provides, based on an individualized planning and programming process, free appropriate public education to students in special education through a continuum of services” (State of Minnesota, 2012). The state can partner with local school districts and schools of education at universities to create courses for licensure renewal that embed core special education standards. By creating courses for licensure renewal that align with state standards, special educators will continue to develop their skills and understanding of their role as a special educator, the role of others, and the role of the system. Oftentimes, licensure renewal is not based on state standards.

Special educators working with learners from historically underserved populations should have experiences with other cultures. The experiences must go beyond school carnivals, world cultural days, etc. Special educators need to move away from the school setting and into the setting of different cultures. Special educators could build intercultural competence by having the opportunity to learn about other cultures in a different setting. Examples of learning about different cultures in other settings include going to a cultural specific grocery store or attending a culturally specific spiritual gathering. Special educators might want to consult with individuals who serve as leaders in historically underserved communities. For the African American community, this might include pastors and for the Native American culture, this could include elders. Caucasian special educators might find it valuable to form a mentorship with an

individual of color. This mentorship might be valuable to the special educators and might serve as an important relationship and learning tool for individuals of color as well. My personal experiences serving as a special educator and equity specialist and my experiences with the educational system have implications on the recommendations. Individuals with experiences with other cultures and additional educational systems might have additional recommendations on how to increase intercultural competence.

The ongoing concern of disproportionate representation is multifaceted. For special educators to have an in-depth understanding of belief systems, they need comprehensive and ongoing professional learning. This comprehensive and ongoing professional learning could take place throughout the school year. For professional learning to be effective, an expert in the field of special education and disproportionate representation should provide the professional learning. Once special educators have a firm understanding of their belief system, alternative belief systems should be discussed (e.g., ecological and contextual view). Special educators need to move beyond the point of simply wanting “tools” for working with learners from historically underserved population to a mindset of introspection and growth in intercultural competence.

All of the themes are extremely important to the multifaceted concern of disproportionate representation. It is important to remember that these recommendations should be taken as a whole and not in isolation. Although presented in context of each theme, all components are necessary for decreasing disproportionate representation.

Discussion

Essential to the findings of this study was the absence of any sense of accountability or personal responsibility on the part of the participants for diminishing

disproportionate representation. Although participants identified a number of external inadequacies, they did not specifically point to any one source of culpability. More importantly, the participants did not own a burden of change. They recognized the inadequacies in others, in the system, and in different cultures but failed to have an awareness of the role they inadvertently played in perpetuating disproportionate representation by claiming helplessness.

The participants' identification of others' responsibilities significantly reduced the impact special educators themselves might have on disproportionate representation in special education. The participants' responses regarding general education further manifested the sense of externalizing inadequacies as they continued to detach themselves from the system and their own responsibility to disproportionate representation by suggesting the time used for staff development was not meaningful and that they had better things to do with their time. Noteworthy was the fact that the participants made no suggestion as to how school could reach out to families in an alternative fashion. It is important to note that participants continued to externalize inadequacies by claiming helplessness due to a perceived lack of tools and preparation in working with learners from historically underserved populations.

The two different stages (Minimization and the Cusp of Acceptance) of the participants' developmental orientation as indicated by the Intercultural Developmental Inventory might have contributed to the dichotomy of helplessness and the sense of hope. The two different stages might "cancel" one another. Although special educators might be further along the developmental continuum, if other staff members are not developing intercultural competence or are at different stages, this might impact disproportionate

representation. That is, if some team members are in minimization and masking important cultural differences in values, perceptions and behaviors, and another team member is in the cusp of acceptance and recognizes and appreciates differences in other cultures values, perceptions and behaviors, these differing world views might cancel one another, thereby continuing the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation of historically underserved learners in special education.

One theoretical orientation that holds promise for providing a foundation to understanding cultural differences is the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS; Bennett, 1998). The DMIS provides a developmental model to recognize how individuals understand and act across different cultural settings. The Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI) is a tool created to measure intercultural competence. Intercultural competence development is increased self-understanding and cultural “other” understanding. It is a self-reflective, intentional process focused on understanding patterns of difference. Individuals need tools to assist in moving from stage to stage along the intercultural continuum; they do not need “tools to work with other cultures.” Intentional professional development must be planned specifically for special educators so they have a clear understanding of the need of introspection and an understanding why “tools” in and of themselves will not diminish disproportionate representation.

This study reflected a lack of responsibility accepted by the special educators with regard to disproportionate representation of historically underserved learners in special education. The participants seemed to exchange a sense of accountability for the ease of identifying inadequacies in others, the system, and different cultures. The DMIS as a

theoretical orientation might offer explicit opportunity for special educators to recognize the necessity of accountability and the true power they hold in contributing to and/or diminishing disproportionate representation. When special educators become aware of their own stage on the developmental continuum as determined by the IDI, are offered intentional professional developments that provide opportunities for introspection, and are provided the practical tools special educators desire, then special educators might begin to feel an awareness of responsibility in diminishing disproportionate representation.

One limitation of this study was the limited number of participants. Additional participants would provide a wider range of responses to include in the data analysis. Additional participants from middle and high school would allow for multiple perspectives of the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation. Another limitation of this study was that the perceptions of special educators were the only perceptions included. Perceptions of other staff members, administrators, general educators, and families and learners from historically underserved populations would allow for a deeper understanding of the concern of disproportionate representation. Additional worldviews might be represented with a wider range of participants. With a wider range of worldviews represented by participants, I might have been able to probe for additional in-depth responses. As an emerging researcher, I will be able to differentiate between superficial responses and in-depth responses in future research. Additional types of methodological inquiry will allow me to probe further into the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation.

My frame of reference (worldview) and beliefs additionally added to the limitations of the study. As a person of color, I have strong opinions on the impact

intercultural competence has in working with individuals from different cultures. Having served as a special educator in three districts and as an equity specialist in the district participating in the study, I presumed my biases (and those of the participants) impacted how special educators work with learners from historically underserved populations. I believe the Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI) was an accurate descriptor of participants' worldviews and that the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) served as an appropriate model of intercultural growth. I believe that "tools" are not going to decrease disproportionate representation but that special educators must identify their own biases and beliefs about other cultures before implementing "tools." I assume that no matter an individual's race, if an individual does not continually move in a positive direction on the continuum of intercultural competence, disproportionate representation will continue to be an ongoing concern. And finally, I believe deficit model thinking impacts how special educators think about and work with learners from historically underserved populations. I believe special educators need to become aware of alternative models to the deficit model.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study analyzed the interviews of four elementary special educators in a Midwestern state. Future research in special educators' perceptions of disproportionate representation in special education could be taken in many directions. Suggestions for areas of future research include:

1. Expand the demographics included in the study to involve other staff and general educators and special educators of color;

2. Expand the study to involve special educators at the middle and high school levels;
3. Expand the study to include families and learners from historically underserved populations who are overrepresented in special education;
4. Pilot a longitudinal from the recommendations in a school district and study the impact the recommendations have on disproportionate representation; and
5. A mixed-methods study using the results of the Intercultural Developmental Inventory and comparing individual results to special educators perceptions of disproportionate representation.

The participants in this study were limited to a single Midwestern school district. Elementary special educators were selected because of their experience in the identification process and their knowledge and foundation of working in special education. Other staff members, general educators, special educators at the middle and high school levels, and parents and learners from historically underserved populations might contribute to the study by examining the perceptions *they* have on disproportionate representation in special education. This study was an initial understanding of elementary special educators' perceptions of disproportionate representation in special education. Future research should include more stakeholders for a more in-depth understanding.

The identified themes provided a different perspective of the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation. The recommendations presented need to be piloted in a single school or district. The pilot study could then be examined for purposes of

effectiveness on decreasing disproportionate representation. Additional research in implementing the recommendations might explain more effectively the impact the recommendations have on disproportionate representation.

Conclusions

This study used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the perceptions of special educators on disproportionate representation in special education. Through individual interviews, four themes emerged regarding special educators perceptions of disproportionate representation: Perception of Others' Responsibilities, System Responses, Responses to Culture, and Perception of Self. From the themes, recommendations were provided to serve as a framework for lessening the over-identification of learners from historically underserved populations in special education. The information cannot be generalized as it is derived from four participants in one school district. This research demonstrated the need for additional research to be conducted. Additional research should be conducted to further investigate how disproportionate representation is perceived by additional stakeholders and if the recommendations could reduce the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1: Semi-structured Questions
 Topic: Disproportionate Representation

Begin by summarizing consent form. Introduce the study and myself; build rapport.

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - a. Where did you grow up?
 - b. What are your elementary, middle, and high school experiences?
 - c. Where did you go to college?
 - i. What was your student teaching experience like?
 - ii. Where did you do your student teaching?
 - d. What experiences do you have with other cultures?
 - e. What was your first teaching job?
 - f. What special education teaching license(s) do you hold?
2. Why did you choose to be a special educator?
3. How long have you been with this district?
 - a. What levels (K-12) have you worked with?
 - b. What is your favorite level?
 - c. How did you land this specific job?
4. How many special education students do you case manage?
5. What does your typical day as a special educator look like?
6. I refer to students from different races as “learners of color”. Others may refer to student from different cultures as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse. What term do you use?
7. What does disproportionate representation mean to you?
 - a. How do you define disproportionate representation?
8. Research shows that African American males and American Indians are overrepresented in special education. Why do you think this is the case?
9. Some experts say that poverty has a strong link to disproportionate representation. What do you think of the link?
10. What changes have you seen in special education, specifically regarding children of color, during your years as a special educator?
11. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of this interview that was not covered in the questions?

Interview 2: Semi-structured Questions

Topic: Intercultural Competence and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Begin by checking to see if there are any changes needed from emailed transcript.

1. The term intercultural competence has been defined as, “the capability of shifting cultural perspectives and adapting behavior to cultural context”. What does this mean to you in your school experience?
2. How do you define intercultural competence?
3. What are your thoughts on intercultural competence in your experiences?
4. What professional development opportunities have you participated in that deal with intercultural competence?
 - a. Did the professional development cause you to think about new things? If so, what?
 - b. Did you change as a result of this professional development?
5. What professional development opportunities have you participated in that deal with Culturally Responsive Teaching?
 - a. Did this cause you to think about new things?
 - b. Did you change as a result of this professional development?
6. What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?
7. What do you do in your classroom to meet the needs of all learners?
8. What Culturally Responsive Teaching practices do you implement in your classroom?
9. How do other teachers in your building respond to intercultural competence and Culturally responsive teaching practices?
10. How do other teachers in your school respond to learners from different cultures?
11. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of this interview that was not covered in the questions?

Interview 2: Semi-structured Questions

Topic: RTI, PBIS, Identification

Begin by checking to see if there are any changes needed from the emailed transcript.

1. Tell me everything you know about RTI.
 - a. How does this district use RTI?
 - b. How does your school use RTI?
 - c. What is your role within the RTI model?
2. Tell me everything you know about PBIS.
 - a. How does this district implement PBIS?
 - b. How does your school implement PBIS?
 - c. What is your role within the PBIS model?
3. Generally IEP teams use a variety of assessment tools before identifying an individual as LD. Is there one specific measure or assessment that serves as a “gatekeeper” for your school?
4. Generally IEP teams use a variety of assessment tools before identifying an individual as EBD. Is there one specific measure or assessment that serves as a “gatekeeper” for your school?
5. Tell me everything you know about IDEA.
6. What do you (or your school) do in the identification process for learners of color to ensure that you are meeting their cultural needs?
7. What impact does language have on the special education identification process at your school?
8. Experts say that teachers need to be conscious of their own cultural values and beliefs and how those affect their attitudes and expectations towards students from different ethnic groups and how they are habitually exhibited in school behaviors. Tell me what you think that means.
9. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of this interview that was not covered in the questions?

APPENDIX B

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION
AND APPROVAL**

A. Purpose

- a. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of special educators on disproportionate representation. Disproportionate representation is an ongoing concern in the field of special education. Nearly 13% of learners ages 3-21 receive special education and related services; that is approximately seven million learners. Of the 13% of learners that receive special education and related services, 38% receive services for a specific learning disability and 6% receive services for emotional disturbance. Fifty-six percent of the total school-aged population is Caucasian, thus the remaining 44% are from other populations (e.g., African American, American Indian, Hispanic, etc.). These percentages should be mirrored in the special education population, but this is not the case. Within the special education population, 48% of the learners are Caucasian and the remaining 52% are from other populations. This difference in percentages represents the ongoing concern of disproportionate representation. This concern is so widespread that current legislation calls for public and parental reporting of disproportionate representation. Over the last 50 years, research on disproportionate representation has primarily focused race. Although race may be a factor contributing to disproportionate representation, this is a complex concern influenced by additional factors. One additional

factor is the perception special educators have of disproportionate representation.

- b. The selection of category type for this research is exempt. Exempt was selected because this study does not propose to disrupt or manipulate participants' normal life experiences, or incorporate any form of intrusive procedures. This research will involve the use of interview procedures. The information collected will remain confidential so participants cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the participants. The disclosure of the participants' responses outside of the research will not place them at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participants' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

B. Methods

- a. Participants
 - i. Participant Selection: Participants will be selected with information provided by the participating school district. Each participant must meet the following criteria: full-time, non-probationary special educators who have worked in the participating district for a minimum of three years; must hold a full-time teaching license in learning disabilities and/or emotional and behavioral disorders and serve learners who participate in the general education curriculum at least 40% of the school day; information from district administered

Intercultural Developmental Inventory (IDI). Participants who take this inventory receive a rating on a continuum from monocultural to intercultural and I will select participants from both ends of the continuum. Of those who meet the above criteria, five will be randomly selected. As the anticipated number of educators who meet the criteria is low, names of those in each category will be selected at random through an electronic or manual randomization process.

- ii. Sample Size: Five participants will be selected. One participant will partake in a pilot study; the purpose of the pilot study is to ensure the semi-structured interviewing process is operational and modifications will be made as necessary. Four participants will participate in the data collection and analysis.
- iii. Age/Vulnerability of Participants: Participants will be 23 years of age and older. No participants will be children or adolescents, individuals with cognitive disabilities, etc.
- iv. Sources for all participants: all participants will be from the participating school district in the Midwest.
- v. Initial Contact: I will initially contact participants in a face-to-face meeting to explain the purpose of the study and the Human Consent Form.

b. Data Collection Procedures

- i. Step-by-step protocol

1. Participants will be asked to participate in three interviews; each interview will last approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed following the interview. Approximately two days after each interview, participants will be asked to electronically provide feedback on the transcription of the interview.
 2. During the first interview, participants will be requested to provide the following information and artifacts: the number of learners on their case list, including race and disability; the number of initial IEP meetings they have been a part of, along with the race and outcome of the IEP meeting.
 3. The first interview will be conducted with all participants before moving to the second interview; the second interview will be conducted with all participants before moving to the final interview.
- c. Data Analysis Procedures: data analysis will be ongoing throughout the study. Data will be disaggregated into the smallest units and then categorized into categories and sub-categories until saturation is reached. Data will be coded using a software tool.
- d. Digital audio recordings, transcripts, and artifacts will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. Hard copies of

artifacts will be stored in a locked drawer in the researcher's locked office. I will be the only one with access to the data. Anonymity will be accomplished through the use of pseudonyms. The data will not be able to be tracked back to the original source because the district and all participants will remain anonymous. Digital audio tracks, transcripts, and artifacts will be destroyed three years after successful defense of the dissertation.

C. Risks, Discomforts and Benefits

- a. There are no foreseeable risks because the risks inherent in the study are no greater than those normally encountered during dialogue on the topic. All potential participants have participated in professional development activities on intercultural competence prior to the study. Some discomfort may occur due to providing personal information on their perceptions regarding the topic. Participants may benefit from participation by gaining a deeper understanding of their perceptions on disproportionate representation.

D. Costs and Compensations

- a. The cost to the participant is the time for the interviews and time to collect requested artifacts.
- b. No compensation will be provided to the participants.



CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: The perceptions of special educators on disproportionate representation.

Researcher: Troy Daniel Gonzales, Doctoral Candidate, School of Special Education, College of Education and Behavioral Science
Email: troygonzales@me.com
Phone: 612.860.7041

Research Advisor: Dr. Harvey Rude
Email: harvey.rude@unco.edu
Phone: 970.351.1659

Dear Special Educator:

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of special educators on disproportionate representation.

This study is conducted under the Institutional Review Board at the University of Northern Colorado. The results of the interviews will be used for the sole purposes of meeting the requirements for partial fulfillment of the Doctorate of Education.

You are asked to participate in three 90-minutes interviews during the months of January and February of 2012. If you grant permission, I will ask you the questions and give you time to share your perceptions. I am interested in how you feel about disproportionate representation in special education. I will ask open-ended, semi-structured interview questions (see examples attached). You will be asked to provide the number of learners on your case list, including race and disability. You will be asked to provide the number of initial IEP meetings you have been a part of, along with the race and outcome of the IEP meeting.

I foresee no risks to participants beyond those that are normally encountered in meeting with an educational researcher to discuss your perceptions. Your participation will involve meeting upon an agreed and convenient time. The data will be coded in such a way to ensure confidentiality to all participants. This study is not designed to impose judgment upon the school district or the participants, but simply to gain an insight into the perceptions of special educators on disproportionate representation.

I request permission to digitally record the interviews to back up the notes taken during each session. Be assured that I intend to keep the contents of the digital recording confidential. The names of the participants will not appear in any report of this research.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in the study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had the opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in the research. A copy of this form will be give to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO, 80639; 970.351.2161.

Participant's Full Name (please print)

Date

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Interview 1: Semi-structured Questions
Topic: Disproportionate Representation

Begin by summarizing consent form. Introduce the study and myself; build rapport.

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - a. Where did you grow up?
 - b. What are your elementary, middle, and high school experiences?
 - c. Where did you go to college?
 - i. What was your student teaching experience like?
 - ii. Where did you do your student teaching?
 - d. What experiences do you have with other cultures?
 - e. What was your first teaching job?
 - f. What special education teaching license(s) do you hold?
2. Why did you choose to be a special educator?
3. How long have you been with this district?
 - a. What levels (K-12) have you worked with?
 - b. What is your favorite level?
 - c. How did you land this specific job?
4. How many special education students do you case manage?
5. What does your typical day as a special educator look like?
6. I refer to students from different races as “learners of color”. Others may refer to student from different cultures as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse. What term do you use?
7. What does disproportionate representation mean to you?
 - a. How do you define disproportionate representation?
8. Research shows that African American males and American Indians are overrepresented in special education. Why do you think this is the case?
9. Some experts say that poverty has a strong link to disproportionate representation. What do you think of the link?
10. What changes have you seen in special education, specifically regarding children of color, during your years as a special educator?
11. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of this interview that was not covered in the questions?

Interview 2: Semi-structured Questions

Topic: Intercultural Competence and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Begin by checking to see if there are any changes needed from emailed transcript.

1. The term intercultural competence has been defined as, “the capability of shifting cultural perspectives and adapting behavior to cultural context”. What does this mean to you in your school experience?
2. How do you define intercultural competence?
3. What are your thoughts on intercultural competence in your experiences?
4. What professional development opportunities have you participated in that deal with intercultural competence?
 - a. Did the professional development cause you to think about new things? If so, what?
 - b. Did you change as a result of this professional development?
5. What professional development opportunities have you participated in that deal with Culturally Responsive Teaching?
 - a. Did this cause you to think about new things?
 - b. Did you change as a result of this professional development?
6. What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?
7. What do you do in your classroom to meet the needs of all learners?
8. What Culturally Responsive Teaching practices do you implement in your classroom?
9. How do other teachers in your building respond to intercultural competence and Culturally responsive teaching practices?
10. How do other teachers in your school respond to learners from different cultures?
11. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of this interview that was not covered in the questions?

Interview 2: Semi-structured Questions

Topic: RTI, PBIS, Identification

Begin by checking to see if there are any changes needed from the emailed transcript.

1. Tell me everything you know about RTI.
 - a. How does this district use RTI?
 - b. How does your school use RTI?
 - c. What is your role within the RTI model?
2. Tell me everything you know about PBIS.
 - a. How does this district implement PBIS?
 - b. How does your school implement PBIS?
 - c. What is your role within the PBIS model?
3. Generally IEP teams use a variety of assessment tools before identifying an individual as LD. Is there one specific measure or assessment that serves as a “gatekeeper” for your school?
4. Generally IEP teams use a variety of assessment tools before identifying an individual as EBD. Is there one specific measure or assessment that serves as a “gatekeeper” for your school?
5. Tell me everything you know about IDEA.
6. What do you (or your school) do in the identification process for learners of color to ensure that you are meeting their cultural needs?
7. What impact does language have on the special education identification process at your school?
8. Experts say that teachers need to be conscious of their own cultural values and beliefs and how those affect their attitudes and expectations towards students from different ethnic groups and how they are habitually exhibited in school behaviors. Tell me what you think that means.
9. Is there anything you would like to add regarding the topic of this interview that was not covered in the questions?

Research Involving Human Participants Coversheet for UNC IRB Application

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title:

Contact Information (reviewers will communicate via e-mail)

Lead Investigator: Troy Daniel Gonzales phone: 612.860.7041

School: Education and Behavior Science UNC e-mail: troygonzales@me.com

Research Advisor: Dr. Harvey Rude UNC e-mail: harveygonzales@me.com
(required for students) **Harvey.Rude@unc.edu**

CERTIFICATION OF LEAD INVESTIGATOR

I certify that this application accurately reflects the proposed research and that I and all researchers who will have contact with the participants or access to the data have reviewed this application and the Guidelines of the UNC IRB and will comply with the letter and spirit of these policies. I understand that any changes in procedure which affect participants must be submitted to the IRB (using the Request for Change in Protocol Form) for written approval prior to their implementation. I further understand that any adverse events and significant changes in risk for participants must be immediately reported in writing to the UNC IRB.

Signature of Lead Investigator

Date of Signature

CERTIFICATION OF RESEARCH ADVISOR (If Lead Investigator is a Student)

I certify that I have thoroughly reviewed this application, confirm its accuracy, and accept responsibility for monitoring the conduct of this research, the maintenance of any consent documents as required by the IRB, and, in the case of expedited reviews, the continuation review of this project in approximately one year.

Signature of Research Advisor

Date of Signature

Summary Information (to be completed by Lead Investigator)

Review Category: ☒ Exempt (2-3 weeks) ☐ Expedited (3-4 weeks) ☐ Full-Board (4-6 weeks)

Research participants will be:
(e.g., adults, elderly, children,
healthy, unhealthy, etc.)

Adults

Type of data collected will be:
(e.g., survey responses, interviews,
blood samples, existing data, etc.)

In-depth interviews

Location of data collection:

North Saint Paul, Minnesota

Is standard consent documentation used? ☒ YES ☐ NO If NO, must be addressed within application.

Is permission required (e.g., school district)? ☒ YES ☐ NO If YES, must include letter (this is not consent).

Is this a funded research project? ☐ YES ☒ NO If YES, must provide source within application.

Submit the original and one copy of the cover page, narrative, and all attachments to OSP, Kepner Hall #25, Attn: Sherry May

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO
Institutional Review Board (IRB)



December 8, 2011

TO: Maria Lahman
Applied Statistics and Research Methods

FROM: The Office of Sponsored Programs

RE: Exempt Review of *The Perceptions of Special Educators on Disproportionate Representation* submitted by Troy Daniel Gonzales
(Research Advisor: Harvey Rude)

The above proposal is being submitted to you for exemption review. When approved, return the proposal to Sherry May in the Office of Sponsored Programs.

I recommend approval.


Signature of Co-Chair

1-4-12
Date

The above referenced prospectus has been reviewed for compliance with HHS guidelines for ethical principles in human subjects research. The decision of the Institutional Review Board is that the project is exempt from further review.

IT IS THE ADVISOR'S RESPONSIBILITY TO NOTIFY THE STUDENT OF THIS STATUS.

Comments:

emaild 12-21-11

25 Kepner Hall ~ Campus Box #143
Greeley, Colorado 80639
Ph: 970.351.1907 ~ Fax: 970.351.1934